Sylvester Perez will replace Superintendent Robert Nicks in December.

For Sylvia Garza, working with incoming Midland ISD superintendent Sylvester “Syl” Perez has been like being in the “fast lane.”

Garza has been assistant superintendent for teaching and learning -- prekindergarten through grade 12 -- at San Marcos Consolidated ISD for three years. She and people who know Perez describe him as visionary, short on pretense, available, committed to kids and enthusiastic.

Along with solidifying relationships with Austin Community College and Texas State University, one noteworthy accomplishment was shepherding a $122 million San Marcos bond issue for new schools and renovations. Work should be finished by early to mid-2008.

Perez on Dec. 1 will replace Superintendent Robert Nicks, who retired last summer after just more than five years with MISD. Nicks' last day is Nov. 30.

MISD trustees will consider Perez' appointment at a brief 5:30 p.m. meeting Monday in the administration office boardroom, 615 W. Missouri Ave. Perez said he has been working with Nicks and his staff on the transition from San Marcos to Midland.

"I'm excited to be the superintendent in Midland, such a solid school district and community. I'm looking forward to working with the staff and community leaders to stay on the path toward improving our school district for all kids," he said.

He added he respects Nicks for smoothing his way north.

"I think it takes someone who is very cooperative and someone who is of Bob Nicks' caliber to be willing to work with whomever the board selected to come in for the betterment of the district," Perez said.

Perez was a finalist for state superintendent of the year, losing out to Region 13 cohort Daniel King of Hidalgo County ISD.

"(Perez) is a visionary. He does a comprehensive analysis of the district as a whole -- instruction, athletics, community. He looks to see what is there. He talks to teachers, he talks to parents. He connects really well with university and key community elements to the road map he sets for the district, in cooperation with the board," Garza said.

"I think you will hear from most people that he takes the time to listen and learn from you," she said.

Perez formed tight relationships with Austin Community College and Texas State University. Austin Community staff works with students all year on the college application process and career testing. College counselors visit students and students go to Austin Community College and other schools.
San Marcos High School graduates get letters of acceptance from ACC. "That's very powerful for our students. We've had many testimonials from students talking about not knowing what it takes to go to college, not knowing what to do. So the College Connection is huge," Garza said.

Since its inception, districts in Austin, Hays, Bastrop and Pflugerville have come on board with College Connection. She said Perez' dream is to have students take enough concurrent courses to graduate from high school with an associate's degree.

"In some cases, university teachers come to campus and teach courses here, like for our advanced calculus (class). We have a few students graduating with right at 30 hours of college," Garza said.

"Along with the advanced academics, we have a project he's pretty much institutionalized with Texas State -- the Caminos project," she said.

This is where Texas State takes 75 to 80 of the district's most at-risk eighth-graders and puts them in a college atmosphere for the summer with professors and San Marcos instructors to earn high school credit in algebra, English I, media, technology and a science.

"We're looking at biology for this summer. It's very intense. The students live in dorms, and in addition to their classes, there are people who come in from all over the country to speak to them about leadership," Garza said.

"Once they finish, they become part of a cohort that continues to work with university staff on leadership," she said. The university tracks their grades to make sure they're doing well.

Likewise, Midland Federation of Teachers President Steve Buck is impressed with what he's heard about Perez. He said the new superintendent sounds like a "pretty quality person and decent administrator."

He was disappointed so few teachers had input on the choice or knew the outcome of the search right away.

"From what I've heard, he will work with teachers. They said he's fairly accessible, which Dr. Nicks was wonderful for," Buck said. "At the same time, (Perez) has a hard job ahead of him."

Buck said the administration needs rearranging due to requirements from the so-called 65 percent rule, which mandates districts spend 65 percent of their operating budget on classroom instruction.

"Some superintendents are calling people teachers that aren't," Buck said. "...I think he'll earn every penny."

Phil Neighbors, past president of the San Marcos Chamber of Commerce and now San Angelo Chamber president, said Perez expanded partnerships with local businesses.

"He gave a public face to the school system in which the businesses were very comfortable not only sharing their requirements but partnering with the schools to produce a win-win situation for business and education," Neighbors said.

Passing the bond issue sticks out most to Neighbors. "That effort had a lot of business and community support. A large part of that I attribute to his being open and honest in answering questions and being available to the public," he said.
Ron Hart of Ron Hart Properties in San Marcos was part of the political action committee that helped pass the bond. "The emotional side of me is very disappointed (he's) leaving," Hart said.

"I respect him as an individual and his decision as it relates to his career. ... I would love to see him stay forever. ... There are so many positives we have to focus on. ... Our loss is your gain."

San Marcos Education Foundation President Fred Markham said a change in the school board and Perez' deeds have changed perception of the school district. He said Perez also brought in good principals and staffers.

"He's pulled the community together to support the schools and he passed the first significant bond issue in years after several ... had failed. He's taught San Marcos it can not only strive for but achieve a higher level of education in the public schools," Markham said.

Who is he?

Now in his 35th year of public education, Perez began his career as a teacher and a coach in 1972 at Lubbock ISD. After 13 years, he got into campus administration, then central office.

The 57-year-old was on the 1983 Converse Judson football team staff that beat Lee High School, 25-21.

A San Antonio native, he is a Harlandale High School graduate. He earned a bachelor's degree from New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas, N.M., his mid-management degree from Texas A&I (now Texas A&M University-Kingsville) and his doctorate in educational administration from Texas A&M University.

He was superintendent for Mathis ISD in Mathis and Clint ISD in the El Paso area for six years before coming to San Marcos. He helped pass bond issues in Mathis and Clint and the district earned recognized status for the first time in its history during his time at Clint.

Perez and his wife Dee have three grown sons.