Press Release
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“Social and Health Risk Factor Levels of Preschool Children Living Along the Texas-Mexico Border”

Childhood obesity is a public health concern that disproportionately affects populations living in poverty and minority groups. The prevalence of obesity is high among all children, but Hispanic children experience a disproportionate higher risk. In the 2013-2014 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), the prevalence of obesity among Hispanic and all other US children of age 2 to 5 years were 15.6% and 8.9%, respectively. Childhood obesity carries a heavy burden. Children who are obese in their preschool years are more likely to become obese in adulthood. Furthermore, children who are obese increase the likelihood of developing diabetes, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, asthma, sleep apnea, and other chronic diseases as adults. Food insecurity, like childhood obesity, is common among low income and minority populations. Food insecurity means that at times during the year, household access to adequate food is limited due to lack of income. This condition puts children at risk for academic, emotional, and medical disabilities; and it is costly.

The UTRGV’s South Texas Early Prevention Study-PreK (STEPS-PreK) collected social, economic, and health measures of over 1200 preschool children and their families living along the Texas-Mexico border. This data provided feedback to design and evaluate health interventions.

The mean age of the students was 4.7 years, 95% were Hispanic, and 51% were male. Based on 2019 US Census Bureau’s poverty thresholds, 57 percent of children had parents living in poverty. Near half of the parents reported that either sometimes, most of the time or always they ran out of food before the month was over. [Note: this study was conducted in 2018, before COVID-19.] And half of the students had family members diagnosed with hypertension and diabetes. Of the total servings of fruits and vegetables served in the school cafeteria, children consumed 40 percent of the fruits and 19 percent of the vegetables. The rest, children threw in the trash. Despite these children not having enough food to eat, they still had higher rates of obesity than U.S. children their same age (18.0% vs 11.6%). This condition is considered a paradox because of the low nutrient intake-high body fat.

School districts are doing their share educating children. Parents and community need to do theirs. Parents are role-models, if they practice healthy behaviors; and Community, needs to make available food of high nutrient value and safe spaces for recreational activities.

This study was funded by the U.S. Health and Human Service and it will be published in the Journal of School Health.

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About Social & Health Research Center
The Social & Health Research Center (SAHRC) was incorporated as a non-profit organization with 501(c)(3) status in 1995. The goals of SAHRC are to detect and reduce obesity and its associated chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. The objective is to develop and implement lifestyle health programs to prevent and manage obesity and associated chronic diseases. SAHRC operates the Bienestar pre-k to 8th grade Coordinated School Health Program (CSHP) and the BieneStar Adult Healthy Lifestyle Program. The programs are bilingual, English and Spanish. Large studies published in scientific journals have shown that the Bienestar CHSP have decreased blood glucose and insulin levels; decreased obesity rates; and improved the nutrition and fitness levels of children. The Bienestar CSHP has been adopted by the Texas Education Agency; and has been recognized as Research-Tested by the National Cancer Institute and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

About University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley's (UTRGV) mission is to transform the Rio Grande Valley, the Americas, and the world through an innovative and accessible educational environment that promotes student success, research, creative works, health and well-being. The UTRGV’s College of Health Professions (CHP) is the leading institution of excellence in health and human services, education, health care, research, and community-outreach. The CHP produces highly skilled practitioners, health educators, and researchers using high quality educational programs, meaningful experiential learning opportunities and intellectual inquiry. The CHP’s research, education and community outreach has been a core priority for the University with the mindset of transforming not only the lives of its stakeholders, but of the community at large by raising the quality of life for everyone in the Rio Grande Valley.

About Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District
Every PSJA student is prepared to participate, compete, and excel in a global society to foster multi-generational prosperity. As educational leaders, the PSJA team is engaged and empowered to connect all students with innovative instruction, outstanding facilities, technology, skills, and social-emotional support while prioritizing health and safety for all. As one PSJA family, we build on our legacy of academic excellence, renowned college and career readiness, biliteracy and extracurricular programs, and our multicultural heritage to ensure every student has the experiences and resources necessary to achieve the highest levels of success.

About La Joya Independent School District
La Joya Independent School District is committed to providing Educational Excellence through rigor, relevance, relationships, and personal responsibility. We are the integral part of learning where students become successful and productive contributors to our global society. We embrace, with passion, the commitment to continuous improvement, collaboration and accountability that will allow our students to imprint the world. LJISD is dedicated to the belief that in order for all students to attain mastery of the instructional goals, there must be a district-wide commitment to constant renewal according to the most effective practices and procedures in the most current research findings.