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UIW official calls plan a 'win-win'

by EDMOND ORTIZ

A recently reached agreement could help strengthen the JROTC program in the Alamo Heights Independent School District, and start military programs at two nearby private high schools.

The memorandum of understanding, approved by the AHISD board in June, allows 30 students from Incarnate Word and St. Anthony high schools to take part in the Alamo Heights High School JROTC program, starting this fall.

"We had been looking for an opportunity like this," said Dan Ochoa, dean of preparatory programs at the University of the Incarnate Word, which has a role in overseeing programs at the Catholic private schools.

A minimum of 100 cadets in grades ninth through 12th, organized into a chain

of command, make up a JROTC unit, according to Army requirements. JROTC members focus on developing traits such as citizenship, leadership, social and communication skills, physical fitness and wellness, geography and civics.

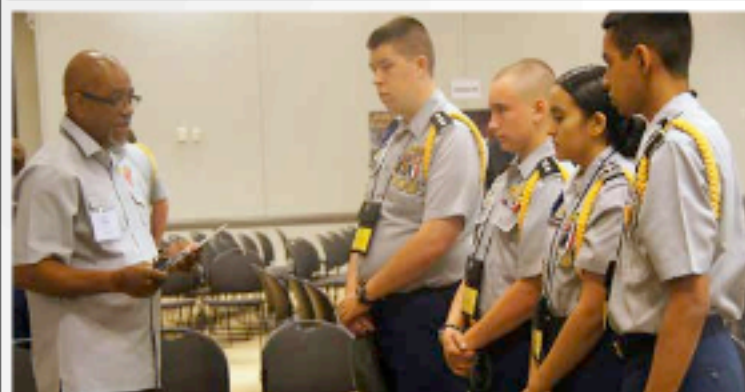
Students from Incarnate Word and St. Anthony may participate at no additional cost. All uniforms and equipment are also provided for free.

Frank Alfaro, AHISD's assistant superintendent for secondary education, explained that in recent school years the district's JROTC program has had difficulty meeting that minimum requirement. Alamo Heights' lone high school recorded an enrollment of 1,549 during the 2013-2014 academic year.

Alfaro also said the Army's "number seems a bit arbitrary to begin with, 10 percent of the population or at least 100 students." He added that while most other extracurricular activities offered by AHISD begin as early as elementary school, JROTC is at a disadvantage because it doesn't start until a student arrives at high school. District enrollment numbers more than 4,700 students overall.

"Given that wide variety of opportunities, few students have the

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A memorandum of understanding will allow new cadets from St. Anthony High School and Incarnate Word High School to take part in the Army JROTC program at Alamo Heights High School. Courtesy photo

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room in their already full schedules to add another activity like JROTC," Alfaro said. "Nevertheless, given the consistent enrollment and the stellar performance of our students in various competition at the local, regional and national levels, it is obviously a strong program of high quality."

Years ago, the Alamo Heights district

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was operating its JROTC program involving students from a nearby KIPP Academy campus. But when the physical campus was relocated, it was harder for KIPP students living in the area to get to Alamo Heights High to continue with the JROTC program.

So AHISD turned its attention to Incarnate Word and St. Anthony, both of which are part of the University of the Incarnate Word's Brainpower Connection. Both campuses are just south of the AHISD boundary line.

Alfaro said that, as of early July, more than 80 students enrolling at Alamo Heights High this coming academic year have signed up for JROTC.

As part of the agreement, AHISD will continue to employ JROTC instructors and provide meeting space for related activities, among other responsibilities. In return, Incarnate Word and St. Anthony will pay AHISD \$4,000 either in one lump sum due Sept. 1, or in two equal installments due Sept. 1 and Jan. 15.

"The current agreement is good for the 2015-16 academic year, with all campuses having the option to renew for an extra year.

Incarnate Word and St. Anthony also will be responsible for transporting their students to and from Alamo Heights High.

"How exactly that will look like, it's up to those schools," Alfaro added.

Extracurricular opportunities include participation in these teams: academics and leadership, cyber patriot, color guard, drill, rifle/marksmanship, physical fitness and raiders.

Teams compete at local, regional, state and national competitions. Alamo Heights' color guard team, the Mulettes, are seven-time national champions.

UIW officials said St. Anthony and Incarnate Word are not big enough to initiate and maintain a long-term JROTC program. St. Anthony's student enrollment has numbered slightly more than 400 in recent years, while Incarnate Word has more than 1,000 students.

While there is no military obligation for those taking part in JROTC, officials at UIW said their Brainpower Connection students now have a chance to expand upon the abilities and qualities instilled in JROTC unit members.

"This is a deeper level with opportunities to further develop leadership skills for young people," said Ochoa, the UIW dean. "It's these skills that colleges or military academies look for in a prospective student."

Ochoa also described the partnership between AHISD as a "win-win" for participating schools.