

Offering career and technical education

Amarillo Independent School District

Amarillo, Texas

Texas has 5.3 million K–12 students enrolled in 993 districts, the second largest K–12 student population in the country, second to only California. Fifty-one percent of the state’s public school students are educated in only four percent of its school districts predominantly in the major metropolitan areas of Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin. The other 49% of students are in a mix of suburban and rural areas, and 459 districts are classified as rural. Texas defines a rural district by default as not fitting into urban and suburban categories, and with a small student population demonstrating slow or no growth.

Amarillo Independent School District (AISD) is supporting these rural districts through their Gateway to Health Careers Project. Designed to increase the healthcare workforce, this innovative healthcare program is administered through AISD’s Amarillo Area Center for Advanced Learning (AACAL). AACAL provides students from eleven rural districts in the Texas panhandle unique opportunities to learn about careers in the health sciences through blended learning combining online learning and clinical experience. Online curriculum and instruction is provided by AACAL through hands-on simulations and through patient interactions provided by their community hospitals, long term care facilities, or emergency medical services. In addition to the simulations, Amarillo Gateway teachers and administrators travel to the districts to train students in the basic skills that healthcare workers need, creating a deeper connection between the students and instructors. Students can graduate high school with an endorsement in Public Service through the Texas Foundation High School Program.

As of Fall 2019, AACAL is serving a little over 600 students in 24 schools in their rural partner districts. The partner schools provide a classroom, Internet connection, computer teaching station connected to a projector to display the online and/or live lessons, student computers, a classroom facilitator to monitor students, and a partnership with a clinical site. Classes are streamed or recorded in Amarillo and viewed live or asynchronously by students in a classroom in their local districts. A local facilitator provided by the rural school is in the classroom to help students during class and to monitor their work and progress throughout the year. Senior students from the rural districts travel to Amarillo for face-to-face instruction that provides them an opportunity to create a cohort across all 11 partner districts. Heather Sawyer, the Canadian ISD online facilitator says, “Students love it. The four that did Certified Medical Assistant are all going into nursing school, and hopefully, they will be able to work in the health profession as they go through school.”

The Gateway program started, as many similar schools do, as a result of an innovative project design to help students. “The program was literally hatched over lunch and sketched out on the back of a napkin,” notes Jay Barrett, Principal of AACAL. “The goal from the beginning has been to get more workers in the healthcare field not only in Amarillo but in rural areas.”

This profile was developed through correspondence with Jay Barrett and Jean Whitehead of Amarillo Independent School District and from a case study published in the *Digital Learning Strategies for Rural America* report.