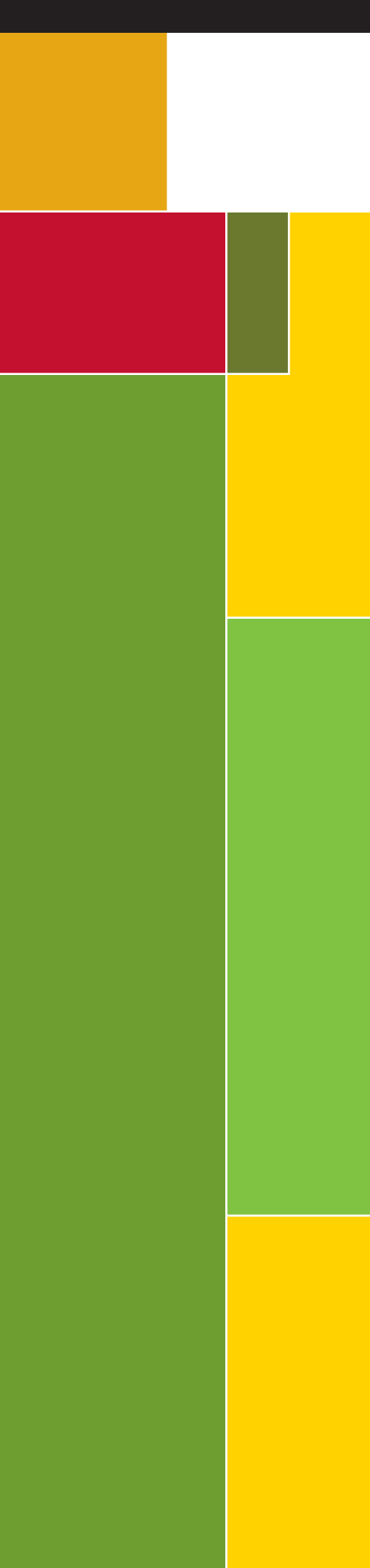


Staying in School:

*How Two Faith-Based Initiatives in Phoenix
Are Keeping High-Risk Teens on the Path to Success*

by Amy L. Sherman





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High school drop-out rates are higher for Hispanics and Native Americans than for any other ethnic group in America. According to the U.S. Department of Education, nearly 43 percent of Hispanic youth fail to graduate high school.¹ In Phoenix, the numbers are even worse in some of the inner-city schools.²

Two initiatives in that sunny city, however, are achieving success with some of these high-risk teens. One is a faith-based nonprofit partnering with public schools in an impressive, multi-faceted, stay-in-school program. The other is a church-sponsored charter school named for one of the city's most highly respected public school administrators, Dr. James Sandoval.

Both initiatives work with kids who have known more suffering in their short years than many adults experience in a lifetime. These are the children of prisoners, the siblings of gang bangers. They are victims of emotional and sexual abuse; the daughters of prostitutes and the sons of crack addicts. They have lived with violence; they have lived in the backs of abandoned cars. They have been victims and victimizers, wards of the state, and inmates of juvenile detention centers. They have known destitution, hunger, and neglect. They have been the heartache of many a school counselor and the headache of many a teacher. For leaders at Neighborhood Ministries and the James Sandoval Preparatory High School, though, these are children of promise.

Success in the 'Hood

Ten of these kids piloted Neighborhood Ministries' mentor/tutor program in its inaugural year, 1996. By all indicators, these kids

should have (in urban jargon) "tanked." Flunked out. Dropped out. Been kicked out. They were the super high-risk kids. They were, in the words of Neighborhood Ministries' founder and executive director Kit Danley, "the kids who were dying." But nine of ten of that first group made it.

Katrina*, a member of the charter ten who is now a senior at Alhambra High School on Phoenix' west side, is a picture of what Neighborhood Ministries' educational program hopes to produce. Mature, confident, caring—and serious about school performance—she takes some college-level courses in anatomy and physiology. Through a partnership Neighborhood Ministries has with Arizona Quest for Kids, she is well-positioned to receive a generous financial scholarship to help underwrite college expenses for four years. She plans to study pre-med.

Katrina's life was headed in a different direction back in 7th grade. Neighborhood Ministries' Education Director, Debbi Speck, says that "our kids are incredibly wounded. Until they explode, they may function OK, but it when it hits, they give up. If emotionally they can't deal with the issues in their life," she argues, "then they're not going to make it." Katrina's explosion occurred in junior high. Previously a good student, she started pulling D's and F's in her classes. The school environment was de-motivating; she recalls her junior high as "really ugly" and "straight up from the ghetto." And problems at home contributed to a significant season of depression. Her participation in Neighborhood Ministries'

**name has been changed*

educational program, first called Partners in Learning and now known as I Can Do It, led to a gradual but permanent turnaround.

"I was never into school; I did really bad," Katrina explains. "I guess 'I Can Do It,' Malissa [her mentor], Debbi

"I Can Do It...just helped me see that whatever I do now makes a difference later."

— a high school senior involved in I Can Do It

[Speck], my other mentors—they just helped me see that whatever I do now makes a difference later. I think that was really hard for me to learn," she admits. "But, I kind of got my act together my freshman year, and started doing better and better."

She continues, "Then I just started thinking, 'I really do want to go to a university. I really do want to go to school and pursue my education.' And I think that's what I Can Do It has done for me. It's really opened my eyes," she says. "Now I can see; like, I always do my homework because this makes a difference."

Good Reasons, Loving Relationships

Testimonies like these are music to Debbi Speck's ears, because the whole premise of the I Can Do It (ICDI) program is that high-risk students can succeed in school, if they are just given a reason to. They must have hope. They need to believe that school matters. More importantly, they need to believe that they matter. ICDI gives kids reasons to stay in school and relationships through which they can begin to receive genuine love.

Katrina recalls a skiing trip she enjoyed through ICDI. Her mentor, a

young woman named Malissa Geer, stayed on the slopes with her for several hours as Katrina struggled to learn how to snowboard. With wonder evident in her voice, Katrina says, "Noone's ever made me feel that special, you know?"

Building deep friendships with low-income families has been Neighborhood Ministries' hallmark over its 22-year history. The organization has grown in fits and starts, adapting to the endless string of needs staff and volunteers encounter as they enter deeply into the lives of families from the under-side. Today, the ministry sits in an impressive 8-acre complex between McDowell and Van Buren that houses a multi-purpose center with classrooms, playing fields, a daycare center, a commercial kitchen and food pantry, a used clothing center, and a medical clinic. But only part of the work happens here, on site. Much occurs inside families' homes and in the corridors of some 34 public schools throughout the city that partner with the ministry in the I Can Do It program.

Virtually all of the students in ICDI are "high-risk" as indicated by five factors: a personal history of academic failure; a family history of academic failure; sibling drop-out; poverty; and an environment of abuse and neglect. I Can Do It is keeping these troubled kids in school, raising their grades, and wooing them from fights, gangs, and drugs. In its first two years, one-third of the participating kids made the honor roll and 98 percent completed their year and advanced to the next grade. So far this year, 78 percent of the 58 kids in the program boast a B average or better and none are failing. Last semester

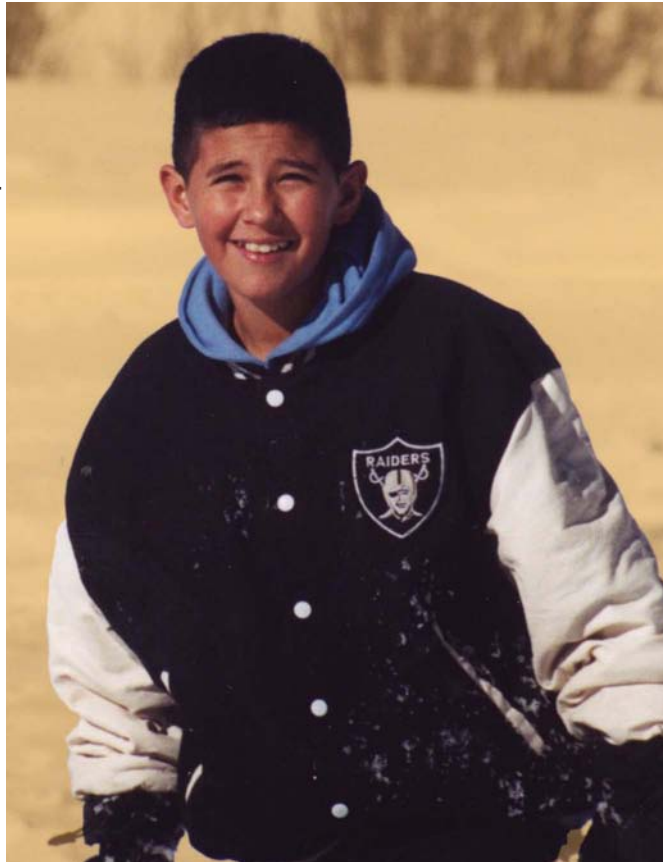
over a quarter of the ICDI youth had perfect attendance. Even more impressively, not one dropped out of school. This is remarkable in Arizona, which has the second-worst school dropout rate in the nation (currently its dropout rate is 11.1 percent).

The program's basic components are straightforward. Each student is matched with an adult mentor/tutor and placed in a small peer group. The groups range in size from 4-8 and are same gender. Mentors meet individually with their students weekly (or more often); small groups gather every three weeks, usually for some fun, "horizon-stretching" activity. ICDI rewards participants for their attendance and school performance through a combination of financial incentives and special trips. Each Friday, ICDI's school liaison, Carol Barger, contacts the attendance clerk at each school where participants are enrolled. She receives updates on students' attendance for that week and learns of any particular problems that may have arisen with them. The school also sends copies of the students' report cards and other records (e.g., test scores) to program staff. Recently, ICDI added a job shadowing component.

Katrina spent a day following a midwife from Bethany Women's Health Care around, and says this further whetted her appetite to become an Ob/Gyn doctor.

What really makes the program succeed, though, is its heart. Staff and volunteers are passionately commit-

ted to the kids. For Speck and Danley—who relocated into the 'hood 22 years ago—this work is a lifelong calling and mission, not a job. Volunteers are carefully screened through a system imitating that used by Big Brothers/Big Sisters. "We consult references, we do background checks, we do an extensive interview. It's pretty intense because we're looking for any red flags," Speck explains. Some of the same volunteers who began with the educational program eight years ago still remain active today. Many put in more than six hours every week. Some tutors begin with



a weekly meeting, only to up their commitment to numerous visits per week. Many end up mentoring not just their assigned child, but the kid's siblings as well. One long-time mentor hosted a pack of kids for a "camping" trip in his backyard over a weekend when the kids were unable

to attend a regular camp. Several mentors and staff members have invited troubled students to live with them for weeks or even months when the kids' home environment became unbearable.

Kids in the program refer to their mentors in family terms. As Katrina puts it, "Malissa's not just my mentor. She's been my mother. She's been my best friend. Really, she's been everything, like a sister." Other students agree. One, a victim of horrific sexual abuse, shared her life story with her mentor. "When I needed time," this young woman recalls, "she always made time for me. I always told her everything." This student credits the love of her mentor for the fact that she has remained in school and not "ended up on drugs."

Cora Garrido, principal of Capital Elementary School, considers Neighborhood Ministries unique among other nonprofits in the city that also work with high-risk kids. "Neighborhood Ministries works

One Neighborhood Ministries' supporter says its educational program provides the number one thing needed by high-risk kids: loving adults for kids who, before, "didn't believe that there was any single person who cared about them."

with the entire family; they're not just looking at the child's educational day, but looking at the child 24/7," she says. "That's a very different

approach." She marvels at the group's ability to track kids as their transient families move multiple times during the school year. There's a visible tenacity and comprehensive commitment that is encouraging to her and other school personnel. Commenting on the tutors Neighborhood Ministries has provided over the years, she says their presence makes teachers feel supported. "You know that you are not solely responsible for Jenny who came to school without shoes, and is hungry and didn't bring her homework. It's no longer just the worry and concern for the teacher—it's shared," Garrido explains. "And just that alone makes a big difference." Dr. Ruth Ann Marston, a prominent public educator in Phoenix who headed Kenilworth Elementary School for decades, is an enthusiastic supporter of Neighborhood Ministries. She sums up her assessment of the organization by emphasizing that it provides the number one thing needed: loving adults to kids who, before, "I didn't believe that there was any single person who cared about them."

How "I Can Do It" Developed
ICDI is a relatively recent initiative of Neighborhood Ministries. It emerged gradually, as other educational efforts were tried, evaluated, and remodeled. Director Debbi Speck, a former teacher of deaf students, initially got involved in 1995. At that time, Kit Danley was putting together a team to help her brainstorm about the ministry's then-current after-school program. "The kids loved the [after-school] program and came faithfully," Danley recalls. "It was a real creative and fun. But what was always so confusing to us was: How can these kids be so successful with us, but failing at school? That was the disconnect that we knew."

She remembers confronting the reality that the program—despite enthusiastic participation, high attendance, and talented volunteers—was not really helping the kids, and not really changing anything. “That was painful,” Danley says with a grimace.

The brainstorming team came to a fundamental conclusion: to make kids successful in school, you can’t focus only on academics. “Of course that’s a component of it,” Danley explains, “but there are so many other emotional pieces about staying in school, and you have to look at those pieces.” And ministry staff were well-acquainted with those other pieces. They included everything from counseling for sexually abused kids to emergency cash assistance to parents to avoid eviction, to legal interventions and prison visits and job referrals. Child Protective Services has relied on Danley multiple times to intervene for abused kids she knows. On numerous occasions, Danley has arranged for Neighborhood Ministry volunteers to provide safe homes for such kids. And throughout two decades of ministry, she and her family have almost always had at least one hurting child or teen living with them.

Danley and Speck pile story upon story about the crushing pressures these kids face—the boy who lived in the back of a car for months, the girl who watched her enraged father pile up all the family’s belongings in the front yard and set them on fire. In this environment, Speck explains, these kids lose a sense that dreams are achievable “or that it even makes any sense to stay in school.” So an educational program can never be merely that; it must provide love

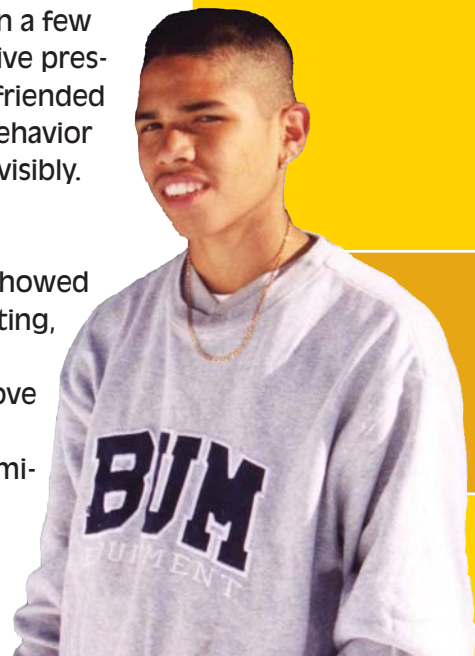
and healing for these wounded kids. It has to facilitate relationships in which these youth learn how to trust. It has to restore hope and give vision.

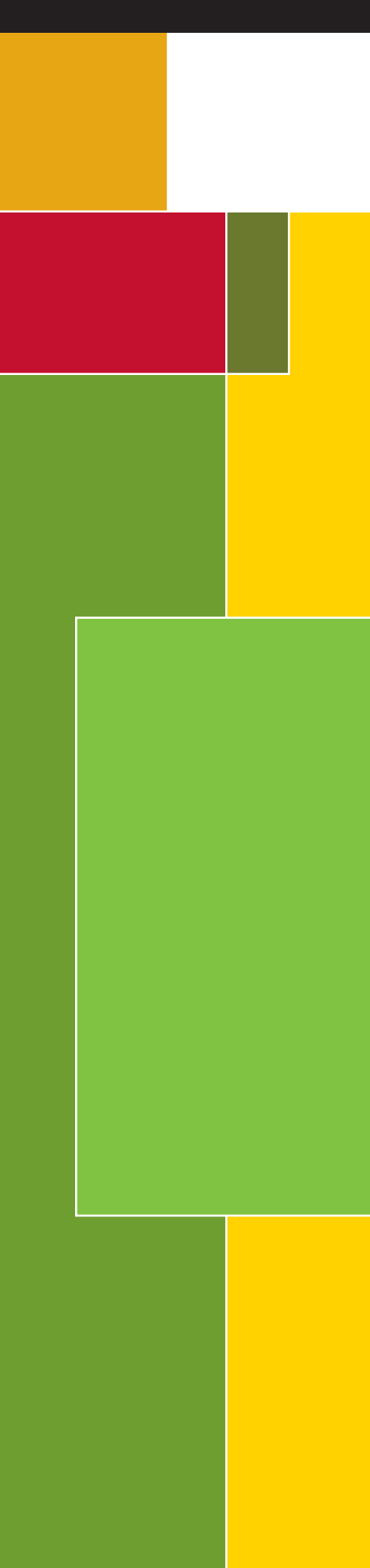
“When you address these things,” Danley argues, the “kids actually start caring. And our kids can succeed if they are actually sitting at the desk ready to succeed.” Figuring out how to keep the kids in school became the focus for the ministry’s educational team.

After soul-searching, the team cancelled the after-school program and looked to replace it with some kind of mentoring initiative. They posited that in-school tutoring, one-on-one, might make a difference for the kids. To test the theory, they decided to try an experiment. Speck persuaded the principal of Herrera Elementary School to allow her to work with a 4th grade boy well-known by Neighborhood Ministries. At the tender age of nine, Raul* had already been expelled from four other schools. Since faculty at Herrera were also at their end of the rope with him, school officials agreed to the pilot. Speck began meeting with Raul one day a week, usually reading to him in the library. Within a few weeks, she became an active presence in the school and befriended the boy’s teacher. Raul’s behavior and motivation improved visibly. The pilot was working.

But one day when Speck showed up for her scheduled meeting, Raul was nowhere to be found. Concerned, she drove to his former home. She found it padlocked; the family had been evicted. “So I

**name has been changed*





began to canvas the neighborhood,” Speck recalls. “I realized that if I didn’t find him, the trail would grow cold.” She located an older Hispanic man who knew the family, and convinced him to show her where they had moved, across town. They found Raul and his four-year-old sister alone in a shabby house. They had been dropped off there a few days earlier, not knowing what was going on or where they were. She put the kids in her car to take them to her home, so she would have time to develop some kind of plan for them. Raul sat quietly beside her with his head hanging down for a long time. Finally, he looked up at her and said, “I knew it was Tuesday, your day to come.” With tears rolling down his face, he added, “I prayed you would find me.”

The experience changed Speck’s life. It was when she got what preachers term “the call.” From then on, she knew she would devote her life to reaching kids like Raul.

Partners in Learning

Neighborhood Ministries persuaded Dr. Marston from Kenilworth to partner with them in an in-school tutoring program. Speck recruited nearly twenty tutors to work weekly with students at Kenilworth. Speck completed evaluations on the kids, then arranged meetings among herself, the tutor, and each student’s teacher. Together, they devised plans to strengthen the students in the academic areas where they were weak.

The new initiative, called Partners in Learning, was a clear improvement over the former after-school program. The key was being on campus. “When you show up at school,” Speck explains, “what you are saying to students is ‘You are important,

school is important, and we get it. We get your world, and we’ll walk with you where you need to go.” In the overcrowded schools, she adds, the mentor’s presence means that this child is no longer faceless. The mentor becomes the child’s voice, an advocate. “A lot of it is saying to the school: ‘We are on this kid’s team. We are paying attention to this child.’”

According to program director Debbi Speck, the key is being on campus. “When you show up at school,” she explains, “what you are saying to students is ‘You are important, school is important, and we get it. We get your world, and we’ll walk with you where you need to go.’”

By its third year, the Partners in Learning program was working with 60 kids in nearly two dozen schools. “It was right and good,” Speck recalls. Some kids were even making the honor roll. But shortcomings were evident. Speck herself was stretched to the breaking point, working individually with dozens of tutors on weekly lesson plans. And she was “home schooling” four of the neediest kids daily. Even more distressing for Speck, though, was the fact that “some kids were still dying.” An incident that winter pushed her to reevaluate the program.

Six of the kids in the program were from the same desperate family. The

father, a cocaine addict, was abusive. Despite the fact that the kids had good tutors, most had dropped out of school. The youngest, a first grade boy, remained in school but was a nightmare for his teacher. One day Speck received a call from a school official, demanding that she come on campus immediately. The teacher was furious at the boy, absolutely at the end of her rope dealing with his acting-out. Speck got in the car, but decided to stop by the boy's home before coming to school. She learned what had happened the night before. The parents had fought, and the father had forced the mother in the car and drove her about sixty blocks from the home. He beat her up and dumped her on the curb. She walked home, arriving around 2:00 a.m. Since her husband locked her out, she curled up on a small piece of concrete outside the door. Early in the morning, the father awoke all the kids, took them outside with him, and urinated all over the mother.



Speck remembers, "I walked out of the home that day, and it felt desperate." She wondered how kids could be kept in school, motivated on a path of healthiness, when they had no support system at home or when home was a horror. She describes, "I stood on the street corner, and just prayed: 'God, this is not changing lives. Give us something new. It's gotta look different.'"

I Can Do It

Speck and other ministry leaders reconvened. They concluded that the mentoring was insufficient; the kids were being asked to change in isolation. They needed more community. Even more fundamentally, a new

paradigm regarding the value of education needed to be created. Speck explains, "People would say, 'Yeah, we want to be in school.' But the reality was if you needed babysitting, if you needed a job, or it was hard, or you got into a fight, you just didn't go to school." She adds, "Our parents were often in crisis. And so, getting their kids in school and keeping them in school was just way too much work. It was too hard. So kids weren't going to school. The question was, 'How can we change the paradigm where it looks different on a value level?'"

The result of the re-tooling was the birth of the "I Can Do It" program. Its design included a new focus on incentives and on community. Students began receiving tangible incentives for school attendance and improved grades—prizes at first, then, to simplify the effort, pure, hard cash. Today, teens earn \$10 for an "A," \$5 for a "B," \$1 for a "C," and \$10 for perfect attendance for a semester. The I Can Do It team also designed reward trips that would expose kids who never left the 'hood to a world of new sights and experiences. Speck worked out discounts at ski resorts, horseback riding camps, white water rafting

companies. In the past few years, student groups have traveled throughout the western states as well as to New York City, Washington, and Chicago; this year, some are contemplating adventures in Paris and South America.

According to parents, the incentives work. Jorge Macias has two kids in the I Can Do It program. He reports, "My son says, 'If I do great, I can go on this trip. If I don't do good, I'm not going.' So, it's a motivation." Rosalba Espinoza, whose son and daughter are enrolled in the program, agrees. "Before Ramon was in this program, I used to get calls all the time—his teacher was always telling me that Ramon was talking back to him and getting into fights. Now that he's in the program, I'm happy because they [ICDI staff] keep track of him, and he doesn't want to get in trouble," she smiles. "He's like, 'If I do, if I have bad grades or something, I won't go on the field trip.'"

Dr. Marston from Kenilworth Elementary commends Neighborhood Ministries for its approach. "Children have very little ability to judge whether what they are learning now is important or not. They need a system of short-

term rewards," she says. "It's just not enough to say to kids—especially kids who are in trouble, who have seen bad things happen in their homes—'Shut up, I don't care if you don't have a connection to the history of Europe in 1710. It's going to be important to you some day.' It isn't." Marston says that I Can Do It is doing a good job of providing those short-term rewards.

In addition to the incentives, Speck launched a new system of small groups as a complement to the ongoing, one-on-one mentoring. "We knew the kids needed a peer group within which to change," she explains. "If we ask them to change in isolation, then it won't happen. Their worlds were not telling them to go to school." So now youths are assigned into groups of 4 to 8 teens, all same sex, with a small group leader trained to create a strong family sense within the group. The groups meet every three weeks for activities that are fun and life-enhancing—hikes in the woods, parties, trips to the museum, football games, barbecues. "The whole idea is to expand horizons," Speck says. "Fun is important—surprise, adventure."



Some teen girls in the program admit that they do not spend a great deal of time in their small groups talking about the future. They are still 15-year-olds, more focused on boyfriends and the social scene. Nonetheless, the peer-to-peer support is working in terms of making college dreams plausible and school attendance normal.

Small group leader Kristen Martin recalls overhearing her group of girls, then 8th graders, discussing the pros and cons of various high schools in the city. Phoenix is rich with charter and magnet schools in addition to the traditional public schools. Deciding which one to attend "is a big topic," Martin reports, as the young ladies try to discern which school will best prepare them for college. "This—talking about college—is an amazing conversation in our world," Speck adds. Getting kids as far as their freshmen year in high school used to be about the best that could be expected.

Malissa Geer, who has served as a mentor and small group leader for the past three years, had one I Can Do It student living with her for ten months after the girl's home situation deteriorated. The girl's best friend from her small group would phone every night. "I'd hear them say, 'Are *you* going to school tomorrow?' 'Well, are *you*?' And then they would go," Geer chuckles. "They pushed each other every day."

Lessons Learned

Neighborhood Ministries staff have learned a number of lessons as they have developed their educational program. Some relate to the building of smooth-working partnerships with the schools, others are about how to train and supervise volunteers, and still others concern

effective interaction with the students themselves.

Achieving a fruitful working relationship with school personnel is critical. To facilitate that, Speck has learned to obtain broad waivers from parents of the ICDI participants, allowing schools to release student information to her and her team. This includes attendance records, grades, test scores, counseling records and the like. Such information enables ICDI staff to monitor students' progress and to serve as effective advocates for the youth. Speck and her team are at the table for parent-teacher conferences, meetings with guidance counselors, or discussions about disciplinary actions when kids blow it.

Speck has also learned the importance of keeping "the ask" clear and simple. ICDI's school liaison, Carol Barger, accompanies Speck on initial visits to new schools. They bring along a short letter to school administrators and a brochure describing I Can Do It. The letter asks the school to provide information weekly on students' attendance, to fax progress reports and grades when they come out, and to give access to the students' teachers and counselors. In short, requests made of the school are limited and specific. Some schools choose to develop the partnership more fully; but even with those that do not, ICDI gets the essential cooperation it needs.

"We knew the kids needed a peer group within which to change," program director Debbi Speck explains. "If we ask them to change in isolation, then it won't happen. Their worlds are not telling them to go to school."

Good working relationships between ICDI and the schools also rest on Speck's ability to speak plainly about the ministry's Christian identity while simultaneously ensuring its commitment to honoring school rules. "I tell them when I walk in the door that we believe in the whole child; what we're about is the whole child's life. And the most important part of that kid's life right now is school, and so we want to help with that," Speck explains. She reassures them that "we are not here to proselytize; we are not here to do anything that's under the carpet. We are here to teach them to read and write and do math. We honor the separation [of church and state] that's there and we've never had a problem, nor have we ever had a school question us."



In the past four years, ICDI has earned a positive reputation in the various Phoenix school districts. The program's results speak for themselves, and it is not difficult for ICDI to initiate partnerships with new schools. In the early days, though, when the program was unknown, Speck had to persuade school officials to allow her mentor-tutors on campus. Interestingly, she found that there was no standard rule of thumb in generating a

new relationship. In some situations, working from the top down—meeting with a district superintendent or a principal—proved most effective. In other cases, a productive meeting with a school counselor could set the new partnership in motion quickly.

The program can't work without solid relationships with school administrators; nor can it succeed without strong, committed volunteers. ICDI has an impressive record of volunteer retention. Some tutors have been working in the educational programs for eight years straight. This success rests on the effective ways that Neighborhood Ministries prepares and protects tutors.

First, Speck, Danley and others make clear to the volunteers the challenges they will face in caring for wounded inner-city kids. They emphasize that these kids find it difficult to trust and that much patience will be required. Second, they discuss the financial hardships the volunteers will witness and stress that volunteers should never give money directly to the kids or families. Speck admits it is hard for tutors to see a family whose only source of electricity is a long orange extension cord run from the neighbor's apartment. But, she says, direct hand-outs can jeopardize and taint the mentoring relationship. So, as volunteers become aware of needs—whether for clothing or school supplies or money to pay utility or rent bills—they can inform Neighborhood Ministries staff. If they like, they can make a donation to the ministry that will then pass through anonymously to the family to meet those needs. Third, the volunteer training covers touchy issues

about what to do if abuse or neglect is suspected or witnessed. Volunteers are asked always to consult with Neighborhood Ministries staff before making any interventions or contacting any authorities. Fourth, volunteers are encouraged to support the parents of the children they are mentoring. This means keeping the parents informed of their activities with the children, encouraging the parents to participate in open houses at school and parent-teacher conferences, and seeking permission from parents to take the kids on outings. Fifth, the program is structured to provide on-going support to the mentors. Mentors are overseen by the small group leaders, who help them troubleshoot problems. If the small group leader cannot help, mentors can contact one of two case managers Neighborhood Ministries has assigned to the ICDI program. And if further intervention or support is needed, Speck and Danley are available.

Staff have also learned important lessons about how to engage the students effectively in the program. For example, Speck tried a co-ed small group in the program's first year. She learned quickly that having young teen boys and girls in the same group was an unnecessary challenge—too many distracting hormones. Now all small groups are composed of kids of the same gender and similar ages. Staff have also become very discriminating in their acceptance of volunteers. They look for younger individuals—college students and young adults—who can relate well to the students and be accepted as “cool” or “hip” by them. And the program has given extensive consideration to how volunteers who must break their commitment can “disengage thoughtfully”

from their students. The key is to help the child not feel rejected. Staff train the volunteers to give the student plenty of advance notice and to provide a clear reason for ending the relationship (e.g., a new job that requires relocation, needing to invest more time caring for a sick relative, etc.). And they plan a special final event, such as lunch out at a restaurant, to provide closure. Sometimes a Neighborhood Ministries staff person will attend the closure event.

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Tracking with Youth for the Long Haul

Neighborhood Ministries staff are delighted with the accomplishments I Can Do It students have achieved. Some of their graduates can only be considered miracle stories. Rosa* has been involved with Neighborhood Ministries since she was three. She was sexually abused almost nightly by her father until he was finally put behind bars a few years ago. Rosa is the first from her family to graduate from high school. She almost didn't make it, having dropped out for a semester during tenth grade. That she returned to school, is drug free, and holds a diploma are powerful evidences of the promise of the I Can Do It program and of James

**name has been changed*

Sandoval Prep, where she graduated in 2003.

But joy over students like Rosa is mixed with realism. She and other high-risk kids have beat the odds thus far, but still face an uphill climb. Rosa, for example, has been living with her boyfriend since age fifteen and now is seventeen and pregnant. She'd begun taking nursing classes at a local community college after graduation, but had to drop out a few months ago. She says she hopes to finish her nursing certification. The question is whether the challenges of a new baby will prove too much.

Here's where the fact that I Can Do It is part of a larger, comprehensive support system offered by Neighborhood Ministries strengthens its effectiveness. Fifty-seven of the current 60 students in I Can Do It are also enmeshed in other programs offered by Neighborhood Ministries—and, therefore, in additional nurturing relationships. Rosa, for example, is enrolled in Neighborhood Ministries' "Mom's Place" program that Kit Danley launched in 2002 to support teen moms. Consequently, she has several friendships to fall back on in this new, challenging period.

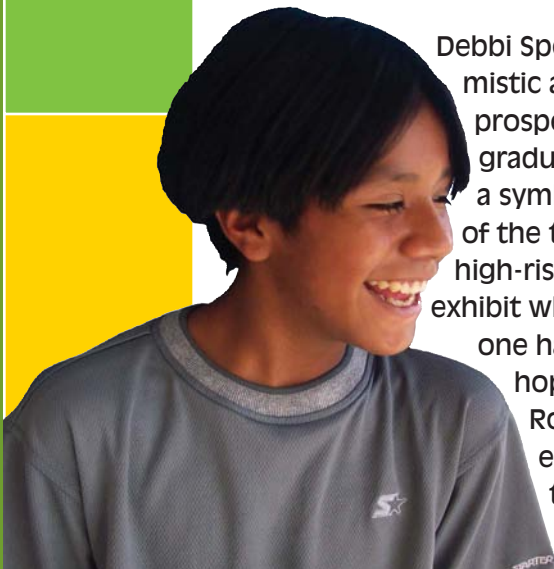
Debbi Speck is optimistic about Rosa's prospects. Rosa's graduation party is a symbol for Speck of the tenacity high-risk kids can exhibit when someone has infused hope in them. Rosa's brothers never thought

she'd be able to finish high school, Speck explains. No objective outsider, examining Rosa's history, would ever have predicted success. She proved them all wrong. Rosa told Debbi to invite every I Can Do It participant to her graduation party. Speck says, "Rosa told me, 'They need to see that they can finish. I did.'"

A "Family-Feel" Charter School

In Phoenix's Maryvale neighborhood, another group of faith-inspired leaders shares Neighborhood Ministries' commitment to high-risk youth—and the opinion that these kids can succeed if the conditions are right. James Sandoval Preparatory High School, a charter school launched three years ago by New Beginnings Church, centers its approach to high-risk students on the foundation of caring, personal relationships. "I built this school on two goals," Principal James Sandoval states. "Take care of the kids academically, and take care of the kid. In order to accomplish those goals, we had to take care of the kid first and make them feel that this is such a unique school that they all of a sudden became someone, somebody."

The primary way the school achieves this is by staying small and creating a family feel. Administrators have set a ceiling on enrollment at 300 students; individual class size is capped at 22. Teachers, parents, and students at Sandoval agree that the school's small size is one of its strongest assets. "I picked this school because it just seemed a lot more family knit," says math teacher Laura Carbajal. "They seemed to be more involved to find out what's going on and why you are missing



school, what's going on at home, those things, than a lot of other high schools seem to be." English professor Tammy Gee agrees. "Since I don't have 35 kids in my classroom, I know all of them. I've met most of their parents, and I can work with them more individually." Students like Angela Martinez appreciate the school's smallness. "What's different [about this school] is that the teachers know you well; they know you better than in a larger school. I like the smaller classes. It's a positive environment."

Parents are grateful for the way the small size lends itself to more individualized attention. Antoinette Snowden's son Jamie has been in special education classes since third grade, and in her opinion, never got the help he needed until he enrolled in Sandoval. Her son's grades have improved from F's to A's and B's. She says she hardly knows how to put into words what it feels like for her son

to come home each day, excited about school.

For mother Carolyn Levan, the value of Sandoval Prep's smallness is the space it creates for appreciating a student's individual talents. She admits that she and her conservative, mid-western husband have often been stumped in their child-rearing by their only daughter, Melissa, whom she laughingly refers to as a "sixties' child." "She's definitely a free spirit and she thinks outside

the box," Levan says. Melissa's experience in the large, urban junior high school she attended a few years ago was "a nightmare." Melissa was constantly in trouble. But she's had a complete turnaround at Sandoval Prep. "Because there is a smaller student-to-teacher ratio here," Levan explains, "there's more tolerance for that thinking outside the box. At the public school, they cannot tolerate that." She continues, "Here at Sandoval, they're not going to condemn you because you've colored



outside the lines." She says faculty at the high school love Melissa's uniqueness and they're smart enough to channel it instead of squelching it.

Principal James Sandoval believes that especially in light of the challenges high-risk Hispanic kids confront, large, one-size-fits-all schools are doomed. He keeps his school size manageable so that faculty can get to know each student individually. Like staff at I Can Do It, he and the

other leaders at Sandoval Prep believe in the power of personal relationships to retain teens with histories of poor school performance. Sandoval tells teachers that their first priority is to build strong relationships with the students: “because with those relationships, you can do anything with the kids, including teach them.” Oscar, a bright if mischievous 11th grader at the high school, gives testimony to the effectiveness of this approach.

Kicked out of Trevor Brown High School for “ditching” (skipping) too often, Oscar has begun to find his niche at Sandoval Prep. He hasn’t even tried to skip school here, admitting—with a grin—that it’s too hard. “They keep track a lot faster,” he explains. “They’re always calling and checking up on [students], telling their parents that they ditched.” But he says he’s not that

interested in skipping anyway. He describes the teachers at Sandoval as “cool,” ready to “hang around with you” and “use their own time to help you out if you need extra help.” He says he’s learned more in a semester at Sandoval than he did in a whole year at Trevor Brown—and says the knowledge he’s gaining here is more practical for “the real world.” His family loves the school because he’s getting better grades now—B’s and C’s instead of F’s. “It’s better here,” Oscar says simply. “Teachers really care and they really try to help you. I think I’m gonna graduate on time from being in this school.”

Teaching the Poor

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of people living in poverty in Arizona skyrocketed 61 percent from 1980 to 1990, and continues to climb.³ Faculty at Sandoval Prep see the poverty daily. English teacher Tammy Gee has been sobered by its intensity in the families of her students. “They don’t have money; they don’t have time. Everyone is working—the students are working, their parents are working, their brothers and sisters are working,” she says. “There’s always this kind of stress about where the money’s going to come from.” Gee mentions a new dress code imposed by the school this year. For these families, she reflects, “coming up with money to go to Wal-Mart and buy eight dollar shirts is a big deal.”

Interviews with students reveal the grueling schedule many face in trying to keep up with school and work sufficient hours to help keep their families afloat financially. One 12th grade student described her typical day. She wakes at 5:00 a.m. to get herself ready, then comes to school early because she has no computer



at home, and needs access to the school's computer lab in order to complete assignments. School's out around 3:30 p.m. and she has about an hour to herself to relax, unless she has more homework to finish. She reports for work at her waitressing job at 5:00 p.m. and gets off around 10:30 p.m. Her mother has been very ill, so this teenager also helps out a great deal at home among her five siblings. Gee says of this student, "She's very serious and very focused on getting her diploma. She was just telling me the other day that her whole family is counting on her and it kind of stresses her out, because she is going to be the one to finish school, she's going to be the one to go on to college," Gee explains. "They're all looking to her to be the one who succeeds and actually accomplishes something."

Because of the poverty many students face, they have responded extremely well to the financial incentives Sandoval Prep has put in place to motivate youth and improve attendance rates. Students earning straight A's are rewarded with \$100. Three A's and a B earns \$50, as does perfect attendance for the nine-week quarter. The incentive program, inaugurated this past school year, helped to cut the absentee rate in half, to 7.8 percent.

Sandoval Prep also offers students the opportunity to serve as paid tutors. Through a private grant, the school is able to offer student tutors \$4 an hour. Some of those participating are particularly gifted in one subject, but had struggled in other areas or, because of behavior problems, had fallen behind on their credits. Some tutors had even been expelled from other schools. For

such kids, James Sandoval says, serving as tutors is a significant confidence booster, and it contributes to an atmosphere at Sandoval Prep wherein students "are participants in their learning rather than spectators."

Faculty at Sandoval Prep see poverty daily. For these families, one teacher notes, "coming up with money to go to Wal-Mart and buy eight dollar shirts is a big deal."

A Church Seeks to Inspire

Sandoval Prep grew out of a friendship between Pastor Eli Marez of New Beginnings Church and James Sandoval, when Sandoval was serving as principal of Maryvale High School. Marez had been looking for property to lease on Sunday mornings to accommodate his growing, 300-member Hispanic congregation. Turned down by a number of public school campuses, Marez was thrilled when Sandoval agreed to allow the church to use Maryvale High. The two men became golfing buddies, and one day, Marez shared with the educator his radical idea: launching a new charter school. Marez had placed his church in the thick of the Maryvale neighborhood on purpose. It was an urban community that had experienced white flight in the 1960s and 1970s and was languishing; leaving it, in his words, "a community without inspiration." From the start, he had told his parishioners that New Beginnings Church had to be a congregation "that truly addresses the social issues." And education was number one on his list. A father of three, he and his wife shared a concern common to numerous parents in the neighborhood: where to send their kids for high school.

Although Sandoval admitted that he was “very discouraged” by the state of public education in the community, he was not initially receptive to the idea of partnering with the church in starting a charter school. He says he had heard “a lot of horrible stories” about charter schools. Marez was persistent, though, and eventually got his friend to agree to accompany him on several site visits to charter schools. They were particularly impressed by a grade school launched by Radiant Assembly of God Church in northwest Phoenix. “The quality of education, the quality of the campus, made you feel like, ‘God, this is extraordinary,’” Marez recalls. The visit “nailed the whole dream and vision in Dr. Sandoval’s heart,” Marez reports. “He saw the potential, and how it could be done.”

At a critical juncture, congregants of New Beginnings Church made a courageous decision: they would take out a \$500,000 loan on behalf of the school under the church's umbrella. "They stepped out in faith," Marez says proudly. "They calculated the risks but really believed this [school] was of God."

In 1998, Sandoval took early retirement and he and Marez began the long process of applying to the state Board of Education for permission to launch the new school. At a critical juncture, congregants of New Beginnings Church made a courageous decision: they would take out a \$500,000 loan on behalf of the school under the church’s umbrella.

“They stepped out in faith,” Marez says proudly. “They calculated the risks but really believed this [school] was of God.” The initial funding was nearly matched by a \$450,000 competitive grant the school won from the federal Department of Education. With that, and a green light from the state Board, Sandoval Prep opened its doors in 2000. James Sandoval’s only regret was that the church insisted on naming the school after him. He says he finds that embarrassing.

Sandoval Prep's Uniqueness

Sandoval remembers a painful moment from his own high school career that has shaped his life’s vocation. He was sixteen, and asked his high school guidance counselor what it took to get into college. “He told me, ‘People like you (meaning Mexicans) don’t go to college. They go to the fields.’” Sandoval says, “It really disturbed me to think that a person in care of kids [could] pre-emptively determine my life in such a negative way. So it’s been my mission that I would take kids who never thought they could [succeed] to a place where they can.”

Sandoval Prep’s target population is inner-city Hispanic kids who are “falling through the cracks” in the public schools. To help them succeed, the school’s curriculum and schedule is deliberately designed with sensitivity to the challenges these youth confront. The most visible example of this is block scheduling.

“If you’re going to inspire, if you’re going to motivate,” Sandoval explains, “these kids want to see the light at the end of the tunnel. A lot of them can’t see that light from August to December, when they end the first semester and get credit if

they are successful." Consequently, at Sandoval Prep classes run 90 minutes. Kids get through as much from August to October here as they would from August to December at a traditional school. Students can also earn credits by participating in the school's "intersession" short courses. These are mini-courses taught during the two-week breaks that are scattered throughout the school's year-round academic calendar. Through the block schedule and the intersession opportunities, students can earn credits faster. This is a huge benefit for teens whose previous failures or suspensions have left them far behind on the number of credits needed to graduate.

The block schedule works, Sandoval continues, because of his school's emphasis on "depth versus coverage." He argues: "We want our kids to be critical thinkers. We can't do that when the [focus] is coverage. In a coverage system the only thing that is constant is time, and learning is secondary." With nearly thirty years' experience in the public school system, Sandoval says he watched kids fall behind, get confused and frustrated, and become "behavioral concerns—turning into suspensions, expulsions, drop-outs. So we don't do that here."

Students seem to appreciate this approach. Five out of six interviewed specifically mentioned that the longer classes gave them time to actually understand the material being taught. Senior Chevy Escobedo is another of Sandoval Prep's success stories, going from nearly all F's in his previous school to consistent A's and B's here. "There's more time in each class, in each sub-



ject," Escobedo says. "Plus they break it down real good. In a traditional school, you go in and have maybe 50 minutes and the way they teach is the same for everybody. Over here, I raise my hand and we always come back [to the material he didn't initially comprehend]." Chevy's mother Angela can't say enough positive things about the school. "From the time he started [here]," she reports, "in a really short time he became a totally different person. He's more confident now; his grades are changed a lot. And we have a nicer relationship between us as mother and son. I'm so very proud of him."

Senior Chevy Escobedo is another of Sandoval Prep's success stories, going from nearly all F's in his previous school to consistent A's and B's here. "There's more time in each class, in each subject," Escobedo says. "Plus they break it down real good."

Beyond the block scheduling, Sandoval Prep differs from traditional schools in that the curriculum here offers no electives. The school employs a prescribed curriculum that, in the principal's words, "prepares kids to meet or exceed university requirements [or] to be successful in the world of work if they don't decide to go the [college] route." The curriculum includes all the same core courses as the traditional schools—four years of math and so forth—aligned with state standards.

reports, over the past two years her son has gotten excited about a career working with computers. This is totally new for him; she says that, previously, he had never given any thought to his future. Now he has rebuilt three computers at home and talks constantly about attending college at the DeVry Technical Institute. "They're really getting him ready to go into the world," she says with satisfaction. Carolyn Levan notes the value of the school's finance class: "The United States has

When it comes to discipline, Principal James Sandoval explains that "what I want my administrators to do is to step on [the student's] shoes without messing up their shine. In other words, step on them to get your point across but don't degrade them to a point where they are humiliated."

In addition, the program at Sandoval emphasizes technology skills; students learn how to program and to repair computers. All take a two-year finance and investing course that covers the basics of personal finance and instructs students about the stock market, taxes, insurance and annuities, and consumer skills such as dealing with debt. Students take a leadership course that hones communications and group work skills and they complete a service-learning requirement. The "Postsecondary Education" class prepares the students to research college programs and explore opportunities for financial aid and scholarships.

The goal in all this is an educational experience that better prepares students for "the real world." Parents say it's on target. Jamie Snowden's mother appreciates the emphasis on cooperative learning, noting that team projects are the norm in the business world. In addition, she

an epidemic problem [with the misuse of credit] and if we can teach our students, young, how to manage their money, their whole life is going to be different."

Curriculum innovations and block scheduling mean little, of course, in the absence of security. But here, too, Sandoval Prep has an advantage: it is a far safer school than the ones most of the kids have attended in the past. "You feel more comfortable here," Chevy Escobedo says simply. "Safer. The other school I was at, it was kind of scary because it's so big." Oscar Cadena agrees. "At Trevor [Brown High School], there were a lot of fights and gang banging and stuff like that. There's not fighting at this school."

Praise and Discipline

Another unique aspect of Sandoval Prep highlighted by parents is the frequency with which students are praised and affirmed. Antoinette Snowden recalls with delight one

morning when she dropped off Jamie. The principal himself came up to her to tell him, in front of her, what an excellent job Jamie was doing in school. James Sandoval says that his thirty years in public education showed him that “high schools are notorious for sending out communications for parents that are negative.” He says that creates “a wedge in the relationship between the school and the home, between the teachers and the kids.” His approach is different. He communicates bad news to parents with an attitude of looking for what can be learned from the failure or the negative situation; what opportunities it presents for reform. And when it comes to discipline, he explains that “what I want my administrators to do is to step on [the student’s] shoes without messing up their shine. In other words, step on them to get your point across but don’t degrade them to a point where they are humiliated.”

Engaging Parents

Sandoval talks a lot about pushing kids to their highest performance level, and has high expectations of parents as well. Students desiring to enter Sandoval Prep must attend a week-long orientation course called “Discovery.” Parents’ attendance at the first session of the class is mandatory; if they fail to show, the kid doesn’t get in. Parents are also required to participate in at least three parent-teacher conferences per year. To make this easier for the many Spanish-speaking parents, nearly all the faculty at the school are bilingual. Sandoval Prep also employs a full-time “student advocate” named Gilbert Lucero. He functions as a combination guidance counselor, social worker, and truancy

officer. He makes home visits, gets to know parents, and troubleshoots any problems. Teacher Tammy Gee says that because of all this, Sandoval Prep is able to get a higher percentage of parents involved than are at the traditional public high schools.

Challenges

Sandoval Prep is an impressive place with numerous individual success stories on display. But it is a new school, and it is behind the curve on some important indicators. Some kids still skip school here; and some still drop out. Test scores, too, could be much better: the most recent data on reading scores, for example, indicates that only 49 percent of JSPHS students approached or met the state’s standards. Context is important, though; recall that the school is a repository for kids who were failing elsewhere. “A lot of our kids come to us literacy deficient in math, reading, and writing,” Sandoval explains. Moreover, some



students matriculate to the school in January and one month later they face the state’s standardized AIMS test. Thus the school is judged for these students’ performance, even though they’ve only attended for a

few weeks. Dr. Sandoval is not embarrassed by the school's test results to date, noting that his students have shown progress on standardized writing tests. "We're moving; we're getting better," he insists.

Teacher retention is another needs-improvement issue on Dr. Sandoval's radar screen. Several of the current faculty members are new this year; few have been around since the beginning. "I'm worried about it because you lose consistency," Sandoval admits. "You lose relationships." As a small charter school, Sandoval Prep cannot offer salaries

as high for veteran teachers as can other, larger campuses. To keep up and also further improve the school's facilities, more private money will need to be raised.

For technology instructor Jared Ikeda, though, the pay is not what motivates his career at Sandoval. He says when the kids testify to the difference the school is making in their lives, it gives him goosebumps. "To hear them, that enthusiasm in their voice that, 'Hey, I believed I couldn't do this, and now I can,'...is where the real reward is," Ikeda says.




Endnotes

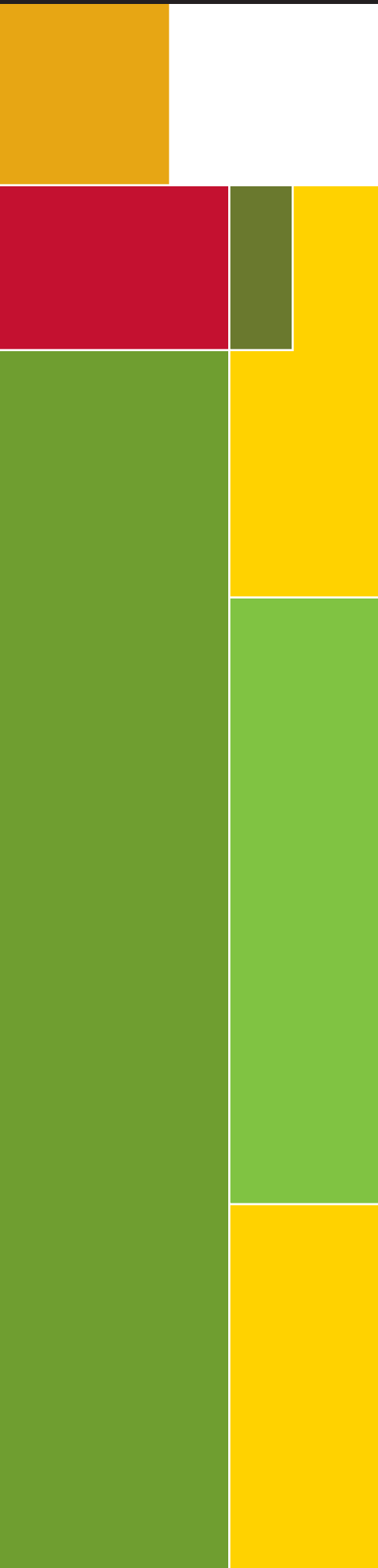
¹U.S. Department of Education,
http://www.kaet.asu.edu/horizon/transcripts/2002/may/may23_2002.htm

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