



Engaging Communities for College Readiness (ENCORE) is a comprehensive program developed by Texas Valley Communities Foundation in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to promote the importance of higher education and college readiness throughout South Texas.



ENCORE has developed a strong advocacy infrastructure in collaboration with education, business and community leaders to serve as a catalyst for change in college and career readiness standards. Strong partnerships have been created with private foundations, Fortune 500 corporations, community-based organizations, higher education institutions, media and local school districts, to develop active and vocal constituencies in support of college and career readiness. The overarching goal of this program is to increase social capital and develop a culture that proactively seeks to improve organizing efforts in the area of education and community engagement.

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ENCORE Awards Laptops to CAMP Robotics Competition Winners at IRRA

By Nadia Tamez-Robledo

MISSION, Texas - What started off as boxes of metal parts, bolts, and a motherboard was transformed into a fleet of racing robots by IRRA learners in a competition held by ENCORE. Engaging Communities for College Readiness (ENCORE) staff members presented awards to robotics contest winners at IRRA in Mission on May 25. The four learners

placed first out of six teams during the center's ENCORE CAMP robotics competition earlier this month. IRRA learners began constructing their robots while participating in ENCORE's Career

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SJMS Family Session

By Nadia Tamez-Robledo

SAN JUAN, Texas - When it comes to making sure that Valley students walk from the stage at their high school graduation onto a college campus, it turns out that talking about higher education in the living room is just as important as talking about it in the classroom.

In an effort to increase the dialogue about college in homes throughout South Texas, Engaging Communities for College Readiness (ENCORE) conducted a Family Session at San Juan Middle School on May 12.

A branch of the Mercedes-based Texas Valley Communities Foundation, ENCORE strives to increase the number of local

students who complete high school prepared to thrive in and graduate from college. The results of a Valley-wide study of college perceptions by South Texas residents by TVCOF in 2008 showed that students rely more on their parents than anyone else for guidance on what to do after high school.

The workshop encourages students and their parents to work as partners in learning about and exploring the benefits of higher education. Family Sessions engage participants in collaborative hands-on activities that spark a discussion about college and career goals and how each family member can help

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Edinburg School District Recognized as One of the Top Five Texas School Districts by H-E-B

By Nadia Tamez-Robledo



Edinburg CISD Receives Recognition for their Commitment to Education

Edinburg, TX-Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District (CISD) has been recognized as one of the top five school districts in the State of Texas by the H-E-B Excellence in Education Awards. A group of Edinburg CISD and Texas Valley Communities Foundation representatives traveled to Austin, Texas for the annual ceremony where the best Texas school districts, teachers and administrators gathered to be honored. During the May Edinburg CISD Board Meeting, Dr. Rene Gutierrez, Superintendent of Schools, and Maria Luisa Guerra, Assistant Superintendent, joined Tony Gonzalez, Director of Retail Operations for the Rio Grande Valley, to present a special H-E-B Excellence in

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Valley Students Get College and Career Ready during ENCORE Annual Event

By Nadia Tamez-Robledo

EDINBURG, Texas - Organized by the Texas Valley Communities Foundation, the Engaging Communities for College Readiness (ENCORE) Southwest Educational Convocation brought over 1000 secondary school students and parents from across the Valley together for two days of interactive college readiness presentations and activities at The University of Texas-Pan American.

The conference attracted students from the Edinburg, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo, Donna and IRRA school districts to learn about the benefits that higher education can afford them in terms of career options and overall quality of life.

Professionals from ENCORE partner organizations like NASA, Boeing and Texas Instruments traveled from as far away as California while Valley natives from State Farm, Wells Fargo, Children in the Fields and AT&T represented local success stories. UTPA student organizations were also on-hand to mentor

ENCORE Scholars, share their own experiences as college students, and explain the wide variety of academic programs and careers that can be pursued through college.

"I felt like I was a college student," said Tyler Yañez, a middle school student from Edinburg, adding that he learned that college is about "studying really hard [and] never going back, always going forward."

Presentations on Friday, May 7, were punctuated by a Town Hall meeting on Hispanics and higher education led by Congressman Rubén Hinojosa and Dr. Rosalinda Barrera, Assistant Deputy Secretary of Education and Director of the Office of English Language Acquisition. Originally from Falfurrias, Texas, Dr. Barrera was appointed by President Obama last year and is the highest-ranking Latina in

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ENCORE Awards Laptops (Continued)

Awareness and Mentorship Program (CAMP), which engages students in hands-on activities that explore the worlds of robotics, forensic science, and business. The laptops each learner received will be one more tool to aid them as they pursue higher education.

"It'll help me in college a lot," said Aaron Jameson, an IRRA senior who plans to enroll in South Texas College after graduating. "I have a desktop at home, but I can carry a laptop around. It's a lot easier."

Teams built their bots from a kit of only metal parts and a motherboard, using teamwork to collaborate on a design and correct their model's flaws. Learners then programmed their robot to run a maze with a winning time of 13 seconds.

"Building the robot was not a problem. Getting it through the maze, that was hard," said Chelsey Sandoval, 12th grade. "I think this is an awesome program. On a scale from one to five, it's a 10."

Founded by Aggie Peña, Information Referral Resource Assistance, Inc. (IRRA) established a six-campus school system across the Rio Grande Valley to serve students who were at risk of being left behind by traditional schools. IRRA centers provides learners from Brownsville to Rio Grande City

with the resources they need to earn their diplomas, transition to college, and prepare for the workforce.

"They actually let me know that I'm eligible for dual enrollment, so I'm going to do that in the summer to earn college credit," said Nora Cuevas, 12th grade. "The teachers help you here. Everybody's fun, everybody motivates you."

Through a partnership with ENCORE, a branch of the Texas Valley Communities Foundation (TVCOF), both organizations focus on their goal of increasing the number of Valley students who graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college, their careers, and life.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES



Students say:

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SJMS Family Session (Continued)

students prepare for success in secondary school and beyond.

Families begin the session with the story of the "Grey House," which illustrates how the lack of conversation about college in the home can carry the cycle of poverty on to each generation.

Students and their parents then learn about the monetary earnings and quality of life benefits afforded by a college degree, various forms of financial aid available, and the academic and personal skills students need to develop in order to thrive in college.

"I still see him as my baby, and this is all catching up," said Norma Washington, whose son is a sixth-grader at San Juan Middle School. "The college courses they can take, I had no idea they could take them that early. It [made me think,] 'OK, you need to get on the ball, and we need to have a plan.'"

Families also work together to create a plan to discuss college goals more frequently at home, talk about their expectations for college, and how they can prepare while still in middle school. The result is that parents leave empowered with the knowledge and tools they need to play a key role in their children's academic success.

Edinburg School District Recognized (Continued)

CISD Board of Trustees for their dedication, leadership, and vision.

Edinburg CISD was selected to join this elite group of Texas school districts for their innovative district wide approach to college and career readiness standards for their students and parents. Since 2009, Edinburg CISD established a partnership with Engaging Communities for College Readiness (ENCORE), a program developed by Texas Valley Communities Foundation in collaboration with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to ensure that all students in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) graduate from high school fully prepared for college, work, and life. ENCORE has worked with thousands of Edinburg CISD students and their parents in the college and career readiness process.

Valley Students Get College and Career Ready (Continued)

in the Department of Education.

Students, parents, community members and educators alike had the opportunity to ask Congressman Hinojosa and Dr. Barrera questions that spanned issues from access to higher education to charter schools. "I felt it was very important that I meet with some of our students in the District to give them an opportunity to ask me questions about higher education and other important issues facing our nation," said Rep. Hinojosa.

The ENCORE Southwest Educational Convocation's second day, May 7, kicked off with a bang as students quickly got to work programming robots and developing business plans for the day's competitions.

"ENCORE actually made me get into robotics," said Enrique Garcia, a junior at Economedes High School in Edinburg. "It actually taught me about college and how to get there. I want to be an engineer, and this is a good way to start off."

ENCORE Scholars began working on their racing-bots during the ENCORE College Awareness and Mentorship Program (CAMP), which was hosted in middle schools and high schools throughout the academic year. CAMP students participate in hands-on college readiness workshops that help them explore career possibilities in robotics, forensic science and business.

"When I heard about college

readiness, I started going [to ENCORE CAMPs], and it changed my life," Yañez said. "It doesn't really matter if you win or lose. It matters if you have fun and what you learn about college."

While the robotics teams did practice runs through a maze and made final adjustments, participants in the ENCORE entrepreneurship competition were busy designing grandiose inventions like holographic computer screens, practical prototypes like portable electronics chargers, and more.

Simultaneously, parents took part in workshops that covered financial aid, admissions, careers available for college-bound students and the overall importance of parental involvement.

"I think it's important to get kids interested in college early in life [and] for us to start instilling in them the expectation for college," said Derrick Treviño, whose son attends Immaculate Conception School in Rio Grande City. "Exposure to the college environment is important because it puts fears to rest. It's programs like these that help change that attitude."

Developed through a partnership between TVCOF and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, ENCORE has worked to facilitate the growth of a college-going culture in the Rio Grande Valley since its inception in 2008. The non-



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profits organizers hope that the ENCORE Southwest Educational Convocation will put students on a path to higher education, the workforce and life success.

"It is great for all of us at ENCORE to conduct events where all partners participating including corporations, governmental agencies, and college student organizations concentrate in providing the footsteps, inspiration and guidance to all students and their families to become college and career-ready" said Ernesto Villarreal, ENCORE Program Director.

For more information about the ENCORE program, please contact Ernesto Villarreal at encore@tvcof.org or by phone at 956.903.4231.