"Madrinas and Padrinos" Approach Helps a Chicago School Build Family and Community

Written by William Schmitt on Friday, 27 January 2012.

A PADRINO & A PRINCIPAL SEE "CATHOLIC SCHOOL ADVANTAGE" IDEA BEARING FRUIT



At St. Benedict's Catholic School, in Blue Island, Ill., near Chicago, principal Susan Rys (pronounced Rise) and parents at the school are articulating a growing connection to their community. One of the parents, Roberto Reyes, reflects how the school has found its voice to call others into cooperation—and how that voice has acquired a Latino accent—with assistance from the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE).

Roberto is one of the school's "padrinos," part of a team of padrinos y madrinas (godfathers and godmothers) who help the school extend an invitation to local families. This team, inclined and trained to offer mentoring services and authentic hospitality while also recruiting children for the school, has come about as the result of training in ACE's Catholic School Advantage campaign.

"The best resource we have is the human resource," says Roberto, explaining that good relationships among the people in the area—many of whom are immigrants—are the best way to get the school's messages across. The Catholic School Advantage campaign, in which St. Benedict's is one of ACE's many partners in the Archdiocese of Chicago, helps schools become more accessible to Latino culture even as they convey the strengths they offer to

local children in need of educational alternatives.

Rys says a number of Latino parents with kids already at St. Benedict's responded enthusiastically when the school embraced the campaign. "It's wonderful to have the group on board," she says. "This group wants to give back and be part of building the community."

The parents assisted with fundraising drives to support scholarships for lower-income students. Increasingly, tamales were on offer at parish events alongside spaghetti, and Christmas events included the pastorela Mexicana – a traditional play about shepherds visiting Baby Jesus, recalls Reyes, whose own heritage is Mexican. He is the father of a fifth grader and a sixth grader at St. Benedict's.

Through the school's "parent ambassadors," Latino parents were invited to play a part in supporting the school, and they often accepted the opportunity to be more involved in their parish and neighborhood, Reyes says. People are realizing the benefits of being connected to the community.

"It is a good place where you can get to meet people of different kinds, not only ethnically but professionally—from construction workers to bankers and lawyers," he says.

Now, about ten of the ambassadors have taken on the Catholic School Advantage idea of being madrinas and padrinos. They reach out to people—often Latinos, but also members of the Anglo and African-American communities, Reyes says—who might be involved in the parish in one way or the other but who do not currently send their children to St. Benedict's School.

"We tell them, 'If you want to see your kid grow up in a better environment and be a better person, doing something better for the community,'" a good education at St. Benedict's can make students more likely to graduate high school and get into college.

This recruitment is not necessarily easy. "There is one big issue," Reyes acknowledges. "They all wonder, first thing, about how to pay for the school" given today's difficult economy and job uncertainties. These ambassadors explain

that "the school works hard to make this school affordable," and they urge the parents to talk to the principal about their particular circumstances.

Importantly, the "godparent" relationship does not end once a child is successfully recruited into the school. Rys says she asks the madrinas and padrinos to stay with the newly enrolled families in a mentoring relationship for a year, helping them address challenges and questions that arise.

A network of enduring ties in which people learn about each other's cultures and lives is being expanded at St.

Benedict's. "People understand that the parish thinks about them," says Reyes, who works for the parish as

maintenance person for the school. "We are creating a big relationship with the town that everybody benefits from."

He points out that the additional student enrollments boost the school's financial stability. Rys adds that the children benefit in a variety of ways: "Our students learn to be self-disciplined and to be of service to others. They are nurtured to reach their potential, both academically and spiritually." That, in turn, boosts further enrollments, she says. "The students do very well. That's a message the parents need to hear."

The virtuous cycle of connection-making is expanding in yet another way. Not only are the madrinas and padrinos, who are all bilingual, reaching out to non-Latinos as well as Latinos; but also St. Benedict's is reaching out beyond its parish boundaries because several parishes in their section of Chicagoland have had to close their schools in the past ten years. "We're going beyond our parish and using this (madrina y padrino) approach to others," says Rys. Already, students come from towns many miles away.

"Diversity's always been a gift here," she says of St. Benedict's and Blue Island. With help from madrinas and padrinos like Reyes, the diversity embraced through the Catholic School Advantage campaign can be a gift that brings a growing harvest of benefits to students, parents, and communities.

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Photo above: Roberto Reyes stands among the "madrinas" who join him in constituting the Parent Ambassadors who assist principal Susan Rys in hospitality and communication with Latino families and others at St. Benedict's.