

PA Kids Foundation offering students and educators more support, cause for hope

By Joan Garvin and Susan Glaze

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*Martin Escobosa teaches Spanish classes at the East Palo Alto Charter School, one of the beneficiaries of the East Palo Alto Kids Foundation.*

Martin Escobosa teaches Spanish classes at the East Palo Alto Charter School, one of the beneficiaries of the East Palo Alto Kids Foundation. An educational marvel is tucked away near the Baylands. Its official title, East Palo Alto Charter School, gives no hint of the wonders taking place there. But the enthusiastic principal, Kristyn Klei, states confidently that all her children will go to college.

The 7-year-old K-8 school is not a remedial program for have-nots, a catch-up plan for the marginalized or a specialized program for children from non-English-speaking homes. It is a positive commitment - a pact among parents, students and teachers. Its 393 students are selected by lottery.

Classrooms are identified by college banners, not by numbers, and students identify with their college - interschool competitions are between "Northwestern" and "Cal" rather than between Room 15 and Room 17. Klei said that this system helps introduce students, many of whom will be the first in their family to receive higher education, to the idea of attending college.

Manicured lawns and bright murals on the graffiti-free walls of the quads contribute to a campus the students can be proud of. Classrooms are neat, quiet and decorated with the students' work.

Although all core subjects are in English, Spanish is taught at two levels - for students whose first language is English and for those who already speak Spanish.

Klei credits the East Palo Alto Kids (EPAK) Foundation grants for allowing the school to expand opportunities beyond the strong basic core curriculum.

This year EPAK enabled the kindergarten to buy library books, gave the Spanish classes materials for authentic costumes for their Latin Dance Club performances and allowed the fourth grade to take an overnight field trip to Sutter's Fort.

EPAK's Family Participation Grants recognize the school's commitment to its belief that "the best way to educate a child is partnership with parents."

One family project was a trip to Stanford University. While the students toured the stacks in Green Library, Spanish-speaking undergraduates spoke with the parents about the value of education, the opportunities for Latinos (72 percent of the charter school's students are Latino) and the need for families to advocate for their children.

EPAK grants motivate the teachers as well as the students, said Castañeda, who has taught in the Ravenswood District.

Other school districts take these advantages for granted, Klei said, but EPA Charter has no built-in resources for these activities. EPAK provides the cushion for the extra programs essential to excellence.

For anyone wary of non-profits with excessive administrative costs, EPAK fulfills the Town Crier criteria perfectly. According to Castañeda, 99.5 percent of cash donations go straight to the children. All EPAK board members are volunteers and donate both their time and money.

The impact on one of its beneficiaries is easy to document in the environment and rising API scores found at East Palo Alto Charter School.