

IN THE NEWS

GETTING OUTSIDE HELP – HISPANIC EDUCATORS LEADERS AND PROFESSIONALS BANQUET EMPHASIZES YOUTH

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Noel Cuellar and Frank Garcia are both children of migrant families who rose through education to the top of their professions. Cuellar, president and chief executive officer of Primera Plastics, and Garcia, superintendent of Holland Public Schools, have started a mentoring program to help encourage local Hispanic children to stick with their education and achieve their goals. Hispanic Educators Leaders and Professionals (HELP) kicked off Thursday at East Middle School.

The program matches 26 eighth-grade Hispanic students from Holland's East and West middle schools with Hispanic adults who have successful careers. "It's something that's needed," Cuellar said. "We want to let them know of the trials and tribulations that we went through and how we made it through with education, perseverance and desire." Cuellar said his family moved to Holland when he was 6. "We picked berries, apples, anything there was to pick," he said. "I didn't know English. It was tough."

Cuellar established a scholarship program through Primera Plastics to help Hispanic graduates. However, three of the four students who received scholarships have dropped out of college. He realized that something needs to be done earlier to help children prepare for college. Through conversations with Garcia, he got HELP started. "These children are our future," Garcia said. "These are students who have expressed a desire to be successful as students and community members."

The adult mentors will meet twice a month with students at their schools. The mentors come from a backgrounds including law enforcement, education and business. Once a month there will be a group activity, such as touring local businesses, visiting college campuses and social activities such as dinners, hockey and basketball games. The mentors will stay in contact with the students throughout their high school career. "This is a critical age to help guide students in the right direction," said Longfellow School Principal Rick Muniz, who is also a mentor in the program. "A lot of them have lofty dreams of what they would like to be someday."

The students met their mentors for the first time during a kickoff dinner at East Middle School. "It sounds like it will be fun," said Obed Garcia, 14, who said he's looking forward to the program. "I want to be a lawyer." Seth Castellanos, 13, also is thinking of a career already. "I want to be an industrial designer," he said.



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