



10. 16.18

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Region One ESC Receives Multi-Million Dollar Grants to Support Post-Secondary Efforts in Regional Middle Schools and High Schools

\$77 Million Over the Next 11 Years toward Post-Secondary Preparedness

Efforts to create a college-going and career-minded culture and a pervasive movement to ensure that all students are not only admitted into a post-secondary institution, but also graduate with a post-secondary degree have received a nod of approval from the United States Department of Education. The USDE awarded \$11 million per year over the next seven years, in two separate grants to the Region One ESC Office of College, Career, and Life Readiness (OCCLR).

The 2018 GEAR UP Partnership Grant recipients were announced this week by the USDE; of the 55 national grants awarded, Texas was allocated 9 grants. Two of those Texas-awarded grants were given to Region One ESC programs, “*College, Ready, Set!*” funded at \$ 4.54 million and “*College Now-Career Connected!*” receiving \$6.58 million annually for the next seven years. In total, \$77 million, the largest apportion of national GEAR UP funds, was garnered by Region One ESC. While the two grants share similar goals in providing activities and services to encourage post-secondary exploration, preparation, and graduation, the *College Now-Career Connected!* grant was written with Early College High School (ECHS) systems in mind, explains Melissa I. Lopez, Director, Region One Office of College, Career, and Life Readiness. The Rio Grande Valley has the largest number of ECHS in the entire state and therefore, has needs that differentiate them from the traditional public high schools. The *College Now-Career Connected!* Grant services center around access to rigorous coursework, preparation for college-readiness exams, and increased success in dual enrollment coursework.

“We were hoping to receive funding for at least one of our grant applications, but when we received the notification that both of our grants were funded, we were ecstatic!” recounted Lopez. “What this means is that nearly 14-thousand students in our region will have access to tools such as programs that offer career skills that align with in-demand employment sectors, work-based learning, enrichment courses in science/STEM related areas, tutoring and academic counseling, opportunities for internships and apprenticeships, and so many more enriching activities. We are so excited for the students and families who will reap the benefits and the numerous opportunities afforded by these two grants.”

The “College, Ready, Set!” grant will be implemented in 25 middle schools and 17 high schools in 17 school districts including Donna ISD, Jim Hogg County ISD, La Feria ISD, Lasara ISD, La Joya ISD, Los Fresnos CISD, McAllen ISD, Mercedes ISD, Mission CISD, Point Isabel ISD, Rio Grande City CISD, Rio Hondo ISD, Roma ISD, San Benito CISD, Santa Maria ISD, Santa Rosa ISD, and Zapata County ISD.

Region One Education Service Center (www.esc1.net) serves over 433,000 students and educators in seven counties in south Texas including Cameron, Hidalgo, Jim Hogg, Starr, Webb, Willacy and Zapata counties. Region One works to assist school districts in improving student performance, assist districts to operate more efficiently and economically, and implement initiatives assigned by the legislature or the Commissioner of Education.

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The “College Now-Career Connected!” grant will be implemented in 30 middle schools and 18 high schools in 12 school districts including Edcouch-Elsa ISD, Edinburg CISD, Harlingen CISD, Hidalgo ISD, La Villa ISD, Progreso ISD, Laredo ISD, Monte Alto ISD, PSJA ISD, Raymondville ISD, United ISD, and Weslaco ISD. Both grants include partnerships with higher education institutions, community organizations, and private institutions.

“The potential impact of these awards can totally transform our communities!” exclaimed Dr. Cornelio Gonzalez, Region One ESC Executive Director. Our College and Career Readiness Department designed programs for the grant applications that will influence not only our immediate generation of learners, but their siblings and their families; the strategies included in these programs will have a powerful transformational effect on their families and our entire region. Imagine the positive consequences for 14 thousand students to attend a post-secondary program and earn a degree that will make it possible for them to earn a good living for their family, and to be contributing members of our society. When you speak of ‘making a difference,’ this is definitely it!”

School districts and charter schools within the seven-county area served by Region One were invited to be a part of the Region One Office of College, Career, and Life Readiness application. Implementation of programs and services offered by the two grants will begin in October 2018.

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