

Project THINK: 'Bringing hope to homework'

From a pilot program begun last year at St. Monica School in Santa Monica, Mount St. Mary's College expanded its mentoring program for underserved youth to Santa Teresita School in East L.A. this fall.

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HOMEWORK CLUB — Santa Teresita students in the Homework Club work on solving math problems.

The fourth-grade classroom at Santa Teresita School is a palette of bright colors, a contemporary museum of hand-crafted billboards, posted essays and expressive drawings.

At the green blackboard half a dozen students, mostly girls dressed in plaid uniforms and white blouses, are engrossed in working out calculations under the watchful eye of a young woman. Together at wood-topped desks, pairs of students are hunched over workbooks, while another young lady walks around answering questions.

A background buzz fills the room from kids asking each other questions and then coming up with answers, punctuated by an occasional giggle.

What kind of class can this be, especially at 3:30 on a Tuesday afternoon? What could possibly keep 25 students so enthralled after the school bell has rung.

The answer is nothing less than mind-blowing — homework! Yes, that bane of students from the time of Socrates. But this is Santa Teresita's new "Homework Club," courtesy of Mount St. Mary's College.

"I like it because we get to do our homework here, and then we learn more things," says Alika Palmer, a nine-year-old fourth-grader.

Her classmate, Victoria Morales, nods. "It helps me out because I get to do my homework with my friends, and we work together so we can get the right answer right. It helps me with math, so I know how to do math now."

Alika adds, "I get all my homework done here," with a look of mixed pride and confi-

dence.

"They help us by helping us do our homework faster," agrees Victoria.

Mount mentors

"They" are college students like senior Nadine Vasquez, 21, an education major at Mount St. Mary's. The site coordinator at Santa Teresita School in East Los Angeles tutors at the 3:15 to 4:15 session, which is broken into two classrooms, this one for grades 4-7 and another next door for grades K-3. She also runs, under the guidance of Maryann Nguyen, an MSMC student affairs assistant who coordinates the mentoring efforts, a second hour-session from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m.

Some students at Santa Teresita, which is next to a public housing project and serves mainly children from low-income families, attend only one of the Tuesday and Thursday after-school help sessions, while others go to both. Teachers recommend pupils who need extra help in math, science, spelling and other

subjects.

"The students seem to really love it," Vasquez reports. "We've only been doing it here for a month, but we have a good turnout. They like coming, and I think the snacks and little prizes we give out make it a little different. It's really a homework club instead of just somewhere where we have to go to do our homework."

Sister Mary Catherine Antczak, Santa Teresita's principal, has already noticed a difference not only in students' academic progress but also in their attitude toward learning.

"Can you imagine that these students are excited to do homework?" the Dominican Sister of Mission San Jose declares. "And I think the reason is that they have the personal attention from their Mount St. Mary's helpers. I think our students are feeling successful because of one very significant reason — some in this group, when they go home, don't have a mom or dad who speaks English. The parents want to help them, but the language has really been an obstacle.

"And look at this, almost every child has a pencil in their hand and their books open," she adds, scanning the room and smiling. "We have all grade levels in the two classes right now, and the Mount students are walking around working with them."

Sister Antczak knows one father who said it took hours for his child to finish her homework, but now because of the one-on-one help she is done in an hour. She says the student goes home feeling positive and her parents feel very supported, plus teachers are enthusiastic because homework is getting done.

"I predict we will see an increase in academic performance," the principal notes. "Because I just know what it would be like if I went home as a student and had a question with homework and my parents were unable to help me. Immediately there starts to be a real challenge for children and for teachers.

"You have the child who returns to class prepared versus the child who isn't prepared who may feel badly, maybe even ashamed," she points out. "And now it's like Mount St. Mary's is just bringing hope to homework — yes, bringing hope to homework."

Higher grades

That's definitely how sixth-graders Nelly Duarte and Kristen Aguilar feel, along with fifth-grader Raymundo Pantoja.

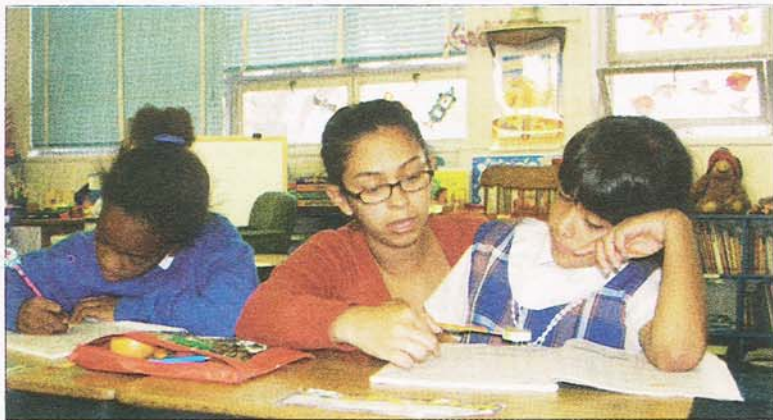
"It's really helped me, 'cause now I get higher grades in math — like from B to an A," says Nelly, grinning. "They explain it differently for us to understand, and they try to make it easier."

Kristen admits her grades were down, especially in math, at the start of school. "But now that I've been here they've gone up, from Cs to Bs because I'm doing my homework way better," she reports. "The tutors help us a lot. They make it easier instead of complicated."

Raymundo says his parents are glad he's coming to the Homework Club. And the tutors are not only helpful, they're fun. "I think it's pretty cool because I get to finish my homework, and when I get home I have free time," he notes. "They've helped me with math, spelling, science — all the subjects. My grades have gone up from Fs to like Cs and Bs."

Teachers have also noticed some positive changes. Lisa Neslusan, who teaches fourth grade, has seen students who weren't finishing their homework now getting it done. She agrees with her principal that the after-school tutoring sessions are especially beneficial for children whose English is not their first language and whose parents can't help them with assignments.

But what's really amazed the educator is the different mindset of some of her students. "I mean, they're excited, they're happy. 'Oh! It's Homework Club today,'" she says. "They enjoy coming here. They enjoy doing their homework." **OLA**



HITTING THE BOOKS — Mount St. Mary's senior Nadine Vasquez helps fourth-graders Alika Palmer, left, and Victoria Morales, with their homework.