

Alamo Colleges explores ties with districts

By Alia Malik STAFF WRITER



Matthew Busch / Contributor

Valedictorian Izabella Monreal heads to graduation for St. Philip's Early College High School in June.

After voicing a long list of misgivings, Alamo Colleges District trustees have authorized Chancellor Mike Flores to negotiate partnerships with school districts for daily operations at select campuses in its steadily expanding collection of early college high schools.

The partnerships would fall under Senate Bill 1882, a two-year-old law that has been embraced or rejected by school districts across Texas. It awards more per-student funding and autonomy to schools that give management authority to a nonprofit group, charter organization, higher education institution or government agency.

"We're seeing that there is a lot of interest from ISDs throughout the state," Flores said. "There is more interest within San Antonio in particular."

Flores said the San Antonio Independent School District, which has more SB 1882 partnerships than any other school district, has approached the Alamo Colleges about negotiating operating agreements for the Travis and St. Philip's early college high schools and a nursing Pathways in Technology Early College High School that SAISD is developing at Fox Tech High.

Another school district, which Flores declined to name, is interested in an operating partnership for a P-TECH high school in information technology that is in its initial planning stages.

Trustees voted unanimously Tuesday to let Flores enter negotiations, but said they had concerns. Any such contracts would have to be approved by the Alamo Colleges board, the school districts' boards and the Texas Education Agency to qualify for the incentives.

The vote also authorized Flores to negotiate proposed partnerships with any other interested school district in the future. Edgewood ISD is planning a P-TECH school at Kennedy High. Ingram ISD, outside Kerrville, is planning one at Tom Moore High and Southwest ISD is planning one at Southwest High.

Some trustees expressed anxiety about the academic and financial targets that the contracts would require the schools to meet. Failure to meet the targets dissolves the partnerships. Trustees said any failed partnerships at P-TECH schools could harm the Alamo Colleges' relationship with the industry partners involved in those schools.

"What does that mean for those high school students and for us involved in that partnership?" trustee Yvonne Katz asked.

Under the partnership law, the Alamo Colleges would have some management authority over school principals, something that especially concerned Katz, a former Harlandale ISD superintendent.

“Principals are going to want people who manage them to be well-versed in school administration,” she said, using air quotes around the word “manage.”

Trustee Roberto Zarate said the idea seemed to put the onus on the Alamo Colleges, rather than the school districts, for the schools’ ability to meet state standards. He also said the community college district’s accreditation requirements are more rigorous than the state accountability system and combining the two could be a problem.

“My commitment level is very low in terms of getting involved in something like this,” he said. “I don’t believe we should chase a revenue stream just because it’s a revenue stream.”

Another board member, Ana Bustamante, a teacher at Southside ISD, said there’s no guarantee the partnerships would improve schools.

“Why would you want to get into partnerships like this?” she said. “I don’t understand. What is the point? Maybe I missed it.”

Flores answered, “This would provide additional resources to the students, to the school districts and to Alamo Colleges.”

George Railey, vice chancellor for academic success, said he wanted to take the district’s five college presidents next month to Midland College, which has an SB 1882 partnership with Midland ISD.

The Alamo Colleges already enrolls about 13,000 high school students in tuition-free dual credit programs. The colleges support 20 early college high schools in and around Bexar County, and 10 more such schools are in the works for fall 2021. amalik@express-news.net