



NORWALK-LA MIRADA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

PRESS RELEASE

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Head Start Preschool Programs Celebrate 50th Anniversary

The Ramona Preschool auditorium was festooned from floor to ceiling with colorful paintings of trees children's handprints created by the preschoolers of Norwalk-La Mirada School District's Head Start classes in honor of the program's 50th anniversary celebration on Feb. 26.

More than 100 Head Start parents, students and preschool staff listened to moving personal accounts from two Head Start alumni who shared some of their earliest childhood memories of learning to speak English and making new friends as Ramona Preschool students.

"As a Head Start student, parent and now teacher, I have experienced all facets of this organization since I was little from learning to read and write to singing and dancing with classmates," said Odelia Pena, a Head Start alumna and teacher.

"I wanted to teach Head Start once I graduated so I could inspire children to strive for everything, like my teachers did for me. It has been an honor serving parents and students for the past 25 years and seeing my students graduate, go to college and become productive members of society."

Los Angeles County Office of Education and NLMUSD officials -- along with representatives from State Senate, Assembly and County Board of Supervisor district offices -- congratulated District staff for the high quality program before parents went into classrooms set up to engage them in art projects, group reading and other activities.

NLMUSD's Head Start program was created in 1966 to prepare children from low-income households for kindergarten and to connect families with the support systems needed to promote health and well-being.

One of the nation's earliest operating Head Start programs, NLMUSD began with just two classes of about 40 students at Ralph Nottingham Elementary School (now Arturo A. Sanchez Elementary School). Today, 42 classes serving more than 800 students operate at six locations. This year, the District began an Early Head Start program, serving 103 pregnant mothers and children ages 0-3.

Young children from families with incomes at or below the poverty level typically lag in cognitive development by age 2. When these children enter kindergarten, they are often further behind and tend to remain there.

The District's program has cut this achievement gap by 20 to 50 percent, with Head Start students consistently scoring above goals set for literacy, motor skills, social and emotional development by the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE).

"This program is vital to the early learning experience of many children in our community, providing them with a solid foundation to begin their educational journeys," NLMUSD School Board President Karen Morrison said. "We are committed to providing the support needed for all of our students to become successful learners, and sometimes that means providing services beyond the classroom."

Not only does Head Start focus on the needs of pregnant mothers and students ages 0 to 5, but it also sets families up with family service workers once children are enrolled. Head Start family service workers help families to set goals, such as owning their own home or buying a car, and work with them to create and implement plans to achieve their objectives. In its 2014-15 annual report, the District's Head Start program facilitated a total of 368 connections between families and service providers, and 66 children were provided with mental health services.

"Our programs help families lift themselves out of poverty while offering their children a high-quality education," Head Start and Preschool Programs Director Laurel Parker said. "Fifty years ago, we couldn't have been as ambitious as we are today. Our classes just keep growing."

Maria Valenzuela, a Head Start teacher, and Regina Roberts, an Early Head Start home-based teacher, contribute to the flourishing Head Start curriculum. The two are this year's recipients of L.A. County Office of Education's Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching.

"I am so proud of our staff who make all this possible for our students and who draw such positive feedback from the community," said NLMUSD Superintendent Dr. Hasmik Danielian who was in attendance. "The support students and parents receive through this program gives them the skills and resources to build bright futures all children deserve."

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

HEADSTART1: *Ramona Preschool staff surround Director of Preschool Services Laurel Parker holds a California State Senate resolution signed by Senator Tony Mendoza in honor of Norwalk-La Mirada's Head Start 50th anniversary on Feb. 26.*

HEADSTART2: *A Ramona Preschool teacher reads "Chicka Chicka Boom Boom" to three students during Norwalk-La Mirada's Head Start 50th anniversary celebration.*

HEADSTART3: *Ramona Preschool Family Services Worker Jackie Rios helps a young boy sort confetti for a crown he decorates during the celebration.*

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