



La Promesa

Changing the Odds for English Learners



School Profile

Name: La Promesa High School

Location: Houston, Texas

Opened: 2021

Grades Served: 9-12

Enrollment: 401

Demographics: 93% English learners, 89% low-income students

Results at a Glance



Academic Excellence:

85% of students passed Biology, 76% passed U.S. History, 97% met Algebra 1 standards on state tests delivered in English, exceeding district averages.



College Credit Success:

92% AP pass rate (score of 3 or higher), among nearly 90 students taking AP exams.



First Graduating Class:

In 2025, La Promesa graduated its first cohort. Every senior applied to college, many of them first-generation applicants.

In Houston's Aldine Independent School District, about 800 students new to the country enroll in middle and high school each year, and their dropout rate was once projected to reach 50 percent by 2027. La Promesa – “The Promise” in Spanish – is an innovative high school created to change that trajectory, with a pledge that every student will graduate and reclassify as a former English learner.

Unlike typical Texas models that shuffle English learners once they reach proficiency, La Promesa maintains cohorts together through graduation, providing continuity as students navigate academic challenges and a new culture. The school rejects false choices between English acquisition and academic rigor, cultural preservation and U.S. integration, or education and work. Instead, it maintains high academic expectations, celebrates students' multilingual assets, and prepares them for college and careers while honoring family economic realities.



[See La Promesa High School in action](#)



NewSchools

La Promesa was built with the community. In 2020, Aldine ISD asked families what they needed, conducting extensive empathy interviews with students, parents, and teachers. A districtwide survey drew more than 13,000 responses: 80% expressed the need for a school designed for students new to the country and 90% supported dual-language programming. The community had spoken, and La Promesa was born from their collective voice.



The Model

La Promesa operates on four interconnected principles that guide every classroom decision and school practice: integrated language and content instruction; experiential learning; relationship building through goal setting; and cultural identity as an asset.

Students build English proficiency while simultaneously mastering grade-level academic work through systematic language-content integration routines that are implemented across all grade levels and subject areas. Experiential, hands-on investigations ensure content understanding precedes language demands. These include activities such as dissecting flowers before learning botanical vocabulary or conducting chemistry experiments before writing lab reports.

Individual relationships anchor academic work through biweekly goal-setting conferences where teachers and students collaborate to establish goals for academics, mindsets, and habits; track progress through data; and engage in student-led discussions about growth. Throughout the learning process, cultural identity becomes an asset rather than an obstacle, with built-in celebrations of students' native languages through courses like AP Spanish Literature and regular opportunities for students to share their stories and cultural knowledge as part of rigorous academic investigations.

Key Innovations

Teaching & Learning

- **Cohort-Based Progression:** Students advance together from 9th grade through graduation in mixed-proficiency cohorts. This structure fosters peer tutoring, strong relationships, and targeted support even after students reclassify as English proficient.
- **Double-Blocked Algebra I:** All students receive two daily periods of Algebra 1, extending time for instruction and practice in this gateway course. The double block, paired with the school's language-content integration routines, ensures recently arrived multilingual learners master grade-level math while building English proficiency.
- **Strategic Course Sequencing:** Science courses are sequenced to match students' language growth. Environmental Science comes first in 9th grade, with Biology moved to 10th, giving students an additional year to strengthen academic English before high-stakes assessments.



Supportive School Culture

- **Growth Block:** Every student has a third-period Growth Block for individualized literacy, math, and language support. Mondays focus on goal-setting; Tuesday through Thursday students receive academic and language interventions in small groups based on assessment data; Fridays become a schoolwide celebration of progress and cultural sharing.
- **Trauma-Informed Training:** All staff receive comprehensive preparation to understand migration experiences and potential trauma students may carry. This training equips teachers to recognize when outside responsibilities like evening jobs to support family affect schoolwork and to respond with appropriate supports that keep students engaged and on track.

Family and Community Engagement

- **Community Advisory Structure:** An advisory group of parents and community members meets regularly to provide feedback on course offerings, student behavior policies, and cultural celebrations. This structure moves beyond traditional parent-teacher conferences and gives families a direct role in decision-making.
- **Apartment Complex Partnerships:** Staff host information sessions and distribute materials in the apartment complexes where many families live. These on-site connections reach families who might otherwise miss district communications and help build trust from the first encounter.
- **Student-Led School Market:** In partnership with the Houston Food Bank, students operate an on-campus market that provides free staples and fresh foods to families in need. Volunteers manage inventory, stock shelves, and assist families, which helps address food insecurity in the school community while giving students leadership experience.

Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: Build Support Infrastructure Ahead of Growth

Innovative schools need to build critical support roles early on, before growth pressures set in. In 2023, La Promesa learned this when it lost an Instructional Specialist who supported student language development during a period of rapid expansion. The vacancy created a cascade that directly affected classrooms: Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) scores declined from prior years' highs even as academic scores continued to rise.

La Promesa responded by filling the specialist role and adding an Assessment Data Specialist, recognizing that scaling their approach required both human expertise and systematic data analysis. Students could access rigorous academic content, but turning that access into measurable English proficiency demanded intensive, data-driven teacher coaching that couldn't be improvised.



Lesson 2: Pair Mission-Aligned Hiring With Ongoing Development

Innovative schools must match selective hiring with continuous professional development to sustain a mission-aligned culture. During its rapid growth from 150 to 300 students, La Promesa stayed committed to hiring educators who could relate to student's language-learning experiences, even leaving positions unfilled until the right candidates were found. The team recruited internationally from the Philippines, Spain, and Nigeria, and involved current teachers directly in the hiring process.

Growth revealed the second half of the challenge: teachers who shared the mission still needed systematic training in trauma-informed practices, cultural competency, and La Promesa's language-content integration approach. Sustaining authentic connections with students required more than shared experience; it demanded ongoing support to help teachers balance language development and rigorous academics.

Lesson 3: Academic Mastery and Language Growth Follow Different Timelines

Schools serving English learners need to plan for two distinct timelines – content mastery and formal English proficiency. In 2024, La Promesa students achieved strong academic results on state assessments delivered in

English, with 85% passing Biology, 76% passing U.S. History, and 97% meeting Algebra I standards – among highest in the district. Yet only 13% advanced one level on the Texas English language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS).

The gap showed that students can fully grasp grade-level concepts while still developing academic English. In response, La Promesa adjusted its course sequence, moving Biology to 10th grade and adding Environmental Science in 9th to provide more time for language growth before taking high-stakes testing. The school now celebrates both kinds of progress, recognizing that academic achievement often precedes measurable language gains.



A Promise to Every Student

La Promesa's next chapter focuses on sustaining and scaling what works. As enrollment grows and student needs diversify, the team is strengthening data systems, expanding community partnerships, and deepening professional learning for teachers to maintain the school's tight-knit culture. By investing in staff development and community connections, La Promesa aims to keep its promise – true bilingualism and graduates ready for college and career – at greater scale.