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THE PACK CONNECTION

2025-2026 • VOLUME 2 ISSUE 7

CELEBRATING LA JOYA ISD'S LEGACY OF ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE AND ACHIEVEMENT SINCE 1983!

La Joya ISD Celebrates Completion of Transformative Coach Rod Softball Field Renovation

Under bright skies and with hearts full of pride, La Joya ISD officially unveiled the newly renovated Coach Rod Softball Field today, marking a powerful and emotional milestone for the district, its student-athletes, and the entire La Joya community.

More than a ribbon cutting, the ceremony was a celebration of legacy, unity, and the unwavering belief that our students deserve spaces that inspire excellence. Located at the Leo Garza Jr. Athletics Complex, the state-of-the-art facility now stands as a lasting tribute to beloved coach and educator Carlos "Charlie" Rodriguez Jr. - affectionately known as "Coach Rod" - whose decades of service helped shape the foundation of girls' athletics in La Joya ISD.



Following months of transformative renovations, district leadership, student-athletes, alumni, community members, and Coach Rod's family gathered for a Welcome Showcase at 9:00 a.m., followed by the official ribbon cutting at 10:00 a.m. The celebration continued with a community tailgate and concluded with a ceremonial First Pitch at 11:55 a.m. - a symbolic moment bridging generations of athletes past, present, and future.

The comprehensive upgrades to the facility include the installation of high-performance synthetic turf, a fixed digital scoreboard, renovated dugouts with expanded storage, upgraded bullpen areas, modernized game-day infrastructure, and a memorial dedication archway at the field entrance. Seating enhancements now expand spectator capacity to 687, including designated wheelchair-accessible spaces, reinforcing the district's commitment to accessibility and inclusion.

"This field represents far more than new turf and upgraded facilities," said Dr. Marcey Sorensen, Superintendent of Schools for La Joya ISD. "It represents our promise to students - that their dreams matter, that their talents are valued, and that we will continue investing in spaces that allow them to thrive. Coach Rod's legacy lives in every athlete, especially our female student-athletes, who step onto this field, and today and each day moving forward. We honor his enduring impact on our District's past while looking boldly toward the future."



The renovation project aligns directly with La Joya ISD's Achieving Excellence Together 2030 Strategic Plan, supporting Priority 3: Thriving Students and Priority 5: Operational Excellence & Financial Stability. By enhancing safety, accessibility, and performance

See COACH ROD Pg. 9

La Joya ISD Moves Forward With Transportation Improvements for Students and Families

La Joya Independent School District is taking important steps to improve student transportation following a recent update shared with the School Board on February 25. After months of review and early action, the district is moving from study to implementation with a clear plan to improve safety, reliability, and long-term sustainability beginning in the 2026–27 school year.

A transportation audit helped the district take a close look at how routes, staffing, and bus operations have been handled over time. The review confirmed what many families and staff have experienced. Routes have become slower and more costly, on-time performance has suffered, and aging systems have made it harder to provide consistent service. Overtime, fuel, and maintenance costs are projected to approach nearly $1 million each next year, limiting the district's ability to reinvest in classrooms, staffing, and student programs.

What the Audit Found

The audit identified several long-standing challenges, including door-to-door routing that increases drive time, services that were never fully funded, outdated routing systems, maps that have not been fully updated in decades, and an aging bus fleet that requires more repairs and fuel. In some cases, routes were created informally rather than through a district-wide system, making consistency and oversight difficult.

"These practices were built on outdated assumptions and commitments that we can no longer sustain," said S.B. Pierson, Chief of Operations & Infrastructure. "Addressing them is necessary to improve safety, efficiency, and responsible use of district resources."

From Review to Action

Since receiving the audit, La Joya Independent School District has already taken steps to strengthen transportation operations. These include requiring active commercial driver's licenses for all new drivers, improving daily student data updates, upgrading routing software, strengthening communication with transportation staff, and introducing new technology to improve route accuracy, safety, and transparency.

The district's corrective action plan lays out a phased approach that includes modernizing routes and consolidating stops where appropriate, standardizing driver training and campus safety procedures, strengthening preventive maintenance and fleet planning, improving parent-facing communication tools, and eliminating services that are not financially sustainable.

For families, these changes are designed to lead to safer routes, more reliable arrival times, clearer communication, better maintained buses, and consistent safety practices across the district.

"Our focus is simple: keeping students safe and providing dependable transportation for families," said Superintendent Dr. Marcey Sorensen. "This plan gives us a clear path to modernize our systems, align with best practices, and build a transportation system our community can rely on."

What Families Can Expect Next

The February update marks an important milestone as the district prepares for full implementation ahead of the 2026–27 school year. Families will begin seeing regular updates this spring and summer as new tools are introduced, routes are refined, staff training expands, and preventive maintenance systems are strengthened.

The district will also be engaging families and the community through information campaigns, principal briefings, community cluster meetings, and a district-wide family survey. These efforts are designed to keep families informed, answer questions, and ensure everyone is prepared for upcoming changes.

"The audit confirmed what many families experience every day and made it clear that action is needed," Dr. Sorensen said. "When transportation systems are outdated and financially strained, it affects student safety, on-time arrival, and our ability to invest in learning opportunities. By acting on these findings, we are strengthening our foundation, being transparent with our community, and taking responsible steps to deliver the level of service our families expect from La Joya ISD."

More details and key dates will be shared with families as implementation continues.

MESSAGE FROM THE Superintendent of Schools



Dear La Joya ISD Community,

As we move through March and prepare for Spring Break, I want to take a moment to thank our students, staff, families, and community for the care and commitment you show every day. This time of year is full of all the work we have right in front of us and we are also supporting our students to and through their next year. This work is meaningful and stressful. And yet you continue to shape positive and rigorous experiences for our students, inside and outside the classroom across our district, every single day.

Spring Break offers a well-earned opportunity to rest, recharge, and spend time with loved ones. I encourage everyone to enjoy the break and to prioritize safety, whether you are traveling or staying close to home. Taking this time to pause helps us return refreshed and ready for the important weeks ahead. Please take time for yourselves and those around you. Self-care and attention to those we love matters most as we rev up for the end of the year.

Across La Joya ISD, I continue to see students learning, growing, and achieving in many ways. From daily classroom instruction to accomplishments in fine arts, athletics, and extracurricular activities, our students are supported by educators who care deeply about their success and by families who partner with us every step of the way. I am proud of the work happening on our campuses and grateful for the dedication it represents. Our data is moving in the right direction and we have each and every one of you to thank for that. Growth is the road to mastery and we are growing. We are getting better at getting better each day. I am proud of the work we have accomplished thus far this year - together.

As we continue to guide our work by what we heard from our community as a whole, we are grounded in our strategic plan, Achieving Excellence Together 2030. This plan reflects the voices of parents, students, staff, and community members and serves as our roadmap for strengthening instruction, supporting educators, and ensuring long-term success for our district. It helps keep our focus clear as we make decisions today that shape opportunities for our students tomorrow. That is what this time of year is all about, staying focused on finishing strong and planning for the year ahead.

March is also a time for continued listening and reflection as we move forward together. I remain committed to staying connected with our families, employees, and community as we work toward shared goals and continue building trust through open communication. I will be sending out a schedule of town hall meetings to continue to connect better with you, in the field, to hear directly from you on what needs to continue to be our focus to improve outcomes for our students while directly supporting our staff and families.

When we return from Spring Break, we will enter an important phase of the school year. STAAR testing begins in April, and campuses are focused on helping students feel prepared, confident, and supported. While assessments are one measure of progress, our role as educators, families, and community members is to require effort, be encouraged by growth, maintain strong attendance, and remind students that they are capable, brilliant, and supported. Having the highest expectations of all of our students is our moral obligation. With your support, they can and will accomplish great things.

As we move into the final months of the school year, let us remain focused, connected, and supportive of one another. There is still important work ahead, and there is much to be proud of. Together, we are building a district where students are challenged, supported, and inspired to reach their full potential. Together, we are growing and demonstrating that we can attain our Wildly Important Goal.

Thank you for your continued partnership and trust. I wish you a safe, restful, and enjoyable Spring Break, and I look forward to welcoming everyone back ready to finish the year strong.

Sincerely,
Dr. Marcey Sorensen
Superintendent of Schools
La Joya Independent School District

MESSAGE FROM THE School Board President



As we move into March, I want to thank our students, staff, and families for the continued commitment you show to La Joya ISD every day. This time of year brings an important mix of reflection, preparation, and momentum as we head toward the final stretch of the school year.

Across our campuses, students and educators are working with focus and purpose. From daily classroom instruction to extracurricular activities, we continue to see the impact of strong teaching, supportive families, and a shared belief in what our students can achieve. These efforts matter, especially as we prepare for upcoming assessments and look ahead to the opportunities that spring brings.

The School Board remains focused on making decisions that keep students at the center of everything we do. Guided by our strategic plan, Achieving Excellence Together 2030, we continue listening to our community, supporting our educators, and investing in programs and resources that strengthen learning across the district.

As Spring Break approaches, I encourage our families and staff to take time to rest and recharge. This pause is well-earned and important as we return ready to finish the school year strong.

Thank you for your trust in La Joya ISD and for being active partners in our students' success. Together, we will continue moving forward with purpose and pride.

Julian Alvarez III
President, Board of Trustees
La Joya Independent School District

PROFILE IN LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE

La Joya ISD Highlights Leadership in Action: Brenda Garcia, Executive Director of K-12 Mathematics & Science

At La Joya ISD, leadership is not about overseeing departments - it's about building systems that transform student outcomes. As part of the district's ongoing Profile of Leadership Excellence series, this month's spotlight shines on Brenda Garcia, Executive Director of K-12 Mathematics and Science, whose strategic vision and student-centered approach are strengthening instruction across the district.

Garcia describes her leadership style as visionary, collaborative, and results-driven. She prioritizes alignment - ensuring curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional learning work cohesively to drive measurable academic growth. Through structured coaching, intentional professional development, and strong collaboration with campus leaders and teachers, she focuses on building leadership capacity at every level.

"Leadership is about intentionally building the systems, structures, and culture that allow students and educators to thrive," she shared. "It requires establishing a clear, compelling vision and ensuring that every action, resource, and decision aligns to that vision."

Her work is grounded in both service and strategy. While deeply student-centered, Garcia emphasizes clarity of expectations, accountability, and data-informed decision-making.

"Leadership is not defined by title," she explained. "It is measured by the impact you create, the systems you strengthen, and the responsibility you assume for collective success and student outcomes."

Garcia's motivation stems from a firm belief that every student deserves exceptional instruction and the opportunity to succeed. Having served as a teacher, assistant principal, and district coordinator, she has witnessed firsthand how aligned systems and high-quality materials directly influence student achievement.

"When systems are coherent and instruction is intentional, students rise to meet expectations," she said. "Knowing that my work influences not just individual classrooms but entire campuses and departments drives me to lead with urgency, integrity, and excellence."

Among her proudest accomplishments is leading the implementation of high-quality mathematics curriculum across grades K–8, Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II, as well as science curriculum across grades K–8, Biology, Chemistry, and Physics. The initiative required close collaboration with teachers, administrators, and district leaders to create cohesive instructional systems supported by ongoing professional development.

While measurable academic gains and increased teacher confidence mark important milestones, Garcia says student success remains the most meaningful outcome. Seeing students master rigorous content, graduate prepared, and go on to thrive in college, careers, and life affirms the impact of this work.

Garcia continues to grow as a leader through reflective practice, seeking feedback, analyzing data, and refining systems to ensure continuous improvement. She remains committed to staying current on best practices in curriculum design, instructional coaching, and organizational leadership.

"It is both a privilege and a humbling responsibility to serve La Joya ISD," Garcia shared. "When we provide strong leadership, aligned systems, and high-quality instructional materials, all students can reach their fullest potential."

Her leadership reflects the heart of Priority 1: Excellence in Leadership under the district's Achieving Excellence Together: 2030 Strategic Plan. By building aligned systems, elevating educators, and holding high expectations for student achievement, Garcia exemplifies how strategic leadership drives lasting impact.

As La Joya ISD continues its commitment to excellence, leaders like Brenda Garcia remind the community that transformational growth begins with vision, alignment, and an unwavering dedication to student success - ensuring every learner is equipped not only for academic achievement, but for lifelong opportunity.



DISTRICT NEWS

La Joya ISD Welcomes New School Board Member: Valeria Vega

La Joya ISD is proud to welcome Valeria Vega as the newest member of the La Joya ISD Board of Managers, bringing with her a passion for education, workforce development, and community service rooted in personal experience.



A proud La Joya ISD alumna and first-generation college graduate, Vega's journey reflects the very mission of the district she now serves.

"As a La Joya ISD alumna, this district means a great deal to me," Vega shared. "La Joya ISD helped shape who I am today, and it's an honor to give back to the community that gave me so much. I'm committed to ensuring our students are prepared not just for graduation, but for the many paths that come after."

Vega currently serves as Director of the Noble Leadership Academy, where she leads internal training, professional development, and workforce pipeline initiatives supporting the construction industry. With more than a decade of experience across commercial, heavy civil, and residential sectors, she brings valuable management expertise and a strong focus on expanding career pathways for students.

She earned a bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and a master's degree in Construction Management from the University of Texas at El Paso. Throughout her career, Vega has been recognized for her commitment to STEM education, workforce training, and community engagement.

Her professional background aligns closely with La Joya ISD's commitment to developing Empowered Graduates under the Achieving Excellence Together:2030 Strategic Plan - ensuring students graduate with the skills, knowledge, and opportunities to succeed in college, career, and life.

La Joya ISD Board President Julian Alvarez welcomed Vega to the board, stating, "We are excited to welcome Ms. Vega! Her experience in leadership development and workforce training will be an asset to our district as we continue preparing students for high-demand careers. As an alumna, she understands firsthand the impact our schools have on shaping futures."

Vega expressed enthusiasm about collaborating with district leadership, educators, families, and students.

"I'm excited to work alongside our board, district leadership, and community as we continue building strong schools and a strong future for La Joya ISD," she said.

La Joya ISD looks forward to the perspective and expertise Vega brings as the district continues its legacy of excellence and commitment to student success.

DISTRICT NEWS

Preparing for Success: La Joya ISD Students Gear Up for Spring 2026 State Assessments

This spring, students all across Texas, including right here in La Joya ISD, will take their state STAAR Assessments. These tests are one helpful tool that show teachers what your child has learned and where they might need a little extra support. They also give parents a snapshot of how your child is progressing in important subjects like reading, math, science, and social studies.

What's New This Year?

Texas has updated what your child is learning in science class, and starting this spring, the STAAR Science test will reflect those changes. This means the test questions will now match exactly what your child has been taught in the classroom.

When Are the Tests?

Here are the main Spring 2026 testing dates that matter for all students in Grades 3 through High School End of Course exams.



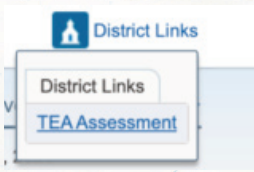
How Families Can Help

Here are a few easy ways to support your child:

- Make sure your child gets plenty of sleep the night before testing.
- Remind them to do their very best–that's all anyone asks.
- Help them eat a good breakfast on testing days.
- Keep mornings calm so they can start their day feeling confident.

When Will I See My Child's Results?

Parents wanting to access their child's state assessments results, may do so through the parent portal skyward. In the upper right corner of the screen click on "District Link" this will open up the TEA Assessment Link that will take you directly to the parent portal and let you review your child's assessment scores.



A Message for Our Students

You've worked hard all year, and we are proud of you! These tests are just one way to show what you know. We believe in you, and your teachers are here to help you every step of the way!

La Joya ISD's STAAR Countdown: Coming Together to Build Confident, Lasting Learning for All Students

La Joya Independent School District has launched a comprehensive academic initiative designed to prepare students for the upcoming State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR). Known as the STAAR Countdown, the districtwide effort focuses on something deeper than test preparation: ensuring students can apply what they learn in class to real thinking and long-term learning.

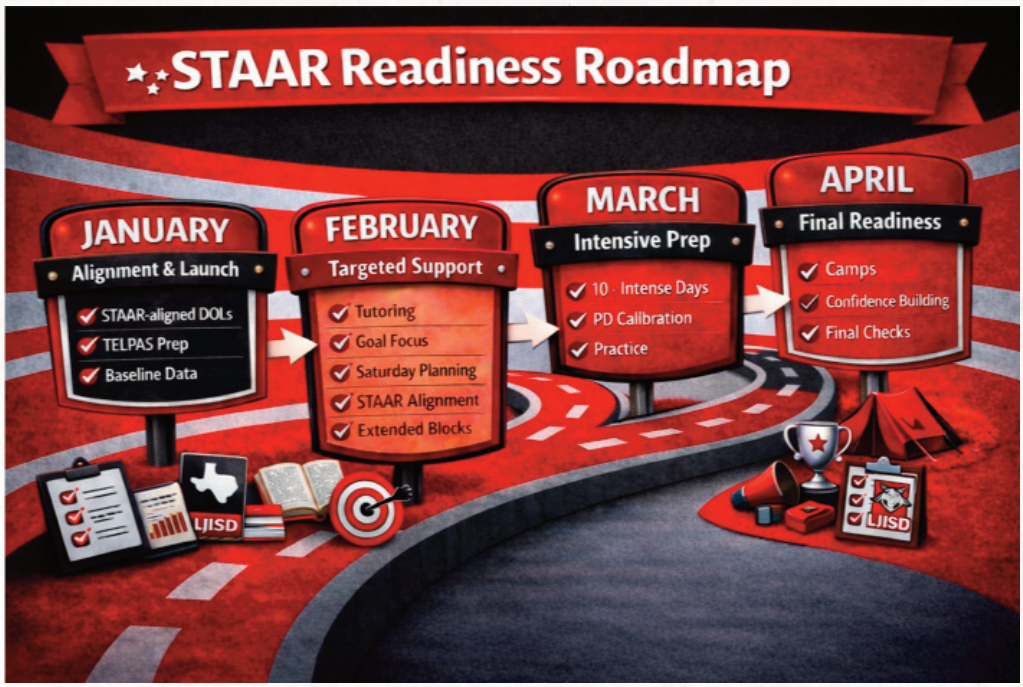
This initiative is not about memorizing answers or short-term review. Instead, it is built around helping students transfer the high-quality instruction students receive every day in their classrooms into independent thinking and application during the assessment and beyond.

The goal is not for students to simply know something for a moment. Students need to truly understand, use, and retain their learning. When students can apply their classroom learning independently, that is genuine learning.

The STAAR Countdown provides a structured, month-by-month roadmap leading up to the spring assessments while maintaining a strong focus on daily classroom instruction. The plan strengthens Tier 1 instruction, the core teaching students receive in every classroom and helps students practice applying those skills in new situations.

Beginning in February, campuses focus on English language development through the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS). Teachers integrate academic conversations, structured questioning, and writing activities into regular lessons so students learn to explain their thinking, not just produce answers.

In early March, campuses move into an intensive preparation phase where students participate in targeted small-group instruction and practice tasks aligned to skills already taught. The district clarifies that this phase does not introduce new material. Instead, it helps students transfer their understanding to unfamiliar questions and situations, a key part of long-term learning.



By April, the initiative shifts into final readiness. At this stage, students refine strategies, build confidence, and demonstrate independence in their thinking. The purpose is to help students approach the assessment calmly while showing what they have genuinely learned over time.

Families are encouraged to ensure students attend school on testing days, get adequate rest the night before, and arrive on time ready to do their best.

The effort reflects a broader commitment to meaningful instruction rather than short-term test performance.

This is about learning that lasts. Students need to be able to apply reading, writing, and problem-solving skills not only on STAAR, but in the next grade, in college, and in their careers. Success means students can transfer their learning to new challenges.

The STAAR Countdown reflects La Joya ISD's guiding belief: Educational Excellence is the Right of Every Student. By aligning instruction, support systems, and community partnership, the district aims to ensure students are not simply prepared for a test, but prepared for future learning.

The message is clear: this is not about a single day or a single score. It is about building understanding, confidence, and the ability to use what they learn long after the assessment is over.

DISTRICT NEWS

Texas Public Schools Week Open House: You're Invited

La Joya ISD invites families to join us for Texas Public Schools Week Open House, happening the week of March 2, 2026. This is a great opportunity for parents and guardians to visit campuses, step into classrooms, and connect directly with teachers, staff, and programs that support student learning.

During Open House, families will have the chance to see what learning looks like day to day and gain helpful information to support their child throughout the school year.

As highlighted in the flyer, campuses will share information on:

- Summer School programs and registration
- STAAR testing and upcoming assessment dates
- Attendance expectations and why they matter
- College and career readiness for secondary students
- Pre-K Round-Up information for families with young learners
- Classroom visits and program showcases

Each campus will host its Open House based on grade level, with dates and times listed in the flyer. Events are designed to be welcoming, informative, and interactive, giving families time to ask questions and explore programs that matter most to them.

We encourage all families to attend and take part in Texas Public Schools Week as we continue working together to support student success.



UPCOMING EVENTS

National Nutrition Month

March 1, 2026
National Athletic Trainers Day

March 2-6, 2026
Read Across America Week

March 2-6, 2026
National School Breakfast Week

March 3-7, 2026
Texas Public Schools Week

March 1-7, 2026
National Social Work

March 6, 2026
Maintenance Work Appreciation Day

March 6, 2026
Texas Girls in STEM

March 16-20, 2026
Spring Break

DISTRICT NEWS

Boots, Books, & Bright Futures: La Joya ISD's Pre-K Round-Up Week

La Joya ISD is inviting families across the community to begin their child's educational journey during its upcoming enrollment week, March 2-6,2026, themed "Boots, Books, and Bright Futures: La Joya ISD's Pre-K Round-Up Week" The district is now accepting students for Pre-K 3, Pre-K 4, Kindergarten, and all new students to the district for the 2026-2027 school year.



From the earliest years through high school graduation, La Joya ISD is committed to providing exceptional programs that help students learn, grow, and thrive. The foundation of that journey begins in its full-day Pre-K classrooms, where young learners build the academic and social skills necessary for long-term success.

La Joya ISD's Pre-K program implements the research-based Creative Curriculum, a play-based instructional model that allows children to explore concepts through hands-on, meaningful experiences. While students engage in purposeful learning centers and guided play, instruction is carefully aligned to Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines to ensure strong academic growth. Teachers work with students daily in small groups for reading and math, providing targeted instruction and individualized support that strengthens early literacy and numeracy skills.

In addition to strong classroom instruction, students benefit from Dual Language classrooms that promote bilingualism and biliteracy in English and Spanish. These programs help students develop cognitive flexibility and cultural awareness while mastering grade-level content. Pre-K students also attend Physical Education with a certified coach, encouraging healthy habits, coordination, and teamwork from an early age.



Family engagement is a cornerstone of the district's early childhood program. Throughout the year, campuses host Unit Celebrations that invite parents into classrooms to see firsthand what their children are learning. During these celebrations, families experience student projects, literacy growth activities, math explorations, and collaborative learning experiences that highlight the progress students are making. These events strengthen the connection between home and school while celebrating each child's accomplishments.

Visit your neighborhood school during the Boots, Books, and Bright Futures: La Joya ISD's Pre-K Round-Up Week, March 2-6, where you will have the opportunity to register on-site, receive assistance with required documents, and have their enrollment questions answered. The event will feature an interactive Pre-K read-aloud experience, and a guided tour of a Pre-K classroom, allowing families to see the learning environment in action.

To qualify future students must meet the following age qualifications:

- Pre-K 3: 3 years old on or before September 1, 2026,
- Pre-K 4: 4 years old on or before September 1, 2026,
- Kindergarten: 5 years old on or before September 1, 2026

To ensure a smooth registration process, families are asked to bring the following items:

- birth certificate,
- proof of residency dated within the last 30 days,
- a driver's license for identity verification,
- an immunization record,
- and a Social Security number if applicable
- proof of income.

District leaders encourage families to register early. With safe and nurturing classrooms, certified teachers, strong academic foundations, and meaningful family involvement, La Joya ISD continues to invest in the success of its youngest learners.

Families are encouraged to take the first step and secure their child's spot. At La Joya ISD, the adventure begins in Pre-K.

La Joya ISD Social Worker Earns State's Highest Honor: Texas School Social Worker of the Year

La Joya ISD is proudly celebrating school social worker Laura Aguilera, who was recently named the 2026 Kathy Armenta Texas School Social Worker of the Year - a prestigious statewide honor recognizing excellence in school-based social work practice.

Aguilera - a social worker at La Joya ISD's College & Career Center - focuses on addressing the underlying causes of attendance challenges, behavioral concerns, and academic disengagement. Through crisis response, mental health support, family outreach, and campus collaboration, she helps ensure students receive the social and emotional support necessary to succeed.

For Aguilera, this state-level recognition brings visibility to work that is often foundational - yet unseen. "Social workers respond to crises, support mental health needs, conduct home visits, collaborate with educators, and connect families to resources," shared Aguilera. "Supporting students' emotional well-being is part of protecting their right to educational excellence."

Her words echo La Joya ISD's Achieving Excellence Together 2030 Strategic Plan, particularly its commitment to Thriving Students - ensuring that every child is safe, supported, and equipped to succeed.

Presented at the Texas School Social Workers Conference, the recognition comes from the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work. Recipients are peer-nominated and selected through a competitive review process that evaluates professional impact, leadership, and service to students and families across K–12 settings.

No stranger to accolades, Aguilera's recognition follows another distinguished honor. In November, she became the first graduate student from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley to receive the 2025 Stacie McGee Student Scholar Award. Together, these accomplishments reflect her dedication to both professional preparation and applied practice within the field of school social work.

"When we invest in licensed school social workers, we strengthen prevention efforts, improve engagement, and support long-term graduation outcomes," Aguilera said. "Attendance patterns often signal unmet needs. Early intervention prevents long-term crisis."

This award also carries historic significance for La Joya ISD, as well as the Rio Grande Valley. Aguilera is only the second school social worker in district history to receive this distinction, following Claudia Gonzalez, who earned the honor in 2016. Together, they remain the only recipients of this award from the Rio Grande Valley.

"This distinction reflects more than individual achievement," said Dr. Derek Little, Chief of Academics & School Leadership. "Laura's recognition at the state level affirms what we already know - that the work happening within La Joya ISD to support the whole child is exceptional. Her dedication to advocacy, prevention, and meaningful intervention exemplifies our commitment to ensuring every student has the opportunity to thrive."

La Joya ISD proudly congratulates Laura on this well-deserved honor and celebrates the lasting impact of her work on students, families, and the entire school community. Through her service, advocacy, and unwavering belief in the power of relationships, Laura continues to elevate the role of school social work - not only within La Joya ISD, but across Texas.

Her achievement stands as a testament to La Joya ISD's enduring belief in meaningful support and the transformative power of education.



STUDENT EXPERIENCE

From Classroom to Career: La Joya ISD's Juarez-Lincoln High School Launches First Apprenticeship Program Through Partnership with South Texas College

In a major step forward for career readiness and workforce development, La Joya ISD's Juarez-Lincoln High School has officially launched its first student apprenticeship program in partnership with South Texas College through its Center for Advanced Training and Apprenticeship (CATA) program.

Recently, 12 students from Juarez-Lincoln High School participated in an industry-based orientation at Crawford Electric, marking the beginning of a hands-on learning experience designed to connect classroom instruction directly to high-wage, high-demand careers.

Through the Construction Technician Apprenticeship Pathway, students will receive both classroom instruction and on-the-job training in the electrical and construction fields. The program is structured to provide industry-aligned curriculum, safety training, and real-world application - allowing students to begin earning hours toward electrical apprenticeship licensure while still in high school.



The launch of the program includes the implementation and demonstration of safety presentations led by safety experts in the field, followed by hands-on station rotations in pipe bending, wiring devices, and pulling wire. Students worked alongside professionals, gaining practical insight into the skills and standards required in the field.

"This is career-readiness in action," said Pablo De Leon, Director of Career & Technical Education for La Joya ISD. "Our CTE Department is focused on creating pathways directly from the classroom to high-wage, high-demand careers. Through this partnership, students are gaining labor-market direct opportunities, hands-on training on actual job sites, and the chance to begin working toward electrical apprenticeship certification."

The apprenticeship model includes two essential components: classroom-based instruction aligned with South Texas College curriculum and structured, supervised field experience with industry partners including Zitro Electric and Crawford Electric. Students will have the opportunity to earn continuing education hours and college credit toward a Level One Certificate while building workforce experience.

"This is an introduction for students to see how it is to work in the field and hear from professionals about their experiences," said Marisol Chavez, Apprenticeship Manager at South Texas College. "We want to provide students with hands-on opportunities so they can start their careers with confidence. Partnerships like this are rare, and we are grateful for La Joya ISD's commitment to giving students real-world



experience."

For La Joya ISD, the initiative reflects a broader commitment to expanding career pathways and strengthening opportunities for Empowered Graduates - Priority 2 of the district's strategic plan. It also advances Priority 4 - Community Trust, Unity, & Partnership - by building meaningful collaborations with higher education institutions and industry leaders to create real-world opportunities that directly benefit students and the local workforce.

"This partnership is essential for our students to develop true workforce-ready skills," De Leon added. "They are not only learning in the classroom - they are applying those skills in real labor environments. That experience opens doors beyond graduation."

By investing in meaningful partnerships and hands-on learning, La Joya ISD continues to ensure students graduate not only with diplomas, but with direction, credentials, and confidence for the future.

Future-Ready: La Joya ISD Seniors Explore College & Career Pathways at Regional Expo

With graduation on the horizon and futures taking shape, La Joya ISD seniors stepped confidently into opportunity at the 23rd Annual Education & Career Expo hosted by Texas Southmost College, in conjunction with RGV LEAD.

Students from Jimmy Carter Early College High School, La Joya High School, Juarez-Lincoln High School, and Palmview High School joined hundreds of peers from across the Rio Grande Valley at the Texas Southmost College ITEC Center to explore career pathways, connect with industry professionals, and engage with representatives from local and state colleges and universities.

The annual expo provides students direct access to business leaders, higher education institutions, and workforce partners - offering invaluable insight into high-demand career fields and postsecondary opportunities. Through keynote sessions, private presentations, and hands-on conversations, La Joya ISD seniors were able to ask questions, gain clarity, and begin mapping out their next steps after graduation.



"Our seniors are at a pivotal moment in their lives," said Lindsay Barajas - College, Career, & Military Readiness Coach for Jimmy Carter ECHS. "Opportunities like this allow our students to see what is possible. It brings their career goals into focus and gives them the confidence to pursue education and training beyond high school."

Allowing seniors to participate in the Education & Career Expo directly supports La Joya ISD's strategic plan - specifically Priority 3: Thriving Students, which focuses on preparing students with the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed to succeed beyond high school. By connecting classroom learning to real-world application, the expo reinforces the district's commitment to ensuring every student graduates future-ready.

Beyond aligning to Priority 3, participation in the expo also fulfills Priority 4: Community Trust, Unity & Partnership. RGV LEAD, a longtime regional partner, has worked for over 30 years to connect industry and education leaders to address workforce demands across Hidalgo, Willacy, Cameron, and Starr counties. Their mission - to ensure youth have the skills and credentials



needed to thrive in the 21st century - aligns closely with La Joya ISD's dedication to expanding career pathways and strengthening college and workforce readiness initiatives.

"This experience bridges the gap between the classroom and the workplace," said Rick Garza, DECA Advisor at Juarez-Lincoln High School. "Students are not just hearing about careers - they are engaging with professionals and institutions who can help make those a goals a reality. It's empowering!"

La Joya ISD seniors explored industries ranging from healthcare and technology to skilled trades, business, and public service. Many left with new contacts, informational materials, and a renewed sense of direction for their postsecondary journeys.

As graduation approaches, experiences like today serve as powerful reminders: the future is not just something to hope for - it is something to prepare for.

DISTRICT NEWS

La Joya ISD Takes Action to Strengthen Strategic Compensation Systems, Build Trust and Transparency

As part of its 2026–27 budget development process, La Joya ISD presented a comprehensive update on strategic compensation at the Feb. 11 school board meeting, outlining deliberate steps to correct inherited system issues, strengthen internal controls, and ensure compensation practices support high-quality instruction, strong leadership, and long-term financial sustainability.

"Strategic compensation is not just about pay," said Mirgitt Crespo, Chief of Business, Finance, and Administrative Services. "It's about making sure our systems are accurate, fair, and sustainable so we can attract, support, and retain the educators and leaders who make a difference for our students every day."

As part of the 2025-26 budgeting process, the District conducted a deep review of compensation data. The internal review, conducted by Business, Finance and Administrative Services and Human Capital & Talent Development teams, uncovered issues originating under previous administrations and Boards affecting the annual salary-step placement and movement of teachers, nurses, and librarians. The core issues involve weak internal controls, inaccuracies in years-of-service records, and widespread coding mistakes, all stemming from prior administrations and Board actions. District leaders emphasized that the internal review was a proactive, data–driven effort conducted as part of routine fiscal oversight.



Current district leadership, including the Superintendent, underscored its responsibility to correct these inherited issues and prevent them from continuing into future budget cycles. Addressing these issues is a critical step in ensuring that district resources are managed responsibly and aligned to student success.

"Our focus is on fixing the system—not repeating past mistakes," Crespo said. "That means verifying historical data, strengthening controls, and ensuring compensation decisions going forward are transparent, consistent, and board-approved."

The District's next step involves administering an employee verification process. District officials emphasized that the verification process applies only to employees on step-based salary schedules – teachers, nurses, and librarians—and that no compensation changes occur without verified data, board approval, and alignment with the annual budget. Employees hired during the 2025–26 school year were already placed using corrected processes and are not expected to be impacted.

"Our community expects us to act with fairness, in alignment with policy, and transparency while also managing our resources responsibly," Superintendent Dr. Marcey Sorensen said. "By addressing pay inequities and a lack of clear processes by previous decision-makers, we are sending clear messages about how we value our employees, continue to strengthen trust in our compensation processes, and ensure that we are recruiting and retaining high–quality staff. We are building systems that support our people as we provide the highest levels of educational excellence for our students and families."

As part of the update, La Joya ISD outlined its strategic compensation priorities for the 2026–27 school year, including:

- Launching a Principal Excellence Initiative to strengthen campus leadership
- Expanding the Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA) to additional eligible teaching roles
- Correcting identified compensation and data integrity issues
- Updating the compensation manual to address long-standing inequities and improve clarity
- Addressing recruitment and retention of historically hard-to-fill high-needs positions

This work aligns with La Joya ISD's five-year strategic plan, Achieving Excellence Together 2030, which prioritizes operational excellence, financial stability, leadership development, and community trust.

"We are committed to fairness, transparency, and responsible stewardship," Sorensen said. "By strengthening these systems now, we are building trust, supporting our employees, and ensuring that every decision we make keeps students at the center."

More information on the district's priorities and strategic plan is available at www.lajoyaisd.com.

La Joya ISD Begins Long-Range Planning to Care for and Improve School Facilities

La Joya ISD is beginning a long-range facilities planning process to help guide how schools and district buildings are maintained, improved, and used over the next 10 to 20 years.

At its February 11 meeting, the La Joya ISD Board of Trustees approved a partnership with MGT Impact Solutions to support this work. The goal is to take a thoughtful, data-informed look at every campus and facility so the district can make responsible decisions that support students, staff, and families now and in the future.

This planning process will include a districtwide assessment of all school buildings and facilities. Each site will be reviewed for building condition, safety, space use, and how well it supports teaching and learning. The final plan will outline priorities and a phased approach for future projects, based on need, instructional impact, fairness across campuses, and available funding.

"As our district continues to change, it's important that our facilities keep pace," said S.B. Pierson, Chief of Operations and Infrastructure. "This work helps us plan responsibly, support high-quality instruction, provide strong learning environments for students, and remain financially responsible for the long term." Superintendent Dr. Marcey Sorensen shared that this effort directly reflects what the district heard from the community during its recent strategic planning process.

"Families, staff, students, and community members were clear about the need to address facility repairs, maintenance, and upgrades," Sorensen said. "This long-range plan allows us to respond thoughtfully to those concerns while also addressing enrollment changes, remaining competitive as a district, and ensuring our schools continue to be places where students can thrive. We look forward to beginning the facility assessments and sharing what we learn with our Board and community."

Community input will continue to be an important part of this process. Feedback from families, staff, and community members will help guide recommendations and ensure transparency as the plan is developed and carried out.

The facilities master plan will serve as a living document that can be updated as enrollment trends, building conditions, and educational needs change. Its findings will help guide future investments and ensure district resources are used carefully and fairly across all campuses.

This work supports the district's Strategic Priority on Operational Excellence and Financial Stability and reflects La Joya ISD's commitment to long-term planning and responsible stewardship of public resources.

More information about the facilities planning process and opportunities for community involvement will be shared this spring as the work moves forward.

DISTRICT NEWS

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standards, the district continues to strengthen its athletic infrastructure while preserving its historic roots.

"Coach Rod built more than championship teams - he built character, discipline, and unity," said Joe Peña, Executive Director of Athletics for La Joya ISD. "Today, we celebrate not only a beautiful new facility but the culture he cultivated. This field will forever remind our athletes what it truly means to represent La Joya ISD with pride, heart, and resilience."

The transformation of the field reflects meticulous planning and collaboration across departments to ensure durability, functionality, and long-term sustainability for student use year-round.

"This project reflects our commitment to operational excellence and thoughtful infrastructure investment," said S.B. Pierson, Chief of Operations & Infrastructure for La Joya ISD. "Every enhancement - from the synthetic playing surface to the expanded seating and accessibility features - was designed with our students and community in mind. We are proud to deliver a facility that honors Coach Rod's legacy while meeting the highest standards of safety, performance, and innovation."





As the ribbon fell and applause echoed across the complex, the newly renovated Coach Rod Softball Field stood not just as a modern athletic facility, but as a living symbol of gratitude and vision - honoring a beloved mentor who shaped generations, and inspiring the next wave of Lady Coyotes who will carry his spirit forward.

To close out the day's celebration, the field officially came to life in the best way possible - through competition and community spirit. Following the ceremonial program, the event concluded with a softball tournament, allowing student-athletes to be among the first to compete on the newly renovated surface. In a memorable moment, Dr. Sorensen delivered the first ceremonial pitch to officially kick off the tournament - a gesture underscoring the district's continued commitment to investing in students and honoring the legacy of Coach Rod.



Today's ceremony served as a reminder that in La Joya ISD, legacy is not simply remembered - it is built upon.



La Joya ISD Expands 2026 Summer Programs to Serve Students at Every Grade Level

La Joya ISD is proud to announce the return of its annual Additional Days School Year (ADSY) Summer Initiative, offering engaging academic and enrichment opportunities for students from Pre-K through high school.

Taking place from June 1 - 26, 2026, the district's comprehensive summer programming is designed to strengthen learning, support student growth, and prepare learners for long-term success.



Through a combination of STEAM enrichment, literacy and math acceleration, credit recovery, college readiness programs, and career-focused experiences, La Joya ISD is ensuring students remain academically engaged while exploring new interests and pathways.

Elementary students will have the opportunity to participate in the district's Summer STEAM Camp, featuring weekly themes and two hours of daily STEAM enrichment activities. The program focuses on strengthening literacy skills, building math proficiency, and providing hands-on learning experiences in a fun, structured environment.

Middle and high school students will have access to a variety of targeted academic programs, including credit recovery and advancement, Early College Summer Bridge Institutes, College Readiness Camps, and so much more.

Programs will be hosted at multiple campuses, including La Joya High School, Palmview High School, Juarez-Lincoln High School, and Jimmy Carter Early College High School. Instructional hours vary by program, with transportation and meals provided.

Research consistently shows that structured summer learning programs help prevent learning loss, strengthen foundational skills, and boost student confidence. La Joya ISD's ADSY Summer Initiative supports the district's strategic plan by fulfilling Priorities 2 and 3, which focus on Empowered Graduates and Thriving Students, respectively. By combining academic support with engaging, hands-on learning experiences, the district ensures students continue building momentum toward graduation and future career success.

Registration is taking place via Skyward. Step by step instructions can be found at lajoyaisd.com/adsy. Parents and guardians are also encouraged to contact their child's campus directly for additional enrollment information. Campus staff will provide details regarding eligibility, program placement, and transportation services.

La Joya ISD remains committed to providing meaningful learning opportunities year-round - ensuring every student has access to the tools, support, and experiences needed to succeed.

DISTRICT NEWS

La Joya ISD to Host Annual CTE Expo, Inspiring Middle School Students to Explore Future Career Pathways

At La Joya ISD, preparing students for the future begins long before graduation day. Through its comprehensive Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, La Joya ISD provides students with hands-on learning experiences that connect the classroom instruction to real-world opportunities.

On Friday, March 27, that commitment will be on full display as middle school students from across the district gather at the Lincoln Building Gymnasium for the CTE Expo - an annual district event that offers an immersive, hands-on experience designed to spark curiosity, build confidence, and inspire future goals.

Meant to expand high-quality opportunities that prepare students for success beyond high school, the CTE Expo directly supports Priority 2 of Achieving Excellence Together: 2030, which focuses on Empowered Graduates.

"Our goal is not only to educate students for today, but to prepare them for tomorrow," said Melinda Flores, Executive Director of College and Career Success for La Joya ISD. "Through CTE, we are giving students meaningful, hands-on experiences that help them discover their passions, build confidence, and begin mapping out a future aligned with their goals. The CTE Expo is an exciting opportunity for our middle school students to see what is possible."

The Expo will highlight the depth and diversity of CTE programs of study available at the high school level. High school CTE students will serve as program ambassadors - demonstrating technical skills, presenting projects, and sharing firsthand experiences from their chosen pathways.

Middle school attendees will explore a wide range of career-focused programs, including:Health Science, Engineering, Business & Marketing, Culinary Arts, Information Technology, Law Enforcement, Education & Training, Agriculture & Welding, and so much more.

Through interactive demonstrations and real-world applications, students will see how classroom learning connects directly to high-demand careers and industry certifications.

Additionally, CTE dual credit partners will also be onsite to provide valuable information about earning college credit while in high school. By offering early access to college-level learning, La Joya ISD continues to strengthen pathways that accelerate student success and expand postsecondary options.

Industry-based partners, institutes of higher education, and local businesses will also be on site to share current workforce trends and emerging career opportunities. Their participation provides students with authentic insight into the skills, certifications, and education needed to thrive in today's rapidly evolving job market.

The CTE Expo serves as a cornerstone of La Joya ISD's commitment to ensuring every student graduates prepared for college, career, or military service.



Celebrating the Heart of Our District: March Employee Observances

March provides a meaningful opportunity for La Joya ISD to recognize and celebrate the dedicated professionals who work tirelessly behind the scenes and on the front lines to support our students, staff, and schools each day.

Throughout the month, we proudly observe National Procurement Month, honoring the team members who ensure our campuses and departments have the essential resources needed to operate smoothly and efficiently. Their thoughtful planning and commitment to excellence help power the daily work of our district.

We also celebrate National Athletic Trainers Month, recognizing the compassionate and skilled individuals who prioritize student-athlete health and safety. Their expertise, vigilance, and care allow our athletes to perform at their best while staying safe both on and off the field.

From March 1–7, we observe Educational Diagnostician Week and National Social Worker Week. Our educational diagnosticians play a critical role in identifying and supporting the unique learning needs of students, ensuring they receive the tools necessary to succeed. At the same time, our social workers provide invaluable emotional, social, and family support - helping remove barriers so students can thrive academically and personally.

On March 6, we proudly recognize Maintenance Worker Appreciation Day, celebrating the dedicated individuals who keep our facilities safe, functional, and welcoming. Their work often happens quietly behind the scenes, yet its impact is felt across every classroom and campus.

Together, these observances highlight the many professionals whose passion, expertise, and service contribute to a strong and supportive learning environment. La Joya ISD extends its sincere gratitude to each of these team members for the vital role they play in helping us achieve excellence together.

DISTRCIT NEWS

Serving with Heart: La Joya ISD Advancing Student Wellness with Heart-Healthy February Initiative

This February, La Joya ISD is putting heart health at the forefront - not only through awareness, but through action. In observance of American Heart Month, the district's Child Nutrition Services (CNS) Department is leading a series of initiatives designed to promote healthy habits, encourage nutritious choices, and support student well-being both in and beyond the cafeteria.



As part of its "Heart-Healthy February" efforts, La Joya ISD is serving meals that highlight fresh Texas produce through its farm-to-school partnership. By incorporating locally sourced ingredients, students are receiving nutritious, balanced options that fuel both their bodies and their academic success.

"At La Joya ISD, we understand that healthy students are better prepared to learn, grow, and succeed," said Rolando Hernandez, CNS Director. "During American Heart Month, we are intentionally highlighting heart-healthy choices that show our students nutritious meals can be both delicious and accessible. From fresh, locally sourced produce to balanced breakfasts and supper options, our goal is to support lifelong healthy habits - one meal at a time."

Beyond implementing mindfulness of heart health, Heart-Healthy February incorporates fun while keeping wellness a priority. Part of the fun includes special Valentine's Day inspired meals. On February 13, meals will feature healthy Valentine's Day cookies and pink applesauce - adding a festive touch without compromising nutritional value.

Heart-Healthy February is part of a broader district-wide initiative to promote cardiovascular health. In addition to nutritious menu offerings, La Joya ISD will host its annual Heart Walk at the end of the month, encouraging students, staff, and families to stay active and prioritize heart health together.

Through nutritious meals, wellness initiatives, and community engagement opportunities, La Joya ISD remains committed to supporting student health - one meal, one step, and one heart-healthy choice at a time.

2026–2027 School Calendar Approved

The La Joya ISD Board of Trustees has officially approved the 2026–2027 Academic Calendar, giving our families and staff the opportunity to plan ahead for the upcoming school year.

The calendar reflects careful consideration of instructional time, professional learning, and student wellness. It ensures that we maximize classroom learning while also building in meaningful breaks throughout the year.

Important Dates

- First Day of School: August 11, 2026
- Last Day of School: May 28, 2027
- Graduation: May 22, 2027
- Total Instructional Days: 179

Major Student Holidays & Breaks

- Labor Day – September 7
- Thanksgiving Break – November 23–27
- Christmas Break – December 21–January 5
- Spring Break – March 15–19
- Easter Holiday – March 26
- Memorial Day – May 31

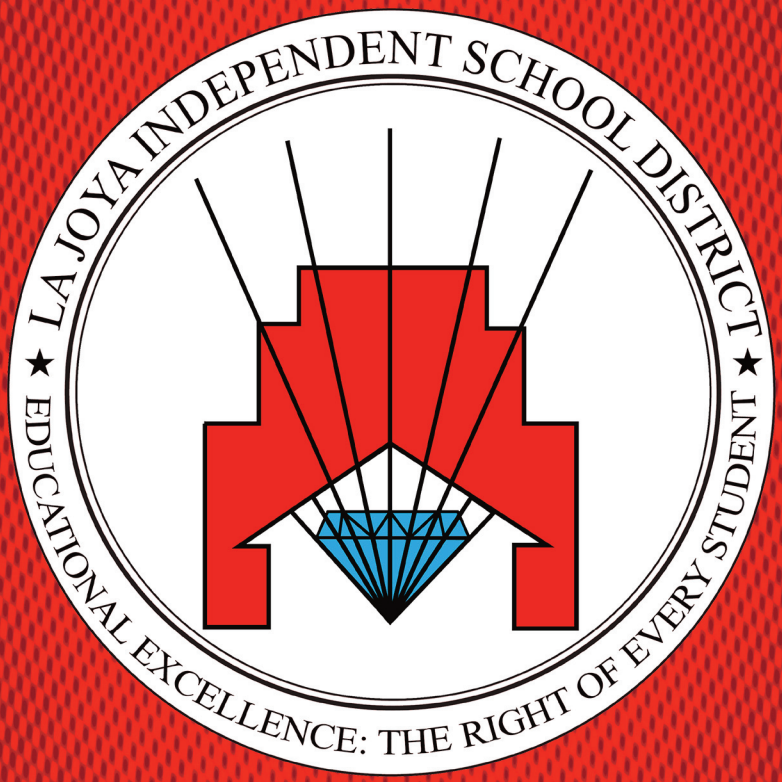
Professional learning and preparation days are strategically placed throughout the year to support our educators in planning high-quality instruction for students.

We encourage families to review the full calendar and mark important dates early. The complete 2026–2027 calendar is available on our district website at www.lajoyaisd.com.

As always, we remain focused on keeping students at the center of every decision we make and aligning our work to Achieving Excellence Together 2030.



LA JOYA ISD



visit www.lajoyaisd.com & follow us on social media @lajoyaisd