



*Originally published in the Whittier Daily News February, 21, 2010*

## **Superintendent's Corner: South Whittier is a special place**

By Erich Kwek

In a recent Los Angeles Times article, Hector Tobar described South Whittier as "nowhere." He went on to say that bad things can happen when you live nowhere.

I beg to differ with Mr. Tobar. I am the superintendent of schools in South Whittier, and I see very good things happening every day. It is a great place for learning and families.

Three years ago, I came to South Whittier with no preconceived ideas about the area.

What I found is a community that cares deeply about its children and schools. Family, children and education are very important to the people of South Whittier, where several generations of families have attended our schools.

Parents want the best for their children, and we intend to deliver.

It is our mission in the South Whittier School District to give our students the best education possible, and to prepare every student for success in high school and beyond by focusing on the core academic subjects in an effective and integrated curriculum.

Most news about education today focuses on fiscal crisis. We have had our share of fiscal crisis in the past year.

Declining enrollment and reduced funding from the state have devastated staffing and spending in many areas, but our spirit and educational programs have not suffered.

Our budget is balanced, and our students are learning more than ever.

Over the last three years, the curriculum and instructional practices at our schools have undergone a major transformation.

Through assistance provided by the state, we have examined every program and practice used in our district and changed them to achieve maximum benefit.

Programs to aid English Language Learners have been added, kindergarten students have a full day program, benchmark testing is used quarterly, and data- driven decision-making is focused on getting results.

Our students are excelling because of this transformation. Over this three year period, districtwide scores on the Academic Performance Index have increased by 37 points. We will continue to grow academically in the South Whittier School District. Our school board is committed to achieving the best results possible for students, and they hold district leaders accountable.

We have achieved our most dramatic improvement at Graves Middle School. The program there has been restructured, and a major component is providing academic support to students.

We offer intervention and remediation before school, after school and on Saturdays. The addition of double math classes and extensive tutoring has resulted in 67 percent of our eighth-grade Algebra 1 students achieving proficiency.

Another important goal of this transformation is to provide an enriched curriculum to seventh- and eighth-grade students who excel. This is done through academy and honors classes and academic electives.

Electives in leadership, journalism, film, band and AVID are now offered during the regular instructional day.

The highlight of the year for eighth-grade students is an opportunity to participate in an academic trip to Washington, D.C.

Graves Middle School's focus on academics, intervention and enrichment is achieving excellent results. Student learning and test scores are moving in a positive direction.

Our district programs are complemented by a strong partnership with THINK Together to provide an after-school program for our students.

Students are provided a daily after-school program that includes academics, enrichment, homework help and sports. This program directly supports instruction received during the regular school day and is provided at all campuses free of charge to our parents.

The students of South Whittier School District are making good progress. Fiscal crisis in the state has not damaged our resolve to deliver the best educational program possible to our students.

The transformation that has taken place in the last few years is amazing to see. It has been possible because of the hard-working and dedicated school board members, administrators,

teachers, classified staff and parents of the South Whittier School District and community. Family and education are top priorities.

Very good things are happening in South Whittier. It is not "nowhere" as described by Hector Tobar. It is somewhere for children to grow and learn, and it is a great place for families to raise their children.

I invite Mr. Tobar to come back and take another look.

*Erich Kwek is Superintendent of the South Whittier School District.*