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## Parents get schooled in reading to kids

By Teryl Zarnow



In this season of graduations, ceremonies at five Santa Ana elementary schools call attention to themselves like the child with all the right answers.

Certainly, the 3 and 4-year-olds are adorable in caps and gowns, totally puffed with pride. But while most graduations mark a milestone already achieved, these represent a promise.

The kids were graduating from Raising A Reader, a new initiative funded by the Orange County Children & Families Commission.

"The ceremony sets a precedent," explains Nadia Flores, who helps coordinate the program. "It says you will be watching your children in cap and gown through their high school, and then their college graduations."

These graduations aim to harness the power of parents who dream of a better life for their children.

For six months, 500 parents and their children came to school for three hours a week. The kids learned in one classroom and their parents in another. That's a lot of hours.

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If you think wanting success for your child only comes with a two-car garage and a mortgage, think again. This program is filled with parents working hard just to make the rent – yet they understand that education is their kids' golden ticket.

Rocio Alarcón understands that promise.

Her son Maricio starts kindergarten in the fall, and Rocio wants to give him a better start than his 9-year-old brother who began school already behind.

Raising A Reader prepares children for kindergarten and teaches parents to help them. It includes parent education classes in collaboration with Healthy Tomorrows from the County of Orange.

The program offers a running start for families that cannot afford preschool.

Studies show that children in welfare families have vocabularies of about 525 words by age 3. Children of professional parents have vocabularies of about 1,000 words. By first grade, that ratio persists.

Reading is vaccination against failure. The more you read, the better you do in school.

Rocio already sees improvement. Maricio is more confident in the group, and he loved the books in a bag each family took home from class each week.

"He looks at the words and pictures," she says. "Now he asks me to read to him."

Rocio and her husband have started saving for their four children to go to college. She believes this graduation will be the first of many.

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Early is better than late. Nadia Flores, 29, missed out on prevention, so she had to settle for intervention.

She grew up on Westside Costa Mesa, near Shalimar Street, when gang violence was common. Neighborhood mothers wanted better for their children, and, in 1994, they worked with churches and community organizations to open the Shalimar Learning Center.

They expected maybe 30 students at first, but 100 showed up.

Nadia, finishing eighth grade at the time, was one of them. Thanks to the support of volunteer tutors and mentors, she graduated high school and, later, from UC Santa Barbara.

What would have happened otherwise?

Nadia says everyone asks.

"At the time, I was failing math and didn't care. I had no goal... You have the perspective of live for the moment. You don't see the impact of what you do now upon what will happen later – unless someone makes those connections for you."

Today Shalimar is a nonprofit organization: THINK (teaching, helping, inspiring, nurturing kids) Together. Nadia is its outreach manager.

With programs like Raising A Reader, she preaches the gospel of prevention.

"It's a lot easier than waiting until a child is in the fifth grade and can't read."

After school at Pio Pico Elementary in Santa Ana is like New York City after hours. It doesn't sleep.

"School just doesn't stop," says Principal Robert Anguiano. "This is a hub of the community."

Programs at Pio Pico run after school, on weekends, and during vacations. Athletic facilities become the neighborhood park. A preschool program serves 56 children and has a waiting list.

It's part of a district strategy to leverage the asset of neighborhood schools.

THINK Together serves about 200 children per day at this one site through several programs. Raising A Reader is one, but there are others year-round, to help with schoolwork and enrichment.

"The support we receive is immeasurable," says Anguiano, careful to credit parents and faculty as well.

Regardless of credit, improvement is undeniable. Pio Pico was named a "program improvement" school in 2003 for failing to reach minimum federal testing goals.

By 2009, it improved sufficiently to ditch that label.

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Downstairs after school at Pio Pico, children in Raising A Reader learn their numbers and colors. Upstairs, parents learn about reading and parenting skills. It's not fancy stuff.

"Just the concept that a child can learn if you talk to them," Nadia says. "That's huge."

Alejandra Carbajal likes being at school with her daughter, April.

"Now April tells me to turn off the television and read to her."

Parents were surveyed before and after the program. The time they spent looking at books with their children increased 20 percent. The number of times children asked their parents to look at books together increased 38 percent.

The subject is reading, but the fundamental lesson is how much a parent can influence a child's success.

"I want the best for her," Yasmin Lopez explains about her daughter, Natally. "She asks a lot of questions. She learns bigger words and they stick in her head. She tells me what she learns, and I learn to teach her more."

This program is fueled by the desire of parents to improve life for their children.

Yasmin attended Pio Pico herself and later earned an associate degree. She wants Natally to go to four-year college.

In one class exercise, parents looked in a mirror to study their parents, themselves and their children: Who do they reflect? What worked, and what do they not want to continue?

Clearly these parents want to see a better future.

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