

TUTORS TO THE RESCUE

Children's Empowerment, Inc. aids struggling Daly City Students

Parents: Kids teaching kids works well

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Marisol Marchany knows she's in big trouble. If she doesn't get her act together, she's going to flunk the sixth grade.

A few weeks ago, her parents ordered her into the new homework center at T.R. Pollicita Middle School, and the chatty "boy crazy" 12-year-old with the dimples knows this is her best chance to squeak by.

"I'm pretty much glad to be here," she said. "When I'm home, I don't do nothing. When I'm in class, I talk or daydream."

Will Marisol pass?

Spencer Holeman, who started the homework center this year through his nonprofit, hopes so.

The Executive Director of Children's Empowerment Inc., Holeman started the organization in 1999 with seed money from the sale of his business in 1994.

His goal: to help disadvantaged kids in Daly City succeed and go on to college.

Holeman, who marches around the corridors in dress shoes and slacks from his days in business, is a numbers man.

It's numbers that led him to Pollicita, the worst-performing middle school in the district.

Preparing for high school

Originally, when he started CEI in 1999, Holeman wanted to focus only on kids at Jefferson High School, a school a few blocks from Pollicita that the state has labeled "underperforming," though it has made progress in the last few years in its test scores.

Holeman started a program there to help at-risk sophomores and a drop-in homework center that serves over 100 students, which the district has praised.

But Jefferson's test-score numbers bothered him: the average incoming Jefferson freshman reads at a sixth-grade level.

Holeman soon realized to help the kids at Jefferson, he needed to help kids at Pollicita. Seventy percent of the high school's freshmen come from Pollicita, though the schools are in different districts.

"We have to reach them before they hit high school," he said. "We want to work with the feeder schools."

The homework center at Pollicita is an attempt to do just that.

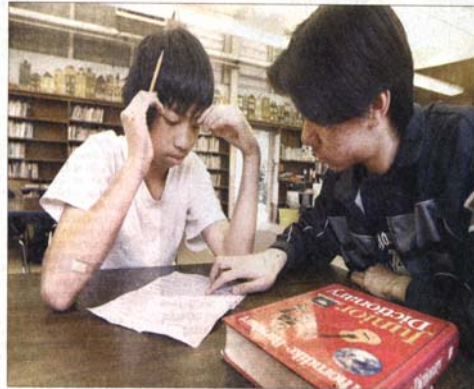
Kids teaching kids

For two hours after school from Monday through Thursday, Marisol joins about 50 other students at the center who have signed a contract pledging to attend the center.

"The kids are referred by teachers or were in our summer school last year," said vice principal Brent Marquez-Valenti. "Many of our parents work multiple jobs or are single parents. We have a lot of latchkey kids, and our students need additional support."

The center works well because it's kids teaching kids, parents say.

The tutors are Advanced Placement and honors students at Jefferson who are paid \$10 an hour by Holeman's nonprofit.



TUTOR JASON THANG, 16 (right), helps Ho Pan Chan, 13, with his English homework at T. R. Pollicita Middle School in Daly City. The homework center is run by former businessman Spencer Holeman.

Mary Marasigan said her daughter Megan, who was getting a D in her seventh-grade math class when she started at the center, "responds well to the tutors because they're high school students."

The older and younger students often grew up on the same blocks, dress the same and like the same music, so the tutors act as role models, said Holeman.

"These may be the only positive young people these kids have in their lives," he said. "Daly City has 117,000 people and 40 gangs."

Latika Solanki, a senior at Jefferson who takes AP Calculus and English, said she's struck by the low self-esteem of the kids she tutors.

"Some of these kids have given up on themselves," she said. "Their attitude is that they don't care. They're not getting support, and they don't have the confidence to reach their potential. The point of this program is to show them that they can do it."

On a recent afternoon, she worked with Carlos Garcia, a 15-year-old eighth-grader, who moved here from Honduras with no English only two years ago. He said he's still not confident about English and questions if he can handle the work at Jefferson next year.

"If you do your work, you'll be fine," Solanki tells him in a motherly tone. "If you have questions, just ask your teacher."

Looking ahead

Holeman hopes to eventually work with kids at the feeder schools to Pollicita: Susan B. Anthony and John F. Kennedy elementary schools, which together provide 90 percent of the middle school's students.

But expanding the programs depends on funding.

He started the nonprofit with his own money, though it's now funded through grants from private foundations. CIE's budget is \$137,000 this year to cover salaries for tutors, field trips, snacks and office costs.

Holeman, 65, estimates he puts in 80 hours a week, though he pulls no salary. Administrators in the district respect his dedication.

"He's not just brought capital and currency," said Jefferson Principal Murray Schneider. "He's put a lot of himself into it."

Pollicita Principal Jay Spaulding said he hopes the funding allows the homework center to stay next year and continue its work.

Parents hopes so, too.

Marisol's mother, Kathy Javier, said the club will hopefully "set the basic studying habits for her."

"We're willing to try anything that will help her," she said.

Marisol has ambition. She wants to go to college eventually, but today she's worried about repeating the sixth grade.

"Right now there's a chance I might be left back, and it'll just make me feel hella stupid," she said. "My mom tells me how serious this is. I realize now it's serious."



HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT Latika Solanki (right) tutors Angelo Infrante in math during an after-school program at T.R. Pollicita Middle School in Daly City. The district, which closed two elementary schools last year, is facing the possibility of more cuts.