Feature

WorkTexas Enlists Multiple Partners to Give Disengaged Youth a Second Chance

Houston program helps teens and adults finish high school, train for good jobs, and thrive

YERLIN RIVERA HAD STRUGGLED academically in high school. She fell in with the wrong crowd, got into trouble, and dropped out. After working two jobs for a year—at Chick-fil-A and a Mexican restaurant—she wanted to finish her education. Rivera lacked so many credits that she would have had to start over as a freshman at a traditional high school, something that did not appeal to her at age 17.

Instead, Rivera enrolled at the Gallery Furniture North location of Premier High School–Houston, an alternative public charter school and training partner of the nonprofit organization WorkTexas. Premier provides training in skilled trades and prepares students to earn certifications that align with industry needs. "I really like that you're at your own pace, but [teachers] are still pushing you to do better," she said of the online credit-recovery curriculum she combined with the certified medical assistant program. "It was a really good way to ease myself back into school."

Three years later, Rivera, now 20, passed her CMA exam in April and is on track to finish high school.

Rivera aspires to "have a career, not a job," she said. "Those are two completely different things." Eventually she wants to become a registered nurse in a neonatal intensive care unit.

WorkTexas, an innovative nonprofit launched in 2020, connects disengaged youth and adults with career training, helping them secure stable employment. It leverages state and federal funding plus philanthropic donations to offer tuition-free classes and wraparound services. It started out with classic trades—electrical, construction, welding—but has since expanded to offer training for a range of other in-demand fields.

Its mission? "To help people get jobs, keep jobs, and advance in their careers," said Mike Feinberg, co-founder of WorkTexas, who rose to prominence in the education world founding the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) national network of charter schools with David Levin.

KIPP pushed college for all, but in retrospect Feinberg wishes it had focused instead on helping students explore a variety of pathways. "It should have been career for all," he said. Students missed the opportunity to learn marketable skills, and many went to college, didn't finish, and are now saddled with debt. Feinberg said it's the latter that keeps him up at night.

WorkTexas is Feinberg's attempt to right the ship with

By CARALEE ADAMS

Mike Feinberg, co-founder of WorkTexas, encourages students at an onboarding bootcamp at the program's Gallery Furniture location in Houston. No stranger to innovative education startups, Feinberg also co-founded the KIPP Charter School network in 1994.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARALEE ADAMS

programs to introduce individuals to the trades and land good jobs. It does this during the day by partnering with two charter high schools to serve students in credit recovery and others in the juvenile justice system working toward their GED. In the evenings, it keeps the lights on to serve adults of all ages for short-term classes. WorkTexas solicits advice from employers so graduates have job-ready skills that match the needs of the marketplace. It also partners with other nonprofit organizations to provide basic support (food, clothing, counseling) at-risk individuals need to succeed.

The operation is part of the Texas School Venture Fund, a nonprofit Feinberg started as a catalyst to start innovative schools. WorkTexas training centers occupy two campuses in low-income Houston neighborhoods. One location is a renovated furniture showroom; another is a former juvenile detention center. It's a small enterprise: In 2023–24, WorkTexas served 203 adults, 113 youth from the juvenile justice system, and 65 students learning trades at Premier. Staff say the size works to its advantage because teachers can provide the personal touch that can make all the difference in re-engaging those who have struggled in the past. While relatively new, WorkTexas is attracting the attention of other educators and employers interested in replicating the model elsewhere.

Yerlin Rivera dropped out of high school as a teenager, but Premier High School–Houston and WorkTexas have given her a second chance. She is now a certified medical assistant.

Finding Community Partners and Funding Streams

When Feinberg set out to implement his vision of accessible training in the trades in Houston, he turned to KIPP's first funder, Jim McIngvale, the Houston business icon known as "Mattress Mack" for his high-voltage Gallery Furniture commercials. The idea for WorkTexas resonated with McIngvale, who has run his business for more than 40 years.

"I see the people coming up here asking for money in a stream of hopelessness constantly. Giving them money doesn't work, because it's gone the next day and they're back in the same situation," said McIngvale, 74, surrounded by motivational banners in his store about hard work and perseverance. "I wanted to figure out a way we could teach these people a trade. Rather than give them a fish, they could learn how to fish and feed themselves."

McIngvale had an excess of retail space and wanted to repurpose it for the greater good. He donated about 15,000 square feet of his furniture showroom and turned it into a trade school.

With McIngvale's backing, Feinberg approached other businesses, philanthropists, government officials, and educators at Houston Community College (HCC) to ask them to join the effort.

Mike Webster, then associate vice chancellor of workforce instruction at HCC and now its president, was in on the ground floor, helping brainstorm a plan for WorkTexas and bring on an array of funders. "It kind of blew everybody's mind at the college, and I think it still kind of blows people's minds," Webster said of the model. "What we didn't have [at the college before] was the Mattress Mack bullhorn to get out there and say, 'Hey, come on down and get trained.'"

That familiarity brings a sense of comfort that breaks down barriers for students, Webster noted. Rather than expecting students to come to a college campus, WorkTexas operates in neighborhoods where potential students live.

To make the enterprise work and truly prepare students for a job, Feinberg sought input from employers.

Beau Pollock, president of TRIO Electric, was an early industry partner, eager to improve the talent pipeline for electricians, whose supply lags far behind demand. He shared the curriculum TRIO had developed, and some of his former employees became instructors with

WorkTexas leverages state and federal funding plus philanthropic donations to offer tuition-free classes and wraparound services.

WorkTexas. Pollock said he likes the hands-on training, along with the social services and emphasis on soft skills that set up graduates to become stable employees.

Feinberg "has embraced the employer's perspective but also has the education perspective and knows the needs of the people going through [the training] to make them successful," said Pollock, who has hired many WorkTexas graduates.

To attend, students tap into federal and state funding from a variety of programs; private donations help fill in the gaps. Many adults use money from the U.S. Department of Labor programs under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and other sources that flow through the Texas Workforce Commission and local workforce boards. The charter high schools are supported by public education dollars, the county juvenile justice system, and a mix of grants. Nearly five years in, WorkTexas has 50-plus funding partners, including individuals, foundations, and corporations.

Premier High School: Engaging Students with Relevant Instruction

On an unusually frigid day for Houston in February, with temperatures in the 20s, Marc Pollicove greets students with smiles and fist bumps at the door of the Gallery Furniture North location of Premier High School–Houston.

"Good morning, Caleb. How are you doing, buddy? Glad you're here," said Pollicove, the school's career and technical education (CTE) coordinator and lead instructor. Some students might not have had heat in their homes the night before, he said. They might have been up late working a job or had trouble getting a ride to campus. Pollicove tries to counter the sting of those challenges with personal warmth, which can at least set a positive tone for the day.

A teacher and coach for 43 years at a nearby public high school, Pollicove said he likes the opportunity to get to know the students better at Premier, where the enrollment hovers around 100.

"They learn because of the school culture we have here," Pollicove said. "We encourage them to persevere, to overcome obstacles they think they have, . . . not to let a single setback set them back forever."

Many of Premier's students have been let down by their previous schooling, so staff members are intentional about rebuilding their trust, said Principal Jill Wright. The school is part of ResponsiveEd, a nonprofit organization that operates more than 100 tuition-free public schools throughout Texas and Arkansas. "You don't overreact when they make mistakes—and you listen," Wright said.

Along with a caring adult, Premier staff members said, the relevance of the instruction keeps students engaged.

On a typical day, students spend about four hours in the classroom on laptops, following an online curriculum and advancing as they master each unit. Trade training takes another two hours daily. The model works because it helps students apply what they learn on the academic side to the trades, Pollicove said. For instance, terminology and calculations covered in the math curriculum are used in construction class to figure out volume for concrete or square footage for laying carpet.

For Juan Flores, a large high school was overwhelming. He said Premier was a better fit, with fewer students and a self-paced curriculum. "It's very subdued," said the 18-year-old who tried carpentry at the school and then switched to welding. "I like to work with my hands and be creative." Flores said he doesn't know for sure if he'll work in the trades, but he's considering all his options.

Adam Tutt, a math and science teacher who started at Premier teaching a summer construction class when he was a homebuilder, said he knows the value of the trades. For students who have not excelled academically, mastering a trade can boost their confidence and open doors. "It gives them a win," he said, and without such a win, "it's hard to motivate yourself."

Wright said Premier students often have fallen behind at other area schools. They learn about Premier from school counselors or friends. There they can complete high school and have the option to participate in one of the trade programs, which take two years to finish. Of the 38 students who graduated in 2024, Wright says 22 also completed an industry-based certification. Some arrive with just a few high school credits to make up and want to get out quickly, Wright said. However, for those who take trade classes, the lure of a credential adds an extra layer of incentive to stick with the training.

Indeed, during the 2023–24 school year, attendance rates were higher—at 85 percent—for students in CTE industry-based certification preparation courses than for students not in the trades (75 percent), according to Craig Shapiro, director of CTE for ResponsiveEd in Austin, Texas.

Too often, students in high school wonder, "Why am I doing this?" Shapiro said. "The CTE part is the why—the application of the learning. Students are staying longer [in school] because you have this other carrot—a license—now enveloped in the program."

If it were up to him, Adam Tutt said, all high school students would be required to take a trade class. "It gives them a skill to branch out, be a part of society, and break the cycle of poverty. College isn't for everybody. . . . I don't think they should have to go to college to have a really good life."

Like all high school students in Texas, those at Premier must pass five STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) end-of-course exams to receive a diploma.

Renowned Houston businessman Jim "Mattress Mack" McIngvale donated part of his Gallery Furniture showroom as space for WorkTexas to teach the trades.

"There is no watering down" of the curriculum, Shapiro says. "What you find with a successful Premier student is that they start out struggling, then, adding the CTE component, . . . they start paying more attention to their academics."

WorkTexas offers résumé workshops, interview preparation, and on-the-job experience through its connections with businesses. As internship opportunities grow, it's creating a buzz, Wright said, with students seeing their classmates make up to $20 an hour while in school and landing jobs after graduation.

With the concept of "high school diploma-plus" gaining traction, Shapiro said there is interest in developing programs like WorkTexas beyond Houston. Other programs might not be housed in a business like Gallery Furniture, but there is a move to establish close relationships with industry to match workers with in-demand careers, he said. For instance, some in the medical field are so desperate for workers that employers are telling Shapiro they want to hire high school graduates who have certifications and to invest in them further by paying for their college education.

To meet the demand, Premier now offers CTE classes at 49 of its 54 campuses in Texas. A U.S. Department of Education Charter School Program grant has paid for vocational training equipment, Shapiro said. Additional funding from the state helps enhance CTE programs.

Shapiro and Feinberg are in the early stages of contacting chambers of commerce, state workforce agencies, and educators to start WorkTexas hubs throughout the state, beginning in urban areas such as Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio. "I suspect it's going to ramp straight up," Shapiro said. "How fast I go will be dependent on how fast I can get businesses to sign on. Once businesses sign on, we're going to have replication."

WorkTexas at Night: Offering Hope and Skills to All Ages

Before they pick up any tools, students in WorkTexas evening classes attend a weeklong bootcamp. In mid-February, a new cohort gathers in a bare-bones metal building next to the Gallery Furniture store that the staff jokingly call "the Castle." A sign on the exterior reads: "Work is life's greatest therapy."

About 30 young men—and a few women—show up before and after the first session starts at 6 p.m. In this program, the average student's age is 31. Participants have ranged from age 17 to 78; about one-third are 17 to 24 and another third are 25 to 35. There is some slack for being late this evening since it's pouring rain outside, but punctuality is among the many values WorkTexas staff emphasize, and they make it clear everyone must arrive on time—or early—the next night.

Feinberg tells students the program will equip them with both the technical skills and the virtues they need to enter the workforce as reliable employees.

"The virtues are your behavior, making moral choices. That is what the employers really want," Feinberg said. "They want people who know how to work on the team, know how to follow directions, . . . know the right thing to do."

Throughout the bootcamp, Feinberg repeats the mantra: "Show up. Be on time. The best ability is availability."

The orientation covers class expectations and how to develop a good work ethic, but it's also designed to inspire. Mattress Mack is the opening night headliner. He tells his story of coming to Houston with $3,700 in his pocket and a dream, putting in 20-hour days, seven days a week for years. "Find a job you love to do, and you never work a day in your life. That's what WorkTexas is all about," McIngvale said.

Nearly five years in, WorkTexas has 50-plus funding partners, including individuals, foundations, and corporations.

In 2023–24, WorkTexas reports that 88 percent of its adult students completed training. Those employed for a year or more earn an average of $23 per hour. The program aimed to have three cohorts in each location in 2024–25 with six to seven different trade training options, which means about 40 trade classes serving about 300 adults.

WorkTexas staff tell students they are committed to them for the long term and will reach out for updates several times a year after they graduate.

"If you decide to stay, this is a five-year relationship. Don't freak out," said Shirmeca Littlejohn, a WorkTexas career-success coach at the orientation. "Five years of us checking in with you: Are you working? Are you happy at your job? Are you working on a promotion? Do you need resources?"

Listening to employers and following up with students to ensure job placement set WorkTexas apart, said Yazmin Guerra, vice president and director of workforce development, who has helped the organization reach out to more than 200 employers. "Other programs are focused on giving credentials, but once that person leaves there is little accountability on their employment," she said. "We make that a priority. Success is not merely graduation."

Of the 637 alumni from the evening program, 345 are employed, and about 100 have returned for a second round of training to upgrade their skills, according to WorkTexas. Despite outreach efforts, staff have lost touch with 172 individuals, and 118 are unemployed.

The promise of ongoing support and a different kind of training appeals to Zaman Al-Mansri, 18. He went to community college but dropped out after a semester and now works as a personal shopper at Walmart, earning $14 an hour. Al-Mansri signed up for the welding program at WorkTexas, where he hopes to earn $18 to $23 an hour. "All the testing is hands on. It's not on paper. The grading is just how well you do it," said Al-Mansri.

Al-Mansri's tuition, like that of many others, was covered by a WIOA program targeted for out-of-school youth through the Texas Workforce Commission and paid to WorkTexas as an approved education provider.

On the third night of bootcamp, WorkTexas brings in representatives from nonprofits that offer financial planning, computer classes, résumé-writing assistance, and other services. As students rotate through in groups, Cecily Salas scans the representatives' QR codes at each

Students at Premier High School–Houston build birdhouses as part of a workshop called "Girl with Grit." The charter school offers the workshop to expose its high schoolers to trade skills.

stop. "If it's free, it's for me," said the 23-year-old, who is enrolled in the commercial electrical class. A TRIO grant received by the Texas Workforce Commission is covering the cost of her training. She has a one-year-old daughter and has been working as a nanny. Having attended college for only one year, Salas said she hopes the certificate will increase her earning potential.

Challenges with child care and transportation number among the top reasons individuals can't hold on to jobs, Feinberg said, and WorkTexas is still trying to figure out the best way to support students who have those problems. Initially, a childcare center was set up at Gallery Furniture, but not many students used it during training. The program pivoted to connecting students with subsidies and available child care in neighborhoods closer to their jobs. WorkTexas has a bus that takes students to work-based internships, and it provides passes for public transportation, but Feinberg said the organization has yet to find a way to completely address that challenge.

Jacob Martinez turned to WorkTexas for training, and it helped him launch a new career. He graduated from high school in 2018 without a plan beyond continuing his job at a grocery store. Martinez moved on to Best Buy but got laid off during the pandemic. "Finally, I thought I needed a skilled trade—something that was going to be permanent," said Martinez, who finished a 12-week HVAC course at WorkTexas in 2022, funded by the WIOA program for adults.

Jacob Martinez completed a course on HVAC maintenance at WorkTexas in 2002. He is now an HVAC technician for the Houston Astros baseball team.

Martinez worked with various contractors and businesses before landing a job as an HVAC technician for the Houston Astros at Daikin Park, earning $60,000 a year with full benefits. "WorkTexas gave me the skills and confidence to go out on my own path," said Martinez, 25. "I'm building for my future and starting to think about applying for a house one day and maybe getting a newer car."

As WorkTexas evolves, the question arises: Is it scalable beyond Houston?

"Mack is definitely the X factor in everything we do," said Feinberg of McIngvale's ability to leverage his position as a top advertiser to get the word out about the program. "But every community has someone like a Mack who is a connector or a local celebrity who could play that role if the community so chose."

In Austin, Richard Whatcott, regional vice president for Camden, a company that owns and manages apartment communities, recently sought partners to provide training for maintenance technicians, much as WorkTexas did in Houston. In Houston, 31 individuals have completed the 10-week training program that WorkTexas runs with Goodwill Industries, and Camden has hired 23 of the graduates. Graduates can start at the company at $18 to $22 an hour with opportunities for advancement, Whatcott said, and many stay there for years.

Whatcott hoped to enlist Austin-based companies to support the training effort and build credibility with the local community. "I knew I couldn't stand this up on my own," he said. Whatcott reached out to the Texas Apartment Association and found a strong partner in Becca Ramati, who manages the trade association's education foundation. Ramati used her network to get two other companies in the sector involved. "She became the Mike Feinberg in Austin," Whatcott said.

Whatcott also contacted Goodwill in Austin, which was eager to assist the training program and offered space. Camden put up seed money for the training and leveraged state workforce development money to cover the paid work experience portion of the program. "That made it more appealing to get other companies involved who may not have the resources to invest," he said. "There's no risk. . . . We only ask that once they're trained you give them a fair shot to get a job with you. It became a no-brainer for other companies."

After all the partners were on board, the first cohort of the Austin program for training apartment-maintenance technicians began in April 2025. With demand for these skilled technicians outpacing supply nationwide, Whatcott would like to see the model developed elsewhere.

Opportunity Center: A Second Chance for Justice-Involved Youth

A few miles away from Gallery Furniture in Houston, WorkTexas operates at a second campus, a former residential juvenile detention facility transformed in 2022 to house

For students who have not excelled academically, mastering a trade can boost confidence and open doors. "It gives them a win," said Premier math and science teacher Adam Tutt.

The Opportunity Center, or TOC. Here, the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department runs its own charter school, giving youth who have been involved in the justice system a chance to earn their GED. Students also get exposure to the trades from WorkTexas instructors. In the evening, WorkTexas holds adult classes at the center in residential construction, HVAC, plumbing, and electrical work.

The daytime programming is for youth ages 16 and up, who are typically referred by their probation officer after a judge has mandated they either return to school or enroll in a GED program. "For the kids, it's a choice [to enroll]," said Vanessa Ramirez, co-founder of WorkTexas and director of TOC. "And choice is important in the decision so that there is baked-in accountability."

All students attend academic classes for half a day and trade classes for the other half. After a week of sampling each trade area, they select one to train in for about five weeks—staying at TOC, on average, for about 12 weeks. Beyond the traditional trades, Ramirez launched another nonprofit, Project Remix Ventures, that offers career classes in entrepreneurship, music production, and other fields.

About 75 percent of TOC's budget is covered by the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department. The remainder comes from philanthropy and grants. WIOA money is used to support WorkTexas student internships, and of TOC's 124 graduates so far, about half (58) have participated in the internship program.

Ramirez, who grew up in the neighborhood where TOC operates and was a KIPP student of Feinberg's, said an approach with wraparound services in partnership with area agencies helps address the varied needs of the students. For instance, Houston Food Bank stocks a food pantry on site; Clothed by Faith provides gently used clothing; and Journey Through Life offers mental health counseling services.

The school is like an anchor tenant in a social services mall at TOC. "To truly get nonprofits to collaborate, that's the magic. That's the secret sauce," said Feinberg of the model. "Schools don't have to do it all, but schools can be the hub because schools are where the kids are spending the majority of their waking hours."

The method is having an impact. As of late April, 63 students were enrolled at TOC, and there is a wait list. Since TOC opened, the students they refer to as "justice-involved youth" are finding new pathways, and recidivism rates are dropping. In 2022, about 48 percent of students from the juvenile justice system in the county reoffended, compared to 28 percent in TOC's program in 2023. TOC also engages with alumni after graduation to boost their chances of making it in the workplace, Ramirez said.

The prospect of job training at TOC was appealing to Hudson Risch, who was about to turn 18 when he heard about the program. "It was kind of tricky around the corner to being an adult. I needed to find some way to make some income," said Risch, who said the staff at TOC have become like family.

"Let's get to work, Texas!" is the phrase that gave WorkTexas its name. It aims for each student to complete high school with a job offer, stay employed, and advance in their career.

Risch completed his GED in the summer of 2024 (passing all four exams) and qualified for an in-school 240-hour internship at La Bodega, the school's student snack bar. He earned a certificate in food handling and now, at 19, has been serving as the full-time manager since last August.

Throughout the day, Ramirez walks the halls at TOC, warmly greeting students by name or just calling them "honey." She asks Risch about business at La Bodega. "In the last week, I made about $600. So, it's been real good," Risch says. Ramirez smiles: "Ni-i-i-ice! That's perfect. The items that are still selling best, the wings?" Risch replies: "Oh yes. Number one: wings. And hot chips—all the spicy things."

These personal connections can motivate students to succeed, Ramirez said. "I love my kids," she said. "Sometimes we have to leverage those relationships to get them to buy in to next steps—because they can't see it for themselves," she said. When staff members establish trust with students, the students are more likely to be open to suggested career paths and to have the confidence to forge ahead.

These are precarious times for organizations that rely on public funds, but the collaborative nature of WorkTexas, its multiple funders, and its business-informed strategy make its founders and allies optimistic.

Randy Jefferson, a Houston music producer and instructor at TOC in the Project Mixtape Studio program, said he wants students to learn how to record music, understand the business of music, and absorb some life lessons along the way as they spend time together in class. "I'm trying to steer them in the direction of producing nonviolent, peaceful songs . . . with a PG-vibe," said Jefferson. "I get a real sense of purpose from these guys." Even if they don't end up working in the music business, he added, "if I influence them to be a better person, that's what I'm trying to do."

Down the hall in Rashaan Hill's entrepreneurship class, students learn laser imprinting, 3D printing, and clothing customization, as well as how to create a brand and run a business selling T-shirts and other products.

"They are allowed to express themselves and turn that into something lucrative," Hill said. "There's a level of freedom in the room and that's a breath of fresh air."

Hill said the class can be therapeutic for the students, who have had challenging experiences early in life.

"They're kids, but they've lived adult lives in a lot of ways," Hill said. "I think the concept works in a way that meets them where they're at and takes them further."

Hopeful Outlook in Uncertain Times

With the recent massive cuts in the federal workforce and programs at the Department of Education and elsewhere, these are precarious times for organizations that rely on public funds. Yet the collaborative nature of WorkTexas, its multiple funders, and its business-informed strategy make its founders and allies optimistic.

In contrast to having one entity—like the county government—running all the programming, TOC works because it benefits from more than 30 different partners with their own staff and funding plugging in to sustain the model, Ramirez said.

"That means it's scalable—even though it's more people to organize—these nonprofits already exist, . . . doing their own fundraising, program development, and compliance to assess their effectiveness," she said. "What we're doing is just making sure that we're embedding them in the right place, at the right time, for the right kids."

Going forward, Premier's Shapiro said there will be challenges making deals with larger companies in new markets, but he anticipates demand will fuel expansion and federal dollars will continue.

"This has bipartisan support. Everyone agrees with the concept," Shapiro said. "Unlike other programs that may find themselves in trouble, I don't think this one will. In fact, I think there will be more money, [considering] the way that the Trump administration and the Biden administration both were pushing this concept of workforce development within the high school and community colleges. I see it as growing. I think this is a winner that will continue to be funded."

Feinberg maintains that the focus of WorkTexas transcends politics. "Think about what our mission is: We're helping people get jobs, keep jobs, advance in careers. Which political party is going to say they don't agree with our mission?"

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