



Hemet-San Jacinto

Program promotes college readiness in youngest students

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The Press-Enterprise

Six-year-old Diamond Pearce dreams of going to college to become a doctor, and No Excuses University could help her achieve her goal.

Winchester Elementary School's No Excuses University is a schoolwide approach to promoting college readiness. Winchester is one of four schools in the nation that pledge to create an environment with no limits to the academic success of every student.

Collett Elementary School in Riverside also participates in the program.

To help prepare students for college and increase their likelihood of attending after high school, some educators are pushing higher education as young as kindergarten.

Inland Area Lags Behind

About 28 percent of Inland-area high school graduates meet requirements to enter public four-year colleges, and college-going rates among high school graduates are low.

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Frank Bellino / The Press-Enterprise
Syracuse University, the college being studied by teacher Madoe Powell's second-graders, colors the class with its signature orange.

The figures are in a study called "State of Decline? Gaps in College Access and Achievement Call for Renewed Commitment to Educating Californians." The nonprofit Campaign for College Opportunity and Cal State Sacramento's Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy released the study in October.

The study showed that the Inland area trails the state by 15 percent with 37 percent of students entering college directly after high school. Thirty-nine percent of California students ages 18 to 24 attend college.

Rafael Heller, senior policy associate with the Alliance for Excellent Education, said the low numbers aren't surprising since most of the nation does a poor job of preparing students. Thirty-four percent of students nationally are college ready. The policy, research and advocacy organization measures college readiness by high school literacy skills and completion of high school courses required for college admission.

More Than Advice, Skills

Speaking of elementary and middle school college preparatory, Heller said it's not enough to advise and give academic support. He said schools need to

also connect students to school at early ages.

"It's almost like high school preparation," he said. "You have to start engaging them earlier on and look at who is disengaging."

No Excuses University was started last year by Damen Lopez, an elementary school principal in San Diego. The idea is to create a culture and climate of success and high goals. Schools must apply to become a No Excuses University.

Adopt a College

At Winchester, college banners from UCLA to Syracuse University in New York hang outside each of the school's 31 classrooms.

Each class must have a bulletin board of the college it adopted up by end of year. Every day the topic is injected in classroom conversations.

Similarities between college students and Winchester children, such as using backpacks, are discussed in one class. In another, pupils are asked where they think an astronaut has been. Instead of saying the moon, the children yell out, "college!"

Teacher Erin Wible asks his students what they want to do when they get older and applies daily lessons to reaching that goal.

"That might change. They're only 7, but we're getting them to start thinking and talking about the choices now," Wible said.

In time, he said, students will connect activities such as learning how to read a book with preparation for the future.

There are more than 670 pupils at Winchester. The school has large transient, low-income and minority populations, according to school figures. Assistant Principal Keith Moore said many of the students will be the first in their families to go to college. Out of five students, half or less have parents with a college education, said Principal Marc Horton.

Many pupils' experience is limited to the San Jacinto Valley, said Madoc Powell, whose second-grade class is learning about Syracuse University.

To help expand their minds, some classes have guest speakers from the college. Others have gone online to take virtual tours of the campuses.

Each month, third- through fifth-graders focus on one of the A-G requirements, which are the criteria for attending a public four-year university in California. It is also a general guideline for other universities. February's focus is two years of a foreign language. Horton said the possibilities for the program are endless.

Inspiration Starts Early

Although the data is yet to come, educators are confident this kind of program will make a difference.

Winchester teacher Melina Serna said that she was inspired in second grade by a high school mentor who talked about college nonstop.

The UCLA graduate said the experience got her to think about college, and once college financial aid experts were brought in, she said her plans became concrete.

"It's never too early to instill something that will keep them off the streets, give them structure and eventually lead to a better life," said Shatara Pearce, Diamond's mother.

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College Ready

Number of high school graduates in the Inland area who complete A-G requirements, which are needed to enter a California public four-year university:

About 28 percent

Number of students in the Inland area who enroll in college directly after high school:

37 percent

Source: California Department of Education
