



[Rio Grande Guardian](#) > [Colonias](#) > Story



Valley Interfaith plans to expand GED en Español program

By Steve Taylor Last Updated: 11 April 2013



Math teacher Victor Gonzalez of McAllen says immigrant students are eager to learn.(Photo: RRG/Steve Taylor)

McALLEN

April 11 - Valley Interfaith is so pleased with its first, limited, foray into GED en Español that it wants to grow the program across the Rio Grande Valley.

Thanks to a pilot project, around 70 immigrants who were eager to improve their education have been taking evening classes in church buildings and in school classrooms since February. They will take their GED exams over the summer months at South Texas College.

“The students we have been working with have been excellent. They are really committed to getting their GED,” said math teacher Victor Gonzalez. “Because it has

been so successful, we want to expand the program across the Valley. We think the demand is there.”

Gonzalez studied to be a teacher and an industrial engineer in Saltillo, Mexico. When he came to the United States at the age of 30 he made Rockport, Illinois his home. There, for ten years, he taught mathematics in primary school and GED en Español to immigrants in the evening.

“The immigrant community in Rockport was tiny while the one we have here in the Valley is massive. That is why it is so surprising that in Illinois they have had a GED in Spanish program for ten years and here we are only in our first year,” Gonzalez said. Gonzalez said he wants to make up for lost time in the Valley. He said when he heard what Valley Interfaith wanted to do he immediately signed on as a volunteer teacher and helped develop the GED course. His course and that of other teachers in the program comprises a class four evenings a week, from 6 to 9 p.m. Wednesday is the one night of the week teachers and students have off.

“Our population is always in need. That is why we are putting so much into this. And the students are responding. They are committed. They are doing really well,” Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez said immigrants in the Valley who have a limited education ought to consider taking their GED because it could come in useful if and when comprehensive immigration reform is passed. “The politics is changing fast in this country. It could be that in order to become a legal resident or a citizen, the immigration bill may require that a resident has to meet certain criteria, including GED and English proficiency,” he said.

Gonzalez paid tribute to the partners that are working with Valley Interfaith. He said they include South Texas College, where the GED examinations will take place, plus the school districts of McAllen, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo, Mission, and La Joya. These school districts have allowed Valley Interfaith to hold their classes on campus, he said. On Wednesday evening, Valley Interfaith held a strategy meeting with some of the students on the pilot project. The idea was to get feedback on the course before the group starts to spread word of the program in churches across the Valley. The meeting was held at Holy Spirit Catholic Church in McAllen. Among the items discussed were potential future collaborations with organizations such as McAllen Economic Development Corporation, the South Texas Manufacturers Association and Workforce Solutions.

“We think we can scale this up, because the demand is there,” Gonzalez said. “We

plan to go to the different churches and give out information on what we are doing. We need to spread the word because this is a good program.”

Gonzalez acknowledged that some employers may be reluctant to give an immigrant a job even if he or she has a GED, if the immigrant cannot also speak English. He said the ability to speak and understand English and have a GED diploma go hand in hand. In the future, he said he would like to see Valley Interfaith hold classes to improve computer skills, again in Spanish. “All of these are important today. These are the basics,” he said.

Asked if he would like to make any other comments on the Valley Interfaith project, Gonzalez said: “I am really excited about the project and I hope I am transmitting this excitement to the students. I think we are doing a very good job. The aim is to get the students to work hard, to do the classwork on time and then to take the exams. My goal is for them to pass with above average scores. I am confident this will happen.”

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