



# INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT OUTREACH IN THE BORDERPLEX REGION



*Preparing the Workforce of  
Tomorrow  
to be Ready to Work*

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At Workforce Solutions Borderplex, students and young adults are a priority in our mission to serve our region. From innovative programs to financial assistance, education assistance, interactive workshops to our one-of-a-kind career exploration events, we let our imagination go when it comes to innovation and creativity to tap into the potential of our talented, younger population. Our robust youth programs are designed to help students upskill and get them closer to their career goals or give them the skills needed to train for their next job opportunity. Grind TALK (Teaching Accountability Leveraging Knowledge) was launched as a two-year pilot program to provide career guidance and workforce information to students within the 20 Independent School Districts' (ISDs) service footprint.

### **About the Program**

The Grind TALK program has since been extended into a long-term project and includes a special focus on ISDs representing the highest concentration of low-income and at-risk students—El Paso Independent School District (EPISD), Ysleta Independent School District (YISD), and Socorro Independent School District (SISD). In these three ISDs, WSB set out to engage 111 middle and high schools with a student population of 77,860. Of this population WSB aimed to deliver workforce and career information to at least 25,000 students via assemblies and career exploration events and provide at least 300 students with individualized career guidance.

WSB has also offered up to 25 student workshops per week at times and has participated in at least 5 collaborative outreach efforts such as job fairs and career expos. In addition, WSB planned to conduct a region-wide Career Readiness Tour to visit all 20 ISDs within their service areas. However, COVID-19 may have since impacted these plans and so alternative virtual plans will be arranged in order to continue outreach to students across the region.

To ensure that students can connect to training and job opportunities, the program has worked with one community college, El Paso Community College; two universities, University of Texas El Paso, and Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center at El Paso; and at least three regional technical colleges, Vista College, Southwest University at El Paso, and Western Technical College. Additional partners that have supported WSB include the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas El Paso Branch, Borderplex Alliance Industry Task forces, Medical Center of the Americas Foundation, and two regional chambers.

This program is built on previous efforts by Workforce Solutions Borderplex to engage youth early on in pursuing their careers. However, with the assistance of a grant from TWC, WSB has expanded the geographic reach and number of workshops of this program, to create a proactive workshop schedule that will better serve the region.

### **Program Goals and Funding Sources**

The Grind TALK program serves youth (as well as parents, teachers, counselors) to proactively prepare youth entering the workforce. WSB helps students make career decisions now so that they know how to prepare for their career while they are still in school. Many Texas Workforce Development Areas typically coordinate with one to two Independent School Districts (ISDs); however, the six-county footprint of Workforce Solutions Borderplex (WSB) encompasses many school districts spread out over a broad geographic area. WSB's service area includes 12 ISDs within Education Service Center (ESC) Region 19 and 8 ISDs in the extended Borderplex ESC portion of Region 18.

These 20 ISDs have 155 middle and high school campuses with 110,904 students. Of those students, 74 percent in Region 19 and 51 percent in Region 18 are economically disadvantaged, and 53 percent in Region 19 and 51 percent in Region 18 are at-risk youth (see Table 2). In addition, 77,860 (70.2 percent) of the students within the WSB service area are located at the 111 middle and high schools in the three largest school districts—El Paso Independent School District (EPISD), Ysleta Independent School District (YISD), and Socorro Independent School District (SISD).

WSB has focused on the three school districts that have both the largest number of students overall and the largest number of economically disadvantaged and at-risk students. The program aimed to reach 32 percent of the middle and high school students in these three ISDs or 25,000 students. The program has focused its efforts on reaching a diverse group of students to expose the largest number of participants to educational pathways in high demand jobs.

WSB has worked with those students who are economically disadvantaged, at-risk, in foster care, homeless, and/or in other underrepresented populations. These students are in need of career guidance and workforce information regarding High Growth High Demand Occupations and available trainings and opportunities related to Middle-Skill jobs and other entry points into the workforce. Grind TALK, however, has also worked to reach students enrolled in CTE and/or magnet tracks and specialized programs such as STEAM Academies, Robotics Teams, Healthcare Teams, and Academic Decathlon that exist within the various high schools.

Additionally, Grind TALK is tailored towards preparation for the workforce by creating exposure and engagement opportunities related to various careers. Examples of the type of exposure and engagement that this program focuses on includes training sessions, career days, or individual help sessions. Some of the workshops have included the following training opportunities:

- Communication in the Workplace
- Organization in the Workplace
- How to Ace Your Job Interview
- How to Stay Focused & Energized During a Pandemic

- A Guide for Middle Schoolers on Careers & Endorsements
- How to Write a Resume and Cover Letter
- How to Find a Job and Prepare for an Interview
- Career Exploration Resources
- High Demand Jobs in the Region
- Budgeting Information
- Soft Skills Training
- How to Make Stress Work for You
- Virtual Interviewing
- Tips for Success
- Certification Information

These initiatives under Grind TALK have been funded via the Career and Education Outreach Grant from TWC. Funding also comes from the TANF program with about \$293,000. WSB has also been working a lot with CTE Committees to make connections with administration and inform programs that they are offering to students.

### **Program Challenges**

Despite the great impact that this program aims to achieve, there are some challenges that WSB has encountered. For example, there are currently only two staff members covering 20 districts across a large region. Aiming to serve everyone in the six-county is challenging, especially since school districts can have such a high variation in needs. Our goal is to ultimately reach these districts with technology.

Another challenge we have encountered includes managing the impact of COVID-19. Our ability to reach some of our foster youth was already challenging, but it has since become even more difficult to engage foster youth while they are at home. Other challenges related to COVID-19 included the transition from meeting with students in person to trying to connect with them virtually. It was also challenging to assist other areas of need within WSB during the pandemic, while trying to reach our target population of students and schools.

Despite these challenges, WSB has learned a great deal about the needs of the various communities we serve. The Grind TALK program has maintained a positive impact on youth in our area, especially by providing exposure to all the career options available to the students. Grind TALK exposes students in this area to the various high demand jobs, endorsements and programs offered to help students proactively make informed career decisions. Overall, the program provides various accessible options for the future, especially because college is not the only avenue for success due to its potential cost-prohibitive factors. Exposing students to options ranging from opportunities in technical schools all the way to college degrees can help them consider a vast number of factors as they consider their career.

## **Outcomes and Successes**

WSB staff members were able to successfully work on various initiatives and partnerships within the regions. Some examples include the creation of over a dozen videos to the virtual channel to engage students even while they are learning at a distance. This resulted in 91 engagements during this quarter. WSB staff also organized a highly attended virtual event in conjunction with the Office of Congresswoman Veronica Escobar called “Level Up: Youth Opportunity Fair.”

Additionally, the regional CTE conference was a success as we were able to provide LMI and our services to many CTE figures in our region, which allowed us to build those connections and schedule upcoming events. Throughout the academic school year (2019-2020), WSB was able to accomplish the following:

- Number of Students Seen: 15,229
- Number of Adults Seen: 2,319
- Number of Presentations: 777

Note: During the summer quarter after the 2019-2020 school year, WSB interacted with many more staff members than students. However, we feel that this was a “success” because it created opportunities for us to reach their students in the coming semester.

Another indicator of this project’s success rate is related to the overall impact at the individual level. For example, one of the students reached out to staff through social media and indicated that they were homeless and looking for a job. Our staff was then able to get more information and connect the student to a partner at WSB who could provide them with services. This student ultimately ended up getting a job shortly after. Success stories similar to this one have allowed this program to thrive and impact the lives of students.

## **Other Rural ISD Initiatives**

In addition to these Rural ISD outreach opportunities, about two years ago, WSB provided funding for rural initiatives and related to the needs of ISDs, as well as the rural governmental entities. WSB funded training for EMTs and provided financial assistance to students enrolled in the dual credit program at the local community college. One of our greatest success stories in the last couple of years in the rural ISDs was related to a school in Fort Davis County. This school needed financial assistance for robotics kits to enter a regional competition. WSB was able to provide \$5,000 in financial assistance to help these students achieve their goals.

## **Solutions for the Future**

After tackling key challenges related to this program, WSB would like to continue to brainstorm more ways of increasing opportunities for fun engagement and interaction with students on career-related projects. Activities were widely successful when they were in person, so now there is a need to explore options to accomplish this virtually due to COVID-19. WSB also hopes to expand outreach and continue to connect with other schools in the Borderplex Region that we have not worked with yet.

Moreover, our plan is to continue our professional development opportunities and connect with CTE programs at schools to provide services in their virtual classrooms, as well as individual services to students who need them. We also plan to continue to share our Virtual Series to expose students to our resources and connect with individuals through social media. We are also planning on doing a few community events, including virtual job fairs and a foster youth series. We have also implemented an interviewing software into our services so that we may provide that to the students and their families in our region.

Finally, some of the best practices that we have learned include building strong relationships with schools' staff so that they understand our program and trust us to work with their students; using our partners, including the ones at Workforce Solutions to partner with us and reach more students; continuing to build our virtual platform of resources since most students are learning virtually during this time.

### **About Workforce Solutions Borderplex**

Workforce Solutions Borderplex (WSB) is the public workforce system in the six-county Borderplex region that assists employers in finding quality employees, and training individuals with the skills necessary to thrive in the workplace. We administer a broad range of programs and services to effectively address local workforce issues. Workforce Solutions also establishes partnerships with various stakeholders within the region to improve education, employment, and economic development. Our organization aims to provide skilled workers for employers by advancing education, employment, entrepreneurship, and economic development opportunities in support of global competitiveness and regional prosperity. Ultimately, we are interested in empowering the most dynamic workforce to achieve global competitiveness and regional prosperity.