

**TEXAS** Supreme Court amends Texas IOLTA Program rules

# BANKING

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Texas Bankers Association

One Industry. One Vision. One Voice.



## Banking on the future

*Financial literacy program  
is changing lives in the  
Rio Grande Valley*

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# Changing lives in the Rio Grande Valley

**I**n January, I had the honor of visiting Sam Houston Elementary School in McAllen, where one of our TBA Foundation Board members, Dora Brown of IBC Bank-McAllen, is helping change lives. Twelve years ago, the elementary school embarked on a program that partners with local businesses to teach children how to become responsible adults by creating a microcommunity in their school, complete with a government structure and jobs. The first partner Sam Houston called was Dora, who gives time, money and expertise to the program and is credited with helping recruit many of the school's other business partners.



Houstonville Mayor Carla Madrigal and City Planner Adonis Cantu.

I first heard about the program in 2003, when IBC Bank-McAllen received a Cornerstone Award for its involvement in Houstonville. Dora also discussed the Houstonville concept at the December Foundation Board meeting. After expressing interest in the program, I was invited by Dora to visit on a day when Brownsville Independent School District representatives were going to be touring the school. IBC Bank-Brownsville is attempting to create a microcommunity in a Brownsville school.

When our group arrived at the school, we were warmly greeted by the mayor and city planner, who took us on a tour of Houstonville. One-by-one, the children in the "top" positions explained the purpose of their jobs and how they relate to the overall community. There were no written scripts; the children spoke from the heart. They were articulate, poised and self-confident. Nearby, the teachers beamed with pride.

The first stop, naturally, was the bank, where kindergartners were lined up and counting their "Cougar Cash" before depositing it with the tellers. "You earn it, we save it" is the bank's motto.

Since April is Financial Literacy Month and April 24 is Teach Children to Save Day, we are featuring the article on Houstonville as an example of what can happen when schools partner with banks. Although it has taken 12 years of hard work to get the program to the level it is today, it all started with a vision shared by teachers, administrators and IBC Bank-McAllen.

One of the Foundation's goals for this year is to recruit 10 banks that have not been involved in financial education before. We did this by offering 10 free Teach Children to Save kits that could be used on April 24 — or any other day. At press time, we were well on our way to meeting that goal.

That's the beauty of financial literacy. You don't have to start big to have an impact. You just have to start. ♦

*Olivia Carmichael Solis*

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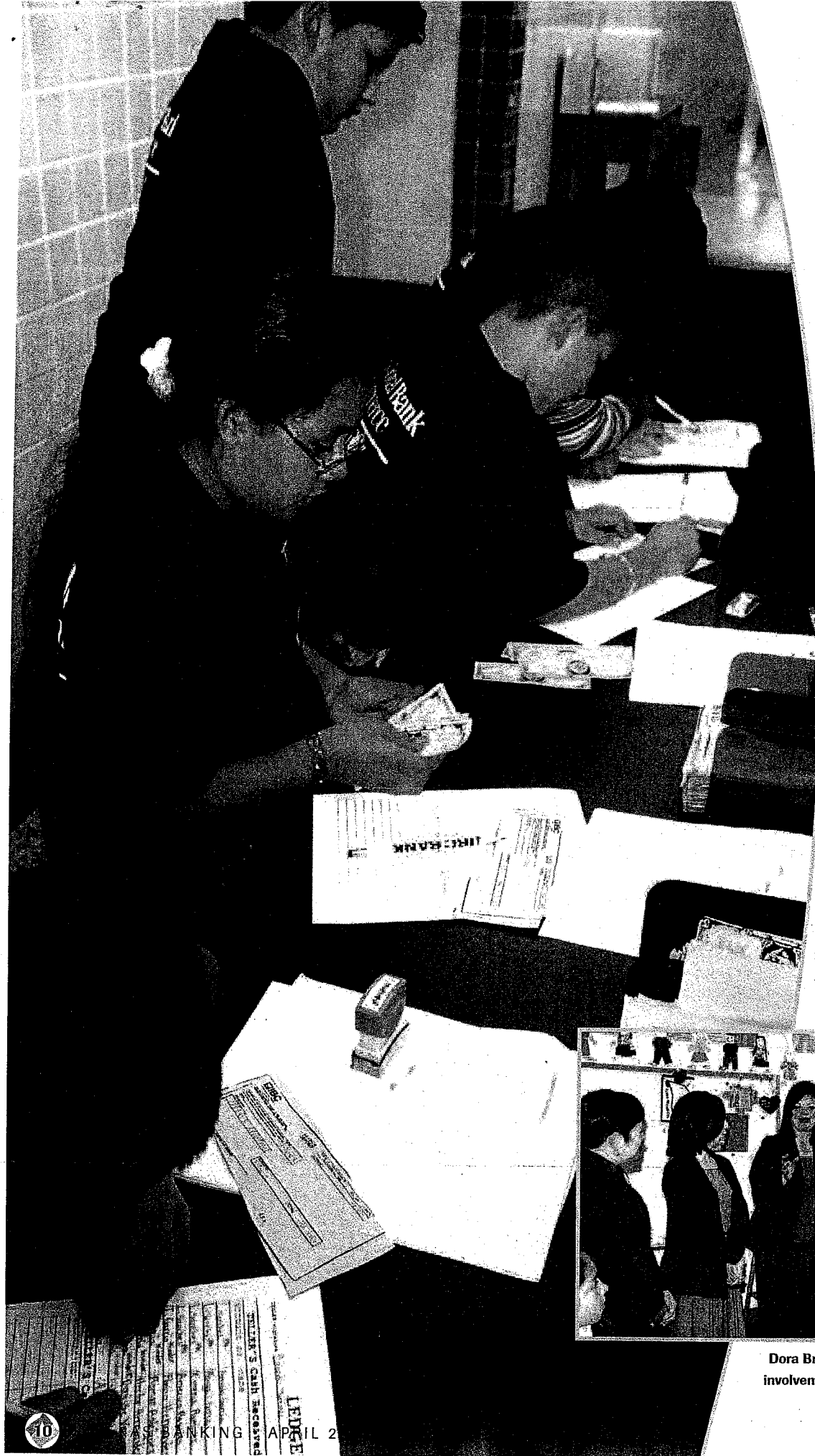
# Ban

*Pint-sized  
citizens of  
Houstonville  
learn life  
skills from  
micro-  
community  
concept*

*By Olivia Carmichael Solis*



**Dora Brown (center) discusses IBC Bank's involvement in Houstonville.**



# king on the future

*The citizens of Houstonville are like those of other Texas communities. They have jobs, pay taxes, send mail and purchase commodities. Their community is run by a mayor, city planner and city commission. The bank, as in many communities, is the heart and soul of Houstonville.*

*The only difference is that Houstonville is run by 10 year olds, and its jobs are held by children as young as seven.*

Houstonville is a microcommunity established 12 years ago at Sam Houston Elementary School in McAllen. With the help of International Bank of Commerce-McAllen and, specifically, Senior Vice President Dora Brown, the 560 students at Sam Houston are flourishing. Although the school is located in McAllen's south side, which is predominantly Hispanic and has a low income level, the school is one of only two campuses in McAllen rated exemplary. The school also earned a Gold Star Award for its 98 percent attendance rate. Discipline problems are at a minimum.

"We owe it all to our microsociety," says Principal Sonia Casas.

All students in grades second through fifth have jobs, which they apply for like any other job. They write resumes, interview and compete with other applicants. Every Friday, they are paid in "Cougar Cash" that can be saved at their on-campus IBC Bank or used to purchase goods. They can also earn Cougar Cash for good attendance and behavior.

The bank and branch are run by four presidents, who make decisions on bank policies, procedures and operations.

The school was initially served by one bank, but over the years it began to experience growing pains. "So the kids came to me and said, 'we need to get a branch,'" Brown recalls. "So we gave them one." Now, kindergarteners through second graders bank at the branch, and third through fifth graders bank at the main bank.

When the children leave Sam Houston Elementary they know how to save money, write checks and deposit slips and pay taxes. They rarely miss school because they've learned the responsibility that goes with having a job. They have leadership and public speaking skills, as well as self confidence and an awareness of what it means to be responsible adults.

"Dora Brown and IBC are truly our partners," says McAllen ISD Superintendent Yolanda Chapa. "They have

taught our students life skills that they would not have been exposed to if not for this program."

## Founding the community

Twelve years ago, teachers at Sam Houston Elementary School learned of the microcommunity concept and visited the school that started it all — Walter Jacobson Elementary School in Las Vegas. They returned to McAllen armed with ideas, action plans and enthusiasm. What they lacked was a business partner, which the teachers at Jacobson said was the most important ingredient in starting the program.

They immediately contacted Brown, who had been active as a mentor at McAllen High School. "We called Dora Brown first, and she jumped on it," explains former Sam Houston Principal Connie Maheshwari. "IBC Bank is the cog in our wheel. IBC gives us anything we ask for, whether it's time or money. Their philosophy is right there with ours."

Brown is credited with recruiting many of the other



IBC Bank is the heart and soul of Houstonville.

business partners involved in the microcommunity.

The first on-campus IBC Bank started out as three desks in a bookroom. Today, the bank is the first business visitors see when they enter the school.

Brown also takes it upon herself to train the young bankers. She takes them on tours of the real IBC Bank and teaches them about the different functions of the bank. In addition, she attends PTA meetings to give parents much-needed financial education.

In the process, IBC Bank gains some loyal customers — both parents and children. She's also hoping some of the students will want to become bankers when they grow up, and is quick to point out that being a bank president is one of the most coveted jobs at Houstonville. It's no coincidence, she says, that most Houstonville mayors started out as IBC Bank presidents.

### Government & laws

The next step in creating the microcommunity was to establish a form of government and laws. "The laws that drive our society are respect, responsibility, honesty and courage," says Casas.

Houstonville is governed by a mayor, city commission and city planner. Elections are taken very seriously. Anywhere from 20 to 40 children run for mayor every year. There are enough candidates that primaries are held.

The candidates give speeches, create posters and campaign. "Security" is tight on voting day to discourage the proliferation of campaign propaganda near the voting booths. By 7 a.m. on voting day, children show up with their voter registration cards to cast their ballots on real voting machines donated by Hidalgo County.

"They have an understanding of democracy and voting rights that a lot of us adults don't take as seriously," says Maheshwari.

Winning the election is such an honor, that parents traditionally throw "pachangas" — Mexican barbecues — for their victorious children.

### Commerce & business

In addition to a bank and branch, the microcommunity includes a:

- Target store, staffed by a manager, assistant manager, security officer and cashiers. Students can purchase goods at the store with their Cougar Cash.
- IRS office, where the IRS manager and agents ensure students pay their taxes on time.
- KHOU news station, where students report on school news and weather with camera equipment donated by a local news station.
- Post office, run by a postmaster and assistant postmaster, which delivers mail to students and sells postcards.
- Future Teachers Academy, where fifth grade students tutor classmates and help teachers with paperwork.
- Radio station, complete with DJs who make announcements and, for \$5 in Cougar Cash, announce birthdays.
- Newspaper, in which students hone their writing and interviewing skills while writing the news.

Every year, new centers are added to the microcommunity. The most recent addition is a recycling center. A few years ago, the school's mayor and city commissioners asked the principal if they could publish and sell yearbooks. Maheshwari, who feared parents wouldn't purchase them, initially denied their request. The students returned



Houstonville citizens give their cash to Target cashiers.



IRS agents collect taxes from Houstonville employees.

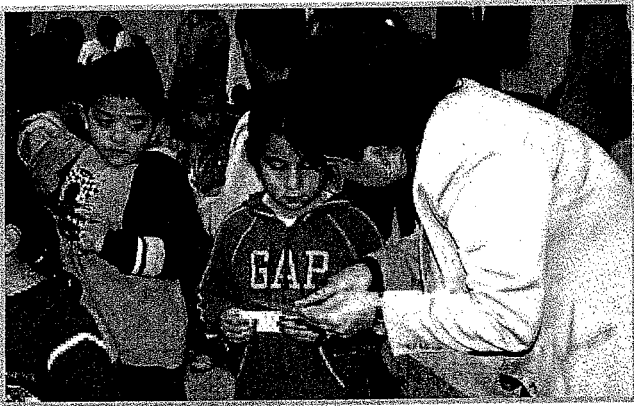


The postmaster and mailpersons deliver Houstonville mail.



The Target manager and assistant manager discuss ways students can spend their Cougar Cash.

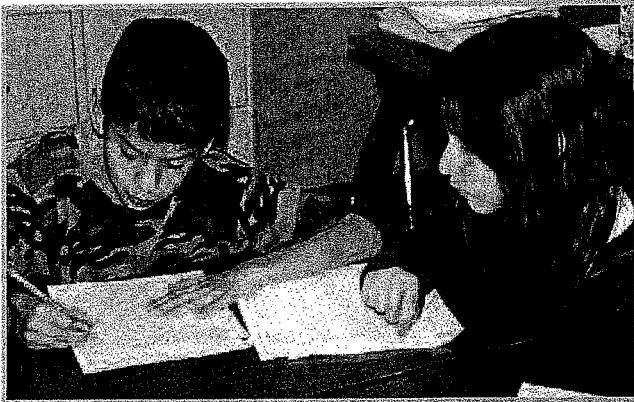




A teacher helps a kindergarten student with her deposit slip.



The IBC branch serves kindergarteners through second graders.



Students are tutored by fifth graders at the Future Teachers Academy.



Radio station DJs make announcements.



McAllen ISD Board member Javier Farias is interviewed by KHOU reporters.

to the principal's office armed with a survey completed by parents that showed how many parents would purchase a yearbook and what they were willing to pay.

When Maheshwari told the children she wanted a day to think about it, the students insisted on a quick decision. "They wouldn't leave until I gave them a decision," she recalls. "What could I do? I said 'yes.'" Today, Sam Houston is one of very few elementary schools in Texas with a yearbook produced by the students.

In addition, students create products they sell in the hallways during twice yearly "Market Days." They have also set up museums and planetariums.

After school, the children receive enrichment classes in leadership, public speaking, technology and other skills.

### *The bottom line*

The teachers and administrators at McAllen ISD are sold on the microcommunity concept. Several years ago, district administrators counseled Sam Houston teachers to cut back on microcommunity programs and focus instead on standardized testing. That year, the school went from being an exemplary campus to a recognized one. When the teachers reinstated the microcommunity concept, scores went back up, and the school regained its coveted exemplary status.

IBC Bank is so committed to the concept that its Brownsville employees are in the process of taking it to the Brownsville Independent School District.

Sam Houston teachers say the benefits of the microcommunity are long-term, as evidenced by the success of the students in their middle and high school years. When Maheshwari retired in late 2006, the teachers and Brown tracked down all of the former mayors for her retirement party. One by one, the students told Maheshwari how the program changed their lives. "Their public speaking skills were so strong, and they were so sure of themselves," Brown recalls. "They told us they learned self-confidence at Sam Houston and reminded us of the impact the program had on their future. They were so sure of themselves, it made us cry."

Even the mayor of McAllen recognizes the value of the program. "When he can't attend a ribbon cutting, he calls the Houstonville mayor to go in his place," Brown says.

"How many children have the opportunity to change things?" questions Maheshwari. "We as adults take that away from them; we think we know what's best for them. But kids are real people — with real dreams, goals and issues, and this program helps them become someone within that community." ♦