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August 3, 1999

Educators applaud White House conference

By GILLIAN SWANSON

The Monitor

EDINBURG - Despite poor attendance and satellite transmission difficulties from Washington, local educators said a televised hookup of the White House Conference on Hispanic Children and Youth was an encouraging sign that Washington finally is putting Latino education initiatives at the forefront of political discussion.

Held at the University of Texas-Pan American and co-hosted locally by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, U.S. Rep. Rubén Hinojosa, D-Mercedes, UTPA, the Rio Grande Valley Empowerment Zone Corporation and Region One Education Service Center, the conference explored the challenges and opportunities for Hispanic children and adolescents and examined the networks of support that can promote their achievement.

The satellite conference addressed strategies to improve educational achievement for Latinos outlined in the presidential report, Our Nation on the Fault Line: Hispanic American Education. The report was used to develop a Hispanic Education Action Plan that provides more than \$520 million in new educational investments for programs for Latino students.

"We are now working to better connect federal efforts with communities, foundations, businesses and elected officials and to activate our collective commitment to improve the lives of all our young people," said Sarita E. Brown, executive director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans. "This has been a very important first step. We still have a lot of work in front of us."

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The satellite connection, originally scheduled to transmit First Lady Hillary Clinton's conference at 8:30 a.m. to the UTPA International Trade Building Executive Room, did not begin transmission until nearly an hour and 15 minutes after the conference started. By that time, almost everyone had left, a representative from Hinojosa's office said.

Hinojosa, who chairs the education committee for the Congressional Hispanic Congress, participated in the conference.

"Seeing the congressman in the front row is indicative that he is truly the education congressman, that through education, our communities will be able to move themselves forward," said Bonnie Gonzalez, chief executive officer of the empowerment zone.

The empowerment zone helps support a broad range of education efforts for youths, ranging from Boy's & Girl's Club activities to English as a Second Language and job training for adult Hispanics.

"What a great strength our diversity is for the future. This converging is truly only a beginning," Mrs. Clinton said. "What we are hoping is that each one of us here will take back the examples of what works and bring it to the community level.

Judith Canales, deputy state director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, said it is her job to convey to colleagues and educators what she learned at Monday's conference.

"I believe the focus today was to re-energize the decision-makers to look at the Hispanic community, and in particular its youth, and recognize we have value and can contribute to this country," she said.