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BROWNSVILLE
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BISD moves forward on 'Early College' campus

Project would give students a head start in high school

BY GARY LONG
THE BROWNSVILLE HERALD

By this time next year, the inaugural class at BISD's Early College High School will be halfway through its freshman year and on the way to graduating from high school with as many as half the credits required for a four-year college degree.

The Brownsville Independent School District on Monday signed a letter of agreement with UTB-TSC to work toward establishing an Early College High School on the campus of the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College.

Merrill Hammons, BISD administrator of the Department of Advanced Academic Services, said signing the agreement letter allows the grant process to go forward. The school has been in the works for about 1½ years. First-year funding is about $600,000, he said.

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BISD Superintendent Hector Gonzales, left, and Steve Rosales, UTB-TSC representative as assistant to the dean for P-16 Initiatives, sign an agreement letter with that established an Early College High School to be housed at UTB-TSC. The ECHS will provide BISD students the opportunity to gain college credit hours.

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The target population is middle-achievers of lower socio-economic status who have the aptitude to be successful in college but lack the skills, motivation and vision to pursue a college degree, Superintendent Hector Gonzales said at a signing ceremony for the agreement letter.

The school would be governed by BISD and funded through grants from the Texas High School Project, a $261 million public-private initiative committed to increasing high school graduation and college enrollment rates across Texas. Its inaugural class would enroll in fall 2008 and graduate in 2012 with as many as 60 college credit hours and/or an associate of arts degree in addition to a high school diploma.

"Our aspiration is to entice and engage the typical high school student in our district, and to direct our attention to those with the potential for college success, but who are lacking the skills, support, motivation and most importantly vision of one day holding a college degree in their hands," the agreement letter states.

Early College High School is planned as a dedicated facility on UTB-TSC's International Technology, Education and Commerce campus to accommodate 400 students. BISD would run the school in collaboration with UTB-TSC.

BISD plans to recruit 100 students from middle schools across the district for the first freshman class, then add 100 students a year until all four classes are filled.

Students would study at Early College High School but participate in University Interscholastic League activities such as sports and band through their home cluster high school — Hanna, Lopez, Pace, Porter or Rivera — from which they also would receive their diploma.

"This is for those middle-of-the-road students who just need that little extra nudge to be first time participants in college," BISD board member Ruben Cortez Jr. said. "This will give them a two-year advantage on continuing their education and help make college not so out of reach."

The school is in addition to BISD's dual enrollment agreements with UTB-TSC, under which students receive college and high school credit for courses taken in high school. Such classes range from basic core curriculum like Composition I, college algebra and general biology to introductory classes in computer technology, health professions and automotive technology.

BISD officials said Early College High School is in response to the "remarkable and flourishing development" of its dual enrollment program in recent years. Currently, about 6,000 students from 22 districts are enrolled as dual enrollment students through UTB-TSC, about 59 percent from BISD, school officials said.

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