

Rocky Mountain News

Program aims to help students stay in school

By Sara Burnett, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

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Photo by Dennis Schroeder / The Rocky

Josie Vigil, a teacher helper, assists fourth-graders Jizele Cortez, 9, left, and Laura Daniela, 9, with their homework at Columbine Elementary School in Longmont. The after-school Homework Club is one of many programs offered by Alternatives for Youth.

Alternatives for Youth in Longmont helps hundreds of students each year through its Homework Club, an after-school program at two middle and three elementary schools.

It also does much more.

In addition to Homework Club - the program a Season to Share grant would help - Alternatives for Youth offers anger management and conflict resolution classes for middle school boys and their families and a summer academic and leadership program.

It also operates its own school, Clearview Educational Center, for middle and high school students who have been expelled from the St. Vrain Valley School District.

More than 75 percent of the youth and families served are Hispanic. Although the vast majority live in Longmont, Alternatives for Youth also serves Erie, Frederick, Lyons and Mead.

The goal is to reduce truancy and help kids stay in school.

What follows is an edited interview with Executive Director Deb Roberts and Mary Vigil, program director.

How did your agency get started?

In 1980 a Longmont police officer shot and killed two Hispanic youths. The incident tore the community apart. The community asked Alternatives For Youth Outside of School, which was operating in Boulder County, to work with the Latino community in Longmont to help people heal. A committee of citizens saw the impact the group was having and decided to incorporate an Alternatives For Youth to serve the St. Vrain Valley School District.

Why did you start Homework Club?

We had a small group of kids meeting regularly after school for homework help and fun activities. We found a lot of them needed more help with homework than they were getting. They were struggling. They had low self-esteem

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because they felt stupid. That was causing them to act out in class. Homework Club builds self-esteem. They're not afraid to go into the classroom anymore. They sit up straighter, and they want to come to school.

Can you talk about a case where your agency made a difference?

We had a young lady in fourth grade whose teacher wanted to hold her back. We worked with her over the summer and learned she couldn't do division problems because she had never understood multiplication. So we went back and helped her catch up. When she got to fifth grade, her teacher noticed a difference. Her chin was up and she was confident. This year she's in sixth grade and is a helper at Homework Club.

How is the economy affecting the people you serve?

Funding agencies already have sent letters warning they will be cutting back on grants. A lot of the parents we serve are losing their jobs. Kids 7 or 8 years old will tell us they are going to lose their house. That's a lot of stress for a child. We try to keep them focused on something else, and keep them going to school. We also will refer families to other community resources if we find out they need something we can't provide.

Alternatives for Youth

* Mission: To help kids succeed academically and in life.

* Founded: 1983

* People helped: 800 kids and their families per year

* Staff: 20. Three are full time.

* Volunteers: 36

* Budget: \$497,000

* Web site: alternativesforyouth.org

How to donate

Post-News Season to Share, a McCormick Foundation Fund, gave more than \$2.1 million last year to 65 agencies serving disadvantaged children, as well as people who are hungry, homeless or in need of medical care. Donations are matched at 50 cents for each dollar, and 100 percent of all donations, plus the match, goes directly to local nonprofit agencies. Call 1-800-518-3972 or go to seasonstoshare.com to donate.

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