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After-school program in Lake Elsinore a big draw

By MICHELLE L. KLAMPE

At Terra Cotta Middle School in Lake Elsinore, children are so eager to stay after school and do their homework, there's a waiting list.

It's a waiting list for an after-school program at the southwestern Riverside County school.

"You get to hang out with friends. You can also do your homework and talk with the teachers," said Abraham Zarate, a 14-year-old eighth-grader, about THINK Together.



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Alessandra Salazar, 13, left, and Brianna Turner, 13, participate in the "THINK Together" program at Terra Cotta Middle School in Lake Elsinore on Tuesday. The program offers a place to get help with homework and take academic enrichment activities such as cooking classes or robotics.

The program is free and can serve about 100 youths daily, said site coordinator Minerva Huerta. Students have to attend the four-hour program at least three days a week to keep their spots.

THINK Together is paid for through a grant from the California Department of Education's After School Education and Safety program. It offers a place to get help with homework and take academic

enrichment activities such as cooking classes, robotics, or the "news crew" that does the program newsletter.

The Lake Elsinore Unified School District has grants for after-school programs at 11 of its elementary and middle schools, including Terra Cotta. The district has contracted with several organizations to operate the programs in the past, but this year Lake Elsinore is using THINK Together exclusively.

Run by an Orange County nonprofit group, also named THINK Together, the agency serves more than 35,000 students at more than 200 schools and community centers in Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino and Riverside counties.



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Bailey Hyland, 12, does her homework as part of the THINK Together program at Terra Cotta Middle School. The program is free and can serve about 100 kids each day, said site coordinator Minerva Huerta. Students have to attend the four-hour program at least three days a week to keep their spots.

Marybeth Slane, director of elementary curriculum and instruction in Lake Elsinore, said the program has been a good fit.

"What I'm seeing is it's helping kids academically," said Slane. "They're really focusing on academic enrichment. They're willing to work with school staff on aligning their curriculum to the school's."

Huerta, the site coordinator at Terra Cotta, said, "I've had kids who come to school just for THINK Together. I've had kids who were not going to school, getting Ds or Fs, and seen a 360-degree turnaround. The majority of the kids are here because they want to be here."



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Ashely Post helps Christian Johnson, 11, with his homework. "You get to hang out with friends. You can also do your homework and talk with the teachers," says Abraham Zarate, a 14-year-old eighth-grader, about THINK Together.

When school gets out at 2 p.m. each afternoon, the program starts with music and games such as musical chairs and students compete for small prizes such as candy.

They spend at least an hour on homework each day, with help available from classmates or program leaders. There's also time for enrichment classes, physical activity such as volleyball or track, and even some time to talk in small groups about things going on at home or at school.

Bertha Elizalde, 12, is a sixth-grader and began attending THINK Together this year. Her favorite activities include the physical activity program, called CATCH, and the cooking class, where she made fruit kabobs and milkshakes.

"It's really fun," she said.

Zarate, the eighth-grader, is now a junior site coordinator, leading his classmates by example and helping Huerta and the staff. He said he changed a lot after he started attending the program.

"My grades are up all the time," he said. "Now my parents are proud of me."