

Dear McAllen ISD School Board Candidate,

As the co-founders of [RGV PUEDE](#) (Parents United for Excellent Dual Education / Padres Unidos para una Educación Dual de Excelencia), we are emailing each 2023 McAllen ISD School Board candidate. We are also McAllen ISD parents, with two boys (ages 8 and 10) enrolled in Sanchez Elementary's Dual Language Program.

Our McAllen PUEDE community would like to know your answers to these questions:

1. **What's your vision for bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy in McAllen?**
2. **Practically speaking, what would you do for McAllen ISD's Dual Language Program if elected?**

RGV PUEDE is not affiliated with any political party, and we neither endorse nor oppose candidates. In 2022, we became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit whose mission is "to educate and organize parents, families, and communities to support, improve, and extend dual language bilingual education programs from Pre-K to 12th across the Rio Grande Valley." Roughly 600 parents and community members are currently subscribed to RGV PUEDE's email list; approximately 250 of us make up McAllen PUEDE. We plan to educate McAllen residents by: 1) posting each McAllen ISD School Board Candidate's answers to the above questions to the RGV PUEDE website, 2) sending each candidate's answers to the McAllen PUEDE email list, and 3) sending a message to McAllen PUEDE's WhatsApp group with this information.

If you are willing and able to provide your answers in both English and in Spanish, we would appreciate it. If not, we will provide a translation so that our community has equal access to understanding your position. (If you choose not to respond, we will simply list "No response" under your name).

McAllen ISD currently offers Dual Language at seven elementary schools (Fields, Gonzalez, Jackson, McAuliffe, Milam, Perez, and Sanchez), one middle school (Fossum), and one high school (Achieve). MISD's publicly available [Strategic Plan](#) indicates the district's commitment to "increase the percentage of students participating in dual language programs" (page 13). McAllen PUEDE supports this goal, but our [Freedom of Information Act requests for enrollment figures](#) have revealed that the district is not following its own strategic plan. We are thus looking for the McAllen ISD leadership to do three things:

1. Follow MISD's strategic plan to increase the percentage of students participating in the program. 1753 MISD students (7% of all students in the district) currently participate in dual language, whereas a full-scale dual language program could serve well over 50% of all MISD students and receive over \$3 million dollars per year in additional state funding thanks to [HB3](#).
2. Increase support for the Dual Language program on the campuses where it is already offered.
3. Increase district-wide equity by extending the Dual Language program to more campuses, especially in South McAllen, which is grossly underserved in this regard. (Largely because of this inequity, only 17% of the 7338 McAllen students classified as "Emergent Bilinguals" currently participate in dual language even though it has been empirically shown to lead to more success for Emergent Bilinguals than the early exit programs in place at most South McAllen campuses).

Since 2016, RGV PUEDE has been working with both UTRGV and McAllen ISD to support, improve, and extend Dual Language programs from Pre-K to 12th. You can read more about our work in the [News and Articles](#) section of our website.

PUEDE looks forward to our ongoing work as partners with McAllen ISD. Please feel free to get in touch with any questions or concerns. And good luck in the election!

Sincerely,
Alex Stehn & Mariana Alessandri

Place 1: Lizzie Kittleman vs. Marco Suarez (Incumbent)

Lizzie Kittleman's Response

Hello, RGV PUEDE!

I am grateful to be a part of this important and ongoing conversation. Bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy (B3) has a long and rich history in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) and specifically McAllen. There is so much I can say about both the nature of B3 as a critical component of citizenship in the RGV and also B3 as a valuable asset to thriving in a diverse and competitive workforce. As a faculty member at UTRGV, where our vision is to become the leading Hispanic Serving Institute in a bilingual and bicultural environment, I am deeply committed to this work.

To answer your first question, my vision comes from a curricular and pedagogical perspective as I have taught elementary students for 8 years and now work in higher education. The unfortunate reality of our schools today is that we mostly prioritize a monolingual and monocultural education. Based on my experience, there is a stigma associated with the Spanish language where our curricular system enacts a "sink or swim" model to drop Spanish and learn English. As I am completing a doctorate degree in curriculum and instruction at UTRGV, I have learned that this is called subtractive schooling. Tragically, our students become less rather than more bilingual. With that said, my vision for B3 is that our leadership sets the tone, the guidelines, and support for our school system to honor Spanish as a valuable academic language.

To answer your second question, if elected, I will work to support Dual Language through the following practical steps. First, I would propose an extensive wide survey for all staff to learn more about the reality of teaching dual language in our schools. As a former elementary teacher, I always appreciated when leadership actively sought out our expert opinions, feedback, and advice. Now, as a potential board member, I want to reinforce the importance of listening and paying attention to our administration, our teachers, and staff. What is going well for our dual language program? What are our current roadblocks? What resources do our schools need to effectively implement dual language? This is the most important step in moving forward Dual Language goals.

After surveying our staff, my second practical step is to reassess our Strategic Plan, which states that our district will implement a high-quality dual language program and expand over time. If elected, I would review dual language data during prior years to have an idea of the trajectory of our dual language program. Our board needs to discuss and prioritize whether we are aligned with our Strategic Plan or not.

Finally, my third practical step is to lean on experts in the field such as RGV PUEDE, who have successfully researched B3 in our local community and beyond. If elected, I will propose a partnership and prioritize more frequent conversations and feedback. If we are not meeting the goals of our Strategic Plan, why not lean on local experts to help us determine, with actionable items, what needs to be done to meet these goals? This final step models multiple 21st century skills such as collaboration, communication, and problem solving. It's important that leadership walks the talk.

In summation, I affirm my support in expanding and supporting Dual Language programming in McAllen ISD. I appreciate the efforts of RGV PUEDE, and I am very much interested in learning more about how I can be supportive. As a current educator, my larger aim is to encourage our community and stakeholders to be proud of bilingualism and bicultural identities.

Thank you,
Lizzie Kittleman

Marco Suarez's Response

As a candidate for the McAllen School Board, I believe that bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy are crucial for our district's success. With a predominantly Hispanic population, it's vital that

we prioritize language acquisition and proficiency in both English and Spanish from an early age. We must also celebrate all cultural heritage, promoting biculturalism and creating a sense of belonging for all students. Finally, we need to equip our students with the skills to excel in both languages through language immersion, cultural exchange, and literacy programs. By embracing our diversity and providing the necessary resources, we can create a more inclusive and welcoming community that prepares our students for success in a globalized world. My goal is to ensure that McAllen School District is a leader in bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy, creating a brighter future for our students.

As your trustee, I have always supported the districts vision. I will continue to support the Dual Language program. This past year I met a family that was sending their child to a private Dual Language school, I invited them to visit Sanchez Elementary. After taking a tour of the school and visiting with the staff and students, we added a new family member to our Dual Language community. A true testament to a program I believe in.

Place 2: Lucia Regalado (running unopposed)

Lucia Regalado's Response

Place 4: Erica De La Garza-Lopez vs. Tony Forina (Incumbent)

Erica De La Garza-Lopez's Response

As a lifelong bilingual resident of McAllen, I have always known the importance of being able to read and speak Spanish. Although Spanish was not the primary language in my home, all of my grandparents only spoke Spanish, and growing up, I spent a lot of time at their homes, playing, working and absorbing the language. As a teen, I worked weekends/summers at my parents' business, Kalifa's Western Wear, where the majority of customers and wholesalers only spoke Spanish. This foundation helped me to excel in my high school foreign language courses, leading me to be able to test out of my college foreign language credit requirements, in return, saving my family tuition monies.

Expanding the reach of the dual-language program at McAllen ISD could open many doors for our students/families in our community. Bilingual and biliterate students the workforce either while they work during high school or post graduation. Whether our dual-language graduates head to college, jump into the workforce or join our armed forces, they are sure to be an asset. The bilingual and biliterate, generally are more culturally aware and given the cognitive benefits, are shown to outperform their peers due to their improved executive function and problem-solving skills.

Given the funds/resources, I would fully support the expansion of the dual-language program at all levels.

I am running for school board to help advocate for responsible budgeting and funding that supports student success. Confirming that HB3 would help provide for up to 3 million dollars in additional funds to our district, which would provide for teachers and given the many vacant seats in McAllen ISD, we could allocate for learning environments/classrooms for expansion of the program. Our district continues to lose students and enrollment to neighboring districts, expansion at all levels, of the dual language program could incentivize families to transfer to McAllen ISD.

Tony Forina's Response

I support the dual language program as it stands now and am hopeful that there will be growth amongst all school to continue to develop our Bilingual, Bicultural students.

Place 5: Rojelio Aleman II vs. Aaron Daniel Rivera

Rojelio Aleman II

Rojelio Aleman II did not respond to our emails or texts.

Aaron Daniel Rivera's Response

McAllen takes pride in its bilingual and bicultural heritage. With a majority of our population fluent in both English and Spanish, we celebrate our multicultural diversity and offer dual-language programs in schools that teach students to read, write, and speak fluently in both languages. My vision is to ensure all students become proficient in both languages while appreciating our cultural diversity. This includes prioritizing essential 21st-century skills, engaging families, and committing to equity, inclusion, and excellence to empower every child to reach their potential.

To achieve this vision, we need high-quality bilingual education programs that promote not only language acquisition but also cultural awareness and appreciation. We must invest in the recruitment and retention of highly qualified bilingual teachers, provide ongoing professional development opportunities for educators, and ensure our curriculum is inclusive and reflective of our students' diverse perspectives and experiences.

Engaging parents and families is also vital. We can achieve this through the provision of family literacy programs, bilingual parent-teacher conferences, and other initiatives that promote collaboration and communication between families and schools.

Overall, my vision for bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy in McAllen is grounded in a deep commitment to equity, inclusion, and excellence in education. By investing in our students, educators, and community, we can create a future where every child has the opportunity to achieve their full potential and contribute to our diverse and vibrant community.

The Dual Language program is a crucial part of our district's mission to provide high-quality education to all students. My younger sister participated in the program during elementary school, and I have witnessed how it has equipped her with the necessary skills to succeed academically and professionally in a world where bilingualism is increasingly vital.

As a McAllen ISD School Board Trustee, it's crucial to work closely with district leaders and advocate for adequate funding and resources to ensure that the program aligns with the district's educational objectives. Hiring and retaining qualified bilingual teachers, evaluating the program's effectiveness regularly, involving families and the community, and making it available to all students are some of the ways to achieve this.

To assist students in reaching their full potential, passionate and dedicated bilingual teachers committed to helping students achieve their full potential are required. To accomplish this, we must provide resources, support, and professional development opportunities such as training, mentorship, and collaboration with other bilingual educators in the district.

Regularly monitoring the Dual Language Program's effectiveness is crucial to identify areas for improvement and ensure that it meets the needs of all students. Analyzing student progress, teacher performance, and program outcomes is essential to make ongoing improvements to the program.

Engaging families and the community is a critical part of the Dual Language Program's success. It entails promoting the program to parents and guardians, providing them with resources and support, and giving them a say in the program's development and implementation.

Lastly, the Dual Language Program must be accessible to all interested students. This includes providing information and support to families new to the program and creating an inclusive environment that welcomes students from all backgrounds.