



PROMOTING RESILIENCE WITH THE UNITED WE CAN! PROGRAM

Our population is continuing to grow. What is different from past growth is that over the next 50 years, estimates suggest 88 percent of the United States' population growth will be from immigrants and their offspring.

“This trend presents unique challenges for Oklahoma,” said Ron Cox, Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension family sciences specialist and George Kaiser Family Foundation Endowed Chair in Child and Family Resilience. “It’s important for OSU Cooperative Extension to provide programming targeting Latino youth and their families if we are to adequately prepare Oklahoma’s workforce to meet the challenges of tomorrow.”

Despite 85 percent being U.S. citizens, the children of immigrants grow up in what are often very stressful conditions. This is concerning because an expanding body of research links adverse childhood experiences to academic failure and to physical and mental health problems that may not show up until adulthood. When children are exposed to chronic stress due to things like violence in the home or neighborhood, parental incarceration, continuous discrimination and fear of deportation, they are much more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression and to drop out of school rather than become productive citizens.

“For example, compared to high school graduates in Oklahoma, dropouts have a nine-year reduction in life expectancy, have on average \$83,000 more in lifetime healthcare expenses, are 3.5 times more likely to be incarcerated, 50 percent more likely to become a teen parent (after dropping out), earn on average over \$5,000 less annually and are significantly more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol,” he said. “Estimates suggest if Oklahoma were to increase the graduation rate among males by only 5 percent, the state would save \$63 million in crime-related costs and increase revenues by \$33 million annually.”

In an effort to address these issues and others, OSU Cooperative Extension has developed the ¡Unidos Se Puede! (United We Can!) program. Cox said the Unidos program helps Latino students reduce chronic stress in various ways, including teaching parents how to become more involved in their child’s schooling; providing youth with a success coach to help them learn critical thinking, problem solving and goal setting skills; and promoting positive peer relationships through specially designed activities and outings.

Although the 24-month program is still being refined through a demonstration project funded by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture and the National Institutes of Health, findings from rigorous evaluations performed by Cox and his team are promising. Students show reductions in their levels of stress and are more skillful in solving their problems; they affiliate with more positive peers; and their parents are more engaged in ways that lead to an improvement in their school attendance, grades and overall well-being. According to Cox, Unidos focuses on early adolescents (7th graders) because of research pointing to the difficulty many students have in making the transition from elementary school to middle school and because this is a time of heightened neuroplasticity in the brain.

“Unidos takes advantage of the fact the brain is naturally going through a period of change that makes it more susceptible to outside influences, both good and bad,” he said. “If we can get kids on the right track during the 7th and 8th grades, they will be more likely to successfully navigate the transition to high school.” School records in Oklahoma indicate approximately 50 percent of the dropouts that occur happen before the 10th grade, and these are the same youth who struggled with the transition to middle school. Currently the Unidos program is only being offered to Latino students and their families in Tulsa Public Schools, but plans are underway to take the program to other parts of Oklahoma and to adapt it for other ethnic groups that have traditionally underperformed in Oklahoma schools.

“The goal is for community partners such as industry and the philanthropic community to see the long-term benefits of programs like Unidos and to work alongside OSU Cooperative Extension to invest in the future of Oklahoma,” Cox said.

