

FORT DAVIS

Fort Davis ISD raises state allotment from \$70K to \$1.5M through private, early childhood school partnerships

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Dirks-Anderson Elementary School Principal Shera Welch holds student Paltyn Zimmerman on one of the last days of the 2022-2023 school year. The school, a part of Fort Davis ISD, was built in 1925 and its main hallway remains largely unchanged. The small district is one of several in the Big Bend region in desperate need of an infusion of state funding. Photo by Maisie Crow.

TRI-COUNTY — Fort Davis ISD's state aid dramatically rose from \$70,000 to an estimated \$1.5 million this past school year due to an enrollment increase from 170 to 486 students made possible by new partnerships with private, early childhood schools.

The partnerships involve the exchange of paperwork, rather than hundreds of students, between the public school district and private schools. The \$1.5 million the district is estimated to receive from the state this year will be split 50-50 with its partner organizations.

FDISD implemented the **Texas Education Agency program** — utilized by 54 districts across the state as of last year, according to the agency — for the first time this school year to bolster its strained budget. The partnerships are one-year, renewable legal agreements.

The vast majority of districts engaged in these partnerships around the state contract with Head Start programs and private childcare centers to dual enroll preschool students only, not preschool through second grade like FDISD. The TEA initiative, introduced in 2003, was intended to enroll more children in pre-K by allowing districts to partner with existing programs then work with the private entities to improve the quality of pre-K education.

By dual enrolling preK-2 students from seven schools, including Alpine Montessori, Alpine Christian School and Wonder School Marfa as well as several others across the state, the district received the basic allotment per each additional student, ranging from \$3,000 to \$6,160, which is then weighted upwards for specific student and district characteristics. In return, these private schools — which are still charging tuition — are getting payouts in the form of lease payments, payroll assistance, access to public school programs and more.

“I think it’s been extremely beneficial,” said Fort Davis ISD Superintendent Graydon Hicks. “We’ve been very successful in our partnerships, and they’ve been very positive.”

Hicks said additional money the district is bringing in is going towards salaries and district operating costs. It’s also helping alleviate the district’s annual recapture payments — funds the district sends to the state because it is considered to have “excess wealth” per student due to the combination of low enrollment and high property values. Last year, without the boost in enrollment, the district paid \$25,000 in recapture payments, this year, Hicks is anticipating owing the state \$0.

“Fort Davis ISD — with the given property values that the state mandated for 2023 — I would have to have 500 kids to get out of the ‘rich’ status,” Hicks said. “That is physically impossible in this area. If I don’t have the partnerships, I wouldn’t be able to do that.”

In addition to the three local schools, FDISD is also partnering with schools in El Paso, Monahans and Burleson, south of Fort Worth. Next year, Hicks hopes to add schools from the Austin and Brazos Valley areas, growing the district’s number of partnerships to 10 schools with up to 600 students enrolled. Hicks said the district has been contacted directly by other schools who want to partner with them, and several

are connected to the district's new full-time Deputy Superintendent Michelle Hartmann, who implemented a similar program at Pawnee ISD in Bee County.

The partner schools choose which specific students to dual enroll with FDISD. Hicks said the district recommends that early childhood education schools pursue local partnerships in the case of a special education, or higher needs, student, so they can receive services locally — something FDISD is unable to provide to schools outside of the area.

Hicks said the partnerships are beneficial for the private schools for a variety of reasons, and each individual deal is unique. "It may be beneficial financially, it may be beneficial for licensing and regulation, it may be beneficial for recruitment," Hicks said.

Private school partners are also able to gain greater access to state and federal grants through the public school district. FDISD is able to help pay for the salaries of employees pursuing additional certifications thanks to a grant from the University of Texas at El Paso. And this year the district helped pay for security upgrades at a partner school with funds from a Safe Schools grant, ensuring they are in compliance with state safety requirements.

This year, Alpine Montessori dual enrolled 17 students with FDISD and is anticipating earning \$100,000 from the partnership, a portion of which will cover Director Eliza Barton's salary for the year. Barton said school leaders were primarily financially motivated to enter into the partnership due to the fact that the school is a nonprofit that runs at a deficit and seeks grants and other ways to keep tuition affordable.

"For us, it comes down to what's best for children. Having resources, being fully funded and having low fees are all what's best for the family and for us, and that's what guided me and what still guides me into continuing the partnerships" Barton said.

Being invited to tag along on FDISD field trips and having access to the district's school buses are added benefits, she said, and district personnel have been supportive on the administrative level. "It's been wonderful, and everything the district said they were gonna do, they did," Barton said. "To me, they went above and beyond in each and every situation."

The partnerships do involve a slew of additional administrative duties for both entities, particularly the public school district. Partner organizations are required to provide daily attendance records and beginning, middle and end-of-year assessments tracking student progress. (Because all students enrolled are pre-K through second graders, the STAAR test is not required.)

FDISD coordinates with partner schools to receive daily attendance reports and test results and formally hires employees from each partner organization to meet required student-teacher ratios. Having to pick up

several salaries without cash in hand from the increased enrollment initially put the district in a bit of a bind, requiring Hicks to submit an attendance adjustment to TEA in October, which was granted. He will have to do the same again this coming year, he said.

In order to handle the additional administrative load and grow the early childhood education partnership program, the district hired a public education information management system (PEIMS) coordinator in addition to Deputy Superintendent Hartmann. Hicks said, so far, the additional administrative burden placed on the district is well worth it. "There's no question, it's been a challenge," Hicks said. "But the benefits of the challenge far outweigh the extra work."

Barton said Alpine Montessori didn't have a problem meeting the district's requirements. Attendance tracking took around five minutes each day and the district provided the computers and software required for student's beginning, middle and end-of-year assessments. She said while Alpine Montessori was already performing student assessments, access to the district's software proved helpful for further identifying student's weaknesses. "It was a way to assess them and get reporting through a software system that we wouldn't have otherwise been able to afford," Barton said.

If the school district is paying the salary of a private school employee as part of the partnership agreement, the funds come out of the private school's 50% split, Hicks said. Any remaining money is then sent to the private school in the form of a lease payment, because FDISD "students" are using the private school's space.

This year, Hicks "hired" 14 remote employees from private, early childhood schools. While they are FDISD employees on paper, they effectively remain employees of the schools where they were already working. Barton was the employee from Alpine Montessori hired by FDISD this past year. She said it was beneficial not only for the school, which was relieved from paying her salary, but also for her personally. Because she worked as a public school teacher in the state of Texas for 16 years before switching over to the Montessori school, she was able to continue to contribute to her teacher retirement system (TRS) account.

Alpine Montessori and Barton will benefit from the same agreement next year, but with a different partner district: Alpine ISD. Alpine Christian School will remain with FDISD. Hicks said, in his opinion, it is not a matter of competition as to who can secure these partnerships, but "a matter of best fit," with partners mutually agreeing on the level of involvement they would like to have. Alpine ISD Superintendent Michelle Rinehart said, in her opinion, local school districts should have the right of first refusal.

Hicks said there are plenty of partnerships to go around and he certainly doesn't "intend to be greedy." FDISD has offered to share how to implement the private, early childhood partnership program with neighboring districts, he said. They invited area superintendents to a meeting on the topic, but only Rinehart and an assistant superintendent from Fort Stockton showed up, he said.

“I sympathize with other area schools that are struggling,” Hicks said. “We offered to show them how to do it. We said we’ll give you a template, we’ll walk you through the process, we’ll even help you find a partner that contacted us, but they may be a better fit for you.”

Rinehart said AISD will use the revenue generated from the Alpine Montessori partnership to pay for a staff member to pursue more partnerships outside of the area. She said while she believes local partnerships are the best case scenario, there are a limited number of early childhood schools in the area, and larger, urban districts may not have the capacity to pursue the opportunity with their local schools, leading smaller, rural districts to seek partnerships outside of their geographic area.

Either way, it’s a “way to bring more resources to underfunded educational institutions in our community,” Rinehart said.

Rinehart said the district’s goal with the program is to attempt to make up for its estimated 15% loss of state allotment that results from a number of issues, including disputes between the state comptroller and local appraisal district regarding property values, a local option homestead exemption and more. “Could we at least get to a position where we’re made whole, and receive what the state says we’re supposed to be receiving every year, but we’re not?” Rinehart said.

AISD and Alpine Montessori are already working together in some capacities, Rinehart said. The district received a \$1 million Stronger Connections grant for student wellness programs which, due to federal grant requirements, Alpine Montessori will receive a portion of. Because AISD has a relationship with the Texas Workforce Commission due to its daycare facility, and Alpine Montessori holds a “rising star” certification from the state, the Montessori school will receive a one-time \$25,000 payment from the state for the new partnership.

The private, early childhood education partnerships do raise questions about public school dollars funneling into private, potentially religious, schools — a hotly debated topic as of late due to Gov. Greg Abbott’s ongoing push for school vouchers. Alpine Christian School’s web home page notes, “We train our students to view the world and academics through a Christian lens,” which includes religious imagery and teachings. So, it’s clear that students in the private school are receiving a taxpayer subsidized Christian education.

Hicks maintains that the partnerships are keeping his district afloat, even if many questions remain about any state-legislated voucher systems moving forward.

“The devil is in the details, and nobody has seen the details,” Hicks said. “They can say we want school vouchers, but how are they going to calculate that into my allocation from the state? Nobody has put that out there. How is it going to benefit me? I don’t know.”

Both Rinehart and Hicks agree that the only reason they have to pursue these early childhood education partnerships is because the state is failing to address funding inequities in public education. They would prefer legislators stop pursuing school vouchers and begin to seriously address flaws in the school funding formula — **which they failed to do this past legislative session** — but that’s not the reality they are facing.

“If the state would ever fix the funding, yeah, I would love to have that funding. I don’t like having a large organization. I don’t think it’s very efficient,” Hicks said. “But I don’t have any other choice. It’s not like there’s an option for me. I have to do it this way.”

“This is not the only way that more resources could come to our area,” Rinehart said. “Legislative leadership and leadership from our state officials to fund public education with funds that the state has could solve this overnight and could have the last legislative session.”