

Meet 2019 Ryan Award Winner:

Joán Álvarez

**IDEA MCALLEN COLLEGE PREPARATORY**

McAllen, TX

757 students in grades 6-12 (2019-20 school year)**96%** Hispanic**3%** White**1%** Asian**77%** Economically Disadvantaged**37%** English Learners

Commitment that goes beyond academics

Joán Álvarez, the founding principal of IDEA McAllen College Preparatory in the Rio Grande Valley, Texas, has made it his life's work to positively impact the lives of his students. Since founding IDEA McAllen in 2012, the school has received an "A" rating from the state of Texas every year. In 2019, it was the #1 school in Texas for both student achievement and growth. 100% of students from the class of 2019 graduated and were accepted to college, and raised their average ACT score from 16.8 in 9th grade to 21.9 by graduation.

These results are possible because of Álvarez's leadership—his recognition of the underlying potential in students, parents, teachers, and administrators, coupled with his abiding belief that a college education can transform not only a life, but also a community. You'll often hear him say, "Every student's graduation tassel is a proof-point of success by design."

Based on his own experiences, Álvarez knows that a college education can be the ticket out of poverty. "When my dad brought us from Mexico to the US, across the border, he said that he was bringing us for one main reason—so we could get a great education. When I was in school, I struggled academically but had great teachers, counselors and principals who were dedicated to helping me one day go to college. I was going to be a first generation college graduate in my family—the first generation anywhere in our family tree. That was really challenging for me. When I graduated from college, we had over a hundred people attend my graduation and I asked my dad, 'Why did so many people come—even family members that I didn't know?' He said, 'Because this is a proof point of what will be possible for their kids, hopefully, one day too.' That moment sticks with me every day: the smile of my dad, my mom seeing me graduate, and my brothers looking up to me. I want that same opportunity for our students."

The research has shown time and time again that transformational leaders are the catalyst for the school reaching its objectives. In our research of excellent school leaders, we have found there are nine Transformational Leadership Building Blocks that school leaders leverage to achieve high impact.



Let's see how Joan used his strengths as a leader to build a school community with high expectations and accelerated outcomes.

Relationship Building

He gets to get to know all of the adults and kids in the building because he wants to understand people's big goals, motivations and challenges.

At the core of Alvarez's leadership is his belief in each individual and their ability to meet their potential. He gets to get to know all of the adults and kids in the building because he wants to understand people's big goals, motivations and challenges. One teacher shares, "Mr. Alvarez has

encyclopedic knowledge of all the kids at McAllen. It isn't about data, it's about knowing their stories. The kids recognize that he can be kind of tough, but he is a person that is always going to be in their corner no matter what. He models that every single day with all of the kids." Alvarez seeks to understand students and their life experiences, and he takes an interest in their pursuits outside of academics. He attends as many extracurricular events as possible. A student recalled one time their varsity baseball coach couldn't make practice, and instead of canceling it, Mr. Alvarez himself showed up to run drills in his slacks and dress shoes. Alvarez recognizes that success is only partially built by what happens inside the classroom—it is the people behind the work that make the magic happen.

Similar to his involvement with his students, Alvarez has a deep commitment to his team of teachers, recognizing their important roles as educators while also honoring their lives outside of the school. "I have formal and informal meetings where I ask staff: How are you doing? How's your family doing? How can I support you? What do you need so you can do your job to the best of your ability?" Ms. Passero, founding teacher and current Assistant Principal, adds, "It's all about relationships. Not only does he know his students, he knows his staff and their families. He knows everyone's husband, wife, girlfriend, and kids. He's very people-oriented and he takes the time to build relationships."

It might seem that Alvarez's empathetic style is innate, but his leadership team sees it differently. Mr. Lester, former teacher and current Principal in Residence, shared this coaching story, "Everyone has their own unique, special connection to Mr. Alvarez, and he's developed leaders to share those same characteristics through modeling and by being really tough and demanding that you learn those skills. He and I talked a lot about empathy because sometimes I came across as unempathetic. That's not a weakness for me anymore. I developed due to Mr. Alvarez taking the time to point it out to me, model it for me, expect it from me and hold me accountable because he cared about his team and he cared that I was successful."

Another way that Alvarez shows his deep commitment to his team and students is through celebration, which is at the heart of the McAllen culture. Alvarez is known for celebrating people by playing "Eye of the Tiger" on his portable speaker in the hallways or lunchroom. The reason for celebrating could be one of dozens: student of the month, attendance or grade recognition, Royal Readers—kids who have read a million words, or moving up an Accelerated Reader level. Mr. Swaringen, founding teacher and current International Baccalaureate (IB) Theory of Knowledge instructor, shares, "Joán is about celebrating other people, which really goes to the core of who he is. He is such a selfless individual. He loves to say 'hear our presence roar'—that's one of the big catchphrases of our campus because our mascot is the tigers. Mr. Alvarez's portable speaker is a literal roaring of that metaphor. He has it with him all the time. He loves to highlight other people."

Some of the biggest celebrations happen when students get accepted to college—they ring a gong and Alvarez pulls out the confetti cannon. Another big celebration happens when a teacher achieves the highest level within the IDEA Teacher Career Pathway (TCP). The TCP is meant to recognize educators as they gain proficiency while staying in the classroom. When someone earns the distinction of Master Teacher, Alvarez is known to bring the band down the hallway for a mini-parade to recognize and celebrate their hard work.

Another annual tradition is the Teacher of the Year award. Alvarez doesn't hold back. Mr. Castillo, founding teacher and current Director of College Counseling, recalls, "The year that I was recognized, Mr. Alvarez not only celebrated with our school, but also invited my parents to the school to celebrate

with me. It's the only time my parents have been to my campus and were able to see me teach in the classroom. Including my family was a huge moment that I will remember forever."

Alvarez's ability to focus on the people behind the work and truly see them for who they are has had a profound impact on the McAllen community. Today, 100% of the founding teaching staff still work at McAllen. Ms. Passero sums it up best, "Mr. Alvarez genuinely cares for your family, the staff, and the students. That's something you can't fake, and that's why people stay—because they know that they are taken care of here."

Strategic Thinking and Planning

"It isn't good enough for most students to meet the goal, true success is only achieved when all students succeed."

Deep relationships are the jumping off point for Alvarez as he leads teams, families and students through a tremendously difficult journey in pursuit of the goal that 100% of students attend a four-year college. Beneath that big goal are smaller benchmarks: average ACT score of 21 for seniors, zero ACT scores below 15, and 100% of sixth graders taking the ACT. The team sets additional goals for students with diverse learning needs— 90% of students pass the state assessment and meet grade level expectations— because it isn't good enough for most students to meet the goal, true success is only achieved when all students succeed. One teacher whose child also attends the school shares this story: "When we came from Mexico, originally my daughter was in a school where she was separated because she's an English language learner. She was not given the same opportunities as other children. One of the things that I love—and it's the reason that I came to work here—is that Mr. Alvarez believes in the success of every student. All of the students here —special education, ESL, gifted children—have the same opportunity to succeed. We see the potential in every student and we make sure that they reach it."

Making good on the promise of college acceptance starts with everyone being on the same page. "Mr. Alvarez sets a vision from the beginning of the year with every stakeholder—students, parents, teachers, and administration. At the annual family picnic, Alvarez meets with every single student and their parents to let them know that they are going to graduate from college one day, even if it has never happened in their family before," one leadership team member shared.

For staff, this alignment continues during beginning of the year professional development sessions, during which Alvarez delivers a State of the School address to share what was achieved relative to last year's goals and to align on the vision for the current year. Each year, Alvarez sets personal goals for himself, and asks the teachers to share their input on his top goal. Each week, he reports on the school's top goals in the newsletter, sharing his and the team's progress. Mr. Garza, founding teacher and current Principal, shares, "At McAllen, everyone is genuinely trying to help students. Mr. Alvarez created an environment where students come first. When everybody's pushing to that same goal you feel supported and you know that if something is off-track, your leadership team is going to be there to make sure things get back on track."

Alignment on the vision is followed up with clear expectations. Mr. Castillo describes it this way, "What stands out to many people when they come and meet Mr. Alvarez for the first time —many

times through a parent meeting—is that there are established high expectations, even for parents.” He goes on to share that Alvarez sets up expectations as a two-way street—parents trust him with their child at the campus and there are expectations they have for the school, and Alvarez also has expectations for them. Parents become involved with their child’s education at home starting in 6th grade, as parents are expected to conduct homework checks, signing off to indicate that assigned work is completed. These expectations of parents grow over time, with the team expecting greater support during 11th and 12th grades as students work towards college acceptance and matriculation. Together, the McAllen community is a place where teachers, parents, students and the administration come together as a family to help support kids on their pathway to college..

Instruction

“It’s not what the goal is, it’s what the goal compels us to do.”

Goals are important, but Alvarez is known for saying, “It’s not what the goal is, it’s what the goal compels us to do.” Instruction at IDEA McAllen is built on the foundation that all students matter and a belief that if adults work hard and collaboratively, all students can meet their goals. One way that Alvarez ensures this happens is by collecting and analyzing data with a focus on the success and needs of individual students. Alvarez shares this anecdote to illustrate his approach: “A strong teacher came to IDEA McAllen from a high performing school. We had already set goals and expectations for the first module exam, and she looked at her results and the numbers were great—93% of students were passing the exam. So I said, ‘Let’s go ahead and focus today’s data conversation on the 7% who did not pass. Who are those students? What were their performance levels?’ The whole hour was dedicated to that 7%, which was only seven or eight kids, and we came out with a plan for those kids. By the end of the data conversation the teacher said, ‘Here I thought I was being successful. And yes, there’s some success, but you reminded me that all the students come first.’ Those seven or eight kids were being forgotten. How can we be successful without those kids? The next module exam came up and the data went up to 98%, and we discussed the 2% of kids who were not where they needed to be. At our school, 100% means 100%.”

Using daily data means that the team can respond to student needs. Ms. Chavez, 8th grade US History teacher, explains, “Whether it is an exit ticket or assessment that we give, we immediately look at it and put into motion the next steps. We don’t wait until the next day. This is something that Mr. Alvarez is always making sure to repeat constantly, and it just became part of who we are: we don’t assess without immediately addressing what the students didn’t understand. We reteach the lesson in a completely different way if the students didn’t understand it the first way.”

Students notice this focus on giving them what they need. One student shared, “I tell parents that want to come to IDEA that the student is like a hand and other schools are like a glove that says ‘one size fits all.’ When you put on the glove, it doesn’t fit just right, and the hand has to adapt to the glove. At IDEA, we tailor the glove to the hand. Our school adapts to the student. If the student needs help in math, the school will go ahead and provide tutoring so that the student really gets everything they need. And so that’s why IDEA is a good school.”



“It starts with a team commitment to ‘rigorous first instruction’”

One way that the IDEA McAllen team achieves such high levels of mastery is through clarity on what strong instruction looks like for students and teachers. It starts with a team commitment to “rigorous first instruction”—the idea that every lesson is high-quality and well-planned the very first time it is taught. Within that first lesson, Alvarez expects teachers to plan how they will measure if students learned what was taught that day. This

focus on getting it right the first time around means that fewer students need support afterwards to meet the goal of the lesson.

In his daily observations of instruction, Alvarez also checks for a focus on individual students. He expects to see 100% of students producing high quality work and receiving high quality feedback throughout the lesson. In short, each student should be getting what they need to succeed. The culture of the classroom is also on his mind. “When I visit classrooms, I am looking for a clear line of motivation from teachers to students. In other words, this is a learning environment where it’s okay to be wrong, but kids know that together they’re going to move forward and learn how to do it right. That means the teacher is motivating students and students are motivating each other, as well. There is a culture of team and family.” Alvarez is also on the look out for coherence: “Do the students and the teacher know where they are headed for the day, the week and the year in terms of curriculum and goals? What do we want to achieve and by when? Am I on track or off track, and if I’m off track, then what is my system or way to get back on track?”

Alvarez also practices what he preaches. He is known for rolling up his sleeves and working alongside teachers and students to get the work done. He prioritizes tutoring students who need additional support, even on weekends. He is the first to step in to support students so they start to see themselves as successful on their pathway to college.

Coachability

“Be humble, stay hungry, and always hustle.”

Alvarez’s clarity on what makes for great teaching, and his ability to communicate those expectations means teachers are aligned on what it takes to be successful. That clarity is paired with a deliberate coaching approach. Alvarez shares, “I’ve always told the team, I’m going to be there for you—in front of you to lead you, behind you to push you, by your right side when you need somebody, and by your left when you just want somebody to hear you.” Alvarez and his leadership team observe classrooms, provide feedback, and then follow up to make sure the feedback is enacted. One teacher shared a



story of Alvarez coaching her to use data each day to understand if students had mastered what she expected them to learn. As a result of his coaching, she developed more sophisticated systems for collecting informal data during lessons and using exit tickets to identify and address gaps in student understanding.

Coaching is also about student relationships. Mr. Castillo said, “One area that Mr. Alvarez gave me feedback on was developing relationships with students and families. I put in the time after he told me that, and did what I could to develop a relationship with students and parents so by the time they were our first graduating class, I had established a relationship with those students and

those families. When times got tough we had that relationship as a foundation so it wasn’t me asking them to do transactional things, but we could come back to our student and counselor relationship.”

Every day Alvarez models one of his favorite quotes: “Be humble, stay hungry, and always hustle.” He constantly seeks out feedback from parents, students, and teachers and genuinely listens and adjusts based on what he learns. He admits mistakes—even to students—and learns from them, too. One student recalls, “I really like how here at IDEA, we’re not a number, but we actually have a voice. We have town hall meetings where we come into the office with Mr. Alvarez and he asks us, ‘What can we improve? What do you think is not working?’ We share our ideas and he writes them down, and we actually see a change in the things we want.”

Get It

“College matriculation isn’t a long shot, but an expectation.”

Alvarez knows that preparing a student and their family for college acceptance and graduation isn’t as simple as getting kids prepared academically. He acknowledges the big goal is to “transform the culture for students and families” so that college matriculation isn’t a long shot, but an expectation. He wants to fill meetings with parents who didn’t think it was possible for their child to get into a top tier university, but end up having to help them choose between three.

This sort of transformation starts by building a desire to go to college within the kids by fostering conversations about their college aspirations, career plans, and college options. Students fundraise so they can visit different schools starting in 6th grade. After these trips, students debrief with Alvarez and he asks them: What did you learn? Is this a college that calls to you? What did you like or not? Alvarez shares, “It’s an exciting moment when a student says, ‘Wow! I can really see myself coming to this college one day!’ It’s so different when they experience it in person.” Starting in 6th grade, students also take the ACT every year on the last day of school. Alvarez talks about changing the culture by building a record of success for every student. He describes it this way, “The difference between

motivating someone and building confidence in someone is with evidence. Kids will eventually hit the reality wall where they say, 'You always tell me to believe, but there was no evidence leading me there.' So I motivate and build their confidence with evidence. I show them that a student can go from being a shy kid who never wants to go up in front of a classroom to being the spokesperson at graduation. Or that a student cannot only submit an assignment for a grade, but submit his or her best application for a university and start receiving acceptance letters from colleges. Transforming the culture is educating the parents, educating the students and educating anybody who has an influence on that student."

The team breaks it down tactically for students and parents. Students spend time researching schools considering fit and match. Does the college fit the students' grades, ACT score, and interests? If so, then is the college a match financially? Assessing match and fit as part of the application process makes it more likely students will attend college and graduate. The school also supports families in filing their taxes and completing the FAFSA.

The school's goals focus on getting students to college, but Alvarez wants every student to graduate from college, too. To that end, each year Alvarez takes a close look at the data for McAllen alumnae—are students on track for college graduation? After engaging in a recent round of data analysis, Alvarez identified a barrier to graduation—re-enrollment the second semester of freshman year. The struggle begins in October when students start to register for second semester and they don't have the money on hand. Alvarez and his Director of College Counseling, worked to address this challenge by finding scholarship opportunities, such as the The Star Scholarship, which is for students from the Rio Grande Valley who are currently enrolled in college. Alvarez and Mr. Castillo work with McAllen graduates to submit the scholarship in October so that students can qualify for funds for the second semester and stay enrolled.

Detailed, multi-year plans are in place for students to build the will and the skill to be successful in college. Not surprisingly, Alvarez takes steps to work with families that have additional struggles. Ms. Chavez shares, "I remember a student in his first graduating cohort that was enrolled in the university, but hadn't made any effort yet to actually go. Mr. Alvarez took it upon himself to drive out with the student and the family to give them a tour of the university, take them out to dinner, and ensure that the student and family knew how important it was to move on and get their college education. He didn't have to do that, but he did it anyway, and that was really motivating for all of us. He ensured that 100% of our students went to university and he still checks up on them. Once a tiger, always a tiger."

Transformational Leaders are the Catalyst for the school reaching its objective.

Alvarez is a model for students, teachers and administrators. He knows that people matter and that they can transform a community by working hard, supporting one another, holding one another accountable and celebrating successes along the way. Indeed, they have transformed the McAllen community. Since winning the Ryan Award, Alvarez has moved into a leadership role at IDEA and now oversees multiple campuses. One of the founding teachers summarizes the impact of Alvarez's leadership: "The world is a better place because of Joán. He is a rare gem who makes every human being around him better. He has already changed the world for the better and will continue to do so."