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Dr. Felipe Alanis, Associate Dean K-16 Education Center, The University of Texas at Austin

By Robert H. Leos



Dr. Felipe Alanis

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When Dr. Felipe Alanis joined the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in 1995 as Deputy Commissioner for Programs and Instruction, he had been serving as superintendent of the San Benito Consolidated Independent School District in the Rio Grande Valley. Prior to being appointed superintendent, Dr. Alanis had served as Deputy Superintendent for the Ector County Independent School District in Odessa, Texas, and as teacher, assistant principal, and principal in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District in south Texas. As Deputy Commissioner at TEA, he assumed responsibility for curriculum, student assessment, and the never-boring state textbook adoption process. The new curriculum standards, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, were only in their second year of implementation, the student assessment program was undergoing some major modifications, and the 1995 rewrite of the Texas Education Code had introduced the conforming/nonconforming textbook adoption process. School districts looked to the agency for direction, and TEA staff felt a certain degree of excitement and enthusiasm as they worked with districts throughout the state to negotiate the new world of curriculum, assessment, and textbooks. As state textbook director during this period in TEA's history, I will attest to the support and solid leadership Dr. Alanis provided as staff addressed the many changes introduced by Senate Bill 1.

Following his tenure as deputy commissioner, Dr. Alanis continued his service in education by serving as Associate Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs with The University of Texas System and as Commissioner of Education, prior to being appointed Associate Dean at The University of Texas at Austin. As Associate Dean, Dr. Alanis coordinates the efforts of the K-16 Education Center, an outgrowth of the Distance Education Center in UT's Continuing Education Division. The K-16 Education Center focuses its efforts on providing instructional services and courses using a variety of flexible delivery mechanisms, including distance learning. In addition, a fairly new program, the LUCHA Program, continues to gain national and international recognition for its collaboration with educational agencies in Mexico to recognize and award high school credit for coursework completed in Mexico, where appropriate. In 2006, Dr. Alanis appeared on Tucker Carlson's national news program to explain the goals and accomplishments of the LUCHA Program.

Dr. Alanis discussed LUCHA and reflected on his career in education in his office in Austin, Texas. [rhl](#).

ROBERT LEOS: "LUCHA" is an acronym for "Language Learners at the University of Texas at Austin's Center for Hispanic Achievement." What is the goal of LUCHA and how can it benefit incoming students?

DR. FELIPE ALANIS: The goal is to reduce the dropout rate among students coming into our schools from Mexico. We provide courses from Mexico that are at least 70% aligned to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (Texas curriculum standards). If the Texas high school they are attending allows them to do so, the students may take the courses they were taking in Mexico when they transferred and continue those courses through the semester or until the end of the school year. This allows the student to have more instructional time for English language learning without losing content. The final exam is administered in English.

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ROBERT LEOS: *Although the LUCHA program is only in its first full year of implementation, what has been the reception so far?*

DR. FELIPE ALANIS: It's amazing. The program has hit a chord and is really taking off. We're getting calls from everywhere because of the need. I keep hearing over and over, "Why haven't we done this before?" It's difficult to answer that question but my hope is that we're filling a gap.

ROBERT LEOS: *A major part of the LUCHA Program involves comparing coursework taken in Mexico with comparable subjects in our schools in Texas. What are some of the differences and similarities between the curriculum in Mexico and ours here in Texas?*

DR. FELIPE ALANIS: We're discovering some things that are just incredible. When we first got started, I received a call from Tucker Carlson of MSNBC. One of his questions was whether the curriculum in Mexico is as rigorous as ours. We had been studying their curriculum, doing the alignment between their courses and ours, down to the granular level. We discovered a couple of things. One of them is that they may cover less in a course but they cover it in much greater depth. Because they have to be work-ready by the end of junior high or middle school, their coursework is more knowledge-based rather than skill-based. The demonstration part is not as strong but the richness of it is amazing. Math and science are extremely rich. They may not learn as much

theory behind a concept, but they understand the concepts and therefore can do the problems. That was one revelation.

Another thing we've learned about the educational systems in Mexico is that their *secundaria* is really like our seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. When we say *secundaria*, we think *secondary*, like high school. So there's a mismatch just in that. With regard to *preparatoria*, the third year of their *preparatoria* is almost like a freshman year in college. That's the rigor. Those are some of the things we've learned so far.

ROBERT LEOS: *An Austin television station recently featured the ceremony held for the Migrant Student Graduation Enhancement Program, one of the programs in your department. How did this program originate?*



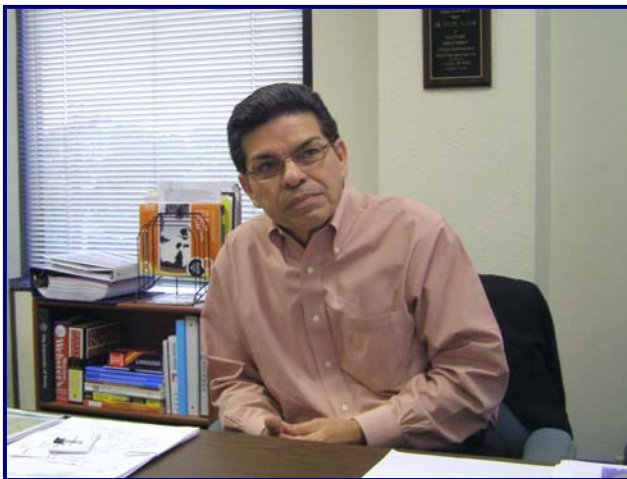
"The program has hit a chord and is really taking off. We're getting calls from everywhere because of the need."

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DR. FELIPE ALANIS: That was a great event. It was the twentieth anniversary of the project, which was nice for me. When I was a high school assistant principal in the early 1980s in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district, about 60% of our students were migrant students. They migrated three times a year and their success rate was very low. Two of my colleagues and I drove to Austin, to The University of Texas and explained our situation. We thought that surely the university would have some type of support program for migrant students. Those conversations grew into what later became the MSRTS (Migrant Student Record Tracking System) and ultimately the program that it is today.

ROBERT LEOS: *You've had a very successful career that includes experience as a teacher, public school administrator, higher education administrator, Deputy Commissioner and Commissioner of Education. What advice do you have for students interested in a career in education? Are there specific skills that you feel they should acquire in order to be successful?*

DR. FELIPE ALANIS: Education is a people business, and you have to have interpersonal skills. As you get into jobs, you must have the ability to be flexible and share an idea. It all boils down to whether the people skills are there or not. Finance, education law, and instruction are most important. It would also help to have a sense of idealism.



“It would also help to have a sense of idealism.”

The K-16 Center includes the LUCHA Program, the Migrant Student Graduation Enhancement Program, the K-16 Curriculum, the UT High School, and many additional services. For more information, visit their website:

<http://www.utexas.edu/cee/dec/>

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