 Superintendent: Henry Lind  
 Primary contact: Debra Baros, assistant superintendent*  
 1,985 students, preK-12, rural  

**District Description**  
Cuero Independent School District is located approximately 100 miles south of Austin, Texas. The district includes the city of Cuero and a rural area along the Guadalupe River. Ranching is the major occupation in the region, and a cotton mill is the largest employer in Cuero. The school district has five schools, but the passage of a recent bond election has enabled construction of two new facilities. The flood-damaged high school was replaced last year, and in 2006 a new building will be ready for the reconfigured middle grades.

In order to improve achievement of all students, the district has made many administrative changes in the past two years. The superintendent is in his second year in the district, several district positions are new, and principals of all four schools are in either their first or second year at their sites.

**Key Findings**

- The Cuero district is targeting the intermediate and middle grades to improve student achievement. Double periods have been scheduled in math and English at the middle school for students who need extra help or remediation. The district is also examining the science and math curricula and instruction from grade 4 through 8 to make sure they are aligned within and across grade levels. In addition, the district is planning a major change in grade configurations that will keep 6th graders in the same school with 4th and 5th graders and reorganize the middle school to serve only grades 7 and 8.

- Cuero teachers who did not meet the highly qualified requirements last year enrolled in professional development classes and specialized training opportunities, and some left the district. Because the district is located in a rural area, however, administrators are finding it difficult to recruit and retain special education, math, science, and Spanish teachers.

- The Cuero staff has concerns about fairness and appropriateness of rules governing the process to determine whether students with disabilities are making adequate yearly progress, and would like more flexibility in this area. The district is reviewing its identification procedures and placement options for students with disabilities.

*Other contacts for this case study include Kelly Stanford, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction; and Jan Reeves, science coordinator.
Overall Impact of NCLB

In the first two years of No Child Left Behind, the Cuero district adjusted to the new requirements, but the staff is finding this harder to do each year. Debra Baros, assistant superintendent, pointed to two specific concerns with NCLB: first, the difficulty of attracting and retaining teachers who meet the law’s requirements for being highly qualified, and second, the method for determining adequate yearly progress for students with disabilities, discussed below.

Despite these challenges, Baros describes the law as having a positive impact on the district because of its increased focus on instruction and the alignment of curriculum to state standards and state tests. She and others in Cuero are very pleased with the NCLB emphasis on increased parental involvement and early intervention for children through Title I and Even Start. The preschool program is located at the same school as the kindergarten, and the district has an extensive Even Start program as well. The combination of these federally funded programs and the K-1 program results in strong home-school connections for families. In addition to the early learning opportunities for young children, the district offers parent education classes and ongoing parent involvement throughout the grades.

NCLB and Student Achievement

Cuero has had high levels of achievement at all the schools in the past, and this continued when state testing expanded to additional grades in 2003. The schools have always made NCLB adequate yearly progress, and no schools are in improvement. Previously, the Cuero district had some schools with “exemplary” and “recognized” ratings from the state for their high academic performance, but in 2005, all schools received a rating of “academically acceptable,” which is one or two steps lower in the state accountability rating system. Although this rating does not indicate poor performance, Baros said that the district and the community expect and want higher ratings for their schools.

The percentage of students scoring at the proficient level or above on state reading/language arts tests in grades 3-11 increased from 84% in 2004 to 87% in 2005. In math the percentage increased from 70% to 74%. In both subjects, the percentages have increased each year, but at the junior high and high school levels, math proficiency continues to trail reading. Writing (96%) and social studies (93%) show very high percentages of proficient students in 2005, as they have in previous years.

The achievement gaps among Cuero’s racial/ethnic groups are greater in math than they are in reading/language arts. There is little or no achievement gap in two areas—writing and social

<table>
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<th>Subject</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>African American</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading/language arts</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social studies</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>93%</td>
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Source: The Texas Education Agency, www.tea.state.tx.us/cgi/sas/broker
studies—but the greatest gap is in science. The proficiency percentages of the three racial groups in all five subjects are shown in table 1.

**Adequate Yearly Progress and School Improvement**

Three of the four Cuero schools—the high school, middle school, and Hunt Elementary—have made adequate yearly progress each year. The fourth school, John C. French Elementary, enrolls only preschool, kindergarten, and grade 1. For proficiency determinations in these early grades, the school uses other indicators, such as early intervention and school readiness assessments. Both French and Hunt schools receive Title I funds.

**Testing Issues**

Testing at the NCLB-required grade levels 3 through 11 has taken place in Texas schools since 2003 in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies. The state requires students to pass the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) before they can be promoted to the next grade. This requirement has been in place for grade 3 for two years and took effect in grade 5 for the first time in 2005. Students have three opportunities to take the test, and all Cuero students have eventually passed the test and been promoted to the next grade. Students in grade 8 will face this requirement in 2008. Two Cuero graduating classes have had to pass the 11th grade TAKS as a condition for high school graduation; no student has been unable to graduate because of the test since the requirement took effect two years ago.

**Impact of NCLB on Curriculum and Instruction**

**GENERAL CHANGES IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION**

In response to NCLB, the Cuero schools have made major changes in curriculum and instruction at the middle and high school levels in particular. Schools are offering double periods in math and English for students who have fallen behind and others who can benefit from remediation. According to district staff, this is working well, and the students who are at risk academically are using the time to master the skills that they have missed. Reading has also received more attention at the elementary level. Each elementary school has a counselor and a reading specialist to work with students who need additional assistance.

The district has set a goal to improve achievement in science for all Cuero students. One way this is being addressed is with a full-time science coordinator. Jan Reeve is in her second year in this position. She helps elementary and middle school classroom teachers find ways to successfully integrate science concepts into their teaching. “I help them with curriculum and instruction, and I model lessons for them,” she said. “We find ways at each grade level to combine science learning with the curriculum so that what is being taught in reading and math includes science.” The district has found that students are stronger in physical science in the early grades than they are in earth science, so there is increased focus on earth science instruction in these early grades.

Cuero’s high school and middle school both have new principals in 2005-06. Both administrators are reviewing all aspects of teaching and learning, including how instruction is provided in classrooms, how the various subjects are taught, and how the curriculum is aligned from one grade to the next. The courses and their sequences are being examined to make sure that students receive the preparation they need to be successful in high school. Kelly Stanford, the new assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, is training teachers to use curriculum mapping, an exercise designed to align their classroom instruction with state standards for the content to be taught in their grade. The teachers determine how well curriculum is coordinated horizontally across classrooms and schools in the same grade and vertically from one grade to the
next. “We’ve unpacked the standards, but now we need to know if there are any missing pieces. With mapping we will find that out,” said Stanford. “The days of teaching in isolation are over. Teachers need to work together, and that’s how we can fit everything in.”

Another change taking place in Cuero is a review of grade configurations in elementary and middle school. With a new middle school being built, the staff is expecting to reduce the number of students on each campus as part of a long-range effort to improve student performance. French School will have only preschoolers and kindergarten children. Grade 1 will be moved to Hunt School with students in grades 2 and 3. The new school will serve grades 4, 5, and 6, and the junior high will serve grades 7 and 8.

**CHANGES IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION FOR SUBGROUPS**

The subgroup of students with disabilities has received considerable attention in Cuero in the past two years because the district is considered “Level 1A for Special Education Intervention” under the Texas Education Agency’s special education monitoring system. The designation occurred because a monitoring team determined that Cuero had too high a percentage of students identified for special education—as high as 13% in the past three years. Cuero’s rating improved by one level in 2004-05, but that still means that the district has to carefully review its process for identifying students with disabilities. The district also must pay attention to the placement options from preschool to age 21 that are available for students with disabilities.

In response to its designation, Cuero has provided a number of additional placements at the schools, and staff members have been trained in a three-tier referral model for special education identification.

With regard to NCLB, the subgroup of students with disabilities has met AYP requirements, and the graduation rate for these students is on par with that of other students. In most subjects, and at most grade levels, the subgroup has a lower level of proficiency than students overall, although the extent of the gap varies by subject. In reading/language arts, for example, 73% of Cuero high school students with disabilities scored at the proficient level, compared with 85% of Cuero high school students overall. But high school math is one area where students with disabilities have exceeded the district average; in this subject, 80% of high school students with disabilities (a small group of about 15 students) scored at the proficient level, compared with 70% for all Cuero high school students.

Assistant Superintendent Baros said that NCLB policies for testing students with disabilities continue to be a concern in Cuero, and she expressed a desire for more flexibility for this group in the law. “Our special education students are taught at their instructional level,” she said, “but they are tested at their grade level, and that’s a problem for us and for a lot of districts.” Baros is pleased with the recent changes in guidance from the U.S. Department of Education about testing students with disabilities, but she continues to believe that more flexibility is needed.

**English Language Learners**

Cuero enrolls a large number of Latino students (38%), and almost all of them are proficient in English. There are only a few English language learners at each grade level, and most are in the primary grades. Most English language learners receive English instruction in small groups and through software programs designed to accelerate English acquisition. NCLB Title III funds are coordinated through a regional process that provides Cuero schools with materials and teacher training for working with English language learners.
Teacher Qualifications, Support, and Professional Development

HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS
All but three Cuero teachers met the NCLB requirements as of November 2005, and district staff anticipates that these teachers will complete their certification or internships by the end of the year. None of these teachers work at Title I schools. The Cuero district has paid for tuition and books for college courses to enable teachers to meet the requirements. Several teachers left the district or were released because it was apparent that they would not be able to become highly qualified. The loss of teachers created a hardship, according to district staff, because the rural area often has difficulty attracting and retaining good teachers. Another concern with staffing is that some good teachers move to other districts that offer higher salaries.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Cuero teachers and other district employees have many opportunities to participate in professional development to improve their skills. These widely varying offerings are provided through a combination of state and local funds as well as NCLB Title II.

Workshops and training sessions have been held on how to disaggregate and use assessment data and how to improve instruction to bring about higher student achievement. Teachers have learned strategies for working more effectively with parents, creating stronger lesson plans, and developing a culture of respect within the school. Other topics for training have included brain-based learning, communication styles, and the elements of strategic leadership. According to Debra Baros, many teachers are stressed and “overwhelmed by all the paperwork” involved with testing and following individual student progress. “We can give them support and assistance, and we do,” she said. “But there is still a lot that they have to do by themselves for their classrooms and their students.”

Paraprofessional Qualifications and Support
The Cuero district uses paraprofessionals at both Title I elementary schools—approximately 18 at each school. Two years ago, only two paraprofessionals met the NCLB highly qualified requirements, and district officials were very concerned with finding ways to help all paraprofessionals meet the qualifications. Their efforts were successful; by 2005-06, all paraprofessionals had either passed a competency assessment or finished two years of college. Training provided by the district through the Para Academy offered special classes in reading, writing, and math that were required for Title I paraprofessionals. Those who did not work at Title I schools were included in the training, for a total of more than 60 employees.

Most paraprofessionals used the training to improve their ability to assist teachers with instruction and pass the competency assessment. Others received college credit from the University of Houston in nearby Victoria and completed associate’s degrees.

Funding and Costs
The district’s Title I allocation of $500,000 has stayed about the same for the past two years, and these funds continue to be used at the two elementary schools. The funds support paraprofessionals who assist teachers at both schools, including paraprofessionals in the prekindergarten program. Title I funds also cover part of the cost of extending the school year for students who need extra help and tutoring.
Data File—Cuero Independent School District

Location: South Texas
Type: Rural

Number of Schools
Total: 5
   Elementary: 2
   Middle/junior high: 1
   High schools: 1
   Other: 1 (special education school)

Number of Title I schools: 2

Student Enrollment and Demographics
Total enrollment: 1,985
   White: 48%
   Latino: 38%
   African American: 14%
   Low-income students: 57%
   Students with disabilities: 13%
   English language learners: 2%

Teachers
Total number of teachers: 145
   Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 98%

Paraprofessionals
Total number of Title I instructional paraprofessionals: 37
   Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 100%

Total Number That Did Not Make AYP Based on 2004-05 Testing
Title I and non-Title I schools that did not make AYP, including those in improvement, restructuring, or corrective action: 0

Number of Title I Schools in Improvement, Restructuring, or Corrective Action

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Number of Schools Offering Choice and/or SES

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