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## superintendent puts priority on access

**Krista Torralva**

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Eduardo Hernández, the Edgewood ISD superintendent, right, listens as the school district's Police Chief Jesse Quiroga speaks during a platica, a neighborhood conversation at a resident's home, on Oct. 28.

Photo: Daniel Carde /Special Contributor

Sitting at a picnic table in a neighbor's yard, Maria Campos listened to Eduardo Hernández speak mostly in English about his five-year plan to open innovation schools in the Edgewood ISD.

Campos, a Spanish speaker and mother of two, tapped the arm of a woman next to her

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math.

He also said the city-funded Pre-K 4 SA is turning the district's Gardendale Elementary into an early learning center. And principals for future innovative schools are touring the country to learn from the best of them. Plans include an all-girls academy, then one for boys.

At the end, Campos made a beeline to Hernández. For half an hour, she peppered him with questions – but not about the academies and big plans. While his ambitions have made a splash in the high-poverty, often-neglected school district on the West Side, sometimes all parents want to know are the basics.

*My daughter has participated in mariachi and all of a sudden Ms. Luna is gone. Where is she?*

*And I heard parents say their kids are being passed to the next grade level without really knowing the material. I don't want that for my children.*

*My daughter is not being challenged enough in her class.*

Hernández, engaging her in Spanish, suggested Campos enroll her daughter in Brentwood STEAM.

*No, no, I like to take the kids to the neighborhood school. And again, where is Ms. Luna?*

He listened to Campos and didn't rush her as the yard emptied out. What you're saying is important, he told her.

"If I can get (parents) excited about the idea of a purpose-driven school, and teaching them how to shop for an education, then through those conversations we can discuss the basics," Hernández said later. "The basics are always important – high quality teachers, high quality principals and of course making sure our buildings are clean."

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Soon after arriving in July 2018, Hernández identified people who were invested in Edgewood, asking them to let him visit their homes and to invite the neighbors.

These “*pláticas*,” Spanish for talk or conversation, are more intimate and less intimidating for parents, some of whom have limited English proficiency. Hernández uses them to make the point that he intends to remain for the long term, that the big endeavors are permanent.

It was a challenge to persuade his own staff. While his board supports him, the uncertainty he faced was manifest.

### **‘Relationship is severed’**

Both the new Gardendale and Brentwood STEAM, both of which opened in August, are part of a plan to create five innovation “zones” — early childhood, STEAM, performing arts, leadership and public service.

At first, not a single Gardendale teacher volunteered to stay through the transition to a Pre-K 4 SA partnership.

“If we’re going to build a zone then we need to do it right and at a pace that we can handle,” Hernández said. “Because the thing I think our district has done in the past is, we jump on ideas and then the next year we forgot about it. I heard that all last year. ‘Please don’t do this and get us all happy about it and then (drop it)’ and, ‘You know what, I love your ideas but what if they get rid of you?’”

Instability had been a constant at Edgewood.

An earlier reform-minded superintendent, José Cervantes, arrived in 2011 and pushed for change on multiple fronts. But he took a buyout in 2015 as his relationship with his board soured amid concerns about the way he handled an abuse allegation at an early childhood campus.

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Months of paralysis led Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath to replace the board with an appointed slate of managers in 2016.

Retired San Antonio Independent School District Superintendent Sylvester Perez became interim superintendent. Late that year, the new board hired Emilio Castro as superintendent, but a board member in 2017 publicized anonymous emails about complaints that Castro violated the personal space of women employees with unwanted touching. An outside investigation deemed the complaints “credible” and he resigned in 2018.

The board appointed Phillip Chavez, then chief academic officer, to interim superintendent and began the search that resulted in Hernández’s hiring. Chavez now is his deputy superintendent.

Hernández said he spent his first year reaching people where they are — in their homes, churches, grocery stores — and saying, “Hey, we get it. This relationship is severed. With that being the case, there’s 10,000 kids coming into our schools. We have an obligation to reach out to one another.”

In a few years, the board will be a different team. Two weeks after it voted to hire Hernández, the state began the transition back to elected trustees by appointing two who had won in 2016 but had not been able to take office. More have followed.

Hernández has rolled ahead. While other area school districts turned down Pre-K 4 SA’s offer to be an outside partner that could trigger extra state funding, he enthusiastically embraced the Gardendale arrangement, a transition that still is in progress but already has brought in more than \$100,000 for the campus.

The board agreed to pour more than \$1 million into the former Hoelscher Elementary to create Brentwood STEAM, a middle school that has started with sixth-graders and will add seventh and eighth grades in the next two years.

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“It speaks to being heard,” Hernández said.

## Challenges ahead

He’s not worried about the changing lineup of board members. The trustees are “thought partners,” Hernández said. They have extensive study sessions that start in mid-afternoon and last into the night. They’ve committed to reading the same books about teamwork and leadership and have agreed to be a “team of eight” — seven trustees and the superintendent.

“I’m thinking about a governance model that will outlive me and the next superintendent. That’s, I think, what’s plagued our districts on the West Side, is that the boards change so much. Nobody wants to get attached to one idea because they figure, ‘Oh, that board’s just going to get rid of the superintendent.’”

What is worrisome is that Edgewood this year had 10 failing schools — that’s half the district — under the state’s accountability ratings, begging the question: Is the district moving too fast, with ambitions getting in the way of the basics?

“We move fast where we have principalships. Wherever I have a leader that’s been there a while, I can move a little faster. Where I have leaders that are new, most of our principals are new, I’m trying to give them the appropriate time — which by research is three to five years — to get their ideas off the ground and really build enough relationships so they can do the work,” Hernández said.

He has demoted principals who he believed had been in place long enough for him to draw conclusions about.

“If you can’t produce the scores, then we’re going to ask you to go somewhere else where we work on you or maybe you’re going to learn some new skills and maybe come back to this,” Hernández said.

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On the first day of school in August, Hernández went from campus to campus welcoming the students. He wants each to know he or she is the ultimate customer.

“The fact that you’re here is important to us. And if nobody’s ever told you this, you are our patron,” Hernández said to sixth-graders at Brentwood STEAM. “If you need anything, we’re here to serve you.”

The message is getting through.

Giana Davila, 14, waited patiently at the end of a *plática* in November for Hernández to finish talking to the president of Palo Alto College. It was a cold night, but the Kennedy High School freshman wanted to say, “Hi,” and thank Hernández for coming to her neighborhood.

She wanted him to know she recognized his efforts. When Davila got her turn, Hernández recognized her right away.

“She’s on our teen board,” he said, referring to a student panel he created last year that does leadership training with the superintendent and makes presentations to trustees.

“It’s amazing to know we have a person that wants to change things in the district,” Davila said.

“I want to be a school leader,” she added. “This is where I grew up. I always want to call this home.”

*Krista Torralva covers several school districts and public universities in the San Antonio and Bexar County area. Read her on our [free site](#), [mySA.com](#), and on our [subscriber site](#), [ExpressNews.com](#). / [Krista.Torralva@express-news.net](mailto:Krista.Torralva@express-news.net) / Twitter: [@KMTorralva](#)*

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