



Alex Rivard\*

## Education at the Alamo

For decades, students from Texas and beyond have visited the Alamo on field trips. As the most visited site in the state of Texas and a storied historic landmark, it's practically a rite of passage. However, providing a responsible and meaningful educational experience for the tens of thousands of students who visit yearly presents a unique set of challenges.

Nestled into the eastern portion of downtown San Antonio, steps away from the San Antonio Riverwalk, students and teachers visiting the Alamo must navigate a bustling tourist destination in a crowded urban area before they can explore the historic grounds. As the Alamo Plan has come to fruition in recent years, providing a world-class education experience to the site's youngest visitors has become a top priority for the Alamo Trust.

From 1905 to 2015, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT) served as stewards of the Alamo, and a small

team of volunteers facilitated guided walkabouts with students. School groups rarely made reservations. More often, buses arrived unannounced and dropped students off, who were then led through the site by one of their teachers. Funding, staff, and resources to appropriately serve student visitors were scarce or nonexistent.

Field trips rarely included more than a stroll through the church, where students heard about the 1836 Battle of the Alamo from the perspective of the Texan soldiers who fought in the battle. My second-grade class took a field trip to the Alamo in 1995, and that was my experience. Afterward, a parent of one of my classmates paid for us to watch a bizarre James Bowie holograph recount his version of the story.

Areas set aside for educational programming didn't exist. Without dedicated space, students had to jostle and compete with the million-plus tourists who visit the Alamo every year. No space or funding meant the student experience would never achieve its potential. Thankfully, a lot has changed since my field trip nearly thirty years ago.

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## History and Context

When Dr. Kate Rogers joined the Alamo Trust in 2021, the Alamo didn't have an education staff. At the time, Dr. Rogers was completing her Doctor of Education from the University of Southern California. Research led her to exemplary historic sites and museums throughout the United States and beyond to study the student experience and how to best bring those lessons to the Alamo. Places like Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, the National World War II Museum, and George Washington's Mount Vernon offered unique perspectives and lessons on how to implement a student-centered experience at sites with complex, multi-layered histories. Dr. Rogers' leadership, research, and focus on students and teachers have made education a top priority at the Alamo.

I began working at the Alamo in early 2022 as the first member of a new education team. The number of people working at the Alamo has nearly doubled since then, and the education department has grown to six full-time teammates—dedicated educators of diverse backgrounds focused on building a world-class program from the ground up. In that time, we've made enormous progress in increasing the number of students and teachers visiting the Alamo and improving their experience to more appropriately explore the multilayered history of the site.

Our growth spurt is just beginning. The Alamo's education team develops field trips, professional development for educators, and curricular resources available for use in classrooms. Each of these areas of responsibility has evolved over the last three years, but we have yet to fully realize our potential. That will have to wait until 2025 when the Texas Cavaliers Education Center is set to open.

Historically, dedicated space for education at the Alamo has been sparse. By 2025, the 4.5-acre footprint in downtown San Antonio—some of the most valuable real estate in Texas—will include nearly a quarter million square feet of new education, museum, and office space. The Alamo Plan has brought unprecedented investment and improvement to the Alamo district that will educate future generations about the nuanced history, as well as preserve its historic structures.

In March of 2023, the Ralston Family Collections Center (RFCC) opens as the first new building to be completed at the Alamo in more than 70 years. It offers more than 20,000 square feet of exhibition space and a new vault

to safely house and display the myriad items in the Alamo's large collection of artifacts.

In 2027, the Alamo Visitor's Center and Museum will be open. For the first time, visitors will be able to explore the site's more than three centuries of history, from the history of the first people who called the region home, to the 20th century when lunch counters in Alamo Plaza peacefully desegregated four years before the passage of the American Civil Rights Act in 1964.

## The Texas Cavaliers Education Center

In 2025, the Texas Cavaliers Education Center (TCEC) will bring unprecedented opportunities for the experience students and teachers have when they visit. Student visitors will benefit from a transformed historic district with more shade provided by newly planted, mature trees, accessible walkways, and a dedicated entrance to the Alamo Gardens complete with a bus lane for safe loading and unloading. Additionally, the historic footprint of the original Mission San Antonio de Valero and the Alamo battlefield will be

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highlighted, so students will be able to understand the evolution of the site and how it has changed over time.

Through adaptive reuse, the TCEC will incorporate Alamo Hall, a 1920s-era historic structure built on the foundations of San Antonio's Fire Station #2. The education center boasts more than 20,000 square feet of education space, a distance learning studio, and new offices for the growing education team.

The separate entrance will direct students to the orientation theater—the site's largest classroom, with a screen spanning more than 20 feet and room to accommodate more than one hundred students. Next to Alamo Hall, the new STEAM lab will allow students to explore Alamo archeology, preservation, art, physics, irrigation, and more. Another first will be the young learner's classroom—a first-of-its-kind space specifically designed for pre-K and kindergarten students.

In the flexible learning spaces in historic Alamo Hall, students can engage in role-play games designed to teach historical empathy, as students put themselves into the shoes of real stakeholders that populated the different eras of Texas history. Outside, students can work together and eat lunch at the learning stairs underneath one of the heritage oak trees. Adjacent to the outdoor classroom, students will learn about plant propagation and pollinator species at the Alamo's mission-era agricultural garden. They'll be able to water the plants and grow food using a functional acequia in the same location where mission inhabitants grew crops nearly three hundred years ago.

## The Evolution of Field Trips

School groups visiting the Alamo on field trips have more options than ever before. The Alamo Discovery Field Trip is the most popular option, where every school group is paired with an Alamo educator to explore the full history

of the site through an in-depth walkabout, including a curated demonstration by Living Historian, a program that provides students with the opportunity to interact with tangible, period appropriate reproductions of material culture, such as 19th-century medical equipment, mission era foodways, and textile production.

Currently, students can view firsthand the ongoing, largest ever archeological excavation of the Alamo Long Barrack—the oldest manmade structure in the state of Texas. Students can also participate in the Alamo's newly released audio tour, narrated by Ray Benson of the band Asleep at the Wheel.

Access to the Alamo Church and Long Barrack will always be free. Interested teachers can lead their classes on a teacher-guided experience at no cost. Every field trip option can be bundled with tickets to the Ralston Family Collections Center at a discounted rate.

Beginning in August 2024, thanks to the generosity of donors, any Title I campus can bring school groups to the Alamo free of charge. That includes any of the paid field trip options, and participating schools will be reimbursed for transportation costs. Title I field trip funding allows the Alamo education team to cast a wider net and engage communities that have historically been unable to visit the site in person.

## Continuing Education For Teachers

The menu of professional development offerings for teachers is also growing. Teach the Alamo is a series of unique professional development sessions that correspond to the galleries represented in the visitor center and museum. The Alamo is a state-approved provider of CPE credits, meaning that it can offer continuing education hours to teachers.

The Alamo education team developed Teach the Alamo, a series of full-day and after-hours professional development sessions designed to give teachers meaningful classroom resources, enhance their content knowledge, and connect in person with the historic site. Interested teachers can visit in person and explore any era of Alamo history that aligns with their interests or content areas. Past sessions include explorations of the histories related to the mission period, the Battle of the Alamo,

indigenous people, archeology, preservation, and the era of Mexican Independence.

Alamo Teacher Institute represents the most in-depth professional development opportunities. These multi-day, all-inclusive programs allow teachers to obtain considerable CPE credits and collaborate with other teachers to develop meaningful classroom resources and conduct deep dives into areas of interest. The Alamo Teacher Institute is particularly innovative in that it offers teachers travel opportunities in addition to continuing education. The Alamo is the only institution in the United States offering such professional development travel experiences.

Participating teachers enjoy meals, airfare, transportation, hotel, and site visits at no cost. Admission to the Alamo Teacher Institute is highly competitive. Teachers who are admitted not only gain a valuable experience, but they return to their classrooms with new lessons at the ready and pilot new activities inspired by their participation.

## Alamo Teacher Institute

In April of 2024, the Alamo embarked on its first-ever teacher institute trip: the Texas Revolution Road Trip. Fifteen participating teachers met at the Alamo and traveled on an overnight trip to historic sites of the Texas Revolution, including Presidio la Bahía, San Felipe de Austin, and the San Jacinto battlefield. Teachers met with historians and other subject experts at each site to explore history where it was made.

In June of 2024, the Alamo took ten Texas teachers to Mexico City for the first-ever Alamo Summer Teacher Institute professional development trip. The Alamo education team led teachers through five days of intensive professional development in Mexico City to explore the Alamo story through the intersectional lenses of Texan and Mexican history.

One participating teacher, Mariana Monárrez, a 20-year veteran educator who teaches Texas history in San Antonio, summed up her view of the trip as follows: “I remember my Texas history teacher when I came here. Santa Anna was a bad guy, and the Texans were the only good guys . . . A lot of my students are Hispanic. For them to see history from a different perspective is incredibly valuable and important. It’s important for every child to hear that. They might have a different idea or image of what happened.”

Participating teachers visited numerous historic sites and museums during their five days of learning in Mexico City. Stops included Chapultepec Castle, where they viewed a flag captured by the Mexican Army at the Battle of the Alamo. Additional historic sites and museums included the National Anthropology Museum, the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the historic center of Mexico City, and the Museum of Interventions.

## The Alamo Curriculum

In 2026, the Alamo education team will release a holistic Alamo Curriculum—a series of lessons and resources, available for free to teachers, to be used in classrooms around the country. The Alamo Curriculum will be organizationally and interpretively aligned to the visitor’s center and museum, scheduled to open in 2027. For the first time ever, teachers will have the necessary resources to empower their students to understand the more than 300-year history of the Alamo. Each curriculum will include helpful supplemental resources, such as videos, overview essays written by subject experts, biographies, and select chronologies. Many lessons are already complete and available for free on the Alamo’s education webpage.

The transformation of the Alamo to a comprehensive education destination represents a significant evolution in how history is taught and experienced. Thanks to the Alamo Trust’s commitment to education—coupled with the introduction of dedicated space like the Texas Cavaliers Education Center, and the development of innovative programs and curricula—students and educators alike are now able to engage with the rich and complex history of the Alamo in ways that were previously unimaginable.

This holistic approach not only honors the diverse stories of those who lived, fought, and died at the Alamo, but also ensures that future generations can explore and understand the multifaceted history of this iconic site. As the Alamo continues to grow as a world-class educational resource, it reaffirms its role as a pivotal place of learning, reflection, and historical empathy, where the past is not only remembered, but actively explored and reinterpreted. The future of education at the Alamo is bright, promising enriched experiences that will leave a lasting impact on all who visit. **NMM**