

Fledgling trauma-response and wellness program helps to improve lives throughout Texas

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Children in San Antonio were missing school because they were struggling with the loss of a parent; they were the head of household and trying to hold down enough hours at work; they needed to drive a family member to chemotherapy appointments; or they were dealing with the challenges of homelessness, they told a local judge.

The first time John Hernandez heard these students' stories was as they were being processed through truancy court.

As Director of Student Services at East Central Independent School District, Hernandez says as he jotted down the barriers to attendance that students were facing, he started to see trends. He knew he had to do something to help children and their families outside of the classroom, because punitive measures wouldn't cut it.

"It takes a village to get kids from pre-K to graduation," Hernandez says. "We know that trauma doesn't stop after 4 o'clock. We have to help kids build the skills to become resilient."

Now three years since its inception, EC Cares is providing resources and wraparound services vital to helping families lift themselves up and breaking down barriers to attendance.

The program allows schools to track and monitor students who are dealing with traumatic experiences—which can include neglect, abuse, poverty, food insecurity, parental divorce, incarceration in the family, and more. A one-page guide with contact information for local agencies who can help are accessible to anyone in the San Antonio area to use, and they have all been vetted by the EC Cares team.

Hernandez says he created the resource guide by acting like a homeless 15-year-old with no insurance. Some agencies left him on hold for hours; others required insurance or charged more money than the families he worked with would be able to afford; and others had phone numbers that had been disconnected.

Based on Hernandez's scenario, the organizations that welcomed in a kid and had solid track records were added



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to the resource list. As families continue to utilize the help from their schools and partnering groups, the culture of East Central campuses has changed for the better, he says, and more kids are coming to school.

Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at School Innovations & Achievement—which has worked with East Central ISD since 2010 to help the district improve student attendance—says Mr. Hernandez recognizes the importance of attendance as it is the leading indicator of other problems.

"Mr. Hernandez and East Central's EC Cares Team received the 2018 Crystal Star Award of Excellence in Dropout Recovery, Intervention, and Prevention from the National

Dropout Prevention Center," Cook noted. "This award says everything about John—an outstanding individual who has made significant contributions to reshaping school and community environments to meet the needs of at-risk youths so they can be successful in school and in life."

According to Hernandez, much of EC Cares' success can be attributed to school and district staff taking their training seriously and staying vigilant.

He recalls a situation in which a bus driver observed a young boy kicking flower pots at home and slamming the door one evening, which she initially brushed off as the child having had a bad day. When the behavior continued to the next morning, the bus driver texted the information to her boss, who called the school counselor. The counselor met the boy as he got off the bus at school, found out the kid was on his way to fight another student, and was able to diffuse a situation. Ultimately, the school and the boy's mother sought additional help from an outside agency and the student received the support he needed.

And it all started with the referral from a bus driver.

"That just shows you that the more eyes and ears in the organization that are trained, the better off students will be," Hernandez says. "Everyone matters. Everyone in the school system is making sure student needs are being met."