



## McAllen ISD Case Study

Located at the southern tip of Texas across the Rio Grande from the Mexican city of Reynosa, McAllen Independent School District is one of the oldest and most respected school systems in the state. Besides earning an “A” rating from the Texas Education Agency for two straight years and a perfect score for financial integrity 17 times in the past 18 years, the district was awarded Regional School Board of the Year and Regional Superintendent of the Year in June.

“We have a legacy that goes back to 1908 that has always been about high expectations and asking students to do stellar work. It’s a reputation we take very seriously,” Community Information Director Norma Zamora-Guerra said. “It’s always about pushing the envelope and doing more for our students. We are always looking at new ways to level the playing field and identify equity gaps. We are constantly looking at the needs of our kids and community and how we can address those needs. ”

McAllen ISD is an open-enrollment district, meaning that families living outside the District’s boundaries do not have to pay tuition to attend McAllen ISD schools. When parents enter an elementary school, they immediately learn why McAllen ISD should be their district of choice. “After school tragedies happened across the country, we needed to make sure our campuses were even safer. We wanted to be even more vigilant about who was coming into our buildings. And, we still wanted an environment that was welcoming and receptive to the community,” Ms. Zamora-Guerra explained. “We decided to put TV monitors in our school lobbies and use The Scholastic Network to showcase the incredible things that are happening at that school and the district so that when people were waiting to get clearance to enter the school, they could learn about everything we have to offer and feel welcome.”

Each school can personalize the messages it shares with visitors and the District has another channel to communicate with families. “Before we were dependent on the schools to remember to promote important district messages,” Ms. Zamora-Guerra said. “Now, we can share what is most critical to us. So, one elementary school might still have openings in its Pre-K program while another school’s program might be full. We can promote child nutrition, share student artwork or videos on what’s happening in the school. Each elementary school student gets a free pass to a football game, so we wanted to promote that. And, we also want parents to know how to get financial assistance.”

We do know it (The Scholastic Network) works. The parents like the information we’re sharing, and we know they’re watching the programming. We know because the school secretaries get bugged if they

don't have the monitors on. Parents are entertained by it," Ms. Zamora-Guerra said. "And, we know it works because we ask parents where they got the information about a program or how they learned where to register their kids, and they'll tell us they saw it on the screen in the lobby."

To ensure all students have access to exceptional learning opportunities anywhere at any time, McAllen ISD became one of the first school districts in the country to make individual learning devices, such as the iPad and Chromebook, available to all students in all grades. "Some districts were caught off-guard having to move to online learning because of the pandemic," Ms. Zamora-Guerra said. "We've had the capability to do distance learning for years. Now we're purchasing hot spots and working on getting to 100% connectivity for all of our families."

As part of its technology refresh plan, half of the districts' students received new devices last fall and this year the other half will receive upgraded technology. For Ms. Zamora-Guerra and her team this event presents another opportunity to engage families. "Parents are coming in now to pick up devices for their kids," she said. "They will be using the foyers to distribute the devices. This is a chance for us to display health and safety information to help them prevent infection."

Currently, 11 of the district's elementary schools and two of its middle schools are using The Scholastic Network to broadcast static messages, emergency notifications, videos, and live-stream events. Based on the popularity of the Network, the District hopes to deploy the network to the remainder of its elementary, middle, and high schools, including its cafeterias and sports facilities during the 2020-21 school year.

"Our plan is to cover all of the schools by the end of the year," Ms. Zamora-Guerra said. "One of our high schools, [James] 'Nikki' Rowe High School, purchased four to five 80-inch monitors to display information about where students can find their class schedules online. Sharing messages about safety and security is one of our top priorities. Our students can create videos and share news with parents and community members who visit the schools."

MITV (McAllen Instructional Television) Producer, Julian Olivarez, is responsible for developing the district content displayed on The Scholastic Network in the schools. He explained that beyond keeping students and staff safe and informed and engaging with families and visitors, the district also uses the Network to prepare all students for college and career. "Starting in elementary school, students are exposed to information from The Scholastic Network's post-secondary sponsors," he said. "One of the features we like best about the Network is the ability to display messages from universities, colleges, trade shows and the military on the TV screens to get kids thinking about what they want to do after they graduate."

Mr. Olivarez also manages and creates content for the district's TV channel and is responsible for maintaining a strong social media presence. With so much on his plate, he appreciates the support he receives from the Scholastic Network. "Any time we need technical support, they are there for us," he said. "We don't call them much, though, because it just works."