



RGV FOCUS

a collaboration with Educate Texas

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**RGV STUDENTS CONTINUE TO MAKE ACADEMIC STRIDES COMPARED TO TEXAS PEERS;
REGION'S LEADERS CELEBRATE GENERATIONAL SHIFT IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT**

RGV FOCUS' vision – to “ensure that all Rio Grande Valley learners achieve a degree or credential that leads to meaningful careers” – takes another step forward

MERCEDES, TEXAS (April 11, 2017) – For nearly five years, leaders from across the Rio Grande Valley have united behind a vision – to “ensure that all Rio Grande Valley learners achieve a degree or credential that leads to a meaningful career.”

Progress is being made toward that objective, thanks to the passionate commitment and enthusiastic hard work provided by **RGV FOCUS**, a collective-impact initiative whose credo is “leaders united to change lives.”

Earlier today leaders from RGV FOCUS unveiled the [2016 Annual Report](#), showing that area students now match or outperform their Texas peers in eight out of 11 key indicators – from high school graduation rates, to FAFSA financial aid and AP/dual credit completion (see detailed stats below). The report, which spotlights successes along with areas needing improvement, reflects a growing shift in educational attainment for Rio Grande Valley students.

“We credit the diverse leadership from the education, community, business and philanthropic sectors who have banded together to make certain our Rio Grande Valley students find success in high school, college and the workforce,” said Dr. Stella Garcia, co-chair of RGV FOCUS and Provost of Texas State Technical College-Harlingen. “While there is still much work to be done, we are very proud of the progress of our students and know it will pay off down the road.”

This type of cross-county collaboration is special, considering the size of the Rio Grande Valley. The region's 1.3 million population comprises four counties, 37 school districts, four public institutions of higher education and nearly 415,000 Pre-K-12 students. Of those students, 25,000 are seniors and more than 97% are Latino. Additionally, there are nearly 70,000 higher-education students, of which 92% are Latino. In 2015 alone, students earned 25 doctoral, 1,379 master's, 4,366 bachelor's and 3,945 associate degrees and were awarded 2,523 certificates from the four public institutions of higher education in the Rio Grande Valley.

The 2016 Annual Report details how high school and college students in the region are performing compared to their peers at a baseline (metrics established by RGV FOCUS leadership in 2012). Furthermore, to provide deeper context, it compares the performance of RGV students against their Texas peers. Also showcased is RGV FOCUS' commitment to strengthen each step and align resources across the cradle-to-career educational pipeline. The 28-page report underscores four strategic priority areas – culture of attending college, college and career readiness, teaching excellence, and dropout prevention and recovery

Highlights from the report were shared with approximately 100 regional leaders at South Texas ISD's High School of the Health Professions. Speakers included Dr. Garcia and her RGV FOCUS co-chair Dr. Alda Benavidez, Superintendent of La Joya ISD. Also participating were Dr. Luzelma Canales, Executive Director of RGV FOCUS; community leader Alma Garcia, who led a lively talk with four students pursuing healthcare professions; and Katherine Diaz, a college and career readiness coordinator at Lyford High School in Willacy County. The four students were Jessica Abrego, Texas Southmost College - SC Medical Laboratory Technology; Lupita Reyna, a dental hygiene student at Texas State Technical College-Harlingen; Luis Silos, South Texas College, cardiac thoracic surgeon; Ramiro Tovar, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley School of Medicine - working toward a Doctor of Medicine. Two students from South Texas ISD's High School for Health Professions – Jeswin Vennatt and Xin Yee Ooi – delivered the welcome.

The Annual Report is the outcome of RGV FOCUS, a collaboration with **Educate Texas**, a public-private initiative of **Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT)**. Founded in 2012 by a small group of district superintendents and higher education presidents, RGV FOCUS has since grown to include other key educators,

nonprofits, community groups, and business and civic leaders dedicated to making major, systemic improvements to educational and career attainment in the Rio Grande Valley. Through the years, this cross-sector group – dubbed the Leadership Team – has met regularly to evaluate assets and needs in the RGV and identify shared goals, strategies and metrics to help drive the vision.

As a result of the Leadership Team’s commitment and perseverance, RGV FOCUS is making a difference.

- On four of the indicators, RGV students top their Texas peers – in the four-year high school graduation rate (90% RGV students compared to 89% Texas students), FAFSA financial aid completion (56% RGV compared to 51% statewide), AP/dual credit completion (38% RGV compared to 35% statewide) and higher education immediate enrollment rate (57% RGV compared to 53% statewide).
- On four of the indicators, RGV students are at the same levels as their Texas peers – STAAR 3rd grade reading (76%), 2-year institutions of higher education (IHE) graduation rate (16%), and higher education graduates employed or enrolled in 2-year IHEs (89%) and 4-year IHEs (78%).
- When compared to the RGV FOCUS 2012 baseline, RGV youth showed positive progress on five out of 11 key indicators:
 - STAAR 3rd grade reading (6% increase from 2012 baseline)
 - STAAR 8th grade mathematics (1% increase from 2012 baseline)
 - 4-year high school graduation rate (3% increase from 2012 baseline)
 - AP/dual credit completion (6% increase from 2012 baseline)
 - Higher education immediate enrollment (1% increase from 2012 baseline)
- Additionally, the number of 18-to-24 year olds who did not graduate high school decreased from 24 percent in 2014 to 23 percent in 2015.
- Finally, illustrating the generational shift toward better education access and success, the report shows that among adults 25 years and older, only 22% have some college education or associates degree, but 42% of the younger generation (18-to-24) has some college education or associates degree – almost double the rate!

The report also illustrated educational challenges the region faces. Leaders noted that further work is needed in postsecondary education. Despite an increase in higher education enrollment, since baseline, the RGV has not seen growth in higher-education graduation rates and workforce success, for both 2-year and 4-year institutions of higher education.

“Regional collaboration is changing lives. While we celebrate our progress, we must recognize that the Rio Grande Valley’s changing economy – ever evolving with jobs in education, healthcare, advanced manufacturing and retail/service – requires increasingly advanced levels of education,” said Dr. Canales, a Valley native who joined RGV FOCUS in 2013. “As we enter our fifth year, our ultimate goal is to improve our systems and reduce the barriers students face so more can successfully complete college degrees or credential programs.”

The event closed with Dr. Benavides delivering a call to action recruiting businesses and community organizations to join RGV FOCUS.

“We graciously thank all those who have played a role and supported RGV FOCUS. Our journey to improve educational attainment in the Rio Grande Valley has just begun, and we urge everyone – from businesses and nonprofits to donors and the media – to join us in this momentous initiative,” said Dr. Benavides.

In addition to co-chairs Dr. Garcia and Dr. Benavides, the Leadership Team members representing school districts are **Arturo Cavazos, Ed.D.**; Superintendent, Harlingen CISD; **Lisa Garcia, Ed.D.**, Superintendent, Point Isabel ISD; **Jose A. Gonzalez, Ed. D.**, Superintendent, McAllen ISD; **Marla M. Guerra, Ed. D.**, Superintendent, South Texas ISD; **Eduardo Infante**, Superintendent, Lyford ISD; **Daniel P. King, Ph.D.**, Superintendent, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) ISD; **Silvia Ibarra, Ed. D.**, Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Services, McAllen ISD; **Gonzalo Salazar**, Superintendent, Los Fresnos CISD; **Jessica Swerdloff**, Chief of Staff, IDEA Public Schools; and **Esperanza Zendejas, Ed.D.**, Superintendent, Brownsville ISD.

The Leadership Team members representing institutions of higher education are **Kristin Croyle, Psy.D.**, Vice President for Student Success, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley; **Sylvia Leal, Ed.D.**, Associate Vice President for Student Educational Outreach, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley; **Shirley A. Reed, Ed.D.**, President, South Texas College; and **Mike Shannon**, Interim President, Texas Southmost College.

The Leadership Team members representing community-based organizations are **Tina Atkins, Ph.D.**, Administrator for the Center for Excellence in Career and College Readiness, Region One Education Service Center; **Tania Chavez**, Fund Development Strategist, La Unión Del Pueblo Entero (LUPE); **Chris Coxon**, Managing Director, Programs, Educate Texas; **Michael Seifert**, Network Weaver, Equal Voice Network Weaver; **Juanita Valdez-Cox**, Executive Director, La Unión Del Pueblo Entero (LUPE); and **Traci Wickett**, President and CEO, United Way of Southern Cameron County.

The Leadership Team members representing workforce organizations are **Francisco Almaraz**, Chief Executive Officer, Workforce Solutions Lower Rio Grande Valley, and **Pat Hobbs**, Chief Executive Officer, Workforce Solutions Cameron.

Funders supporting RGV FOCUS are the **Greater Texas Foundation**; **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**; **W.W. Caruth, Jr. Foundation**; **Ford Foundation**; and **Lumina Foundation**.

The school districts of the Collective are **Brownsville ISD, Donna ISD, Edcouch-Elsa ISD, Edinburg CISD, Excellence in Leadership Academy, Harlingen CISD, IDEA Public Schools, Ignite Public Schools, La Feria ISD, La Joya ISD, La Villa ISD, Lasara ISD, Los Fresnos CISD, Lyford CISD, McAllen ISD, Mercedes ISD, Mid-Valley Academy Charter District, Mission CISD, Monte Alto ISD, PSJA ISD, Point Isabel ISD, Progreso ISD, Raymondville ISD, Rio Grande City CISD, Rio Hondo ISD, Roma ISD, San Benito CISD, San Isidro ISD, San Perlita ISD, Santa Maria ISD, Santa Rosa ISD, Sharyland ISD, South Texas Educational Technologies Inc., South Texas ISD, Valley View ISD, Vanguard Academy and Weslaco ISD.**

The higher-education institutions of the Collective are **South Texas College, Texas Southmost College, Texas State Technical College-Harlingen** and **University of Texas Rio Grande Valley**.

The community-based organizations of the Collective are **Educate Texas, Equal Voice Network, La Unión del Pueblo Entero (LUPE), Region One Education Service Center, Equal Voice Network, United Way of Southern Cameron County** and **Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA)**.

The workforce organizations of the Collective are **Workforce Solutions Cameron County** and **Workforce Solutions Lower Rio Grande Valley**.

To learn more or get involved in RGV FOCUS, visit rgvfocus.org.

Annual report, news release, press kit materials and images are available at the following link – rgvfocus.org/media

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About RGV FOCUS

RGV FOCUS is a collective impact initiative in the Rio Grande Valley – a group of leaders from school districts, higher education institutions, community-based organizations and the workforce partnering to improve student lives from cradle-to-career. RGV FOCUS was launched in 2012 to transform college readiness, access and success across Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy counties. The work to date is driven by the following vision: *All RGV learners will achieve a degree or credential that leads to a meaningful career.* RGV FOCUS is a collaboration with Educate Texas, a public-private initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT). For more information, please visit rgvfocus.org.

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