Roughly 30 years ago, San Antonio educator Irene L. Chavez noticed life challenges were keeping high school students away from regular school attendance. When she asked students why, they expressed concerns about social pressures, jobs, and parenting.

Chavez, an administrator and former teacher of Northside Independent School District (NISD) took a new approach to this issue by establishing a “stay in school” public service campaign. She was awarded a grant by the Texas Education Agency to establish a three-year, community-based pilot program to help meet the needs of at-risk students. Exceeding expectations, Northside School District continued the program as the Irene L. Chavez Excel Academy.

Success in guided flexibility

Principal Darren Calvert had served seven years as the school’s counselor under Chavez’s leadership, and believes in the empowerment of at-risk students.

In the program, students aged 17–21 attend school at a flexible pace with six cross-certified English, math, science, and social studies teachers. “There’s not a subject we teach on our campus that doesn’t have a highly qualified teacher,” said Calvert, who added that one of the English teachers is also certified to teach Spanish and Art.

The flexibility of the school day program allows students to learn at their own pace. School hours are from Monday to Friday, 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m., students age 17 are required to be on-site for a minimum of five hours per day, and 18-year-olds require a consecutive four hour minimum. During out-of-school hours, students are able to access online course materials and complete homework 24/7.
“Students can come to school whenever they get here. Whatever challenge they face, they can work school around that. There’s no fluff—it is straight instruction,” said Calvert. “We’ve taken out all the fluff so kids are getting exactly what they need. There are no extra projects.”

**Enrollment in the program includes:**
- meeting with the registrar, secretary, principal, clerk, and counselor
- informing students about their projected graduation date
- assignment of two classes at a time
- each half credit class takes two weeks to complete

“Two classes at a time keeps our students focused, keeps them from dodging a class that may be more challenging, and forces them to do the work when it’s assigned,” said Calvert. “Kids are actually moving through the program more quickly by taking two classes at a time.”

**Taking students to the next level**

Student workshops are conducted by local speakers and teach students about personal budgeting, coping skills, college planning, and more.

Partnering with local organizations like the San Antonio Food Bank, social and food services are available to students who need resources.

Paul Hamilton, an alumni of the program and a college graduate, is now a champion for the program. As just 1 of 1,700 students labeled at-risk over the last six years at the academy, he now works as a communications systems engineer for NASA. Hamilton earned his high school diploma at the academy, which today achieves a 90 percent graduation rate. “As adults, sometimes students will just watch our lips move, but the same advice means a lot more coming from someone in their age group.”

This year Calvert will walk 20 students through the college application process with hopes that each student gains acceptance into a junior college or four-year university. “When students graduate from us, they’re fully aware that we will always help them. It’s a full wraparound service. When you get us, you get us for life.”

**Take the lead**

Online and blended learning is the student-centered solution you’ve been looking for. Be bold and partner with us to map out forward-thinking strategies that will reimagine the classroom and empower your educators to provide dynamic, engaging learning for every student.

[pearson.com/online-blended-solutions](http://pearson.com/online-blended-solutions)