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Carreon: Teach for America Celebrates 20 Years in the Valley

By Robert Carreon

Robert Carreon, executive director of Teach for America-Rio Grande Valley. (Photo: RGG/Steve Taylor)

McALLEN, Feb. 8 - I've called the Rio Grande Valley home since 2003 when I moved to La Joya to teach high school social studies at Jimmy Carter High School as a Teach For America corps member.

Teach For America has called the Valley home since 1991 when we recruited our first corps of 25 teachers to lead classroom in local public schools.

Back in 1991, we reached approximately 2,200 students. In the 2011-12 school year our corps has grown to nearly 140 teachers reaching some 15,000 kids growing up in our highest-need communities. A lot has changed and a lot has been accomplished during the last two decades. As Teach For America in the Rio Grande Valley celebrates our 20th anniversary, we celebrate the progress made in the last 20 years and look ahead with purpose and optimism towards a future that holds an excellent education for every Valley child.

Twenty years ago, as Teach For America was welcomed into the Valley education community, the Texas Education Agency didn't even track educational data for students in our region. Since that time, our kids have proven that they are capable of achieving at the highest levels with hard work and the right support from committed adults. Their educational achievement information now receives the same attention as that of children across Texas, allowing our schools to set high expectations for rigorous curriculum, graduation rates, and college and career readiness.

A rich nonprofit community dedicated to strengthening our schools and our communities has developed with organizations like La Unión del Pueblo Entero and VAMOS affecting change on the ground and the halls of government. Business leaders like Alonzo Cantu and David Merrill have taken up the challenge of ensuring our kids receive the kind of education that will prepare them to be competitive in a 21st century economy.

Although our communities have made great strides toward educational excellence and equity, we still face many challenges that slow our progress toward giving all of our students, regardless of family income, access to a top-notch education. According to recent census data, 37 percent of our population lives below the poverty level, a rate more than twice as high as the statewide average of 17 percent and the national average of 14 percent. Unemployment rates hover around 11 percent. As a result, only 56 percent of our

neighbors have earned a high school diploma and even fewer, just 13 percent, have earned a college degree.

But we know this doesn't have to be the case. Valley families put their trust in our public schools to provide their children with the tools they'll need to reach for their dreams and end the cycle of poverty. As community members, we can all play important roles in bolstering the systems that our families place their faith in.

At Teach For America, as we reflect on our twenty years as partners in the Valley education community, we're excited to build upon the impact of the 1,000 committed leaders we've cultivated locally over the last two decades. We reaffirm our commitment to this critical work and set our course to reach our shared goal of expanding opportunity for every Valley child.

To realize our mission, we must maximize the efficacy of our teacher training and support so that our teachers can set the highest expectations for their students, track student progress towards their goals, and do whatever it takes to ensure their kids are making the progress necessary to stay on track for future success in school and in life. We must also continue to cultivate our communities' future leaders who will continue working from all sectors to create the fundamental conditions necessary to close the achievement gap between students growing up in poverty and their more affluent peers. Working alongside other committed educators, we will empower our students to shape their educational future.

As we celebrate our 20th anniversary, I am humbled and honored by the opportunity we have to be part of building our community's future and by the partnership and support Teach For America receives from our many friends and neighbors in the Rio Grande Valley. We could not be more proud to be a member of this community working to address our region's most pressing problem that we can and must solve.

Robert Carreon is executive director of Teach For America-Rio Grande Valley.