



▲ Arlington ISD trustees gather around their superintendent at the TASA/TASB Convention in Houston. Pictured from left to right: board member Kecia Mays, Chief Financial Officer Cindy Powell, board member Polly Walton, Chief Academic Officer Steven Wurtz, board member Bowie Hogg, Superintendent Marcelo Cavazos, Assistant Superintendent of Administration Michael Hill, board President Jamie Sullins, board member John Hibbs, Communications Director Leslie Johnston, Vice President Aaron Reich and administrative assistant Lisa Benjamin.

## 2016 Superintendent of the Year

## From 'First Day' to last, Arlington ISD's Marcelo Cavazos shows students the way

By Bobby Hawthorne

**F**ive years ago, Marcelo Cavazos, Arlington ISD superintendent and 2016 TASB Superintendent of the Year, started what he calls "First Day." Every year on the first day of school, he and a few handpicked colleagues visit as many of the district's 76 campuses as

possible. Their mission is to welcome students and teachers and remind them that "there is a way to success, and it's not just about money or social status. It's about self-fulfillment, and it begins here and now," the superintendent says.

Cavazos does this, rain or shine, through sweltering Texas heat and humidity or — well, what else is there?

In his first year, the superintendent finished the day by accompanying home an elementary school student who lived

nearby. It was a short stroll, but Cavazos was decked out in a business suit and tie, so, by the time he reached the student's house, he was drenched in sweat.

During First Day this past September, he visited 11 schools, drove 43.1 miles and logged 11,240 steps (the equivalent of 5.22 miles) in just more than nine hours.

Why go to all this trouble, all this sweat?

Because Superintendent Cavazos understands the challenges facing Arlington ISD's 63,000 students, their parents and the entire community. He wants them to embrace the one thing he has come to know to be absolutely true: Education may not be the only way to get ahead, but it is the best path forward.

The youngest of six children, Cavazos was born to Consuelo and Jesus Cavazos. He grew up outside San Benito, located five miles south of Harlingen and about a quarter-mile north of the Rio Grande. The town is best known for singer Freddie Fender — one of the first Hispanic musicians to reach the larger Anglo audience. Fender's "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights" reached No. 1 on the country charts in 1975.

For the Cavazos family, neither days nor nights were wasted. Consuelo made certain of that. She understood that to escape the fields, you worked hard, you saved, you invested, you worked harder. By the time he was 12, young Marcelo had joined his parents, four brothers and a sister in the fields, picking okra — a tedious task that requires long sleeves and gloves, even on the hottest of days.

Their earnings went toward purchasing clothes and school supplies for the coming year, even though the family could have used some of it to pay bills and buy food, given that all the children were out of school for the summer.

"But she was insistent that that money was to be saved," Cavazos says. "So, early on, we put our money in a big piggy bank. Meanwhile, my mom would buy clothes and supplies on layaway at the local department stores. At the end of the picking season, we'd break open the piggy bank and count our money, and then we'd go to town."

The highlight of the trip? The store's air-conditioning and a visit to the public library afterward.

"The library, to us, was a fancy place, and we'd check out books, read them there, then

bring them home," Cavazos recalls. "And my mom had the idea that all of this would help us down the road. The work. The savings. The reading. It all connected and serviced a larger plan."

## 'Kind and generous'

Fortunately, young Marcelo was a reader. He loved mysteries, such as the Hardy Boys, and biographies — particularly, presidential biographies. His favorite president was Abraham Lincoln. He also loved school and needed little coaxing when it came to homework.

"I was very much into studies," he says. "I was all about academics, clubs and organizations, such as student council and the National Honor Society."

He joined health organization clubs, skipped sports and band, and took mostly honors classes. When he feared the classes were too rigorous and wanted to drop them, his mother intervened.

"No. Stick with it for six weeks," she would tell him. "If you want out then, I'll get you out."

In actuality, students had only a week to drop, but she insisted: "I can get you out after six weeks. I can do that. I promise."

So, Marcelo would buckle down and discover the course wasn't so hard after all — and Mom never had to reveal her bluff.

In the end, he graduated from San Benito High, close to the top of his class.

"Marcelo has always been kind, generous, focused, studious and has had an unwavering commitment to faith and family," says his older brother, Arturo Cavazos, who is the superintendent of Harlingen CISD. "These qualities were true then, and they are true today."

For example: Because he was one of the top graduates of his class, Marcelo received several academic scholarships.

"When he started at The University of Texas-Pan American, there were two of us already in college," Arturo says. "Coming from humble backgrounds, we had to work to make ends meet, and Marcelo would not think twice about contributing from his scholarship funds to help us out. He was always looking for a way to advance all of us, to make sure that all of us finished college."

## The path to Arlington

Of course, they all did.

In 1990, Marcelo Cavazos graduated from The University of Texas-Pan American with a degree in political science. He also earned his master's degree at the university.

He enrolled in an introduction to administration course, even before he had landed his first teaching job. There were approximately 60 students in the class — virtually all veteran teachers or coaches, trying to move up the education ladder.

One day, the professor announced, "We have someone in our class who is looking for a teaching job, so if anyone has an opening for this young man, well, maybe that would be nice."

A short while later, Cavazos was teaching junior-level American literature at Mission High School. Two years later, he moved to McAllen to teach English and government. In 1993, he was appointed the secondary language arts supervisor for Mercedes ISD. In 1998, Cavazos moved to Austin to join the Texas Education Agency Department of School Finance and Support and to earn his doctorate at The University of Texas. Eventually, he moved to Arlington ISD to become an associate superintendent for instruction. He officially was named deputy superintendent in 2009 and became superintendent in 2012.

Under his watch, Arlington voters approved a \$663.1 million bond program. The district has opened two fine arts/dual-language academies, expanded community-based prekindergarten offerings, and signed agreements with The University of Texas at Arlington, the University of North Texas and Tarrant County College to give high school students greater access to dual-credit and early admissions options.

According to Arlington ISD board President Jamie Sullins, Cavazos has led a district-wide transformation "in a time that can still be measured in months — not the years and years that you may expect."

## The most powerful connection

Being named Superintendent of the Year is certainly an honor, Cavazos concedes. He says he is humbled by it, but he knows the award isn't his alone.

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“I realize how interdependent we are,” he says. “Early on, you think you can influence and affect all these things, and, to some extent, you can. But it’s limited. Eventually, you realize there’s this interdependency with all of us: students, parents, teachers, staff. That is a big leverage you can use. It makes the work more complicated, because it’s not about one person. It’s an entire interdependent system.”

The key relationship, he insists, isn’t administrative.

“The interaction between student and teacher is the most powerful thing we can leverage in a school system,” he says. “I remember when I was teaching. One young man was struggling emotionally, contemplating suicide. Class was wrapping up one day, and he stayed behind. I was gathering my things, and he was staring down, fumbling with his books, and then he slid a library book toward me. I could see that it was a book about suicide.”

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot,” the student told Cavazos.

“So, we talked and I referred him to a counselor, and we found a time and a place for him to resolve his problems,” the superintendent recalls.

“Teachers deal with these kinds of experiences every day,” Cavazos says. “You never know what students are dealing with, what they’re going to bring up, when they’re going to open up, so teachers must be as prepared to handle the social and emotional side as they are the academic side.”

### The most attainable path

Cavazos says he understands that public education is more challenging now than ever — what with constrained budgets and layers of regulations — but he is determined to expand opportunities for all students.

“And when we do that,” he says, “it builds a momentum, not only with the students, but also with the teachers, the parents, everyone. It has a ripple effect throughout the entire community. It gives them the will to continue, to do even more.”

Education may not be the only path out of poverty and toward greater social justice, he adds, but it’s the most attainable path to the vast majority of people.

Cavazos is determined to expand educational opportunities to students — from the “First Day” of school to the last — “to help

## Fun Facts about Marcelo Cavazos

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**What’s your biggest pet peeve?** No more soap in the soap dispenser.

**Your last meal: What would it be?** Potato and egg tacos made by his wife, Nora.

**Favorite actor? Favorite role?** Jack Nicholson in “As Good As It Gets.”

**A song that makes you tear up?** “Amor Eterno” by Juan Gabriel.

**At football games, are you a sitter or a stander?** Stander.

**What’s No. 1 on your bucket list?** Meet the Pope.

them be successful, to help them realize their dreams in a tangible way.”

Says the Superintendent of the Year: “When I talk about the path — and I often do — it’s not just a talking point, not just a nice thing to say in public. It is the way.”

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