

Students tout ways Communities in Schools helps

By Ron Maloney New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung correspondent | Posted: Sunday, February 2, 2014
12:07 am

An Oak Run Middle School eighth-grader struggled with her composure, grabbing a tissue and wiping her eyes as she described what it was like to see her mother taken away to jail and then broke down completely.

Pulling herself together, she looked around a classroom at a dozen or so adults there to learn about the importance of Communities in Schools, a locally based nonprofit aimed at helping at-risk students stay in school, succeed and achieve positive goals in life by attending a “school chat” in which students told about the challenges they face.

Then, the girl brightened as she began talking about her “second mother,” CIS site coordinator Monica Beltran, who is responsible for implementing the anti-dropout program for 110 Oak Run students.

“With my mom going to jail and everything, Miss Beltran has been there for me,” the girl said. “I go to her for everything. I can talk to her. I know she’ll be there for me.”

A CIS site coordinator, Beltran holds a master’s degree in social work and is responsible for working with teachers, counselors and school administrators for coordinating a support system for students that can include a mentor, help with homework, help with getting food or virtually any need a student has that could enable them to succeed in school.

Each CIS student has unique needs, Beltran said, and the CIS program can be individually shaped to meet those needs.

“I see as many as I can in a day or in a week,” Beltran said. “I have different groups that each have six to eight kids — three groups on Wednesday and one on Friday.”

In addition to securing tutoring or help with homework or maintaining good grades, CIS intervenes in a student’s life in many ways, Beltran said. Sometimes it helps students pick better or more positive friends. Sometimes, with the help of volunteers, it provides positive relationships with a stable, secure adult through mentoring.

And sometimes, the needs CIS addresses are more basic than that.

Beltran has about a dozen families she helps with food through the aid of the Oakwood Baptist Church food pantry.

About one third of Communities in Schools’ funding comes through the Texas Education Agency, while another third comes through local donations. The remainder comes from the host school district, which in the case of Oak Run Middle School is the New Braunfels ISD.

Oak Run Assistant Principal David Lewis praised the CIS program — and Beltran in particular.

“Miss Beltran is an amazing juggler,” Lewis exclaimed, noting that the program Beltran represents doesn’t only address in-school issues.

“I think there’s an important link between what we’re doing in school each day and what goes on at home,” Lewis said.

Oak Run Principal David Simmons agreed.

"Communities in Schools has been a valued partner with Oak Run Middle School in terms of furnishing support and guidance for our students," Simmons said. "They have enhanced our parental involvement and continue to be an invaluable resource for our school."

Like Beltran, CIS Executive Director Chris Douglas said the CIS program is tailored to meet the individual needs of each student.

“These students here today are just four of the more than 100 kids Ms. Beltran works with,” Douglas said. “As you saw (listening to the students’ remarks) here today, some need to be seen more than once a day, some once a day, some once a week. Everything is individualized.”

Each student is assessed for attendance, grades and behavior, Douglas said.

“We find out what’s going on with the student, and we find out what’s going on at home, as we know that what’s going on at home affects what goes on in school,” Douglas said. “We might think a parent getting out of prison is a joyous time and everything is good, but that may be the worst time because you have found a new normal and then everything changes. Helping them fit into that new normal is what it’s all about. It’s hard to focus on school if they’re worried about their parents going to jail.”

Douglas told the “chat” visitors that CIS depends not only on its professional staff, but on a cadre of volunteers who can become student mentors. These volunteers, who must be able to devote at least 30 to 45 minutes a week, pass criminal background checks and are trained in the role in which CIS hopes a positive relationship with an affirming adult outside the family can improve self-esteem and contribute to success in school.

“We have at least a thousand kids who could benefit from having a mentor,” Douglas told the group.

“We’re always looking for mentors, and if you have groups or belong to a church that would be interested in taking part in our mentoring program, we’d like to hear from you.”

CIS will be hearing from Jerry Barney of Spokane, Wash., and Canyon Lake, a venture philanthropist who is trying to establish a program in Washington state and is considering another one here that would combat child abuse. He’s been learning about CIS and said he was very impressed with the program and its work.

Barney listened to what the students said and then spoke to them briefly.

“I see a lot of courage in you,” he told the kids. “To change behavior is very difficult to do,” he said. “You have to want to — and you have to want to inside.”