



Whittier Union HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

To Achieve and Maintain Excellence...

NEWS RELEASE

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Whittier Union After-school Program Helps Students Find Authentic Voice Through Art

WHITTIER – Whittier High School senior Kim Morales was skeptical when, as a freshman on academic probation, she was asked to attend a special presentation by the Spirit Awakening Foundation (SAF). Initially, Morales was unmoved by the intervention specialists' positive focus and talk of self-expression through the creative arts.

Spurred by her friends, Morales began attending weekly SAF after-school open discussion sessions. Morales quickly discovered that her mentors were perceptive, easy to connect with and motivated to help Morales find her place at school.

"I genuinely enjoy and love the Spirit Awakening program," Morales said. "My mentors have helped me so much and have so much confidence in me. They never judge me. In open discussion, we talk about things I could never imagine talking about at school. I feel like we can all connect or relate to similar situations or problems that we have. It's been wonderful."

The SAF intervention program helps students build confidence and raise self-awareness, using creative writing, visual arts, mentorship, service and leadership training. Its facilitating artists and teaching assistants connect with Whittier and Frontier High students through empathy and authenticity.

Through its art-focused curriculum and field trips to Universal Studios and the Skirball Cultural Center, SAF artists and teachers motivate dozens of students a week – many of whom are on academic probation – to excel in their studies, grow leadership skills and find their authentic voice. The program has proven so successful that it is now part of Whittier High's incoming freshman summer seminar.

"I can't say enough about what Spirit Awakening has meant to our students," Whittier High Assistant Principal Allison Huntley said. "They are more comfortable at school, more confident, have better attendance and are developing stronger relationships with other students and teachers. The mentors are simply amazing. I've never seen anything quite like it."

SAF was brought to Whittier High in 2017 by then-Assistant Principal Richard Rodriguez, who saw the need for an effective extracurricular intervention program to keep struggling students from falling through the cracks. Rodriguez, now assistant principal at Frontier High, was impressed by the energy and connectivity of the facilitating artists.

"Spirit Awakening had been working primarily in juvenile camps and was looking to expand to high schools," Rodriguez said. "We worked to build a curriculum that would resonate with Whittier students,

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one that addressed self-awareness and self-esteem through the arts. It worked so well I brought the program to Frontier in 2018. It's a much smaller scale here, but the students love it."

The after-school program has adapted to COVID-19 restrictions by replacing in-person lessons with Zoom conferences three days a week. From 20 to 50 Whittier High and five to 10 Frontier High students participate.

The Spirit Awakening Youth Art Project is a partnership between the Los Angeles County Probation Department, the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture and the Spirit Awakening Foundation. For more information visit <https://www.lacountyarts.org>.

"Now more than ever, the social and emotional well-being of our students is of paramount importance at Whittier Union," Superintendent Martin Plourde said. "The Spirit Awakening Foundation has a unique ability to connect with our students and not only allow them to find their creative voice, but to transform them into excellent students and leaders on campus."

PHOTO CAPTION

WUHSD_100720_SAF: Whittier High School senior Kim Morales works on a drawing during a creative arts class taught by Spirit Awakening Foundation facilitating artists. The afterschool intervention program, available at Whittier and Frontier high schools, aims to help students build confidence and self-awareness through its art-focused curriculum, meditation and field trips.

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OUR MISSION:

The Whittier Union High School District provides all students with an engaging, quality standards-based instructional program delivered by a well-trained staff resulting in improved student achievement. Whittier Union High School District works to achieve and maintain excellence in providing a comprehensive education for all students.

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