

Community Impact Case Study FY20

Teach For America, Rio Grande Valley



I. Case Overview

Over three decades, Teach For America staff and alumni have contributed to a growing collective effort to ensure that children in the Rio Grande Valley are doing better than their peers elsewhere in Texas. Located in south Texas on the border of Mexico, the Rio Grande Valley - “the Valley,” to locals - spans four counties, includes 37 school districts and is home to 1.3m people (430,000 children).

Launch Year 1991

Alumni Approximately 1,400 have taught in the Valley through TFA and 174 currently live there

Alumni include 99 alumni teachers and 7 school and system leaders. Alumni have also helped lead a collective impact organization, serve on boards, lead teacher training organizations, and serve in leadership roles in the state’s Department of Education.

Founded by TFA alumni, IDEA Public Schools has grown to 30 schools in the Valley. 100% of IDEA’s graduating seniors have been accepted to college.

Student progress

- The graduation rate has gone from the lowest (78%) in 1998 to highest (91%) in the state today.
- 87% of students attend A- or B-rated schools. There are no D-, E-, or F-rated schools in the community.
- In 2011, 32% of students graduated high school with associates degrees (2-year college/university degrees). In 2019, 43% of students do.
- Nearly 60% of the region's students have earned some college credit by the time they graduate high school. Students are more likely than their peers elsewhere in Texas to take Advanced Placement courses or earn an International Baccalaureate diploma.
- The community focuses more on college readiness, enrollment, and completion in a way that it had not before.¹

II. Rio Grande Valley Community



One way to understand the Valley is to learn its colonial past and how those dynamics still shape the economy today. The land first belonged to the Coahuiltecan tribe, and it was colonized by the Spanish. The history of struggle continued through multiple wars in the 19th century and into changing economic landscapes in the 20th. Throughout each period, power shifted from the original colonizers of the land to a largely white power structure.

In the 20th century, the plight of farm workers rose. The *Bracero* (“manual laborer”) program sponsored 4.5 million border crossings for guest workers, in the Valley and nationally. Yet wage theft continued by white landowners; recent estimates indicate that former *braceros* lost out on up to \$500 million in wages that should have been paid to them. Farm-workers continue to face

challenges and exploitation today. (Read more [here](#).)

As the economy changed again in the 1990s with new international trade policies, opportunity gaps in education meant that many of the Valley's students were not competitive for more managerial jobs. Today, the economy continues to evolve. New pathways to the middle class are important in a community where over 90% of residents of the Valley are low-income. “The local economy is different than even 7-10 years ago,” says Robert Carreon, a TFA alum and former Executive Director of Teach For America - Rio Grande Valley. Growing industries include tourism, systems engineering, computer science and coding, aerospace (due to a SpaceX facility in the area), and the medical field. The expectations for students to develop knowledge and skills to meet these demands are high.



¹ Before the 1990s, Texas' Department of Education did not have student performance data for kids in the Valley, despite having it for all other areas in the state, an indication of the state's lack of attention to the vibrant community. Now, the Valley is the best place to be a Hispanic student, in terms of predictable education outcomes, in the state of Texas.

“An American high school diploma is the ticket to college is the ticket to money is the ticket to success,” says Marcos Vargas, the son of parents who worked strawberry fields in the Valley and a TFA alum.

Marcos also describes life in the region: “There is a lot of green, lots of culture. A lot of brightly colored houses. A lot of families and a lot of family outings.” The values of community, family, and support are strong, as illustrated by Julio Garcia’s [speech](#) where he shares stories of his community that helped him succeed as a student and then as a Teach For America fellow. He views teaching in the Valley as paying forward his success.

III. Growth in Collective Leadership

The story of the Valley reflects a collective effort toward supporting more students to enter the American middle class by expanding college access and matriculation through college. In the US, a college education predicts higher earnings than people without degrees, more reliable healthcare and benefits, and a far less likelihood of experiencing unemployment.



In 2012, the Valley’s education leaders and stakeholders came together to build on the state’s efforts to expand college access. The diverse set of stakeholders, including TFA, together set a bold vision for the Valley. The effort launched RGV Focus, a [community impact organization](#) that “works side by side with community partners to serve as connector, organizer, and supporter to create equitable ideas and actions to achieve shared goals” across the K-12, higher education, and workforce continuum. TFA helped staff and advise the effort - e.g., the head of TFA in the Valley recruited the executive director of RGV Focus. Alumni are part of the group’s leadership team.

The collaborative includes both district and charter school leaders, hosts events on college readiness, and shares holistic [data dashboards](#) on students across the Valley. The availability of linked and transparent data systems on young people is a marker of progress considering no data was available in the early 1990s.

The collective efforts to increase college-going were enhanced by IDEA schools. Founded by TFA alumni in 2000 and staffed in part by TFA alumni, IDEA schools have played a central role in boosting college-going in the Valley. IDEA was also initially part of RGV Focus, influencing college-going and graduation as its central collective goals. IDEA serves 31,000 students across the Valley in 30 schools. 100% of graduating seniors are accepted into college. Students begin visiting colleges in third grade and middle schools prepare students for the many Advanced Placement classes they’ll be expected to complete before graduation.

“IDEA deserves a lot of credit for building the college-going infrastructure we’re now seeing in the Valley,” says Carreon. Before, in the community, college was viewed as an investment in self versus getting a job to support your family after high school. “That’s different now in part because IDEA has normalized college from a young age by talking to parents about college, sharing what you get for making the investment in college, and what you have to do along the way at each step.”

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Funding partners also fueled the efforts of educators and partners on the ground. Throughout the 2000s, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provided multi-million dollar grants for key research that catalyzed college-going as a priority in the region and state. This knowledge, alongside the convening power of funders, accelerated the impact of leaders on the ground.

Students in the Valley have benefited tremendously. Since RGV Focus' creation, the PK-16 continuum has strengthened to better serve more students for new economic demands. Dual enrollment and early college high schools provide free college-credit courses to high school students, resulting in many graduating high schools with associates or two-year college degrees and thousands of dollars saved (money that is often borrowed, resulting in debt). Today, nearly 60% of the region's students have earned some college credit by the time they graduate high school. Students are more likely than their peers elsewhere in Texas to take Advanced Placement courses or earn an International Baccalaureate diploma. Students have better access to middle class life than ever before.

IV. Role of Teach For America

Teach For America, Rio Grande Valley and alumni played important roles in this story of collective progress:

Initiating a mechanism to foster collective action

TFA staff and alumni played a crucial role in the launch and implementation of RGV Focus, the collective action initiative that has done much to raise standards, foster collaboration and shift attitudes across the education ecosystem in the past decade. TFA alumni sit on the leadership of RGV Focus, and the executive director was recruited by the head of TFA in RGV.

Influencing attitudes through high expectations

The high expectations that TFA corp members and staff had for all students was particularly important in the early days. TFA's presence in the Valley contributed to a growth in expectations among stakeholders across the ecosystem, and a demand for increased resources. "Coupling that increase in skill of educators with the strong will and ownership of community has been an important part of the recipe for success," says Carreon.

Building a college-going infrastructure and culture

IDEA schools' laser focus on college access and success, and its scaling efforts, are a big part of why the Valley's students are more likely to attend college now than before. College is part of the Valley in a way it was not before.

Recruiting and fostering homegrown talent

TFA educators and alumni, many of whom are former students, are found across the system as teachers, principals, and system leaders. TFA recruits a diverse set of fellows and recruits locally. 30% of TFA-RGV fellows are from the Valley and 50% are people from the global majority. Carreon reflects: "I used to open Induction by saying: 'Welcome to the Valley!' One time, a fellow mentioned, 'you know, I've lived here my whole life.' It was an 'aha' moment for me. Our orientation and the way we talk about this work - and the community, future, hopes and dreams of families. We are joining an effort that has been underway that fellows who didn't grow up here are joining and supporting." Many staff and alumni grew up or lived long-term in the area and thus TFA brings more relationships and knowledge of the local community. Staff leads Paula Gracia and Ana Gonzales are both tenured education leaders from the Valley, as well as long-tenured staff on TFA (including some for over a decade).

Being entrepreneurial in response to enabling public policies and private investment

Both TFA and IDEA were both opportunistic about accessing resources from 'Race to the Top', a US federal program that provided funding to school districts and supporters. They used the federal resources to support their work to foster greater collaboration and alignment across the ecosystem.

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