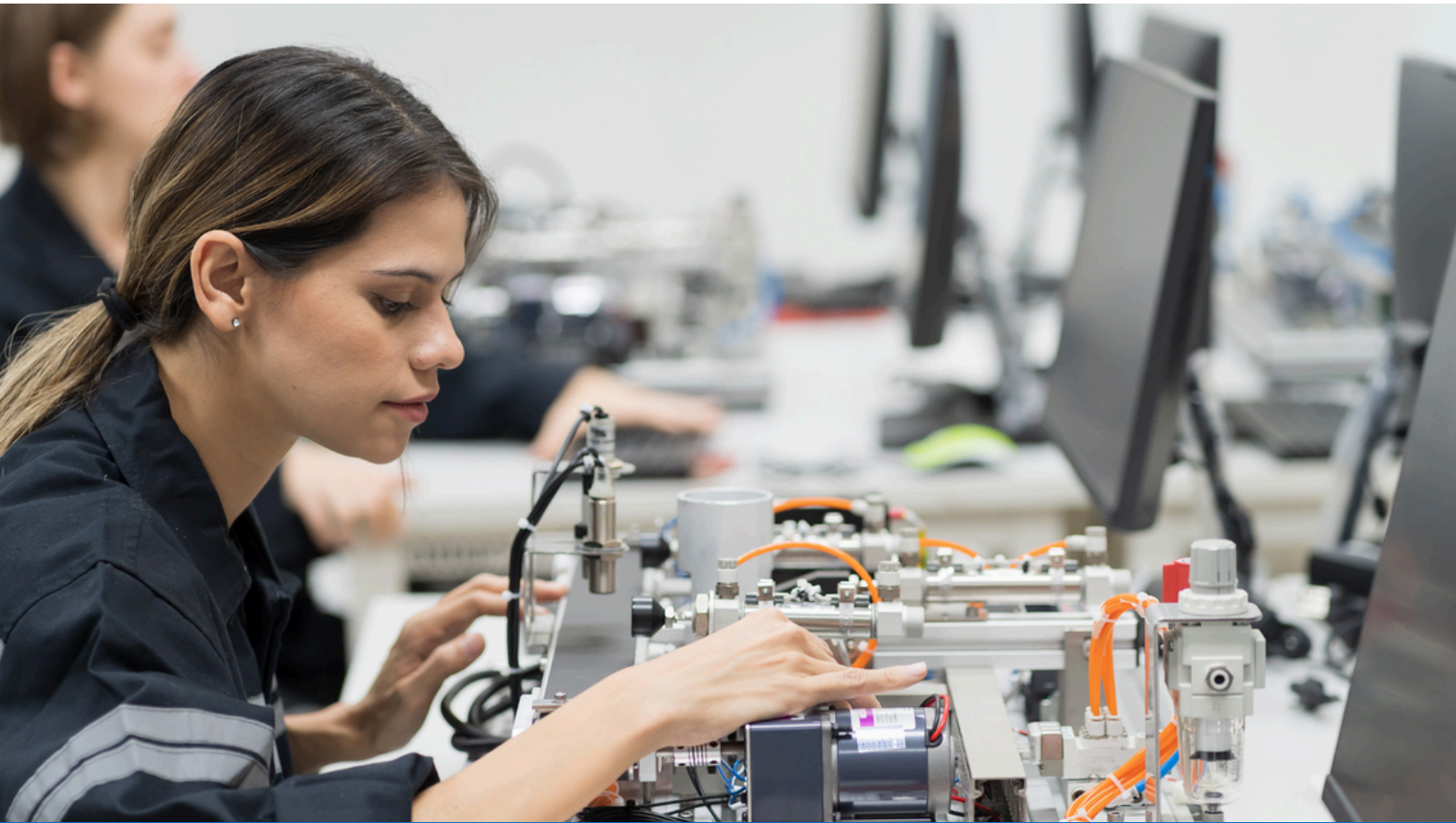




**Texas Education Agency School Model Playbook:  
Rural Pathway Excellence Partnership (R-PEP)**

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# Introduction

**The Challenge:** *Tremendous work is happening in Texas public schools to expand high-performing school options throughout the state.* Districts and schools want to provide high-quality school models with a proven success track record that meet their community needs and interests. But where should they begin? Although there are many successful schools across the state, many district and campus leaders have limited exposure to what models exist, what is possible with each model, and what is required to implement them successfully.

## **Purpose:**

The Texas Education Agency is committed to increasing the number of students in great schools. One way the Texas Education Agency (TEA) is ensuring this occurs is providing a series of playbooks featuring evidence-based, Effective Schools Framework-aligned (ESF) models that can be replicated across the state. Each playbook will allow leaders to consider what's possible and offer a framework that provides a solid launching pad.

Transformational schools have leaders who are deeply passionate about the work and who have deeply internalized the purpose and mission of their school model. This playbook aims to support transformational district and school leaders like you by providing foundational material to internalize so you don't have to start from scratch.

## **How this playbook is organized:**

The playbook is organized into four chapters. The first three chapters outline the key stages of developing a Rural Pathway Excellence Partnership (R-PEP), while the final chapter highlights successful schools that have implemented the R-PEP program.

**Chapter 1: Plan:** Describes the model's mission, the student experience, and the intended outcomes. Readers can envision what the model would mean for their community by exploring these three components.

**Chapter 2: Implement:** Details best practices for implementing the model with alignment to the Effective Schools Framework and supporting TEA programs.

**Chapter 3: Evaluate:** Includes planning and implementation success criteria as well as a planning and implementation timeline.

**Chapter 4: Schools Leading the Way:** Features profiles of schools that are successfully implementing the model throughout Texas.

***This playbook can be utilized in two primary ways:***



### 1. For inspiration:

District and campus leaders and stakeholders at the beginning stages of the R-PEP designation journey can review the playbooks to see what is offered, what's required, and what's possible with the specific school model. When reading for this purpose, chapters one and four may be of the most interest.



### 2. As a how-to guide:

School teams can work through the playbook to learn about best practices for designing and launching key components for a new school model. When reading for this purpose, reading chronologically from chapters one through four may work best.

***Regardless, use this playbook in collaboration with others in your community.***

*These components will be the most powerful in an R-PEP creation process. By conceptualizing and creating a model with the founding team, a school leader can breathe life into their mission and increase understanding and buy-in from all stakeholders.*

*\*Note: In order to best share about the R-PEP benefits and considerations, this playbook will include insights and perspectives from key stakeholders and technical assistance that have been instrumental in the R-PEP program. At the heart of R-PEPs are the people on the ground who showed courage and leadership to commit to doing things differently in the best interest of rural students. A special thanks to our rural trailblazers of the Rural Schools Innovation Zone, namely Executive Director, Michael Gonzalez and superintendents, Dr. Maria Casas, Conrad Cantu, Steve VanMatre, and Mike Barrera, their district boards, and district staff and academy directors.*



*Rural Schools Innovation Zone superintendents and Executive Director Mike Gonzalez with Commissioner Mike Morath upon formalizing the RSIZ.*

# Chapter 1: Plan

After making a case for the model and sharing its compelling benefits and track record in Texas, the first chapter will explore three components so that readers can envision what this model would mean for their community:

1. Mission: What is the broad purpose of the model and what makes it special?
2. Instruction and School Culture: What is the student experience?
3. Intended Outcomes: What is the model designed to achieve?

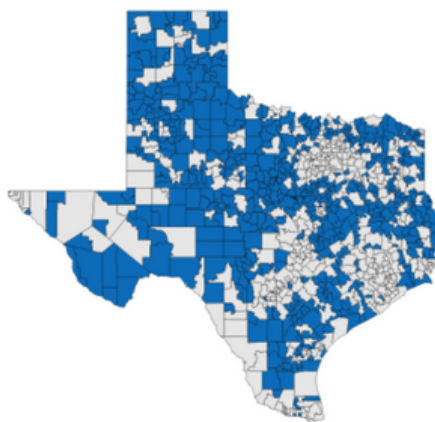
Readers will find the following consistent format under each component:

- Component definition
- Important considerations for this model
- Guiding questions that can be used to design the component for this model
- Model-specific examples

## *Model Overview: A Case for Change*

Approximately one in five American students attend a rural school. In Texas, 63% of the independent school districts, totaling 640 districts, have fewer than 1,600 students. In fact, fifteen of Texas' twenty Education Service Centers are majority rural. Moreover, the student population served by these rural districts is predominantly economically disadvantaged.

Districts with Less Than 1,600 Students



\*Blue indicates school districts with less than 1,600 students in 2022

Despite their significance within the state, students in rural communities have underperformed in college attainment and access to high-paying careers, partly due to the need for system-level changes that are difficult to achieve in their isolated local context.

According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), only 29% of individuals from rural areas between the ages of 18 and 24 are enrolled in higher education, compared to almost 48% of individuals in that age range who come from urban areas and 42% from suburban areas.

In fact, an analysis of National Education Longitudinal Study data found urban students nationally were 74% more likely to enroll in college than rural students and 106% more likely than rural students to attain a bachelor's degree. Higher education attainment is correlated with increased career opportunities, higher individual lifetime earnings, better quality of life, and positive contributions to society. Therefore, it is critical to undertake efforts that better prepare students in rural communities for postsecondary success given the changing needs of the current workforce.

The R-PEP model aims to expand high quality college and career opportunities for rural students. It can be challenging for small, rural school districts to be able to provide a robust array of college and career options for students on their own. This model fosters collaboration between rural school districts, higher education, and industry partners to leverage existing college and career pathways and to build new ones together that are responsive to regional labor market needs.

## Benefits of the Model

The R-PEP model offers a range of benefits including:

- Meeting the demand for future college-educated and career-prepared employees in regionally relevant industries in Texas;
- Increasing industry-based certifications earned and college graduation rates in historically underrepresented demographic groups (including Hispanic and rural communities);
- Allowing rural students greater access and choices when preparing for high-quality college and career pathways;
- Leveraging community partnerships with local colleges and industries to amplify the impact of resources, including shared staff, professional development, funding, and student opportunities;
- Leveraging an economy of scale between multiple districts with limited resources, and
- Increasing district revenue by maximizing CCMR, CTE, and R-PEP funding.



## Enabling Policy

Texas has positioned itself as a trailblazer in creating the conditions, policies, and incentives that support high-quality college and career pathways and programs across the state. These policies create a powerful engine to incentivize the creation, expansion, and continuous improvement of college and career pathways that lead to credentials of value aligned to regional labor market needs, ultimately catalyzing student success and economic development. All four of these enabling policies support the R-PEP model and can provide the infrastructure, funding, and incentives to allow for adoption of the model at scale. The policies also provide a financial win-win for both the district and the collaborative as student success earns additional funding for districts, higher education, and the partnership to reinvest in programs and opportunities.

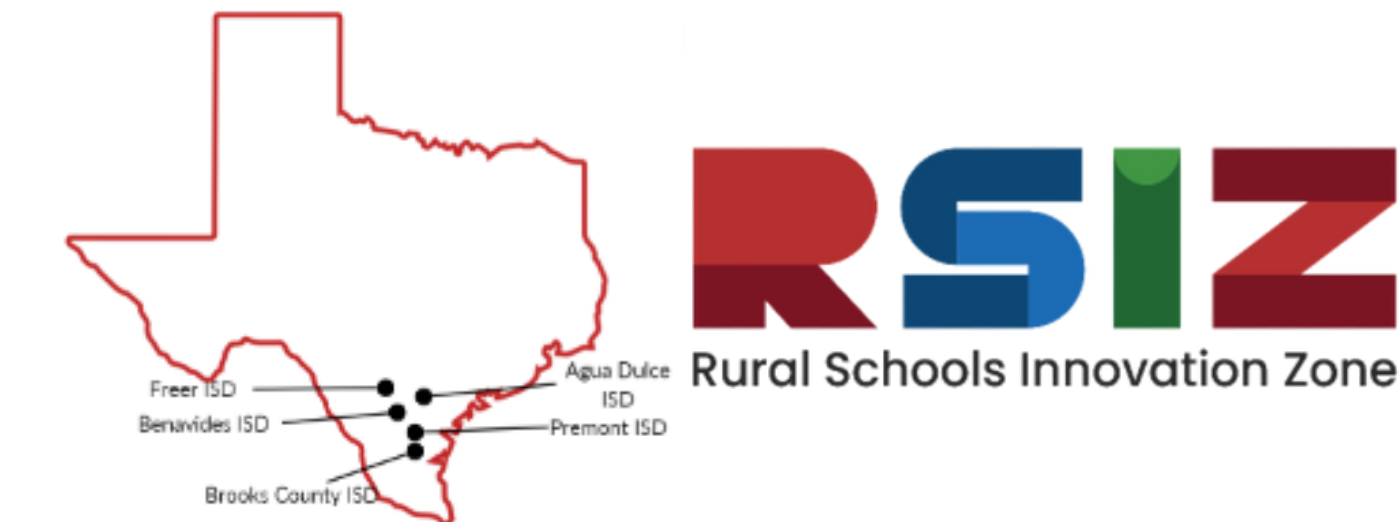
- **CCMR Outcomes Bonus Funding:** Passed as part of HB3 in the 87th legislative session, the CCMR Outcomes Bonus provides an outcome-based bonus to each Texas district for every student above a certain threshold who achieves one of a set of predetermined postsecondary outcomes. These funds create a cycle of achievement in which districts are incentivized to invest in attaining these postsecondary readiness outcomes (e.g. TSIA scores, IBCs and Level I and II certificates, persistence in college, and/or military enlistment) and receive annual funding bonuses to reinvest in CCMR readiness priorities and student success. In successful R-PEP, these bonuses can provide a growing pool of resources to invest in postsecondary readiness across districts.
- **CTE Weighted Funding:** As part of Texas' school funding framework, CTE courses generate a weighted funding amount above and beyond the basic allotment depending on the rigor/level of the course and the time students spend in the class. While the framework details have shifted over time, the underlying mechanism results in a formula that provides additional funding to cover the cost of CTE courses - as more students enroll in CTE coursework and progress into higher-level courses, more CTE funds flow into the district. This funding mechanism has been essential to the growth of the RSIZ and is essential to the financial sustainability of the R-PEP model.
- **Rural Pathway Excellence Partnerships (R-PEP):** Passed in the 88th legislative session, HB2209 (R-PEP) currently provides up to \$5M to incentivize the adoption of rural partnerships across the state through financial incentives: a weighted per-FTE allotment multiplier and planning and implementation grants.
- **House Bill 8:** Passed in the 88th legislative session, House Bill 8 shifts funding for community colleges from a student enrollment funding framework to one that funds community colleges primarily based on outcomes. As part of this bill, the legislature made it possible for economically disadvantaged students to participate in dual credit opportunities at no cost to the student as long as the community college sets the course tuition rate at an amount no greater than a limit set by coordinating board rule. In practice, this bill dramatically expands funding and access for high school students to enroll in dual credit courses at no tuition cost to students or their district, meaning that districts can expand pathways available to students without incurring additional costs.

## Definitions

- **R-PEP** – The Rural Pathway Excellence Partnership (R-PEP) program, established the 2023-2024 school year, allows rural school districts to enter into agreements with other nearby school districts to develop rural college and career pathway partnerships. The goal of the R-PEP program is to increase access to high-quality post-secondary pathways for rural students through multi-district collaboration, expanding opportunities for underserved students to succeed in school and life while promoting economic development in rural areas.
- **Coordinating Entity** – The coordinating entity manages the R-PEP for the partnership having entered into a performance agreement approved by the board of trustees of each partnering school district and must be an eligible entity as defined by Section 12.101(a).
- **Pathway** – R-PEP pathways, aligned with TEA approved career clusters and programs of study, are sequences of courses determined by the R-PEP that lead to regionally high-need and high-wage careers.



## Track Record



The Rural Schools Innovation Zone (RSIZ) in South Texas has emerged as a proof point for the R-PEP model. Formed in 2019, the RSIZ was first launched as a collaborative partnership between three independent school districts (ISDs): Freer ISD, Premont ISD, and Brooks County ISD, adding Agua Dulce ISD and Benavides ISD in 2023. The mission of the RSIZ is to expand opportunities for students in the region to attain meaningful and valuable career opportunities for the 21st century job market. The RSIZ, in collaboration with postsecondary institutions and industry partners within the region, has developed career academies within the zone that provide high-quality preparation for postsecondary success. Through this collaborative model, the RSIZ has shown impressive outcomes for rural students. Based on the Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) data from 2021-22:

- The RSIZ has **tripled the percentage** of graduating students each year completing an industry-based certification\* since 2019, from 12% in 2019-2020 to 51.7% in 2021-2022.
- The RSIZ, for the second year in a row, has **outperformed the state and surrounding regions** (Region 1 and Region 2) in CCMR score, graduation rate, and dual credit completion.
- The RSIZ has more than **quadrupled the percentage of graduating students earning college credit during high school**. Prior to the RSIZ, 15% of students in the districts were completing dual credit courses. In 2021-2022, 66% of graduating students had earned dual credit.

\*IBCs include Phlebotomy, EKG, Patient Care Technician, Certified Medical Assistant, Educational Aide, Electrical 1, and NCCER Core

## Mission

### Component Definition

The mission is the foundation upon which a school is built, and it should guide all decision-making within the school community. In successful schools the mission drives everything - from priorities to culture to instruction.

### Model Considerations

The mission of R-PEPs is to provide all rural students with meaningful, high-quality college and career opportunities aligned to regional workforce needs that lead to school and life success for students and economic development for rural communities.

R-PEP schools champion their students as equally deserving as their urban and suburban peers to have expanded access and choice to pathways and opportunities. Through collaboration, rural districts can accomplish together what would be impossible separately. There can be tremendous regional impact when districts, higher education, industry, and other partners come together to multiply options available to students. Joe Siedlecki, former leader at the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and former Associate Commissioner of Innovation and Charter Schools at TEA, says, “This type of collaboration is the path forward for rural districts wanting to offer their students more choice and opportunity.”

Before crafting a mission or vision, a district with whom they might partner. As the name of the model suggests, this action cannot be pursued by one district alone, and a mission should reflect collaborative - not just individual - goals. A district should think about any collaboration they currently have with districts, Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) and/or industry partners. Do they share any staff, resources, or services with other districts? What relationship do they have with leaders in other districts?

In the example of the RSIZ, Premont ISD was already sending several students to Freer ISD for their Next Generation Medical Academy as they had no CTE programs of their own. While this was a more informal agreement, it set a foundation for future partnerships. Additionally, the Premont ISD superintendent was the former superintendent in Freer ISD, so existing relationships with staff that supported collaboration were already in place.

Finding a common vision is central to building a strong foundation of collaboration between districts. It is important to have a basic commitment between a group of districts and other key stakeholders before crafting the mission and vision. A natural starting point for many rural regions is around CTE pathways.

To create and establish a common vision and mission, the district, school leaders, board members, community partners, and other key stakeholders must be prepared to think about serving students in new ways. Dr. Casas, former Superintendent of Brooks County ISD, states, “The mindset is no longer ‘these are my students or your students.’ These are OUR students. What we model for them is collaboration.”

It is possible for each district within an R-PEP to maintain its identity even while partnering with others. The RSIZ superintendents have emphasized that collaboration is an alternative to consolidation, and they appreciate how the programming has built relationships among high school students from different districts. According to Conrad Cantu, Superintendent of Freer ISD, “The rivalry [for example] between Premont and Freer is strong. On Tuesday they could be playing an intensely competitive basketball game against each other and on Wednesday morning they’re in class learning together.”

## Our Mission

Our Mission is to provide rural school students high-quality opportunities for postsecondary success.

## Our Vision

Our Vision is to reinvent the rural education experience.

### Reflection Questions as you Craft your Mission:

- How will the formation of an R-PEP support regional workforce needs? Why does expanded access to pathways and college opportunities matter in this region?
- What is the common vision of collaboration that all districts and partners want for their region and students?
- How can you plan with community stakeholders, especially district boards, and increase buy-in?
- How can you use the mission drafting process to invest communities in the value of coming together when rural communities have sometimes seen themselves as rivals?

## *Vision for Instruction, Pathways, and R-PEP Culture*

### **Component Definition**

Instruction, pathways, and R-PEP culture go hand in hand to create the student experience. The instructional and pathway beliefs shared by staff reflect the belief that student success is paramount, whether through attaining certifications for high-skilled jobs, earning dual credit towards advanced degrees, or both. R-PEP beliefs reflect the values of the school communities in serving all students in their region.

### **Model Considerations**

In an R-PEP, instruction, pathways, and R-PEP culture should align to create high expectations and support for students towards postsecondary success in a career field of their choice. School leaders and staff at each campus within an R-PEP must share the belief that through collaboration, sharing of resources, and high-quality opportunities, all students can be successful. Instruction beliefs should center around a shared understanding of the integration between providing high quality core content instruction as well as direct technical skills, each embedded with key soft skills, including communication, critical thinking, and collaboration. This integration promotes a holistic approach to education that prepares students to excel in their chosen path, whether that means entering a job following graduation or pursuing advanced degrees.

### **Reflection Questions as you Craft your Vision for Instruction, Pathways, and R-PEP Culture**

- How do the instructional beliefs reflect alignment to the mission that students have multiple options to define what success looks like for them? What instructional practices will the staff commit to in bringing these beliefs to life?
- What training or professional development will be needed for teachers to implement instruction that matches these beliefs?
- What common beliefs need to be held by staff around college? Careers?
- What beliefs are held by the communities about opportunities for students after high school? How will you create buy-in to the R-PEP vision as part of this?

## *R-PEP Structure*

### **Component Definition**

All too often exciting initiatives falter because of changes in leadership, priorities, or focus. Additionally, leaders in rural districts often serve in multiple roles (a counselor is also the PEIMs coordinator, a principal may also be the grant writer, etc.) and have little time to dedicate to pursuing a new school model or bringing innovative ideas to their districts. Thus, it is imperative within the R-PEP model that districts agree upon a structure that adds capacity to the work through a “Coordinating Entity.” This is to ensure sustainability of the partnership, add capacity to support Pathways, and embed a continuous improvement loop to guarantee the initiative is working for students. The Coordinating Entity, identified by the R-PEP, can be an existing or new nonprofit, Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs), or Education Service Center (ESC). While each district and institutional partner is primarily focused on the success of its own programs, the Coordinating Entity is focused on the success of students across all partner districts and the quality of programming delivered in all Pathways.

The Coordinating Entity enters into a [Performance Agreement](#) with all parties. This agreement is the guiding document of the R-PEP that outlines clear roles and responsibilities, sets ambitious and shared student outcomes goals, and defines how the R-PEP operates. The premise of this Performance Agreement is that students benefit when stakeholders work collaboratively to expand opportunities for post-secondary success and that the R-PEP can effectively design and implement high-quality programming that leads to greater opportunities for students in school and life.

There are several key factors identified in TEC Section 29.912 that must be included within a Performance Agreement as well as other considerations:

#### TEC 29.912 Considerations

- Performance goals and progress measures
- Coordinator entity authority over pathways
- Student pathway eligibility
- Managing progress and publishing outcomes

#### Other Considerations

- Partnership staffing
- R-PEP budget & operations (transportation, scheduling, financial framework)
- Partnership enrollment policies
- Partnership term length and limits
- Relationship of partners

## Model Considerations

In an R-PEP model, there are several structural options for stakeholders to consider and they should align on a model that best fits their community needs as well as builds on partnerships and capacity in the region.

**Option 1: New Non-profit (RSIZ example):** Following a design process, stakeholders in the RSIZ felt that the formation of a new nonprofit, dedicated to supporting, advancing, and sustaining the work of the R-PEP over time, was the best fit to serve as their coordinating entity. The RSIZ is governed by its own board of directors, comprised of a representative from each school district, an IHE representative, and a community representative. This has been a successful approach in ensuring all districts have a voice on the board and that there are community representatives to provide diverse perspectives on industry, academics, etc.

The board:

- Represents community and district interests and sets the overall strategy for the R-PEP;
- Hires and evaluates the nonprofit executive director;
- Shares accountable for the agreed-upon performance agreement student outcome goals; and
- Approves key policies, contracts, and the annual budget.

**Option 2: Existing Non-profit (PBIZ example):** In the Permian Basin Innovation Zone, an existing collective impact organization, the Education Partnership of the Permian Basin (EPPB), is the coordinating entity. As a collective impact organization, EPPB brings stakeholders together from different sectors to address areas of common need in the region, including education. Adrian Vega, Executive Director of EPPB shares, “We aim to serve the Permian Basin region and students through several key focus areas, including post-secondary readiness. Our capacity and ability to support the PBIZ is a direct reflection of our commitment to ensuring our region is able to grow and thrive, starting with our students.”

**Option 3: Education Service Center (FCRC example):** The Coordinating Entity for the Falls County Rural Collaborative (FCRC) is Education Service Center Region 12. ESC12 hired a dedicated Executive Director to manage the FCRC and allocated FTEs from throughout the ESC to dedicate time and energy to the successful launch of the R-PEP in SY24.

Regardless of the form that the coordinating entity takes, it should:

- Provide additional capacity to implement programming and facilitate collaboration.
- Bring key voices to the table for shared decision-making.
- Ensure the initiative lives beyond the tenure of any single district, higher education, or community leader, thereby increasing the ability to sustain the effort over time.
- Enter into contractual agreements with districts and partners that clarify roles and responsibilities and ensure the R-PEP is working for students and meeting agreed-upon performance goals.
- Continually assess and improve programming
- Disseminate lessons across stakeholders and inspire others who might benefit from a similar approach.
- Appeal to potential funders and supporters

Ideally, the coordinating entity will have a team of individuals to support the R-PEP work, namely a Director/Executive Director, college/career liaison(s), and student support specialist(s). It will be up to the R-PEP to determine what positions are most needed to support their region. Review a sample R-PEP organizational chart [here](#).

### **Reflection Questions as you identify your R-PEP Structure:**

- What are your current partnerships with IHE partners, ESCs, or workforce boards in your region?
- Who are the stakeholders that should aid in determining the R-PEP structure?
- What are the clear and actionable goals of the R-PEP? How will the coordinating entity hold the R-PEP accountable?

## ***R-PEP Funding***

### **Component Definition**

In planning an R-PEP, one of the most important elements of the planning process is aligning stakeholder expectations around the partnership's financial implications. R-PEPs receive a funding allotment based on student contact hours in eligible pathways. Additionally, because of the structure of Texas' school funding formulas and legislative incentives, the RSIZ can increase the revenue generated by each participating student during each semester of academy programming. Therefore, if other R-PEPs decide on a similar approach as the RSIZ, they could reasonably expect the primary outcome to be improvements in participation, program options, and program outcomes. While it is possible for R-PEPs to create some cost savings for districts, the focus is on generating additional revenue to reinvest in R-PEP pathway program priorities.

### **Model Considerations**

The financial arrangement of R-PEPs is critical to ensure sustainability. There are two important components to the funding structure: start-up costs and ongoing operating expenses. The start-up costs are those investments that must be made up front to 1) build the R-PEP and 2) create or strengthen the initial program offerings. While R-PEPs often require and have received start-up funds to launch, if designated as an R-PEP, the partnership will receive a funding allotment during the actual implementation. While districts may receive additional revenue and/or save costs through the partnership, those funds are primarily reinvested in the quality of the program and successive phases of growth and development.

There are several possible financial structures that an R-PEP should consider before choosing the one best suited to its goals and stage of maturity. The RSIZ was fully funded for the first two years with state and federal grant dollars. While R-PEPs should consider pursuing grant opportunities to support the initial phase of work, grant funds should not be the sole source of financial support for the partnership. For additional information, those interested can review the R-PEP Annual Budget and Funding Model overview [here](#).



### Reflection Questions on R-PEP Funding

- For career clusters, programs of study, and pathways of interest, what up-front investments would increase program quality and capacity? What sources of funding could be tapped to meet those needs? (consider R-PEP planning grants, Perkins, Jobs and Education for Texans (JET) grants, etc.)
- At scale, how are partnering districts expected to contribute to the sustainability of the R-PEP, and specifically the coordinating entity? Among different financial framework choices, which option seems most aligned to R-PEP goals and pathway needs?

## Academic and Career Technical Education (CTE) Programs

### Component Definition

An R-PEP expands the number of CTE pathways and programs partnering districts can provide to students. There may be current pathways or partnerships at different district schools, and, through an R-PEP, students at any of the collaborating schools would have the opportunity to attain additional certifications, college credit, or internship/work-based learning experiences. It is important for R-PEPs to consider not just existing programs and staff capacity but also existing and future labor market needs and wage attainment data when selecting career clusters and determining which related pathways to offer.

### Model Considerations

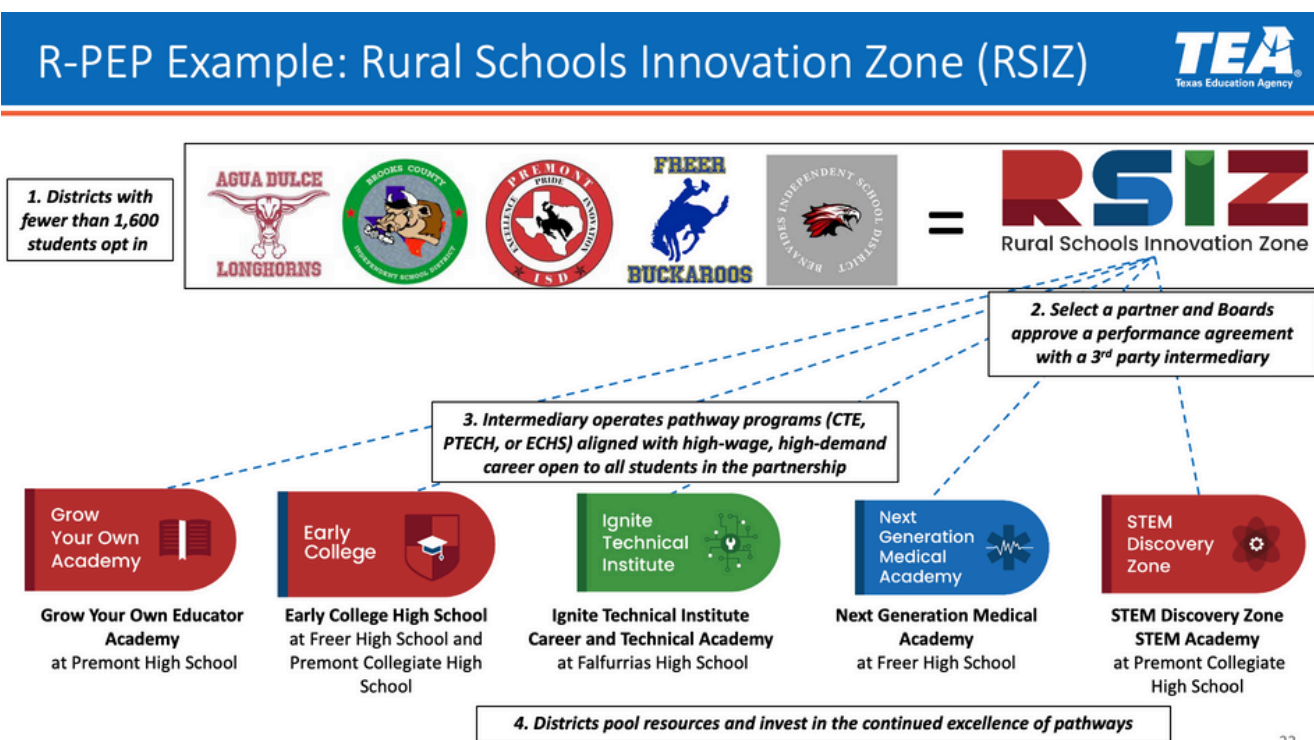
There are two considerations within this component of the R-PEP model: 1) what career clusters and related pathways to offer, and 2) the mode in which they are offered to ensure students have access.

In determining the career clusters and related pathways offered, R-PEPs should tailor them to the local context of the regional/community needs, labor market data (sample labor market analysis [here](#)), and student interest. The goal is that each of the pathways prepares students for a high-wage, high-demand job within the region through the attainment of certifications or degrees. A sample pathway crosswalk is included [here](#) as guidance. A guiding set of principles for “high quality pathways” developed by the [Texas Regional Pathways Network](#) has several key components:

1. Alignment with labor market demand
2. Cross sector partnerships
3. Links between secondary and postsecondary
4. Credentials with value in the labor market
5. Effective advising
6. Integration of rigorous academics and career-focused learning
7. Continuum of work-based learning experiences

In determining the pathways and academies in the RSIZ, current programs and course offerings were considered, along with labor market analysis and student surveys.

## RSIZ Example:



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In addition to working together to determine the best pathways, R-PEPs need to consider how to ensure programming is accessible to all students in the region. In the RSIZ, districts become “hosts” of specific academies, and transportation is provided to students from any of the other districts within the RSIZ. Because students are traveling to other districts for academy courses, the RSIZ has also supported the sharing of elective and/or non-tested courses between the districts.

There are implementation options for R-PEP models that differ from the RSIZ model. One could be to utilize existing facilities or IHEs as a centralized hub of academies where every student would travel to one location for shared pathways. An R-PEP might also operate as a hybrid model where some pathways are offered at districts and some pathways may be offered more centrally. Regarding transportation, instead of transporting students to academies equipment or staff could be transported across the R-PEP districts.

### Reflection Questions as you Align Academic and CTE Programs

- What current college and career programming is offered to students? Which are aligned to regional workforce needs?
- Which potential new programs could be started to address gaps in regional workforce needs?
- Are there additional ways to leverage existing resources and staff within the R-PEP for hard to fill positions? (i.e., advanced math and science, art, dual credit, Advanced Placement (AP) courses, etc.)

## Intended Student and R-PEP Outcomes

### Component Definition

The purpose of the R-PEP model is to expand access for rural students to engage in high-quality college and career pathways that lead to postsecondary success in high-wage, high-demand jobs. The outcomes of this model for students include attainment of industry-based certifications in high-demand fields, completion of CTE pathways, earning of dual credit hours that support continuation at two year or four-year colleges, and completion of a work-based learning experience (internships, job shadows, etc.). Ultimately, R-PEPs can be designed to drive not just high school outcomes but also longitudinal college, career, and life outcomes many years after high school graduation.

### Model Considerations

In an R-PEP model, the intended outcomes should explicitly state that through collaboration and increased access to high-quality programs, students will be able to attain ambitious and measurable performance goals and progress measures tied to current college, career, and military readiness outcomes, longitudinal postsecondary completion, and employment-related outcomes.

### Reflection Questions as you Craft your Intended Student and R-PEP Outcomes

- What does the process look like for determining pathways? What considerations are taken into account?
- What student outcomes are most important to the communities in the R-PEP?
- Which student subgroups or historical achievement gaps should stakeholders consider as they are setting R-PEP goals?
- How will the R-PEP track goals to ensure strong student outcomes? What is the process for data collection and sharing across the R-PEP districts?
- How can the R-PEP work to collect data in a longitudinal way to track students after they leave high school?
- What skills or competencies do college and industry partners suggest are most needed for success in the classroom or in employment? How can these be incorporated into pathways?
- What are additional wrap-around supports that can be provided to students to navigate life after high school? (i.e., soft skills workshops, building social capital, mentorship programs, etc.)

**Intended student and R-PEP goals could include(example goals [here](#)):**

- Increase in # and % of students earning “meets” and above on STAAR EOC
- Increase in # and % of students earning an Industry-Based Credential (IBC), dual credit hours, and associate degrees
- Increase in # and % student identifies as “College Ready” on TSI
- Increase in # and % of students earning CCMR Outcomes Bonus
- Increase in # and % of students enrolled in a postsecondary institution (two or four year) or employed in a career field aligned to their pathway of study and the regional workforce within a year of graduation

## Chapter 2: Implement

The Effective Schools Framework (ESF) was created by the Texas Education Agency and defines five levers that are essential in high-performing campuses. Exemplars and tools for each lever can be found [here](#).

Implementing the recommended actions in the ESF is a critical step for any school model and will improve outcomes for children. However, to differentiate the student experiences between one school model and another, effective leaders need to think about the design decisions for each lever to ensure coherence to their mission, the school's instructional and cultural vision, and intended outcomes.

As you read this chapter, hold Chapter 1 in your mind. As you read about each lever, the considerations for the R-PEP model, and suggested actions, continue to ask yourself: How will I approach the implementation of each of these important levers while also bringing the R-PEP model to life? How can my choices in this area of design elevate my R-PEP model programming?

Finally, in this chapter, you will also see highlighted many of the Texas Education Agency's programs available to districts and campuses. As you hone your design, you will want to consider what additional supports are available to your school and what programs might allow you to continue to carry forward your vision after the initial launch.

### Level 1: Strong School Leadership Planning

**Lever Summary:** Effective campus instructional leaders with clear roles and responsibilities develop, implement, and monitor focused improvement plans that address the causes of low performance.

#### R-PEP Considerations:

Achieving the mission of collaborating across a region to provide students with shared high-quality college and career pathways requires the right district **and** campus leaders in place. It is imperative to have district and campus leaders who are innovators and are willing to do things differently to serve students more effectively. This work requires having a high-functioning leadership team within the R-PEP that includes membership from each district and partner.

#### Required Actions:

- Staffing plan includes at least two full-time equivalent roles
- Allocation of responsibilities for progress and outcomes

**Recommended Actions:**

- Ensure that your district and campus leaders engaging in this work demonstrate readiness in the belief that, through collaboration, they can serve their students better and are open to collaborating with others. Here is a [sample readiness assessment](#) for districts.
- Create clear roles and responsibilities for all leadership team members including counselors, principals, academy instructors, and teachers so that each member can leverage their strengths to carry forward the R-PEP mission. [Here is a template that can be used.](#)
- Consider what unique roles the R-PEP may need to be added to your campus leadership team and create job descriptions for each. This could include an IHE Liaison, a specific R-PEP Counselor, and/or a Family Engagement Specialist.
- Consider potential and specific challenges around master scheduling for each district guided by a solutions-based mindset. See a sample master schedule [here](#) from the Permian Basin Innovation Zone (PBIZ).
- Develop a [monitoring system](#) that tracks student performance and progress toward realizing the R-PEP vision.
- Create opportunities for cross-district collaboration among “like roles” (counselor meetings, academy director meetings, and principal meetings), ensuring that they should be recruited, onboarded, and trained with the mindsets of "our students" and "our outcomes."

## Level 2: Strategic Staffing

**Lever Summary:** Campus leadership retains effective, well-supported teachers by strategically recruiting, selecting, assigning, and inducting teachers so all students can access high-quality educators.

**R-PEP Connection:**

As in any model, instructors are foundational to the success or failure of the model. Because the R-PEP model is focused on expanding high-wage, high-demand college and career pathways, it is critical to hire high-quality CTE/academy instructors and college instructors and to give the Coordinating Entity the accountability and autonomy to manage Pathway staff to achieve desired outcomes.

Districts engaging in the R-PEP model should leverage all available autonomies and best practices to create academy instructor roles that meet R-PEP needs. For example, successful R-PEP districts give themselves flexibility in this area by adopting a board-approved District of Innovation Plan that exempts the district from certain teacher certification requirements. This could include strategies of not only waiving teacher certification requirements but also hiring industry professionals on a part-time basis, hiring retired professionals, etc. Here is an example of a [District of Innovation Plan from Freer ISD](#).

It is also imperative to ensure that these teachers are retained, which can often be difficult if they can make more in the industry than they can teaching. Successful R-PEP districts can increase funding to high-performing teachers, including CTE instructors, through the Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA) so they can earn a designation and additional stipend on top of their salary.



*The RSIZ was able to support districts in designing and implementing TIA systems that generated over \$750,000 for teachers across the three districts this past year.*

It is also critical that instructors with the R-PEP model are deeply knowledgeable in their industry areas while also being able to teach effectively and build strong relationships with students. It is important to consider that many of these instructors may not have taught before, so providing them with additional pedagogical support is important. In the RSIZ, for example, Freer ISD includes new CTE instructors in their new teacher academy to ensure that all their instructors receive a mentor teacher and learn specific teaching practices and classroom management strategies.

In addition to the CTE instructors, it is important for an R-PEP to create intentional support and connections to the college professors who teach the dual credit coursework. When students attend classes, especially those that also include college students, R-PEPs must ensure that professors support the dual credit student experience and make sure the expectations are clear.

### **Required Actions:**

The Coordinating Entity must have the authority to

- Select, assign, and manage pathway-specific personnel at each partner campus
- employ and manage the staff member responsible for the pathways at each partner campus
- employ and manage the pathway instructors at each partner campus



**Recommended actions:**

- Create an [onboarding process](#) for new staff that will have a role within R-PEP work that provides information about the R-PEP, best practices, and roles and responsibilities.
- Collaborate within your community and region to learn about available partnerships with industry for strategic staffing of academies.
- Leverage hiring flexibility, especially if having a District of Innovation status, to widen the pool of talent for CTE instructors. Consider hiring part-time instructors in the workforce, retire-to-rehires, etc.
- Align with IHE partners on student supports and onboarding for professors teaching rural high school students.

**Did You Know?****TEA Supports**

The Texas Education Agency offers several opportunities to support Strategic Staffing on your campus or in your district. These programs may already be in place within your district, or it may be something that you could pilot at your campus in collaboration with your Human Resources team. Two programs to explore are:

- The [Grow Your Own Initiative](#) creates a pipeline from high school to college, and back to the community they grew up in.
- The [Texas Strategic Staffing](#) program is a two-year process that helps develop paid teacher residency opportunities.

***Level 3: Positive School Culture***

**Lever Summary:** Positive school culture requires a compelling and aligned vision, mission, goals and values, explicit behavioral expectations and management systems, proactive and responsive student support services, and involved families and community.

**R-PEP Connection:** A strong R-PEP can only exist if there is a true belief that everyone in a region is responsible for ensuring student success and if students feel supported and knowledgeable about their college/career options. An R-PEP is not just a partnership among school districts, but also communities, families, employers, and colleges. It takes an entire region working together and creating high expectations and expanding opportunities for the model to achieve its desired vision.

The Rural Schools Innovation Zone (RSIZ) has done an excellent job of ensuring that all students, no matter their district, are supported and feel included. Several activities and actions that promote a positive collaboration include:

- For graduation, any student who has participated in an academy gets to wear a special purple stole to signify their achievement of completing a program through the RSIZ.
- At every RSIZ Board quarterly board meeting, there are student and teacher recognitions to celebrate passing of certification exams, teachers earning TIA designations, students competing and placing in regional and statewide competitions, and more.
- The RSIZ conducts several family information sessions each year to share information about the academies, course offerings, and opportunities through it.
- At sporting and extracurricular events, fans cheer for their home team but respect and cheer for the other district teams too. Sportsmanship is valued because while students may be opponents on the courts and fields one day, the next day they are peers and colleagues in the academies.

### Required Actions:

- n/a

### Recommended Actions:

- Develop a series of cross-R-PEP events such as [family information session nights](#), academy visits, student celebrations, etc.
- Design R-PEP [information sessions](#) and learning opportunities for district staff, community members, and other relevant stakeholders.
- Create clear and ongoing systems of communication with the superintendent and local school board regarding updates, benefits, and impact of the R-PEP, ensuring there is clear understanding and continuity of information.
- Create [specific messaging](#) on R-PEP benefits and the importance of building together as a region.
- Family engagement activities should happen consistently, providing opportunities to learn about expanded course offerings, different academies, the benefits of the R-PEP model for their students, and how they can support their students.
- Students from all districts should have college and career enrichment opportunities including learning visits to the academies, mentorship programs, college visits, etc.

### Did You Know?

#### TEA Supports

TEA offers many resources and training opportunities for schools to design an effective Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) through their TIER (Tiered Interventions Using Evidence-Based Research) program. [Trainings are available through your](#) Education Service Center (ESC), or you can access [online trainings](#) or [targeted resources](#) at your own pace as well.



## Level 4: High-Quality Instruction Materials and Assessments

**Lever Summary:** All students engage daily with TEKS-aligned, high-quality instructional materials and assessments that support learning at appropriate levels of rigor.

High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) are curricular resources that:

- Ensure full coverage of Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS).
- Are aligned to evidence-based best practices in the relevant content areas of RLA (Reading Language Arts), math, science, and social studies.
- Support all learners, including students with disabilities, English Learners, and students identified as gifted and talented.
- Enables frequent progress monitoring through embedded and aligned assessments.
- Includes implementation supports for teachers.
- Provide teacher and student-facing lesson-level materials.

**R-PEP Note:** Within the R-PEP model, the core academic component of a student's journey is equally as important as the opportunity to access high-quality, rigorous career pathways. An R-PEP's goal is to ensure that students graduate college, career, or military ready; however, there is also an intentional focus on the importance of breaking down the barrier between the “academic” and the “career”, encouraging students to engage in career pathways as well as advanced or dual credit coursework while in high school.

### R-PEP Connection

R-PEPs are responsible for supporting students by providing high quality college and career opportunities that set them up for success after high school. As mentioned above, it is critical that R-PEP offerings for students are based on labor market demand and that the materials and resources provided within these programs are rigorous and prepare students for engagement in that field. The R-PEP should ensure that course crosswalks of shared pathways are vetted and approved by both IHE partners and industry partners to ensure they are high-quality and will prepare students adequately for entrance into college or a career. R-PEPs also can share resources and staff to support students not on track to graduate or who have not passed the TSIA. The use of a TSI Student Support Coordinator specifically for the R-PEP has been proposed in several innovation zones in the state.

Also, an R-PEP should ensure that all student-facing staff (i.e., core content teachers, CTE teachers, and counselors) are aligned within the R-PEP model regarding student support.

### Required Actions:

- Develop pathways from [TEA-approved Career Clusters and Programs of Study](#)
- Conduct and utilize labor market data (sample version [here](#)) to align on shared pathways that lead to high-wage, high-demand jobs in the region
- Pathways include college and career advising for students
- Pathways incorporate work-based learning experiences that allow students to reflect on and apply what they have learned

### Recommended Actions:

- Ensure each pathway has [a coherent crosswalk](#) reviewed by IHE and industry partners.

## Assessments

- Provide support to districts on tracking and monitoring students who may be at risk of not graduating or who have not passed the TSIA.
- Provide support to students for certification exams, including test prep, tutoring, etc.



### Did You Know?

#### TEA Supports

The Texas Education Agency offers many supports to help districts and campuses select and implement HQIM effectively.

**Research Based Instructional Strategies (RBIS):** You can read all about the RBIS and what they look like in action here. Additionally, there are many trainings available to explore the research-based practices that HQIM is designed to support. You can choose a training course in either ELAR or math, learning about what practices are the most effective for students and how HQIM brings these to life. Reach out to your local Education Service Center (ESC) for more information ([Find your ESC here](#)).

**TEA Career and Technical Education & Programs of Study Resources:** These resources outline the approved statewide and region wide programs of study for career and technical education programs

- CTE Career Clusters and Programs of Career Clusters and Programs of Study
- [Regional Programs of Study](#)
- CTE [Programs of Study Alignment to Endorsements](#)
- TEA [P-TECH Playbook](#)
- TEA [Rural P20 Playbook](#)
- TEA [College and Career Prep Playbook](#)

## *Level 5: Effective Instruction*

**Lever Summary:** Campus leaders provide teachers with job-embedded professional development and access to time and data needed to reflect, adjust, and deliver instruction that meets the needs of all students.

### **R-PEP Connection:**

For students to be able to be successful in their core academics and career pathway courses, there must be effective instruction across disciplines. For effective instruction to occur, it is imperative that teachers set high expectations for their students. In fact, the widely shared “Opportunity Myth” study released by The New Teacher Project demonstrated teacher expectations had a stronger effect on student achievement growth than any other factor that was studied. To ensure that teachers engage students in rigorous learning, leaders must set up systems and support for job-embedded professional development in order for teachers to continuously improve the relevance, rigor, and compassion of their instruction to ensure post-secondary success for all students.

**Required Actions**

- n/a

**Recommended actions:**

- Design opportunities for staff across the R-PEP to connect, engage, and share best practices.
- Develop R-PEP-wide best practices for instruction that are shared across multiple channels.
- Develop onboarding for new staff that is specific to the R-PEP goals and purpose.

## Chapter 3: Evaluate

Similar to effective curriculum design, successful schools are best designed when leaders begin with the end in mind and take scaffolded steps to get there. This chapter centers on two important tools, a timeline and fidelity of implementation success criteria, allowing you to evaluate what you should do, when, and whether you are on track for success. This chapter contains both general R-PEP design steps and model-specific considerations, guiding each phase of the process.

If you are reading this playbook for inspiration, you may wish to review these two tools to evaluate your district's capacity to commit to this timeline as well as whether these success metrics align with your goals. If you are reading this playbook as a how-to guide, this chapter will allow you to plan backward from the success criteria in order to deliver on a school that brings to life your mission and achieves your intended academic and graduate outcomes.

In addition to using this timeline and success criteria to monitor progress, perhaps most importantly, they will be key supports for your change management process. In their book, [Switch](#), authors Chip and Dan Heath describe how great change management efforts take into account the clarity all stakeholders have on the initiative, the emotional resistance they might feel towards that change, and how leaders can set up a learning and working environment and conditions that help people to change. When thinking about implementing a new school model, you will have to win the hearts and minds of staff, students, families, and community partners. Use these tools to create clarity on what you are doing, harness positive momentum and emotions, and make it easier for people to collaborate with you in your efforts. As you read this chapter and review these tools, you can also utilize [this framework](#) based on the research in *Switch* to help guide your planning.

### Planning Timeline

As you determine your path forward, understanding what phases of work are necessary and when they must happen is critical. By following this [suggested timeline](#), your team can ensure that your new school model meets the community's needs and that each step you take builds on the previous.

In the change management process, a timeline allows you to “shrink the change” by laying out small, easily achievable steps that build momentum. Most importantly, it directs your team to their destination throughout the journey. You will want to build out a detailed plan, including roles and responsibilities that align with this timeline so that you can ensure a clear path with motivated team members.

### Fidelity of Implementation Success Criteria

As you work through the suggested timeline, you will also want to set up a plan that monitors your progress toward a successful R-PEP design and a successful and sustainable launch. These documents outline the success criteria for both the [R-PEP Design Planning Key Indicators](#) and [Implementation Outcomes](#) years and include the elements outlined in Chapter 1, as well as for each Effective Schools Framework Lever.

Similar to the timeline, internalizing this success criteria for each stage of the R-PEP design and launch process allows you to create a manageable system that people are excited about because they know where they are going. Additionally, these criteria will allow you to celebrate successes early on while still pushing forward to even further development.



## Chapter 4: Schools Leading the Way

In this chapter, we will look at several highlights from throughout the state, review what is working in these R-PEPs, and review lessons learned.



### R-PEPs in Texas



**R-PEP Profile:** Rural Schools Innovation Zone (RSIZ)

**Districts:** Premont ISD, Freer ISD, Brooks County ISD; (Benavides ISD and Agua Dulce ISD added in 2023)

**Grades Served:** Grades 9-12 (currently developing 13th Year models)

### R-PEP Demographics:

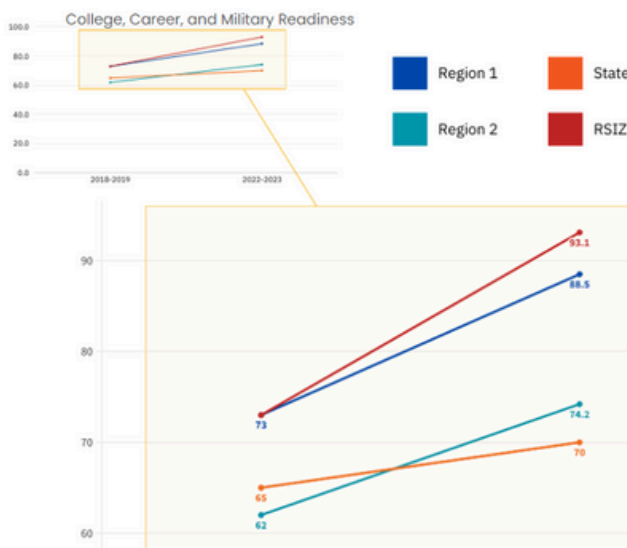
- 780 Students
  - 95.8% Hispanic
  - 3.8% White
  - 0.4% Asian
  - 0.1% Two or More Race
  - 88% Economically Disadvantaged
  - 25% SPED

### R-PEP Summary:

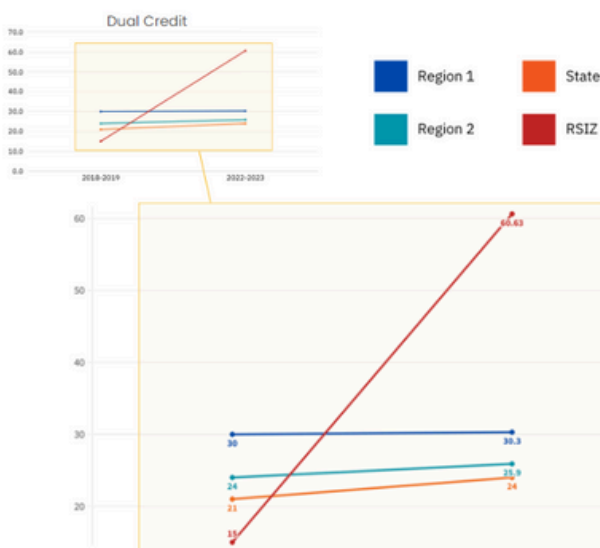
The Rural Schools Innovation Zone (RSIZ) is a first-of-its-kind initiative focusing on improving educational opportunities for rural students in South Texas. Formed in 2019, the RSIZ was originally launched as a collaborative partnership between three independent school districts (ISDs): Freer ISD, Premont ISD, and Brooks County ISD.

The mission of the RSIZ is to expand opportunities for students in the region to attain meaningful and valuable career opportunities for the 21st century job market. The RSIZ, in collaboration with postsecondary institutions and industry partners within the region, has developed academies at four campuses within the zone providing high-quality preparation for postsecondary success.

Over the past four years, the RSIZ has shown impressive student outcome results, surpassing both the state and surrounding regions in several key CCMR indicators, including graduation rate, dual credit completion, and industry certifications earned. Students involved in the RSIZ academy offerings are the first to share the value of this collaborative model. As a Premont ISD student shared, **"The experiences with the RSIZ cannot be found anywhere else. We get that one-to-one learning with teachers and get to explore different certifications and careers. The academies open your eyes to things you never thought about in your career path."**



Since 2018, the RSIZ has outperformed the state and surrounding region in **College Career and Military Readiness**.



The RSIZ has dramatically increased the availability of **dual credit** opportunities for students. Now, RSIZ students complete dual credit opportunities at double the rate of the surrounding region and state.



**Highlights:****Scalable and Replicable**

The outcomes of the RSIZ have inspired other rural regions across the state and nation to design and launch R-PEPs of their own. The RSIZ has hosted hundreds of visitors through “seeing is believing” visits to share the benefits of rural collaboration and how it can serve as a model for others to expand access to high quality college and career pathways for rural students. There are currently two other R-PEPs in Texas in various stages of development and launch.

**R-PEP Legislation**

Based on the student outcomes seen in the RSIZ, in the 2023 legislative session the Texas Legislature passed the Rural Pathway Excellence Partnership (R-PEP) program to incentivize and support multidistrict, cross-sector, rural college and career pathway partnerships that expand opportunities for underserved students to succeed in school and life while promoting economic development in rural areas.



*RSIZ and PBIZ Superintendents with Texas House of Representatives member J.M. Lozano, sponsor of the R-PEP bill.*

**National Recognition**

The RSIZ was one of five finalists selected across the nation for the Rural Tech Project through the U.S. Department of Education. As part of the Leaders in Future Technology Capstone Program (LIFT), students working within a team of their peers design a technology enabled solution to a challenge in their rural community.



*RSIZ students engaged in the Rural Tech Project presented in Washington D.C. in June 2023 and were able to meet with their U.S. Representative, Vicente Gonzalez.*



**R-PEP Profile:** Permian Basin Innovation Zone (PBIZ)

**Districts:** Grandfalls-Royalty ISD, McCamey ISD, Crane ISD

**Grades Served:** Grades 9-12

**R-PEP Demographics:**

~450 Students

- 74.5% Hispanic
- 21.7% White
- 3.4% African American
- 0.4% Asian
- 1% Two or More Races
- 51.5% Economically Disadvantaged
- SPED (Special Education)

**R-PEP Summary:**

The Permian Basin Innovation Zone (PBIZ) is made up of three districts, two IHE partners, and the nonprofit organization, the Education Partnership of the Permian Basin. The mission of the PBIZ is for small, rural districts to work together, embodying the heart and strength of rural Texas, to compete, prepare, and support students, educators, and community in the creation of a vibrant and successful Permian Basin region. The PBIZ launched its pilot of shared career clusters and related pathways in Health Science (Nursing Science), Education & Training (Teaching & Training), and Manufacturing (Welding) in the fall of 2023.

**Highlights:**

**Energy Pathway**

The Permian Basin is a unique region of the state, rich in natural resources and oil. Jobs within this sector are in high demand and are high wage; however, the region is not currently poised to develop homegrown talent, and, consequently, many of the energy and natural resources employers hire their workforce outside of the region. The PBIZ plans to build upon an existing Energy Pathway pilot, creating a tailor-made and comprehensive career pathway that will prepare students for energy jobs in the region.

## **Additional Resources**

### **Evaluation Tools**

These tools include surveys, data collection templates, and evaluation frameworks designed to help districts assess the program's impact and progress. These tools help districts gather valuable feedback, track key performance indicators, and make data-driven decisions to continuously improve the program.

#### **Resource List:**

[Student Survey \(example\)](#)

[Family Survey \(example\)](#)

[R-PEP Sample Board monitoring system](#)

[R-PEP walk-through tool demonstrating fidelity of implementation based on success criteria](#)

### **Other Operational Resources**

Various operational resources support the effective implementation and management of the R-PEP program. These tools help districts address the logistical and administrative aspects of the program.

#### **Resource List:**

[Sample master schedule](#)

[Sample funding model and annual budget](#)

[Sample coordinating entity organization chart and job descriptions](#)

[Sample labor market data and workforce analysis](#)

[Sample pathway crosswalk](#)