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The school bell rings and students stay to study

After-school programs at De Anza Elementary in Baldwin Park keep students, faculty and even families focused on education.



Uriel Cardenas, 5, and his sister, Jennifer Plata, 9, work in the computer lab at De Anza Elementary School in Baldwin Park. (Christina House / For The Times / December 2, 2009)

By Seema Mehta

The bell signaling the end of the school day at [De Anza Elementary](#) in Baldwin Park rang more than an hour ago. But hundreds of students are still at school, studying vocabulary, practicing math and completing homework under the supervision of teachers.

With the help of state grants, federal funds and teacher volunteers, nearly half of De Anza's students spend extra hours every week learning at school -- hours well beyond the traditional school day.

"Until six o'clock at night, you would think we're still in session," said Principal Christine

Simmons. "Seeing the campus so alive like that, and seeing the parents and students so excited, just makes me and all the teachers want to work harder."

The result, according to the state Department of Education, is a dramatic improvement in student achievement.

The school, despite serving a community with considerable obstacles, had more than four times the average elementary school's academic gains on state standardized tests of language and math skills.

The school reached 754 on the Academic Performance Index, which ranges from 100 to 1,000 based on test scores. The state's goal is 800.

Though impressive, the gains are not entirely surprising.

Researchers and educators for decades have said that increasing the amount of time American children spend in school is vital to improving their achievement and competing with such nations as India and China. Earlier this year, President Obama called for lengthening the school day and year.

Despite widespread agreement that more classroom time is the right course, states' budget shortfalls have hampered the ability of districts to increase academic offerings.

Along with teacher layoffs, rising class sizes and fewer arts and music offerings, state funding cuts also are increasingly taking a toll on the time students spend in school.

Hawaii has hacked 17 days off its school year. California schools, whose academic year has traditionally been 180 days, were not spared; districts in Riverside, Camarillo, Ojai and Whittier lopped a week off the school year and other districts eliminated after-school programs. More are expected to make such cuts as the state grapples to close a \$21-billion budget gap.

"There are conversations in half of our districts about whether they can reduce instructional days, not because any of them want to . . . but they can't figure out any other way to absorb the next round of budget cuts," said Charles Weis, president of the Assn. of California School Administrators.

De Anza, which faces difficult challenges, is bucking that trend in an unlikely place. More than half the students are learning English and 84% receive free or reduced-price lunches, a measure of poverty.

The 650-student campus is tucked into a rough neighborhood near the interchange of the 10 and 605 freeways. Gunshots were recently fired near a school bus two blocks from school. For three years in a row, until the 2008-09 school year, De Anza's test scores failed to meet federal academic targets.

But a refocused teacher corps, an energetic new principal, a hands-off superintendent who protected staff from pink slips and a slew of after-school opportunities turned the school into a gathering spot for families in the community -- and stopped De Anza's academic stagnancy.

"It's very good for all the kids," said mother Rocio Lopez, 31, as she watched her son and daughter practice math problems in the computer lab after school.

Teacher Chuck Kemp, 60, circled the room, helping children when they got stuck.

"These programs, they just extend and support what we're doing throughout the day in our regular instructional program," he said.

Kemp, like the other teachers who staff the computer lab and the library, isn't getting paid a dime to be there. When the district ran out of money to keep facilities open after school nearly a year ago, teachers volunteered their time to ensure that the children had access to computers and books.

The 32 teachers at De Anza are veterans; the newest one was hired eight years ago. But unlike teachers in other school districts and despite the tough economic times, not a single instructor in the Baldwin Park district was threatened with a layoff last year.

Across the state last spring, tens of thousands of teachers received notices of possible layoff. Most were rescinded, but Baldwin Park Supt. Mark M. Skvarna said the damage was already done.

"If you hand out pink slips to 600 or 700 people, your instruction on that day stops," he said.

"You can't expect people to do what they're doing, which is trying to make up years and years and years of the status quo, without them knowing if they have a place of employment."

The school also revamped classroom lessons last year so that teachers were hewing more closely and explicitly to the state's standards.

But most notably, according to Skvarna and Simmons, De Anza increased opportunities after school.

In addition to the computer lab, which can be used by 65 students after school, two other voluntary programs are drawing more than 200 students. An English and math tutoring program for struggling students, funded by federal dollars, provides four hours of instruction each week to 141 students. And an after-school program operated by the nonprofit organization Think Together and funded by a state grant provides five days a week of supervised learning. Nearly 90 children receive assistance with homework, English, math and science lessons, physical education, and arts for 15 to 19 hours a week. There is a waiting list.

Experts say such opportunities for extended learning are vital in improving student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap. However, the best efforts enrich children's learning and are not solely focused on improving test scores, said Sylvia Rousseau, a professor of clinical education at USC's Rossier School of Education.

All children should have an opportunity to participate, Rousseau said. She lauded De Anza's test gains but said the most important measure is not a standardized test but whether students are becoming critical, creative thinkers who will be competitive in the global economy.

Extended time "can be very helpful [but] it has to be carefully crafted," she said.

The programs at De Anza have been a boon for Maggie Portillo, a sixth-grader who was working on math homework about scale drawings.

"I like how they help us when we need help," said the 11-year-old, adding that her parents, a tire repairman and a receptionist, work long hours. "At home, I have nobody, it's just me and my brother," who is 8.

Another change that has driven the students' success is a tangible effort to turn the school into a safe gathering place for families.

Parents and students mill around the campus, studying in the library or lining up to borrow books.

Simmons, who became principal at De Anza last year, said the goal is to create access to amenities -- a structured study environment, computers, the Internet and books -- that are commonplace in more affluent communities.

"Parents come here and study with their kids because they don't have a quiet place at home," she said. "We're trying to make it so they have access to things they don't have access to at home."

Walking across a playground decorated with flags from universities across the nation, she added that the students and their parents need to believe opportunities are open to them if they work hard enough. Simmons recalled an assembly that took place hours earlier, when she handed out ribbons and key chains to students who excelled at their lessons or read large numbers of books.

Why were they were working so hard, she asked.

"To go to college!" they roared.

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