

University Bound

Grade-schoolers encouraged to think about college

10:00 PM PDT on Friday, October 6, 2006

By **ROBERT P. MAYER**
The Press-Enterprise

RIVERSIDE - Antonio Vasquez proudly sported his Penn State T-shirt, waved his blue-and-white pompoms, and repeatedly screamed "Go mighty Lions" along with his fourth-grade classmates at Collett Elementary School.

College is still several years away for this 10-year-old, but Antonio's enthusiasm at Friday's kickoff for Collett Elementary School's No Excuses University program matched his determination to possess a college diploma someday.

"I can have a good life and have a good education, and grow up, and I'll be fine when I'm older," Antonio said.

No Excuses University is designed to set elementary students -- particularly those from low-income homes -- on a path toward college, through visits from college officials and visual reminders of college throughout the campus, from the pennants on the doors to renaming a hallway "College Lane."

Friday's event was akin to a multicollege pep rally as the students assembled on the field. Each class was decked out in the colors and regalia of a different college or university, all screaming cheers representing their chosen school.

A college degree is the key to a successful, fulfilled and happy life, said La Sierra University President Lawrence Geraty, who spoke at the event.

"In the United States, everyone, and that includes everyone sitting here today, can go to college," Geraty said. "It will prepare you for anything you want to do in life."

Each classroom at the Riverside elementary school has "adopted" a university. Teachers are encouraged to share their college experiences as well as to remind students of their long-term academic goals. Each Monday, students will wear T-shirts emblazoned with "No Excuses University class of 2020" or some variation on the student's projected graduation year from college.

"I have had more kids talk about college and ask about college than ever before," said Julie Munyer, a fourth- and fifth-grade language-arts teacher, who wore a homemade T-shirt of her alma mater, Brigham Young University. "I had a little girl come to me yesterday and ask how long it takes to be a doctor. I've never had that."

In between speeches, classes marched past rows of other classes, each carrying a banner of their adopted university and waving pompoms of the school's colors while the music of college marching bands filled the air.

"This is amazing. Some of these children have never even imagined that college is possible," said parent Julie Moreno, whose daughter is in fifth grade. "And that we're starting it at a young age, kindergarten level, they will know that the sky is the limit."

Collett modeled its program on one created last year at Poway's Los Penasquitos Elementary School.

"We found at the high schools, there's a lot of talk about college readiness, but we didn't see that at all at the elementary level," said Jeff King, principal of Los Penasquitos Elementary, who was at the Collett event.

Now, nearly every interaction and conversation at the school in some way connects to the No Excuses University and to college preparation, he said.

"You talk about college every day, you plant in their mind, you make it part of their subconscious and demand academic excellence," he said. "Everything focuses on this dream that every student will be qualified to attend college if he or she chooses to do so."

Collett is the first school to adopt Poway school's program, and four more elementary schools around the country are in the application process, he said. There is no cost for the program.

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Collett Elementary third-grader Janvi Gonzalez and classmates wear graduation caps emblazoned with the year they would theoretically finish college as part of the No Excuses University program, in which each class has adopted a university.