

August 26, 2006

Westside Education and Training Center Links San Antonio's West Side to Education and Jobs

By Linda Wilson, *Making Connections* – San Antonio Diarist

In August, 2006, when students walked through the doors of the newly opened Westside Education and Training Center (WETC), they stepped into a facility that bears testimony to how quickly things can get done when community comes together.

A first for San Antonio's West Side, the new WETC offers a spectrum of post-secondary educational opportunities for youth and adults. Students can study close to home, choosing from courses that will give either college credit or place them in a quick, turnaround workforce pipeline to higher-paying jobs.

The newly-renovated 31,000-square-foot building features 11 classrooms, a technical skills assessment lab, an open computer lab for students and community members, a 2,500-square-foot manufacturing technology lab and houses the newest office of Centers for Work and Family.

Enrollment jumped from 294 students in the first month of operation to 1,079 by mid-July, 2007. Enrollment is way ahead of schedule at the popular site, and WETC has already surpassed its projected target goal of enrolling 964 students within the first 12 months of operation.

Community sets vision for the institution

WETC was pieced together within 18 months by a Blue Ribbon Committee which involved the City of San Antonio, Edgewood School District, Alamo Community College District, resident leaders, industry representatives, Centers for Work and Family and *Making Connections-San Antonio*. MC-SA's role in joining these groups as a catalyst for the Center's development is a powerful example of the utilization of influence and leverage to make sustainable impact on a broad area of the West Side community.



Community people from the Edgewood School District were the first to call for placing a higher educational facility in their area. They looked at vacant schools in the Edgewood District and wondered why they couldn't be reopened and put to good use for the community. They knew that a new educational facility could improve the image of the community, bring a new culture of learning, and stimulate positive growth.

The residents presented their ideas to the City of San Antonio Economic Development Department, Edgewood School District trustees and the Alamo Community College District (ACCD). ACCD already had four campuses in the San Antonio area, but none in the Edgewood District or in the West Side of San Antonio. ACCD and EISD clearly realized that it would be beneficial to create bridges that would lead elementary and secondary students to higher education.



From its beginning, the Blue Ribbon Committee was comprised of community people, governmental institutions and nonprofits. The Blue Ribbon Committee had grown to over 50 members from City Councilwomen to small business owners to advocates for persons with disabilities. Toyota suppliers shared their plans with the group and other industry leaders focused on what employment skills they most needed for their worksite.

In summer 2005, Blue Ribbon Committee members expressed their vision of what the center could provide to the community. They called for a center that would:

- be a community collaboration,
- employ shared governance,
- link short term with long term training,
- offer continuous worker/student follow up
- offer virtual one stop [social] services, and
- work in conjunction with high schools to offer a seamless transition.

To make the vision a reality the Blue Ribbon Committee representatives went before each governing body and gained their commitments to invest in the project. Edgewood School District provided the vacant Lincoln school through a no-cost lease, the City of San Antonio allocated \$150,000, while ACCD is meeting other operating costs through grants and other contract funds. Some funding from a \$1.3 million Department of Labor grant is being used for production worker training and for a summer youth training program offered at WETC.

By August 2006, renovations were complete and the doors were opened! An official community-wide grand opening was celebrated on November 14, 2006.

Creating a seamless flow from education to workplace

At WETC, students can choose from college courses that are transferable to other higher education institutions, or they can select quick turn-around training in skills that can immediately lead to higher-paying jobs in San Antonio. Several courses were developed with input from employers who articulated their precise employment needs. Many courses offer immediate industrial certification at completion, as well as college credit. In an effort to keep curriculum relevant, students are given guidance as to what skill sets will make them competitive in the labor market and that are relevant to current demand occupations.

Three campuses within the ACCD system offer courses at the WETC. These courses were specifically selected because they are likely to lead students directly into higher-paying jobs that are known to be in high demand in the area. Examples are courses in water treatment, and financial customer service. Residents can get their certification to become Certified Health Workers or Certified Nursing Assistants. The Open Entry/Open Exit plan allows students freedom to take self-paced Administrative Computer Technology courses for either college credit or noncredit.



San Antonio is quickly taking a strong place in manufacturing. The new Toyota Tundra Assembly plant and the Toyota suppliers are not far away. At WETC, students can enroll in a free 4-week production worker training course that gives them skills that manufacturers are looking for in today's job market. Admission to some courses doesn't require a high school diploma or GED.

WETC goes to the heart of a very pervasive problem for the *Making Connections – San Antonio* community – the under-skilled, underemployed workforce of the area. WETC deals with that problem in multiple ways. It opens the door for continuing education for adults who need a high school diploma. It offers something for a person seeking one or two fundamental skills like English as a second language or GED. It can give workers certification to get a better job. With the dual credit programs beginning in high school, students can be gaining college credit while in high school.

Overcoming barriers to student success

ACCD's Westside Community Education Center is located onsite at the WETC to help students overcome the barriers that might stand between them and a successful career. Assistance with educational planning, financial aid, and career placement are available from ACCD staff.

Support is also available from Centers for Work and Families (CWF), which offers students wrap-around services such as advice about income support, Texas Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Children's Medicaid and CHIP, housing, credit repair, asset building, child care, transportation, and other services.

The Blue Ribbon Committee continues work on refining a governance system for the WETC that will maintain the high level of community enthusiasm and involvement that birthed the facility. A Blue Ribbon Subcommittee is developing an evaluation plan that will not only track students while they are enrolled, but also follow them to measure the long-term impact of their education.

In the WETC, the Blue Ribbon Committee has developed an institution destined to bring lasting economic impact to the West Side community, even as it produces a highly skilled workforce ready to make a major contribution to the entire metropolitan area.