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Teachers, principal reach out to help West County students

By Kimberly S. Wetzel
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Most teenagers would cringe at the sight of their principal or teacher standing on their porch on a Saturday morning.

But the Richmond High School students who found themselves in that exact predicament Saturday did not need to be concerned about bad news.

This time, the news was mostly positive.

More than 100 teachers, parents, city officials and members of the community joined new Richmond High School Principal Orlando Ramos Saturday to knock on doors of 400 students identified as struggling in school to tell parents that the school cares and wants to help.

The event, dubbed "The Faces of Richmond High School" by Ramos, targeted students who didn't pass the California High School Exit Exam and other standardized tests last year.

"When was the last time you have heard of a school knocking on doors to encourage and promote family ties to the school and academic achievement?" Ramos said.

Volunteers were instructed to ask parents to give their permission for their teen to stay until 5 p.m. week days and come to school some Saturdays to help them get caught up. Parents and other family members were also asked to get involved.

"I think its a real dramatic shift in the education community's effort to reach out," said Andre Soto, a volunteer for the event and member of the West Contra Costa Unified School District's Bond Oversight Committee. "We see that there's a way to turn things around and I'm excited to be a part of it."

Some parents declined to open the door for volunteers or weren't home, but many welcomed them in and enthusiastically signed permission slips.

School officials are still tallying how many slips were collected.

The message to families, Ramos said, wasn't that their children are failing, but rather about reaching out to parents to show the community the school feels passionately about the academic achievement of its students.

Ramos served as one of the volunteers.

"I want to help you man, I want to see you bring up your academic achievement," Ramos said to Richmond High student George Alcalá in his Richmond home. Alcalá's family, including his brother Roberto, welcomed Ramos with open arms.

"We really appreciate you coming out, and appreciate the working you're doing," Roberto Alcalá said to Ramos.

The event is just one of several simple yet unorthodox changes Ramos has initiated at the school since taking the reigns this year.

He's also cleaned up garbage and graffiti on campus, shortened the time in between class bells to prevent kids from loitering in the halls or in front of the school and instructed teachers to make 10 positive phone calls to students' homes every month.

Richmond High is one of the district's most notorious campuses for violence and academic underachievement. There are about 3,000 suspensions per year at the approximate 1,600-student school.

Ramos got the idea to reach out to families when he worked at Andrew Draper School in the Harlem neighborhood in New York City. There, he knocked on doors of about 20 struggling students and asked parents to allow extra instruction. By the end of the year, 16 of the students showed significant improvement.

"We pushed and pushed and pushed (the students)," Ramos said. "And once those kids started seeing academic gains, we didn't have to push anymore."

Ramos said he decided to launch a similar event on a larger scale at Richmond High because it was clear there are many students in need and many people liked the idea.

"I decided to take a gamble on this event based on the support I've gotten from the community," Ramos said.

Saturday's volunteers each took three or four folders containing the names of the student along with directions to their homes and permission slips for parents to sign.

The volunteers, particularly the teachers, were excited about the event and the possibility that reaching out to families could help student do better in the classroom.

"I think its a fabulous idea, its been a long time coming," said volunteer and longtime Richmond High teacher Patty Shallcross.

"Ramos is the catalyst for all the changes that needed to happen here," said Adel Alegandre, volunteer and longtime bilingual counselor at the school. "We wouldn't have come if we didn't believe it was going to work."

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