



IN-DEPTH PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT  
Spring Branch Independent School District, Texas



MARCH 2015



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## About This Report

### Acknowledgments

CRPE credits Spring Branch Independent School District for being open to a review of the district as it implements the portfolio strategy. This report is a subjective analysis of interview data and should be considered a starting point for a citywide conversation about the district, its goals, and ways to measure the work going forward. Our thanks go to the board members and department directors who readily gave their time to us. Our most particular thanks go to Superintendent Duncan Klusmann and Executive Director of Strategic Leadership and Innovation Elliott Witney for opening the district to us.

### About the Author

**Libuse Binder** is a former research analyst at CRPE. Her work with the Portfolio Network included communicating with portfolio district leaders to follow progress, and helping to convey CRPE's understanding of what the portfolio strategy looks like in practice. Ms. Binder is currently executive director of Charter Board Partners, Washington State.

### About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families.

Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools.

CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through private philanthropic dollars, federal grants, and contracts.

## Executive Summary

Spring Branch Independent School District (SBISD) is an urban-suburban district located in Houston, Texas. It adopted the portfolio strategy as a way to reach its goal of doubling the post-secondary completion rate from the district average of 36 percent in 2012 to 72 percent in 2017.<sup>1</sup> Superintendent Duncan Klussmann, who plans to retire in 2015, has led SBISD since 2004 and has built a coalition of loyal school and district staff who have worked to improve preparation for higher education, engage stakeholders throughout the community, and apply rigorous performance standards.

While the Texas Legislature categorizes the school system as a “high-wealth district,” 58 percent of its 35,000 students come from low-income households, 32 percent are limited English-proficient, and 58 percent are Hispanic. The Spring Branch community is divided geographically by Interstate 10. Most of Spring Branch’s higher-performing schools lie in more affluent neighborhoods south of the freeway. The neighborhoods north of I-10 are home to most of the district’s historically lower-performing schools.

The district has worked to bridge this divide and to increase performance overall, creating community unity around its “T-2-4” campaign, which seeks to “double the number of students completing a technical certificate, military training, two-year degree, or four-year degree” by 2017.<sup>2</sup> The T-2-4 initiative grew out of a process that began in fall 2010 when the district launched a task force to develop its five-year plan. Though the district’s current overall graduation rate is around 90 percent, fewer than half of those graduates go on to obtain a technical or college degree. Unsatisfied with these results, SBISD decided to set an ambitious and highly publicized goal. [The Spring Branch Plan, 2012-2017](#), lays out district priorities, including improved K-12 academic performance, a 100 percent high school graduation rate, and 100 percent of graduates ready with the skills needed to succeed in college or other post-secondary training.

Since embarking on its T-2-4 campaign, SBISD has had to further leverage its already strong community relationships, especially among residents who don’t have a vested interest in Spring Branch schools. Only about 20 percent of residents who live within the district boundaries have students who currently attend SBISD schools. The population is varied—many are retirees, families whose children have already graduated from SBISD, or those whose children attended

other schools. Even so, the community at large has a history of supporting the district’s key initiatives. In 2007, voters passed a \$597 million education bond, the largest in district history.

Spring Branch ISD has continued to implement the portfolio strategy in the months since CRPE researchers conducted interviews. This report encompasses SBISD’s mindset and activities at two different points in time: the original round of interviews with district leaders in October 2013, and a follow-up snapshot assessment in July 2014.

### USING DATA AND DISTRICT-CHARTER COLLABORATION TO TACKLE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

SBISD needed to make the case to parents and community members for why the district needed the T-2-4 plan. District leaders used data to show that even students from the higher-performing schools were struggling to succeed in college and were not well prepared as a group for post-high school life. These data helped to convince parents that more needed to be done to improve outcomes for all students. The district hired academic advisors to support students in applying to higher education programs, and it contracted with KIPP and YES Prep to run two middle schools that would be co-located with two of the district’s lowest-performing middle schools. The resulting SKY Partnership (Spring Branch/KIPP/YES Prep) has garnered national attention as an example of how to leverage a healthy district-charter collaboration in order to improve schooling options, as well as to share both resources and best practices.

### CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAMS ADDRESSING SPECIFIC NEEDS

As part of its T-2-4 goal, and to increase the number of high-quality options for all students, the district has embraced implementation of the portfolio strategy—a framework in which cities or districts manage a portfolio of schools, including some run by charter authorizers and other independent entities.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Klussmann and the district’s Executive Steering Committee put together five cross-functional teams (CFTs) to decide the best approaches to achieving district

1. Based on six-year graduation data from the graduating class of 2004 when the goal was set in 2010.

2. “[The Spring Branch Plan 2012-17](#).” Spring Branch Independent School District, accessed February 13, 2015.’

3. The [portfolio strategy](#), devised by the Center on Reinventing Public Education, creates diverse options for families in all neighborhoods by opening new high-performing, autonomous schools; giving all schools control of budgeting and hiring; and holding schools accountable to common performance standards. It is a continuous improvement strategy, with city and district leaders and educators constantly learning from the work and seeking better outcomes through innovation.

goals quickly. The teams are tasked with everything from revising existing systems to developing tools and training to reimagining the district's governance role. The CFTs, which began meeting in November of 2013, comprise more than 100 district staff, including principals, assistant principals, district administrators, and school board members. The CFTs focus on five areas:

- Leadership Pipeline (developing a pipeline for all SBISD positions, from teacher leaders to the superintendent)
- Driving Results (developing a performance management strategy with stringent and transparent accountability systems)
- Teacher Development and Evaluation
- Spring Branch To and Through (increasing percentage of students achieving T-2-4 goal)
- T-2-4 Culture (supporting and developing a strong T-2-4 culture at individual schools as well as developing a system to measure the health of the SBISD culture)<sup>4</sup>

## COMMITTING TO BEING A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

The entire district is united behind achieving the T-2-4 goal in less than three years. Most district staff interviewed feel that there is a positive trajectory, both in terms of student achievement and overall district morale. Furthermore, all district employees we spoke with shared clarity about the T-2-4 goal. But not all employees were clear about their role in achieving it. SBISD must find ways to determine and convey specific goals and interim metrics that all staff can measure and work toward.

One of the district's greatest strengths is that it is open and willing to try the best ideas, wherever they come from. Dr. Klussmann has been vocal about his willingness to learn change management strategies from all sectors and to find and integrate best practices from not only the education sector, but also from the business and philanthropic sectors. Given this reputation, SBISD has been able to attract talent nationally and has worked closely with both KIPP and YES Prep to co-locate campuses and partner on professional development for teachers and leaders.

## IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

We see structural challenges that may get in the way of fully implementing the portfolio strategy and meeting the district's T-2-4 goal by 2017:

- What interim metrics will Spring Branch put in place to measure progress toward its T-2-4 goal?
- Which departments will be responsible for each of these metrics?

- What will be the consequences for schools not making significant progress toward the T-2-4 goal?
- How will Spring Branch further engage lower-income communities?
- How will Spring Branch continue to expand and improve its quality options?
- How can the district restructure to support a higher level of autonomy for all school leaders?
- Will Spring Branch be able to successfully implement its new talent strategy?
- Do schools get the funding they need in a way they can use, especially to support innovation and more autonomy over curriculum and staffing?
- With its growing enrollment and shrinking state funding, how will Spring Branch continue to ensure a high-quality education for all its students?
- Does everyone—from district leadership to school staff to key community leaders—understand their specific role in supporting the T-2-4 goal?

In this report, we take a baseline measure on these issues and other key portfolio components, and suggest ways SBISD might seek progress over the next year.

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE SBISD PORTFOLIO STRATEGY

In October 2013, researchers from the CRPE conducted a rigorous qualitative analysis of the internal processes and policies of Spring Branch Independent School District related to portfolio management.

CRPE is the portfolio strategy expert—developing the strategy and studying various aspects of portfolio reform since 1993 and supporting cities and districts with portfolio implementation since 2008.

Portfolio works toward the promise of a great school for every child in every neighborhood. The portfolio strategy's seven key components are:

- Good options and choices for all families
- School autonomy
- Pupil-based funding for all schools
- Talent-seeking strategy
- Sources of support for schools
- Performance-based accountability for schools
- Extensive public engagement

4. Spring Branch ISD brief describing cross-functional teams, provided to CRPE December 2013.

## RESEARCH METHODS

For this analysis, CRPE researchers worked with the SBISD Executive Director of Strategic Leadership and Innovation to identify and interview people in key roles. Over the course of several days in October 2013, researchers met with and interviewed 18 key district leaders, school board members, and principals to get a sense of the work, challenges, expectations, and the respondents' take on what needs to happen next.

Researchers developed interview questions for each type of respondent. Broad questions covered plans, strategy, and expectations. Certain respondents, such as department heads, were asked specific questions pertaining to specific portfolio strategy components.

In addition, we did some general background research, including reviewing documents presented to the school board about the cross-functional teams and the T-2-4 goal and metrics, descriptions of community engagement initiatives, Explore SKY Partnership documentation, the district-charter collaboration compact, and SBISD's annual district profile.

### WHERE SBISD CURRENTLY STANDS: 2013 BENCHMARK SUMMARY

Below is a brief summary of how SBISD currently performs on the portfolio strategy framework's seven components. A more complete analysis and comparison to cities across the country that are similarly engaged in implementing the portfolio strategy—including CRPE's recommendations for next steps to generate progress on the portfolio strategy in the year ahead—is provided in later sections of this report.

#### Good Options and Choices for All Families

The district has made an effort to inform families about school choice and the in-district transfer policy, which allows families to choose a different school if space is available. Currently, families find out about their options through word of mouth and the district's annual school choice fair. Preliminary results suggest that these early efforts seem to be driving enrollment in higher-performing schools. For example, Spring Woods Middle School, one of the district's highest-performing middle schools, has seen a steady increase in enrollment since the effort began to inform families about their options.

The district also has a long history of productive engagement with its charter sector, including a successful district-charter collaboration compact. For more than a decade, Spring Branch has had two in-district charter schools: both admit students via lottery, one school has admissions criteria. Spring Branch ISD also works closely with KIPP and YES Prep and has contracted with them to run two middle-

school programs that are co-located at two of the district's chronically underperforming middle schools. In addition, SBISD is contracting with YES Prep to co-locate a high school at Northbrook High School in fall 2015 to give students graduating from the KIPP and YES Prep middle schools a charter high school option. The district has aligned its application form and timeline with its charter partners. SBISD does not provide transportation to families who transfer to a school outside of their neighborhood. Currently, only 16 percent of families are choosing a school other than their zoned school.

The district has been working to ensure every school has a high-performing principal and leadership team; it plans to replace ineffective leadership teams with those with a proven track record as school leaders or assistant principals. SBISD is also exploring other practices in its own system. For example, they have started a "district management organization," empowering a high-performing school leader with two campuses. Rather than chartering, they have allowed her to run two campuses and have granted her all the autonomy she needs to run those schools.

#### School Autonomy

School leaders in SBISD have a range of autonomy: they are free to use whatever curriculum they choose and are no longer required to use district-created common assessments. Currently, principals can recommend candidates for hiring, but the superintendent has final say in staffing decisions (both hiring and firing), and leaders have minimal budget freedom. District leadership is expressing interest in giving principals autonomy over staffing, budget, and hiring decisions, and one of the cross-functional teams is devoted to determining the best ways to roll out autonomy. The district has a traditional structure for budgeting and hiring, so this change will require restructuring and a push to move more decision-making to the school level. While some district leaders expressed concern that not all principals are ready for autonomy, the district rolled out an autonomy pilot program in the 2014–2015 school year with their school leaders. The pilot gives school leaders an opportunity to prove that they can handle this new level of responsibility; for example, the standardized, common assessment program is being managed at the campuses. The pilot also helps the district determine what additional supports are needed to expand into a system with more autonomous schools.

Each leader is paired with an executive business leadership coach. The coach and the "driving results" cross-functional team are charged with supporting the development of school leaders and tracking outcomes of this new autonomous model.

## Pupil-Based Funding For All Schools

SBISD currently operates with a traditional funding model, where most resources are controlled and disbursed through the district's financial office. The district distributes state funds through a per-pupil allocation; the district sets and disburses 85 to 90 percent of each school's budget. While the district financial office is supportive of the T-2-4 strategy, that office is concerned that schools lack the capacity to handle the increased responsibility. Despite the strong district-wide focus on developing a leadership pipeline, district leaders believe there needs to be more focus on the specific training principals would need to oversee a larger portion of the school budget.

## Talent-Seeking Strategy

Spring Branch has put much effort into developing a pipeline of strong teachers and leaders, actively recruiting talent from external programs and identifying and elevating internal candidates. The district currently offers leadership development to school team leaders, assistant principals, and principals, and has expanded its partnership with alternative programs like Teach for America and Teach for Texas. A new partnership was recently launched to develop what might evolve into a master's program with the University of Houston focused on instructional coaching with KIPP, YES Prep, and neighboring Aldine Independent School District. In addition, the district has established a memorandum of understanding with Relay Graduate School of Education in Houston to expand high-quality options for master's degrees to district teachers. In an effort to provide additional school staff with professional development opportunities, a wide range of staff are encouraged to participate in the optional school review teams that work to assess each other's campuses.

Different departments in the district manage human capital. A senior staff position is devoted to human resources, another manages leadership pipeline and development, and another manages recruitment and evaluation. The challenge now is how to synthesize the development and recruitment efforts into a more streamlined system that cultivates strong talent pipelines, supports new ideas and recruitment strategies, strengthens teacher evaluation and performance expectations, and trains school leaders to build and develop their own teams.

## Sources of Support for Schools

SBISD provides the majority of school services and is in early-stage discussions about how to give school leaders more options for instructional services and professional development. Beyond these, all services are provided or contracted directly by the district. But this has the potential to change as the autonomy pilot highlights which providers and partners are needed to support increased school-level freedom.

## Performance-Based Accountability for Schools

District leadership believes the current Texas state accountability system doesn't provide data that allows the system to drive toward T-2-4. Since the district is focused on completing higher education, they don't think that a focus exclusively on state accountability gives them enough or the right type of information. To address this discrepancy between state standards and district standards, SBISD rolled out an internal accountability system for all schools with more stringent standards in 2013. The system tracks performance across schools using a variety of measures. All accumulated school data is available to school leaders and board members, but has not yet been shared with the public. The district has yet to set performance targets, and, at this point, even chronically low-performing schools are not in danger of replacement. The district plans to publish the results of the new accountability system in the form of a report card in both English and Spanish. Chronically under-performing schools are slated for intervention in the form of a leadership change. When published, the report card will be the first of its kind in the district and offer a factual review of schools and their performance on a number of measures.

## Extensive Public Engagement

Communication and engagement throughout the district is one of SBISD's greatest strengths. Thanks to a charismatic superintendent, a clear goal, and robust community partnerships, the district has been able to galvanize much of the community behind its T-2-4 goal. Both Spring Branch's Good Neighbor program and mentoring program offer tangible ways for community members to support individual students, school academic targets, and extracurricular activities. Convergence around the district's T-2-4 goal is seen as a community goal, rather than a district one. The district has been focused on outreach and involvement efforts to better engage the historically underrepresented Hispanic community.

## Conclusion

Spring Branch ISD has done an impressive job building community support by engaging families, community members, and district staff around a shared goal and steps to get there. The district must now move quickly to keep the focus on reaching these goals.

The district's cross-functional teams are a good start but they must move from simply meeting to deciding and implementing. First on the list is establishing clear expectations and measures for all schools. SBISD has an opportunity to improve school accountability and the transparency of that process. Families and community members need clear information about school performance. An online version of a school report card should be released, along with a print version shortly thereafter.



The district should also continue to move toward a student-based allocation funding formula, using the principal autonomy pilot to see what funding decisions principals most value and to develop training that will help them build budgets reflecting their school priorities.

The district should consider transitioning to an open enrollment district with transportation provided where needed, especially to students currently attending chronically underperforming schools.

Now that the district has clearly established its T-2-4 goal for 2017, it should regularly report progress to the community and enlist the community's help in areas where it is not meeting benchmarks. SBISD's clear T-2-4 goal, supportive school board, commitment to being a learning organization, and strong relationship with the charter sector has laid the groundwork for the district to make rapid gains. The district has already made impressive progress. However, without taking bolder actions in the upcoming year, it will be challenged to meet its T-2-4 goal. The time is now for the district to act swiftly and achieve its ambitious goal.

## Snapshot Analysis of Spring Branch

**LEGEND:**

nothing in place yet

much work to be done

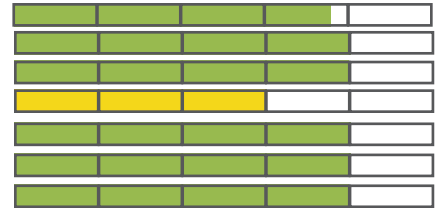
some elements in place

in progress

national exemplar

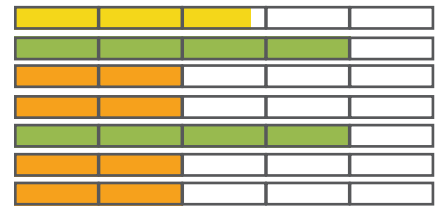
**GOOD OPTIONS AND CHOICES FOR ALL FAMILIES**

- School choice for all families
- Equity and access to all schools for special education students and English language learners
- Coordination of enrollment and school information for families across sectors
- New schools opened based on family/student/neighborhood need
- Schools replaced based on performance outcomes
- Intentional development of new district schools or homegrown charter schools



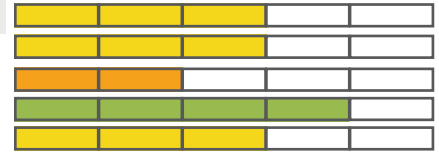
**SCHOOL AUTONOMY**

- All schools control staff selection and dismissal
- All schools control budget
- All schools control pay
- All schools control curriculum choice
- Autonomies are defined through MOUs, performance contracts, or charters
- Schools free to seek contractual waivers or exemptions



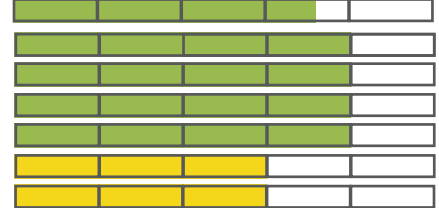
**PUPIL-BASED FUNDING FOR ALL SCHOOLS**

- District funds are allocated to schools based on number of students and student type
- High proportion of district funds being sent to and managed at the school level
- Common prices set for facilities and central services across sectors
- Plan in place to identify and address schools with low productivity (low achievement, low enrollment, or high costs)



**TALENT-SEEKING STRATEGY**

- Policies in place for using alternative pipelines to find/develop talent
- Recruitment of new principals from proven pipelines
- Recruitment of new teachers from proven pipelines
- Intensive development of teachers and leaders, and district staff
- Performance-based evaluation system in place to recognize or remove teachers and leaders
- Innovative ways to increase the numbers of students taught by strong teachers and leaders



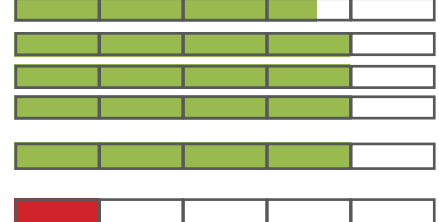
**SOURCES OF SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS**

- Schools free to choose support from an array of independent providers
- Procurement policies that enable schools to work with vendors, regardless of established district contracts
- Strategies to engage independent providers (educational technologies, professional development, interim assessments)



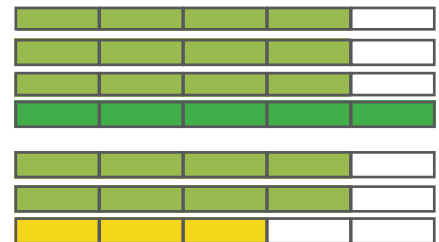
**PERFORMANCE-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SCHOOLS**

- Schools have rich and timely information on student and school performance
- Common school performance framework in place
- Performance framework uses multiple measures: student performance, student progress, school climate, student engagement, equity and access, long-term student outcomes
- Performance framework used as a significant factor in: school expansion, intervention, replacement/closure decisions
- Publication of a school report card based on common performance framework



**EXTENSIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

- Solicit ideas, values, and concerns from families and communities about school and district decisions
- Partnerships and coalitions with all key stakeholders
- Communication plan to convey information about reform strategy (including strategic plan, implementation schedule, annual updates, and external progress review)
- Plan for helping district and school staff understand and support the strategy
- Empower principals to be lead communicators about school and district strategy
- Public criteria and schedule for school closings and opening; clear and better options for families affected by closure





## Good Options and Choices for All Families

**DEFINING THE BENCHMARK** | In portfolio cities, families have the freedom to attend their neighborhood school or choose one that best fits their child. Portfolio cities make sure there are good schools in every neighborhood, but they try to avoid mandating school assignments. They also give families useful information and support to make enrolling clear and simple.

### ANALYZING SBISD'S CURRENT POSITION:



#### ELEMENT | School choice for all families



Spring Branch has 46 campuses, and 42 of those are run directly by the district. Two in-district charter schools serve grades 6–12 (one middle school and one school combining middle and high school). In addition, the district contracts with two charter management organizations (KIPP and YES Prep) to offer two middle school options. Both of these schools are co-located at district-run schools.

Currently, students are assigned to a neighborhood school. They can opt into any other school if the receiving school has room, but transportation is not provided for these choices, which can prove an impediment to choice. (One exception to the transportation policy is for students who want to attend KIPP and YES Prep and live within the neighborhood zone where those two schools are located. In this case, transportation is provided.) Parents have to fill out a separate application to apply to KIPP or YES Prep. In addition, parents must also transfer students only during the designated transfer period every spring.

SBISD held their first choice fair in 2013 to explain all the school choices available to families. Each school was asked to create an information sheet about its programs. The district also asked teachers to tell families about their choices, especially the in-district transfer policy. In some instances, the fair seemed to have an impact. For example, Springwood Middle School, the district's highest-performing middle school, has seen enrollment increase steadily since participating in the choice fair.

Currently, the district aligns its application dates with KIPP and YES Prep. The waitlist for KIPP and YES is small; district leaders believe that parents are not yet fully aware of their choices. To address this, the communication team is working with school leaders to teach them how to better communicate options to families. And the district is working with KIPP and YES Prep to develop a single application system so parents can apply to all schools at once.

#### ELEMENT | Equity and access to all schools for special education students and English language learners



The district has extensively analyzed the effectiveness of its eight dual-language programs. After finding results were lagging in several areas, they are giving school leaders autonomy over these programs to encourage the discovery of different, more effective approaches. The most effective programs for English language learners (ELL) have been at the KIPP and YES Prep campuses, which take a two-way dual-language approach.

One of the in-district charter schools operates an accelerated middle school program, which has grade and conduct requirements for admission. While it is one of the district's highest-performing schools, it is not providing equal opportunity to the district's special education and ELL students. The KIPP and YES Prep schools serve special education and ELL students in percentages similar to those of district schools overall.

#### ELEMENT | Coordination of enrollment and school information for families across sectors



Starting in the 2013–14 school year, parents could use a common application for all choice options (in-district charters/contract charters). While the application is housed on the district website, traditional district schools are not part of this application process. Families must follow a different process and fill out different forms to exercise choice through the in-district transfer process. Currently only 16 percent of district families choose to go to schools other than their assigned neighborhood school. In response to these relatively low numbers, the district is moving toward a common application for all schools for the 2015–2016 school year that will have the same deadline and application for all schools in the district.

## ELEMENT | New schools opened based on family/student/neighborhood need



As part of its efforts to offer more options to students zoned to chronically lower-performing schools, SBISD several years ago co-located and contracted a YES Prep Middle School on its Northbrook Middle School campus and a KIPP Middle School on its Landrum Middle School campus. Rather than authorizing a charter, the district contracted with KIPP and YES Prep to provide educational services to Spring Branch ISD students. The district had 1,600 students attending charter schools in 2014, an increase of 100 students from the previous year. In addition, almost 1,300 students had a choice option as a component of their day in 2014, through the district's vocational options, charter programs, and/or transfer policy.

The district also plans to open a YES Prep high school in the 2015–2016 school year to serve 600 students from YES Prep Middle School, KIPP Middle School, and any other district students interested in attending a high school that follows the “No Excuses” college preparatory model (as space allows). The first two contract schools have been well received by the community; the district is in talks with other high-quality providers about the possibility of additional contract schools. If this happens, more community input is needed to determine school location and what type(s) of programming to offer.

## ELEMENT | Schools replaced based on performance outcomes



While SBISD has no plans for wholesale replacement of underperforming schools, those schools are in the process of getting new principals and leadership teams. Spring Branch is also exploring the possibility of expanding its SKY partnership. When determining the need for school intervention, SBISD uses its internal accountability system performance measures rather than focusing on Texas state test results. The district's “driving results” cross-functional team is focused on developing internal metrics to allow the district to judge performance as it relates to meeting the goal of preparing all students for success “to and through” college and other post-secondary ventures. Spring Branch is discussing authorizing an in-district achievement zone similar to the Achievement School District in Tennessee or the Recovery School District in Louisiana that would open up autonomy and innovation to more quickly turn around lower-performing schools.

## ELEMENT | Intentional development and opening of new schools



While the district would like to expand its offerings, the challenge is to demonstrate the need. Both KIPP and YES Prep have short waitlists; the district needs to expand its efforts to make choice more accessible to all families. As more families ask for more options, both KIPP and YES Prep have voiced a willingness to expand. The SKY Partnership could possibly expand to include in-district providers (utilizing in-house talent) with a proven track record in the school system.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOOD OPTIONS AND CHOICES FOR ALL FAMILIES

### Enroll higher-performing schools to capacity

The majority of families in Spring Branch ISD choose to go to their neighborhood school. The district should publicize options more broadly to families whose children are in chronically underperforming schools, eliminate barriers to access (such as different application deadlines and requirements), and offer more transportation options. Robust information about what each school offers and a more streamlined enrollment process will make it easier for families to access choice. SBISD should align their choice and transfer process so families can make decisions among all school options at once.

### Improve information systems for families

While the district currently has an internal accountability system that measures school performance, it is crucial that families in low-performing schools are informed that their school is not performing as well as other district schools and understand the other options available. The descriptive information “one-pagers” that schools are producing should be coupled with school performance data, based on the internal accountability system. This information should be user-friendly and accessible both in a printed and online format in English and Spanish. [The New Orleans Parents Guide](#) is a good example of how this information could be presented.

### Improve quality of current options

One possible solution is to transform low-performing schools into innovation schools and run them as in-district charters, with all the autonomies KIPP and YES Prep currently have. Principals at these innovation schools would sign a memorandum of understanding with the district to grant them autonomy over staffing, budget, and curriculum. In turn, these school leaders would be expected to show significant school performance growth each year in order to continue to lead their school.

### Expand collaboration with charter schools

Both KIPP and YES Prep have a track record of serving high-poverty student populations well in Houston. SBISD should continue to be strategic about scaling up with the charter sector and finding partners with distinctive programs, as well as partnering with CMOs to help attract talent to Spring Branch. The charter schools also serve to operate as an example of school freedom that the district can strive to give to its traditional public schools.

### Open enrollment to all students

One of the district's highest-performing schools has selective admissions requirements, and parents must fill out different applications in order to attend KIPP and YES Prep. The district should run a transparent common enrollment process that opens all schools to all students, including schools with a waitlist. A common enrollment system that aligns application deadlines and requirements into a single document is planned as part of the SKY Partnership. The district should follow through with its plan to have this system in place for the 2015–2016 school year. A CRPE brief, [“Coordinating Enrollment Across School Sectors: An Overview of Common Enrollment Systems.”](#) lays out some of the basic considerations when designing a common enrollment system.



### School Autonomy

**DEFINING THE BENCHMARK** | In portfolio cities, principals and teachers—the people who work with students everyday—can decide what and how to teach to bring out the best work in their students. The principal is the center of the portfolio strategy.

**ANALYZING SBISD’S CURRENT POSITION:** 

**ELEMENT | All schools control staff selection and dismissal**



While principals can make staffing recommendations, the final say still rests with the superintendent. The autonomy pilot has prompted discussions about how to shift the structure to give that final say to principals. The hiring process currently starts at the district level; the human resources department conducts an initial screening of all candidates, although principals can identify and encourage candidates to enter this process. Principals receive coaching from the district on how to hire for mission alignment and growth potential. Once principals have screened candidates, they recommend to the district those they would like to hire.

Texas has no collective bargaining agreement, so dismissal decisions are made through a district termination process. In 2014, principals recommended 60 of the district’s approximately 2,700 teachers for dismissal. Most chose to resign rather than go through the dismissal process.

**ELEMENT | All schools control budget**



Most budget control still rests at the central office, with school leaders controlling between 10 percent and 15 percent of their overall budget. Some district staff expressed concern that principals aren’t yet ready for budget autonomy; some also expressed the belief that even those who are ready should focus on improving instruction rather than managing a budget. Principals are able to propose changes to their staffing models, but these must be justified by the principals and approved by the school board. SBISD has taken a firm stance on the importance of co-curricular activities—such as sports, band, and arts programs—and therefore requires that all schools offer them. The same is true even with the two contract charter schools, which have full flexibility over curriculum but must offer co-curricular activities.

**ELEMENT | All schools control pay**



School leaders have little control over pay, which is determined mainly by number of years served. Schools can offer stipends for additional work, such as designing curriculum or assessments.

**ELEMENT | All schools control curriculum choice**



The two in-district charter schools have autonomy over which curriculum they use as long as the curriculum covers the Texas essential knowledge and skills standards. KIPP and YES Prep also have full autonomy over their curriculum. The superintendent has encouraged teachers and leaders in traditional public schools to modify, supplement, and even write new lesson plans, as long as these new plans prepare students for the common assessments and are aligned with state standards. While SBISD had to get a contract for specific textbooks, schools are not required to use them. All trainings and professional development sessions are now voluntary. While there is no central oversight or approval of modified lesson plans, school leaders are held accountable to student results. And those teachers and schools that are demonstrating results have been asked to share what they are doing with the rest of the district. The district has placed an increasing emphasis on innovation and improvement, but also needs to agree on metrics that all schools must meet to ensure that students are on track to meet the T-2-4 goal.

**ELEMENT | Autonomies are defined through memorandums of understanding (MOUs), performance contracts, or charters**



The district is implementing an autonomy pilot and is working with the cross-functional teams to define what autonomies these early adopters will be given. The plan is to put these autonomies in writing, but this has yet to happen.

## ELEMENT | Schools free to seek contractual waivers or exemptions

Principals are able to schedule an extended day, and most schools utilize this freedom to extend programming. Principals are also able to allocate teacher time as they see fit; however, the system-wide master schedule makes it difficult to make significant changes.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL AUTONOMY

### Roll out autonomy with input from principals

SBISD will learn much from piloting autonomy with principals in the co-pilot seat. The process needs to start with the understanding that the district and the principals will learn as they go—principals will learn how to leverage the new freedoms for better student outcomes, and the district will learn what supports need to be in place for greater autonomy district wide. The district should consider Phase Two of autonomy as something that district leaders could opt into, but that all principals should know that this is the direction the district is heading and continue to seek their feedback on what this should look like. For a practical how-to on rolling out autonomy, [see this CRPE brief](#).

### Set a date for the whole district to be autonomous in three to five years

The message to the rest of the school leaders should be this: We will become a district of empowered, autonomous leaders. You were not trained for this, but we will train you. If you don't want to do this, you have time to find another leadership position in another district. But in three (or five) years, all school leaders in SBISD will have control over hiring, dismissal, curriculum, and budget—with the expectation that if school leader decisions don't lead to improved student achievement and a positive climate, another leader will be waiting to take the helm.

### Put autonomies in writing

The district should also consider codifying principals' freedom and increased accountability through a performance contract similar to the [NYC principal performance contracts](#) used when that city first piloted autonomy. Importantly, the cross-functional teams and district leadership should define the specific autonomies that each school leader will get and in what order the district would consider releasing these decisions/freedoms. The understanding should be that these early contracts are iterative and evolving as the district learns more about what supports are needed and continuously raises its leaders' performance expectations.

### Include budget training in the autonomy pilot

Some district leaders, including the superintendent, expressed hesitancy about relinquishing budget control to school leaders. As part of the training program for principals in the autonomy pilot, include operational training and consider whether some of the current central finance office staff could be moved to school sites to support principals directly.

### Shift the central office mindset

SBISD has cleared a major hurdle by being open to an autonomy pilot, but the district is used to running most schools along the same model. Now role and culture shifts are required to complete the transition to an autonomous system of schools. In the central office, everyone from the leadership team to middle management will need to shift from controlling and directing schools to supporting and serving schools. This may mean building a new reporting structure so that central office managers are comfortable taking risks, and providing a "red phone" approach to their principals by getting them help when they ask. And principals are buffered from central office demands of email and meeting requests. District leaders should review district protocols and job descriptions to ensure that centralized practices are not encroaching on school autonomy.

## Pupil-Based Funding for All Schools

**DEFINING THE BENCHMARK** | The pupil-based funding model links money to each student in a school, rather than to school positions. It allows principals to make spending choices that make the most sense for their school and to make sure as much money as possible is spent directly in classrooms, rather than at the central office.

**ANALYZING SBISD’S CURRENT POSITION:** 

**ELEMENT** | District funds are allocated to schools based on number of students and student type



Money follows each student in the system. Title I campuses receive more money, with restrictions on how it is used. SBISD uses a formula that calculates the amount of money per student based on each student’s needs. The current formula is based on ELL/FRL/SPED numbers but could be refined further. Each campus also has a parent-teacher association; funds raised through school PTAs can vary greatly. The district tries to offset this inequity through grants to campuses that raise less money.

**ELEMENT** | High proportion of district funds being sent to and managed at the school level



Approximately 85 percent of funds are held and disbursed directly by the central office.

**ELEMENT** | Common prices set for facilities and central services across sectors



KIPP and YES Prep pay the same amount for facilities and pay the same as district schools to vendors with whom the district has contracts. Transportation is provided to all schools and not charged to KIPP or YES Prep. All schools are able to purchase services from other providers outside of the district for some services, including supplemental curriculum and additional professional development. The central office negotiates and allocates larger contracts for services like transportation and food. Central office departments have not priced out their per-unit service cost. As schools move toward budget control, the goal is for principals to get a menu of services and choose which services they want to “buy back” from the district.

**ELEMENT** | Plan in place to identify and address schools with low productivity (low achievement, low enrollment, or high costs)



District enrollment has steadily increased over the last few years; it is currently at its highest in 25 years. It is unlikely that a school will be slated for closure due to low enrollment.

If enrollment drops due to performance, district leaders work with school leaders to improve the school, as well as to improve recruitment efforts.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUPIL-BASED FUNDING FOR ALL SCHOOLS

#### Get the facts on the true cost of central services

Currently, central office departments can’t say what their per-unit service costs are. It will be important to determine these costs over the next year to make progress in other areas, such as budget autonomy. Spring Branch’s CFO should continue to work with [Edunomics Lab](#), which has guided many districts in the transition to pupil-based funding.

#### Prioritize moving centralized resources to schools

SBISD should set an ambitious bar for the proportion of district funds that get sent to schools. The CFO and her office can work with principals in the pilot autonomy program to determine what training principals need, as well as which resources (such as IT and curriculum) can be moved immediately to the principal’s purview.

#### Close or merge underenrolled schools

As schools move toward operating on their true budgets, underenrolled schools will not be able to stay open. Some schools may be able to change up their program to attract more students, and they should be offered the freedom to do this (see the Recommendations for School Autonomy/Empowerment). But some schools will not be able to draw enough students, and SCS will need to help these schools either find another school to co-locate with, or close out.

#### Explore becoming a service provider to neighboring schools and districts

SBISD has a close and long-standing relationship with KIPP and YES Prep and they have an opportunity to collaborate further with these CMOs on professional development and curriculum. Working together, these three providers should create a menu of the best services they provide and offer them to more SBISD district schools and Houston-area school systems. This collaborative venture would serve to not only generate revenue for SBISD, but would also expand the reach of many successful and innovative curricula that individual teachers in Spring Branch are already developing.



### Talent-Seeking Strategy

**DEFINING THE BENCHMARK** | The most important element of education is the people who teach and lead the schools every day. Every city needs smart, compassionate, motivated, creative people working in the schools and district offices. Portfolio cities focus on developing the strong people they have and seeking new talent from the best training programs, districts, charter schools, and other sectors.

**ANALYZING SBISD’S CURRENT POSITION:** 

**ELEMENT** | Policies in place for using alternative pipelines to find and develop talent



Talent is a primary focus for the district and it is working to build robust talent pipelines, including identifying and recruiting talent through alternative programs. SBISD partners with Teach For America (TFA): in 2011–2012, the district hired 6 TFA teachers and then 20 the following year. For the 2013–2014 school year, the district requested 50 teachers from TFA but was only able to get 25. All TFA teachers are participating in the Teaching Excellence training program that YES Prep offers in collaboration with SBISD. The district is also in talks to partner with TFA in their fellowship program. And SBISD is discussing a partnership with the University of Houston and their year-long career-changers program that would culminate in a master’s degree and teaching certification.

**ELEMENT** | Recruitment of new principals from proven pipelines



While no formal structure yet exists, several district leadership team members heavily emphasize recruitment and have successfully hired several well-respected current and future leaders from both inside and outside the district with the intention of developing them into school leaders. The district is also building a master’s program at the University of Houston focused on instructional coaching in collaboration with KIPP, YES Prep, and Aldine ISD. Additionally, Spring Branch ISD is also focused on developing assistant principals’ skills to ensure they can handle the new level of autonomy that will be in place when they take the helm of a school.

**ELEMENT** | Recruitment of new teachers from proven pipelines



The district actively recruits second-year TFA teachers from the Houston area, although they have an agreement not to recruit teachers from their charter partners. The district also utilizes some traditional recruitment and is analyzing recruitment strategies at local universities and

examining where the best teachers are coming from. The district focuses heavily on ensuring that their teachers’ first year in the classroom is as positive as possible, laying the groundwork for a solid professional experience, reducing attrition, and developing strong teachers. To that end, SBISD is designing an internal onboarding program to improve early career experiences.

**ELEMENT** | Intensive development of teachers, leaders, and district staff



Strong teachers get the opportunity to become instructional coaches and/or serve on school review teams. Both of these district-wide professional development opportunities are ways to move up the career path, and they are both district-wide professional development opportunities. However, there are no reported measures of how well this program is doing at improving teacher effectiveness. SBISD is partnering with KIPP and YES Prep to identify the best avenues for identifying talent, as well as successful recruitment and development initiatives. Thus far, five candidates from SBISD have gone through the Rice University Education Entrepreneurship Program. Relay Graduate School of Education will start a master of arts in teaching program for early career teachers.

**ELEMENT** | Performance-based evaluation system in place to recognize or remove teachers and leaders



SBISD doesn’t believe in performance pay as a proven mechanism to motivate performance, but the district is looking at ways to reward teachers that include more autonomy, increased recognition, and professional development opportunities (such as participating on the school review panels). The district is also trying to determine how to give school leaders the flexibility to offer incentives to teachers as they see fit, and to empower school leaders to figure out what motivates different teachers to work at peak performance throughout the year. The “talent” cross-functional team is also looking at how high-performing CMOs have used incentives to retain high-performing teachers. The district is adamant that student performance—and therefore

teacher performance—be defined by more than state tests and that it be tied to other measures such as college performance. SBISD also continues to revise its policy about how to remove ineffective leaders.

### **ELEMENT | Innovative ways to increase the numbers of students taught by strong teachers and leaders**



The district is in the early stages of placing more struggling students with the best teachers and sharing the work of those teachers more widely across district classrooms. Exemplary teachers are asked to participate in the district's school review process; one goal is to build a systematic performance management culture focused on sharing and identifying best practices. SBISD is also exploring ways to use technology to extend the reach of strong teachers

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TALENT-SEEKING STRATEGY**

### **Establish a clear professional evaluation process for teachers**

The cross-functional team focusing on teacher development and evaluation needs to produce a teacher appraisal system that can be piloted by a small group of leaders. This system should include multiple opportunities for evaluation and feedback throughout the school year, as well as other weighted measures such as student achievement and growth.

### **House all human capital functions under one department**

Currently, a disconnect exists between teacher development, teaching and learning, and human resources. Due to a \$37 million budget shortfall several years ago, SBISD has dramatically cut staff in the teaching and learning department. The district should use this restructuring opportunity to further streamline its human capital process. All human capital functions, including identifying strong teacher pipelines, recruiting, developing, and retaining, should be under one department. Further, school leaders should have full control over the staff in their building. The central office's role should be to identify and build strong pipelines for principals to choose from and then support the staff the leaders choose.

### **Continue to develop and publicize opportunities in Spring Branch**

SBISD has a reputation as a desirable place to work, but it needs to further differentiate itself from other Houston school districts by systematizing recruitment and development efforts. The district can do this by publicizing the new opportunities to be a Spring Branch principal with many new freedoms, getting the word out on the University of Houston partnership, and encouraging the best teachers in the area to work at Spring Branch and enroll in the university's master's program. The district should train all principals in the best ways to look for talent and encourage principals to share with their strongest teachers the options for meaningful early-leadership opportunities.

## Sources of Support for Schools

**DEFINING THE BENCHMARK** | Schools need to be able to make use of the best ideas and materials available. Those things may come from the district, but they also might come from local organizations or from online providers. Portfolio cities help schools find these best ideas, training, or materials, and allow them to choose and purchase what they want within their budget.

**ANALYZING SBISD’S CURRENT POSITION:**

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**ELEMENT** | Schools free to choose support from an array of independent providers



A recently revised policy allows SBISD schools to access resources from independent providers for professional development and similar services. However, the district still provides most services like transportation, nutrition, special programming, gifted and talented services, etc.

**ELEMENT** | Procurement policies that enable schools to work with vendors, regardless of established district contracts



SBISD is rolling out a new program to let district leaders work with any provider they want, as long as the district leader can justify to the district why they are using the alternate provider.

**ELEMENT** | Strategies to engage independent providers (educational technologies, professional development, interim assessments)



While the district is still the main service provider, it is moving toward a network system, much like New York City’s, where school leaders can opt into a network of providers that best suits their school’s needs. This transition will phase in as part of the pilot program for autonomous principals. Leading these efforts from a services standpoint is the Chief Information Officer, who is very open to the idea of broadening technology service providers.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOURCES OF SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS

#### Survey schools about what they need

To provide better service to all schools, the district needs to know what procurement processes are onerous and what services are subpar or lacking. The district should also ask school leaders and teachers which services they are buying outside the district that they are very satisfied with and explore ways to make those services more widely available. For example, the Chief Information Officer and his department should start to play the role of attracting and matching personalized learning supports to schools.

#### Learn from charter partners

Both KIPP and Yes Prep have been operating Houston-area schools for more than ten years and have established a pipeline of providers. Once areas of highest need have been identified, the district should work with KIPP and Yes Prep to identify providers who might best serve SBISD schools and possibly even scale up to serve schools across the greater Houston area.

#### Determine what successful service looks like in each department

The superintendent has done an excellent job instilling a culture of service to his senior cabinet. This culture must now permeate every district department. Each department should establish specific metrics to measure how effectively they support schools and how they support the T-2-4 goal. The “driving results” cross-functional team should work with each department to help identify these metrics.



### Performance-Based Accountability for Schools

**DEFINING THE BENCHMARK** | Schools need to be caring, cheerful, exciting places. They also must be places where children learn the challenging things they need to succeed in the world. For all the possibilities that portfolio cities give to schools, schools must be able to show they are teaching all students, and that students are engaged and prepared for the next grade or transition.

**ANALYZING SBISD’S CURRENT POSITION:** 

**ELEMENT** | Schools have rich and timely information on student and school performance



There is an emphasis on sharing data across school sites, as well as a district climate survey. District leaders didn’t think the Texas accountability standards were rigorous enough, so they developed an internal accountability system that includes metrics on college readiness, student achievement, student growth, attendance, discipline, and student engagement. Principals and teachers are expected to set performance goals that are aligned with these metrics. The results were made available to all school leaders and board members, but they are not yet available to the public.

**ELEMENT** | Common performance framework in place



As part of the district’s internal accountability system, the school system plans to publish a report on all schools (district, in-district charter, and contract charter) by the 2015–16 school year. While the accountability system will not have letter grades like the New York or Louisiana systems, the district expects all schools to demonstrate growth. District leadership expects that the report’s release will be disruptive to the overall system because the results of some schools will be surprising.

**ELEMENT** | Performance framework uses multiple measures: student performance, student progress, school climate, student engagement, equity and access, long-term student outcomes



The internal accountability system reflects all these measures, albeit in a somewhat limited way. The district refers to the state student performance reports, and all principals attend monthly vertical data meetings. While the district doesn’t think the state standards are rigorous enough, the district has yet to establish clear growth metrics. Student engagement is measured through the Tripod survey, equity and access are measured by ensuring the percentage of ELL and SPED

students are served in equal numbers across all schools. While Spring Branch is making a big push to measure long-term outcomes, much work still needs to be done to improve data analysis and collection. SBISD is working with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to collect these data and currently measures student outcomes up to six years after high school graduation.

**ELEMENT** | Performance framework used as a significant factor in: school expansion, intervention, replacement/closure decisions



The district uses the performance framework to determine what schools need a leadership change or reconstitution in some other way, including a possible expansion of the SKY partnership. While the district is “willing to do radical things to the schools north of I-10 that are chronically underperforming,” outright school closure is not part of its plan.

**ELEMENT** | Publication of a school report card based on a common performance framework



SBISD has no district-developed school report card to show how schools are doing across important measures and give families information to guide their enrollment choices. The state of Texas does grade schools on an A–F scale, and these results are public.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PERFORMANCE-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SCHOOLS

### Publish a report card as soon as possible in conjunction with the common application

SBISD's internal accountability system (IAS) already measures valuable information. For families to find the IAS helpful, it must be made into a user-friendly version that can both assist families in deciding which school is right for their child, and if necessary, give them the information needed to demand more from their current school. Further, the district should establish a transparent process each year with a clear timeline for families to opt into a different school, with priority given to families in lower-performing schools. If a school is slated for intervention, families in those schools should receive notice of their options and priority in transferring to another school. A school report card for all schools, including charter schools, should be issued in time for families to make enrollment decisions. [The New Orleans Parents Guide](#) offers a good model.

### Use the internal accountability system to make transparent decisions

The IAS should be used as the main tool when Spring Branch conducts a transparent annual review of schools. This review should be released in conjunction with the school report card. Spring Branch should continue to develop its pipeline of more effective programs, as it has already done with KIPP and YES Prep. Evaluation and intervention efforts should be accelerated to encompass all consistently underperforming schools.

### Extensive Public Engagement

**DEFINING THE BENCHMARK** | Cities need to know what families want and value and need to show what they will deliver. This strategy brings a lot of changes to schools. It works best if it channels the needs and dreams of communities for their children, and translates those into new opportunities for families, teachers, and school leaders.

**ANALYZING SBISD’S CURRENT POSITION:** 

**ELEMENT** | Solicit ideas, values, and concerns from families and communities about school and district decisions



Engagement about ways to improve educational opportunities for SBISD students is seen as a community goal, not just a district goal. There is a long-standing history of more traditional school engagement; every school has a community improvement team, a robust website that includes school events, active PTAs, and a very strong volunteer advisory board. The challenge recently has been how to communicate T-2-4 goals and solicit community feedback on how to improve specific schooling options. Dr. Klussmann has visited each school individually and presented school information about how many students from each school are continuing on to college and describing what the district wants to do to improve these numbers. The superintendent also engages with each neighborhood about how their schools are performing, which ones have waitlists, and what the district plans to do to improve the schools that are underperforming.

**ELEMENT** | Partnerships and coalitions with all key stakeholders



SBISD has been fortunate to have the long-standing support of local civic and philanthropic organizations, including coalitions of business and government leaders, with robust engagement around education reform. A team of community leaders meets regularly with the superintendent and the school board. Current district leaders, school board members, and most school leaders have strong and wide-reaching personal connections with grassroots community organizations and faith leaders. These relationships have been put to good use through district-wide mentoring and the Good Neighbor program, both of which offer community members tangible ways to assist with district improvement efforts. The district has 10,000 registered volunteers, and the Good Neighbor program honors top participants annually to recognize their efforts. Various internship opportunities through the district’s Guthrie Center High School create

partnership opportunities with many local companies. In addition, the superintendent has a strong relationship with state legislators. The district has also connected with several faith-based organizations, including one that has rebranded all its materials with the district’s T-2-4 goal, further extending the district’s reach.

**ELEMENT** | Communication plan to convey information about reform strategy (including strategic plan, implementation schedule, annual updates, and external progress review)



SBISD has a strong plan to convey information, progress, and the rationale behind district decisions. The district’s communication plan won the Best in Texas Award from the Texas School Public Relations Association in 2014. The district’s engagement office is a key strength, regularly updating the district website, networking nationally about the SKY Partnership, and finding opportunities for the superintendent to communicate directly with stakeholders. The district holds regular community meetings about initiatives, and the Spring Branch Education Foundation not only raises money for SBISD, it also helps communicate district progress to the public.

**ELEMENT** | Plan for helping district and school staff understand and support the strategy



District staff are able to articulate the strategy both internally and externally, although some still struggle to describe how they fit into it. District leadership recognizes this issue. To help bridge the gaps, the superintendent sends out YouTube messages, holds regular meetings with all district staff, and has put in place the district’s five cross-functional teams. These teams are charged with being the voice of the district, made up of principals, assistant principals, and district staff.

### **ELEMENT | Empower principals to be lead communicators about school and district strategy**



The district encourages families to see their school as the first point of contact when they have a concern or complaint. SBISD has a protocol for parents to give feedback if they don't feel their needs are being met at the school level. District leaders have expressed a strong desire to empower principals to articulate their own vision for their school.

### **ELEMENT | Public criteria and schedule for school closings and openings: clear and better options for families affected by closure**



As part of the five-year plan, SBISD published a timeframe for district plans to open new schools. For example, YES Prep will open a high school in the 2015–2016 school year to serve students currently in Spring Branch YES Prep and KIPP middle schools. When a school is slated for intervention, Campus Improvement Teams offer input on what should change (leadership, programming, etc.). These discussions are not always public.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXTENSIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

### **Publicly assess district progress toward its T-2-4 goal**

It will be critical to develop and circulate a district update soon. Once the cross-functional teams have established metrics and goals, these should be shared publicly as soon as possible. This report should include school performance goals based on the IAS, district department benchmarks and progress, quantitative evidence of progress based on the IAS, and a summary of cross-functional team work to date. The superintendent should use his YouTube presence to assess victories and challenges, engaging the community wherever possible to offer possible solutions.

### **Communicate more effectively with employees**

Spring Branch's organizational chart is outdated, which reflects the evolving district plan. It will be important to get a clear picture of the how each current or reorganized department works in service of the T-2-4 goal in coordination with each other. The district should build on its established ethos of openness and problem solving to establish a culture that also includes clarity of purpose and annual metrics for each department and employee.

### **Extend the district's problem-solving community**

Leverage strong existing district partnerships to find solutions for some of the district's stickier issues, such as how to assess and manage performance or how to move dollars more quickly to the purview of school leaders. More outreach should focus in particular on engaging the Hispanic community, as this community has been historically underrepresented in district decision-making.



## Conclusion

Spring Branch ISD has done an impressive job building community support by engaging families, community members, and district staff around a shared goal and steps to get there. The district must now move quickly to keep the focus on reaching these goals.

The district's cross-functional teams are a good start but they must move from simply meeting to deciding and implementing. First on the list is establishing clear expectations and measures for all schools. SBISD has an opportunity to improve school accountability and the transparency of that process. Families and community members need clear information about school performance. An online version of a school report card should be released, along with a print version shortly thereafter.

The district should also continue to move toward a student-based allocation funding formula, using the principal autonomy pilot to see what funding decisions principals

most value and to develop training that will help them build budgets reflecting their school priorities.

The district should consider transitioning to an open enrollment district with transportation provided where needed, especially to students currently attending chronically underperforming schools.

Now that the district has clearly established its T-2-4 goal for 2017, it should regularly report progress to the community and enlist the community's help in areas where it is not meeting benchmarks. SBISD's clear T-2-4 goal, supportive school board, commitment to being a learning organization, and strong relationship with the charter sector has laid the groundwork for the district to make rapid gains. The district has already made impressive progress. However, without taking bolder actions in the upcoming year, it will be challenged to meet its T-2-4 goal. The time is now for the district to act swiftly and achieve its ambitious goal.