

San Jose charter school + family = success: Education

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Downtown College Prep displayed an unusual set of senior photos at the San Jose charter school's 2005 commencement: Each photo showed the graduate surrounded by parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters. Graduation isn't just the student's achievement, the photos said. It's a family affair.

Educational parity begins at home, most Americans believe. Uninvolved parents and unmotivated students are responsible for the achievement gap separating poor, minority students from middle-class whites, said respondents to the Phi Delta Kappa-Gallup survey. Only 17 percent said school quality was the major factor; 75 percent blamed parents, students and social factors.

What the question misses is how a school can affect parent involvement and student motivation. Downtown College Prep doesn't just try to educate students. The high school tries to reach out to families and neighborhoods to create the habits and expectations that lead to success.

DCP recruits students who are "failing but not in jail," in the words of co-founder Greg Lippman, who was 31 when the school opened in 2000. The average DCP student earned D's and F's in middle school and starts ninth grade with fifth-grade reading and math skills. Most are the children of Mexican immigrants who clean high-tech offices, repair leaky roofs, drive delivery trucks and cook tamales. Half the parents have an elementary education; another third didn't go past high school. Many don't speak English fluently; some don't speak it all.

They want their children to do well in school, if only to qualify for a decent job. They have no idea what they can do to help.

DCP's insanely ambitious mission: Prepare all students to succeed at four-year colleges.

As a charter school - an independently run public school - DCP must persuade parents and students to choose an eight-hour school day filled with tough academic classes. If the parents lose faith in the school, they can pull their kids out and the school will fold. Every day, DCP works to earn parents' trust and instill an ethic of *ganas, orgullo and comunidad* (desire, pride and community).

Homework is to DCP what rice is to China. Teachers assign homework every day. Students need to build strong work habits to have any hope of catching up academically and preparing for college-level work. Yet, with a few exceptions, incoming ninth-graders

aren't used to doing homework regularly. Some haven't done homework ever. They've been passed along anyhow, with no work habits and a string of F's.

Again and again, the principal and teachers hammer in their simple message: Do your homework. Every day, you'll have homework. You have to do it every day. You can't pass your classes and go to college if you're not willing to do your homework. So, do your homework.

DCP teachers call home when a student misses two assignments - and three assignments, and four, five and six assignments. Students are supposed to get a parent to sign their daily homework log, showing what is due in each class. At the start of ninth grade, nearly every parent gets a series of phone calls: Jose still isn't doing his homework; Maria hasn't done the homework log.

Few parents can help with homework. They don't have the education or the English fluency. But all can demand their children show *ganas*. Hard work is something these parents understand. DCP asks them not to let their children give up.

Virtually every DCP student tells the same story: "I hated it, at first. I wanted to quit, but my mother told me to keep trying. After a while, I got used to it."

Often immigrant parents know only what their Americanized children choose to tell them. DCP helps parents understand the system.

At a parent class taught in Spanish, Lorenzo's mother looked puzzled at the explanation of grades. She turned to Jennifer Andaluz, co-founder of the school. "*F no es fabuloso?*" she asked. "No," said Andaluz. "F isn't fabulous."

DCP holds a series of events at which students can show off their work to parents and other visitors. In addition to Open House and Talent Night, there's Geometry Night, Architecture Night (with designs by remedial math students), History Bowl, the College Readiness Dinner Party and more.

Every week, students are honored for progress, even if that means raising an F average to an F+. Students who've never before cared about school cheer each other for doing homework, improving grades or making the honor roll.

Discipline is tight. "Some people think we're proto-fascist here," Lippman said in the school's second year. He shrugged. "We'll do whatever it takes," he said.

Until senior year, students wear uniforms, with a ban on red and blue, which are gang colors, and such gang fashions as stuffing an extra sock under the tongue of a sneaker. They hate the uniforms, which they associate with elementary school. But parents appreciate the school's vigilant attempts to keep out gang influences.

Students who don't want what DCP had to offer are reminded they can go elsewhere. But they're asked to give it a try. Urged on by their parents, most stick with it. Even students who resent DCP's rules and resist homework love the attention they get there. They get hooked on hope.

Now in its sixth year, DCP has sent 100 percent of its graduates to four-year colleges; 97 percent remain on track to earn a degree. On California's Academic Performance Index, based on standardized test scores and graduation exam passing rates, the school scores well above average.

Now that about a third of ninth-graders are younger siblings or cousins of DCP students, school leaders see a shift in students' preparation. *Ganas*, homework and college requirements aren't news anymore in DCP's extended family.

Among role models is the 2005 *Ganas* Award winner, Lorenzo. Once an all *fabuloso* student, he's now a freshman in college.

Joanne Jacobs, who writes an education blog at JoanneJacobs.com, has written a book about DCP, "Our School: The Inspiring Story of Two Teachers, One Big Idea and the School That Beat the Odds."