

## After School in a Colonia

### **An after-school program in rural Texas improves student achievement and social awareness while it connects students, their parents, and the community.**

**I**t's 4:00 PM at Geraldine Palmer Elementary School in Pharr, Texas. While children at most schools across the United States are leaving school at this time or are already home, the students at Palmer are engrossed in their after-school activities. In one room, students carefully practice their steps for an upcoming *ballet folklórico* performance for parents. "*Muy bien*," says their instructor, a parent who was recruited for her talents as a trained dancer. Another parent nods in agreement while she sits in the corner carefully stitching the students' costumes.

Down the hall, in a former storage room, students are applying math skills to inventory the canned goods in the school's food pantry. They are preparing for the next day's distribution to neighborhood families in need of food.

In the office, several students huddle around phones that are usually idle at this hour; the students are calling local businesses, soliciting donations for their school uniform drive for needy students. "Hello, my name is Alejandra, and I am a 4th grader at Palmer Elementary. I'm calling to ask for your support in a school project we're doing," says one student, carefully reading from her notes.

These scenes exemplify the programs available at Geraldine Palmer Elementary School and the HEROES Academy, a college-preparatory middle school on the campus of Cesar E. Chavez Elementary School. In January 1999, the two schools received three-year grants from the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program to support a variety of after-hours activities,

including academic tutoring, computer literacy, *ballet folklórico*, arts and crafts, and guitar, as well as service learning. These federal dollars have brought new life to the neighborhood and have improved the chances that these students will overcome their economic disadvantages.

### **Life on the Border**

The rural Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District is located 11 miles from the Mexican border. The population is 95 percent Hispanic and 5 percent Caucasian. In terms of wealth, the district ranks in the bottom 3 percent of Texas school districts—1,015 out of 1,040 districts. Approximately 80 percent of the district's citizens live in *colonias*, impoverished neighborhoods along the border, which often lack such basic



**A student discusses books with her mother on Mother-Daughter Day at the after-school center at Geraldine Palmer Elementary School.**

necessities as running water, sewer services, paved streets, and drainage systems. The median annual family income in these *colonias* is \$9,000, and the unemployment rate hovers between 40 and 50 percent.

For the children of these *colonias*, the lack of resources and opportunities often makes them easy prey for recruitment into gangs and other delinquent behaviors. For this reason, school officials, teachers, parents,

Photos courtesy of Yolanda Castillo



"In this program, I get to help people instead of going home and watching television."

and community members wanted to provide a safe environment for these students after school.

### Community Commitment

Developing quality after-school programs depends on commitment from parents and students. At first, our school staff struggled to involve parents from the *colonias* that surround the two schools. Many parents felt intimidated by their limited level of education, whereas others were unfamiliar with the language or school culture. By obtaining feedback from parents about what they wanted from their children's education and by educating parents about the benefits of extracurricular involvement, we helped parents become stakeholders in the after-school programs.

Inviting parents to volunteer their time also increased their sense of ownership and commitment and created true advocates. Some parents have become parent-tutors, facilitators in group discussions, and participants on the school's decision-making committee. Gaining support from parents takes time, but because the school is open after hours, it seems friendlier and shows parents that the facilities and the staff truly serve the community.

Our after-school programs have addressed the need to educate parents not only to better support their children's education, but also to improve their own linguistic and academic skills. We offer a number of English as a second language (ESL) and General Educational Development (GED) classes during the afternoons and evenings. As a result, more parents feel empowered to play an active role in the day-to-day activities of the school.

Taking steps to involve parents and address their concerns has been essen-



Students in the after-school program participate in such service learning projects as cleaning up the neighborhood and visiting a local nursing home.

tial. Once parents see how well their children are doing and how much they enjoy the after-school activities, parents become partners in the learning process and are the school's biggest supporters. One parent wrote,

Thanks to the after-school programs, my son does not just sit at home in front of the television while I am at work. He has become more confident and responsible. I now brag about him constantly.

Another parent reported that she saw significant progress in her son as a result of the after-school program:

He really didn't like to work on projects that were hands-on and was often impatient with his ability to complete projects. While taking an arts-and-crafts class, he gained more confidence and became more interested in drawing and painting.

Making sure that the after-school programs address the specific needs of the students and parents takes careful planning and an appreciation for the challenges these families face every day. Many parents are migrant farm workers



and are often traveling to Michigan and Minnesota to search for work. During the winter months, when these migrant students are in the Rio Grande Valley, many find a much-needed stable environment in which to thrive by participating in the after-school programs.

Dalila is a 5th grader and a migrant student. Dalila is also blind and takes her state assessment tests in braille. She achieves remarkable results, however, despite obstacles. When she participated in an after-school musical keyboarding class, she discovered a newfound talent and a sense of self-fulfillment, confidence, and self-esteem. Her self-assurance leaves little room for doubts. Says her mother,

I attribute Dalila's success to all the support and the services that she has received both during the school day and in the after-school programs.



## Service Learning

A key component of our after-school programming is service learning, which provides students an opportunity to give back to their community while inspiring a sense of caring and compassion. When students brainstormed ideas for community projects, they found that many of their fellow students needed food and clothing. Many students did not have enough money to purchase school uniforms, so students organized a clothing drive. They contacted local businesses by telephone and solicited donations for uniforms. After each donation, students promptly wrote thank-you letters. To complete the project, students practiced math, communication, decision-making, and problem-solving skills as they interacted with community members and documented their progress on computers.

Tammy, a 10-year-old, remarked, "In this program, I get to help people instead of going home and watching television." The program helped children see how school relates to real-life problems and raised their awareness of the needs of their fellow students and neighbors. A parent of a participating student said,

The enrichment program has helped my daughter understand that there are people less fortunate and that we should not look down on them. I had been trying to find a way to explain this to her, and the clothing drive helped.

At the HEROES Academy, a local artist conducted a series of lessons with the students on the history and culture of migrant farm workers, including the story of Cesar Chavez, the leader of the United Farm Workers. For the culminating project, the artist helped students design a mural showcasing the history of the farm workers in the community. To celebrate the unveiling, teachers and staff organized a community celebration to coincide with the state holiday in honor of Chavez. More than 200 parents and community

Students perform their *ballet folklórico* for the community.



members gathered in front of the mural. During the dedication, the students, not the adults and administrators, gave speeches and rousing readings.

The effect was palpable. For three weeks, Maria Sanchez's son came home from school with paint on his shirt and pants. "I didn't know what he was doing," she said. "But then he said he was working on a mural to honor Cesar Chavez, and I said OK." When she finally saw the mural, she smiled broadly. "It makes me so proud," the former migrant worker said.

## Connecting with the School Day

Our program also supports and promotes the instructional goals of the regular school day. Many teachers at the two schools were eager to work on the after-school activities, and most found that the added time with their students helped them learn more about their students' lives. Free from the structured school day, teachers found more flexibility with their lesson planning. As Mary Alice Navarro-Garza, a teacher in the after-school program, said,

One of the greatest things is the freedom to use my creativity, knowledge, and strengths in designing efficient and challenging projects with the students. We encourage and

empower students to believe in their dreams. Having ownership of our projects is what makes this fun.

Another teacher added,

Learning in the after-school programs goes on in a self-exploratory way. It's funny, but after school I feel like a mother nurturing the children. The approach is one of listening, understanding, and interacting with students in a natural and meaningful way. The pressure and anxiety of the day's teaching turns into a new level of energy, one that is completely uplifting not only for me, but also for my students.

## Evaluation

We conducted student and parent satisfaction surveys to obtain feedback.

Salvador Flores, the principal at Geraldine Palmer Elementary, explained,

We were constantly asking ourselves, Are our after-school programs meeting the needs of our students and their parents, and if not, how can we redirect and make adjustments to better meet our community's needs?

One example of these adjustments came after a parent survey revealed a disappointment with some of the academic components of the program. Parents felt the after-school tutoring merely repeated the regular school curriculum. Drill-and-kill methods of test



preparation decreased the motivation of students to attend the after-school programs, and as a result, attendance fell. In response, our coordinators worked with after-school instructors to include more creative and fresh lessons in the after-school components.

We constantly monitored the academic progress of participating students to provide insight into the effectiveness of the program. Throughout the year, we analyzed benchmark tests from the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), attendance rosters, and teacher reports to see how individual students were doing.

The HEROES Academy has shown tremendous progress in the academic achievement of the students who are involved in the after-school programs. The TAAS, administered in April 2000, showed a 28 percent gain for students

in both reading and math. The percentage of students who passed reading after one year in the program jumped from 44 percent in 1999 to 72 percent in 2000. The percentage of students who passed math was equally impressive: from 65 percent in 1999 to 93 percent in 2000. These data are all the more significant considering that the majority of the students had been labeled at-risk by state standards, and many of them have limited proficiency in English.

### Academic and Social Benefits

All these achievements show that schools that engage students and parents in after-school programs benefit not only the participants but also the entire community. As public schools are called on more and more to meet the needs of the communities they serve,

after-school programs are an important strategy. Providing students with opportunities to improve their academic skills while exploring their interests and newfound abilities helps them, their teachers, and their parents build closer relationships. Connecting the campus with the community ensures that these all-too-often separate entities come together to address a common goal and to share in the responsibilities and successes. ■

**Yolanda Castillo** is coordinator for the 21st Century Community Learning Center at Geraldine Palmer Elementary, 703 E. Sam Houston, Pharr, TX 78577. **Martin Winchester** is coordinator for the 21st Century Community Learning Center at the HEROES Academy, Cesar E. Chavez Elementary, 401 E. Thomas Rd., Pharr, TX 78577; [winchestermartin@aol.com](mailto:winchestermartin@aol.com).

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