

Family outreach pays off for Mounds View district's Latinos

Program for growing minority helps parents help their kids
BY ELIZABETH MOHR
Pioneer Press
Article Last Updated: 12/09/2007 11:38:13 PM CST

Nico Cardena, 3, waits with his father, Armando Cardena, before the start of an event for Latino families in the Mounds View school district Friday at Pike Lake Education Center in New Brighton. (BEN GARVIN, Pioneer Press)



Nico Cardena, 3, waits with his father, Armando Cardena, before the start of an event for Latino families in the Mounds View school district Friday at Pike Lake Education Center in New Brighton. (BEN GARVIN, Pioneer Press)

Once shy and isolated, now confident and more sociable, Maria Isabel Carrillo says she couldn't have come out of her shell without the help of Mounds View Public Schools.

But she's not a student, she's a parent.

She came to Minnesota from Mexico and, as a single mother, was scared and insecure.

The Mounds View school district offered resources and help through a parent outreach program, which that has made all the difference, she said.

"This has helped me move ahead with my life, move forward," Carrillo said through a Spanish interpreter, adding, "Everything is so much more positive (now)."

The program focuses on Latino families because they make up the second-largest minority group in the district behind African Americans, and the numbers are growing, according to program director Ruth Tharaldson, who was hired about five years ago. Latinos made up 2.6 percent of the students in the district five years ago; this year, the number is about 4 percent.

The Mounds View district is not unique.

While statewide public school enrollment numbers have decreased by about 3 percent since 2001, Latino enrollment has increased by more than 38 percent, according to a study by the Center for Rural Policy and Development, a St. Peter-based research group.

There have always been high numbers of Latino immigrants in bigger cities, but recent increases are occurring in rural and suburban areas, said Rogelio Munoz, executive director of the Chicano Latino Affairs Council of Minnesota.

"Investment into their education, health care and environment is crucial to their adjustment," Munoz said.

The Mounds View district parent outreach program is an effort to address those issues.

"We're just trying to make connections between school and home," Tharaldson, a school-home liaison and an English-as-a-second-language teacher, said.

The school-home liaisons and Spanish interpreters are the program's core. They provide parents with "the nuts and bolts" needed to adjust to their new lives in a new cultural atmosphere, Tharaldson said. Such services include job-hunting contacts, English classes, interpreters, adopt-a-family programs, health care and insurance resources. They also organize Latino Family Night events, where Spanish-speaking families in the district can connect with each other, tap available resources and discuss important issues.

"(They come to me) with anything that's a basic need. Abuse, problems with the school - they call me," Fabiana Valentinuzzi said. "Now that I have an office, I'm overwhelmed."

Valentinuzzi and Tharaldson are the district's school-home liaisons, and there are just a handful of Spanish interpreters, who have taken on more duties to help ease the liaisons' load. Learning the language is key, but it's important for families to keep sight of their heritage, Valentinuzzi said.

This process isn't easy, says Antonio Mendez, who immigrated to the United States about 20 years ago. He said it was difficult for him to change his cultural perspective and adapt. But his son, a sophomore at Irondale High School, is well adjusted because of it.

"There is less pressure to say, 'You have to fit in. You have to be integrated,' " Mendez said. "That becomes a problem with the kids of the immigrants. In a lot of cases, (the parents) don't see that. They don't see that they have to integrate in order to help their kids."

But the problem isn't just that parents have been slow to adapt, Mendez said. There is also a lack of understanding of Latino cultures by school staff and other students. The kids "are not understood at school," he said.

Tharaldson and Valentinuzzi continue to target Latino parents, while individual schools have established diversity training, resources and student-led committees.

The combined efforts have proved effective.

Maria Rios, a Mexican immigrant with three kids in the district, said the Mounds View program helped her, which, in turn, strengthened her relationship with her children.

"I feel much more strong and confident. And I understand where (my kids') education is going," Rios said through a Spanish interpreter. "It has allowed us to learn to support our children (emotionally) and to understand them."
Elizabeth Mohr can be reached at emohr@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5162.

http://www.twincities.com/localnews/ci_7679224?nlick_check=1 (1 of 2)12/10/2007 8:42:42 AM

[Home](#) [News](#) [Local](#) [Sports](#) [Business](#) [Entertainment](#) [Life & Culture](#) [Travel](#) [Help](#)