

**OPENING THE GATES:**  
**Learning Supports**  
**at**  
**Elizabeth Learning Center**

The Elizabeth Learning Center is one of the demonstration sites for the *Urban Learning Center* model of the New American Schools comprehensive reforms. "Learning Supports" is the name this model has adopted for its enabling component.

## From Vision to Reality ... Opening the Gates



A new child arrives at school and gets an official welcome and orientation from a specially trained peer.

A family comes to the school to get health care and counseling services.



A young mother shows up at school for adult-education classes, confident with the knowledge that her child is safe at a no-cost child-care center in the next room.

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It's no wonder that the 2,800-student Elizabeth Learning Center is a hub of activity, because these kinds of happenings and more go on every day inside the gated complex here in Cudahy.

Actually, it wasn't so long ago that these gates effectively kept the community out. As recently as five years ago, all of this community-related activity was just a vision of a few education reformers. But with clear ideas, a few grants, dedicated staff and volunteers, and a lot of hard work, the dream of making Elizabeth Learning Center a comprehensive Learning Center is finally becoming a reality.

The vision for this gritty, working class city east of Los Angeles was to create an educational center that focused not simply on learning, but on enabling students to learn. As these "Learning Supports" — such as a comprehensive referral and counseling system, organized community outreach, and extensive volunteer involvement — have taken shape, this pre-K-12 school is moving closer toward being able to help students and families that might otherwise suffer from lack of services.

# Learning Supports Design

The Elizabeth Learning Center took on this design in 1992 when it became one of the first Urban Learning Centers sites. The Urban Learning Centers, developed with the support of the New American Schools Development Corporation, represent a public-private collaboration of the Los Angeles Unified School District, United Teachers Los Angeles, and the Los Angeles Educational Partnership.

The Urban Learning Centers design is a comprehensive urban school model that aims to create a learning environment where high-quality instruction is supported by strong connections to the community. The design is composed of three parts: (**Teaching and Learning, Governance and Management, and Learning Supports**).



## **The Learning Supports component includes the following:**

- ◆ Classroom-focused enabling
- ◆ Crisis/emergency assistance and prevention
- ◆ Support for transitions
- ◆ Home involvement in schooling
- ◆ Community outreach
- ◆ Student and family assistance

The Learning Supports portion aims to restructure and integrate school and community resources to improve the health and well-being of students and families. But they are not meant to be simply add-ons or fragmented service offerings. The idea is to enable students to learn by creating a seamless structure of support from within and outside of the school building.

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*“Our thought and design started from saying, we need something more than integrated services. We knew that if you were going to have a real impact on addressing barriers, you would have to do something that was thoroughly a part of the whole school operation, weaving in the community.”*

-- Howard Adelman, Professor of psychology and Co-director of the School Mental Health Project/Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.

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# "Nerve Center" of Activity

At Elizabeth Learning Center, the Family Center is essentially the nerve center of the Learning Supports structure. In any given day, parents walk in to sign up for adult education classes or for volunteering, students come in for counseling appointments, and various committees and panels meet to discuss planning and operations.



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The school has made clear its commitment to the Learning Supports structure in its decision to pay a full-time release teacher to coordinate the center. It also pays for five 15-hour-per-week "community representative" positions, in which parents coordinate different aspects of the Learning Supports programs. "If the school didn't have this overriding philosophy, we probably wouldn't derive these positions," says Mary View-Schneider, the Family Center director. As evidence, View-Schneider cites a recent school budget meeting where attendees discussed the need for continued backing of the Learning Supports — a line item that might be the first thing cut in any other school.

## "Integrate, Integrate, Integrate"

The services offered at the learning center are broad and varied. And since no single service can be isolated from the rest, the recurring theme seems to be "integrate, integrate, integrate." For one thing, the Family Center plays host to a wide variety of different *counseling services*. In addition to a five-day-a-week school psychologist, the school also offers students and families weekly appointments with a social worker, a special-education psychologist, a marriage and family counseling intern, and a social work intern.

A carefully designed *referral plan* helps teachers find appropriate resources for students and helps families get the help they need. And the offerings seem to be appreciated: View-Schneider notes that one family called the center after having moved out of the neighborhood to ask if family members could come back to the school to talk with one of the counseling interns.

# Rolling Out the Red Carpet

## Welcoming Newcomers

On most school days, between 7:30 and 9:30 A.M., Elizabeth Learning Center parent Elizabeth Alvarez is the first person other parents will see when they arrive at the school.

From a little desk in the lobby, Elizabeth is ready to welcome new parents who come to the school. But her job isn't simply a matter of offering a greeting and a handshake. She has come prepared to hand out packets chock-full of information for the new parents — and for new students as well — in the hopes that they will quickly consider themselves part of the community.

Alvarez, the head of the school's welcoming committee, is one of the school's "community representatives." She is paid for 15 hours per week, but her work often goes well beyond that time.

For the new parents, she puts together information such as maps, schedules, summaries of the family center and health clinic services, and volunteer

***"Now I see many more parents getting involved."***

**Elizabeth Alvarez, parent**

applications. She gives them a tour of the school. And she leads a once-a-month orientation session for parents. For the new students, she assembles folders containing maps, paper, pencil, and a place to write down their new teacher's name and room number.

Within the school, she helps coordinate the "peer buddies" program, in which one boy and one girl from grades 2-12 are designated to act as a special friend for new students.

The peer buddies kit she puts together includes, among other things, suggestions of things the buddies can say to the new students. "Think about how lonely it can feel at a place where you don't know anyone," reads one part of the kit. "Help the new student feel less lonely by spending recess and lunch with them for their first week of school."

Alvarez, who has a son in 8th grade, has lived in the area for three years.

"I wanted my son to attend this school, so we moved here," she says. "I thought this was the best place for him to attend." Alvarez adds that she's seen a big difference in the level of parental involvement over the course of her three years. The adult classes bring more parents to school, she says, and of course the welcome and orientation don't hurt either.

The Family Center also serves as home to the *transition support* services, in which new students and parents get the red-carpet treatment when they arrive at the school's doorstep. This kind of support is necessary, organizers say, because the high student body turnover at the school means new faces all the time.

New students, for instance, receive a few accessories that they might need on the first day: a shiny new pencil, a few blank sheets of lined paper, and a green folder to hold everything together. Inside the folder is also a map of the school, and a carefully folded leaflet where the student can write down the teacher's name and room number. "Welcome to Elizabeth Street Learning Center" reads the leaflet. "We're glad you're here."

New parents receive a packet filled with maps, schedules, and information about the school, including an application to be a volunteer. Although most materials are available in both English and Spanish, View-Schneider explains, many parents still have problems understanding the unfamiliar forms. Thus, parents who are trained to help new parents with the paperwork volunteer valuable time to aid in the transition.

# Valuable Volunteers

Parents, of course, are also involved in a host of other *volunteer positions* at the school, from assisting in school safety and maintenance tasks, to monitoring the lunchroom and the schoolyard, to helping out in the classrooms.

Their contributions are indeed substantial: A sign in the family center announces that parents volunteered a total of 1,009 hours in September, bringing the total for the three-month period to 3,280 hours, or \$26,240 in free services to the school.

## Coordinating Volunteers

Norma Contreras not only organizes parent volunteers at Elizabeth Learning Center, she gives them the inspiration to volunteer. She keeps a birthday calendar so that she can remember each volunteer's special day with a greeting and a little gift. She organizes a potluck dinner once a month and sometimes she even goes along with others on their volunteer assignments.

Contreras does all of these things because she understands that it's not always easy for parents to find the time to get involved. "Volunteering is hard because parents have a lot of other things to go

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**"I just love this job."**

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Norma Contreras, parent

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home to," she says. "But when we give them these good things, they have more energy." It appears that she must be doing

something right: the school has 75 active parent volunteers. In a recent month, the parents logged more than 1,000 volunteer hours.

Contreras began by working in the school herself as a volunteer. Now she is paid for 15 hours a week as a "community representative". She enlists parents for duties such as helping out with school security and maintenance, assisting in the classrooms, and working in the child care center. She painstakingly maintains lists and charts showing who volunteered. And she's not shy about getting on the phone with parents when volunteers are needed.

"My relationship with the parents is to talk to them, help them, and give them examples of what kind of help they can give," says Contreras, who has three children at Elizabeth Learning Center.

Contreras' work as a coordinator has obviously helped bring many more parents into the school. But the coordinator job has also helped boost her ambition to continue her own education, and it has filled her with pride in what she's done. In fact, she's prepared a curriculum on self-esteem that she's going to present to parents at an upcoming workshop. "One parent said, 'You made my day today,'" she says, beaming.

## Linking Schools to Parents & Communities

Over the past 5 years Elizabeth Learning Center has also developed an array of *adult education* offerings, from English as a Second Language, to computer skills, to knitting. Nearly 1,000 adults participate in the classes, which are offered from anywhere between 7:30 in the morning until 9:00 at night. In many other schools, the day school is very different from the night school, says Carol Valentine, the adult education coordinator. Yet at Elizabeth Learning Center, she says, one is simply an extension of the other. For instance, if a student is having a hard time with English in the classroom, the referral system works such that the adult education coordinators then contact the parent to see if he or she wants to take an ESL class.



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***“The child-care component has been key because it allows parents to come in and know their child is next door and they’re learning.”***

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Emilio Vasquez, Principal

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But what really distinguishes the Elizabeth Learning Center adult education offerings is the on-campus child-care program for which the parents themselves have assumed responsibility. Parents attending the classes may bring their child to the child-care center for the nominal cost of \$1 per day. And parent volunteers in turn staff the center, a large room adjacent to the adult classroom. The center serves children between the ages of one to 14, and generally hosts 25 children in the morning, 55-60 in the afternoon, and 10-15 at night. Emilio Vasquez, the school’s principal, says he is amazed at the extent of participation and the organization it takes for the parents to coordinate this kind of activity.

View-Schneider adds that the comprehensive adult education program has ripple effects that will be felt for a long time. For instance, she has already noticed that children of parents enrolled in English classes were coming into school with a much more ready understanding of English.

Last but not least, Elizabeth Learning Center is perhaps most deeply connected to the community through its *on-campus health clinic*. The clinic provides a range of health services, including primary health care, prescriptions, care for acute conditions such as asthma, health education and nutritional counseling, immunizations, and screening for tuberculosis, diabetes, and cholesterol. It represents a community collaboration, with support from St. Francis Medical Center and California State University at Dominguez Hills. The clinic provides services to all Learning Center students free of charge; parents and siblings of students pay according to ability. And not surprisingly, the Family Center and the health clinic are coordinated so that they share referrals for health, counseling, and other family services.

# Health Academy Brings in Community

Elizabeth Learning Center has also strengthened its ties to the community on the academic front through its *Health Academy*, a program geared toward careers in health for students in grades 10-12. In fact, the academy marks one of the more radical changes at the school in recent years. Five years ago, there was not even a high school on campus.

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*In the spring of 1997, 43 of 45 health academy graduates were college-bound.*

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The Health Academy is a school-within-a-school program that receives funding as a state-supported California Partnership Academy. It features service learning activities and community service for 10th grade students, professional mentor partnerships for 11th grade students, and internship opportunities for 12th grade students.



All of these activities are carefully coordinated with the help of community partners, including California State University's Dominguez Hills and Los Angeles campuses, Cerritos Community College, the local Kaiser Permanente office, and St. Francis Medical Center. The higher-education institutions provide instructors and information on curriculum offerings, while the institutional partners offer internship and on-the-job observation opportunities.

Lisa C. Kramer, the Health Academy lead teacher, says that organizers primarily spent the first four years building the program's infrastructure and refining the curriculum. And now they've got an eye toward improvements for the future. "We finally have got our process where it works," she says. Now, she adds, the academy's managers can focus on long-term evaluation of students and building up more parental involvement. "The strength of the program is that they're willing to look at it and adapt it," observes Bonnie Jones, a health care consultant who helped design the academy. "This program is going to continue to evolve." And, adds Jones, it's hard to separate the Health Academy from other programs at the school, now that they've become so closely integrated.

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*"The school, the clinic, the Health Academy, they're all intertwined. We're all starting to benefit from everyone else's programs."*

-- Bonnie Jones, Health Care Consultant

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