

My University: Elementary students plan for college early

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For a group of Farr Elementary School students, attending Cal State University San Marcos is already in their plans.

Approximately 70 third through fifth graders from the elementary school located in Escondido visited the campus yesterday to get a feel of what university life is like. The students, wearing t-shirts that read, "I am college bound in 2017," attended library and college workshops, took a tour of the campus, and were presented with traditional Aztec dancers. They were also given certificates for their attendance and folders with information about the university.

The students, primarily of Latino descent, are part of the Open Gate program, which consists of gifted and talented children. The program involves different college-related activities that often include parents. Most had never stepped foot on to a university campus before, said Ana Ardon, Research project Coordinator for the National Latino Research Center at Cal State San Marcos.

"The area is one of the lowest socio-economic pockets in all of California," said teacher Yvette Hernandez Payne who coordinated the trip to the school and teaches the Open Gate Program children. "College is talked about I want them to know that college is possible, I always remind them there is still a possibility for them to go."

Hernandez Payne is a CSUSM alumnus, who was working on her master's thesis while already teaching at Farr.

"It was exciting for my students to see that I wrote a book that is at the library they were just at," she said.

Throughout their visit, the students were reminded that CSUSM is "everyone's university" and that "everyone can come here" as long as they study hard, learn how to write and never give up. Hernandez Payne said it is very important, that despite the challenge of living in a low socio-economic area, the children still count on very supportive parents. She said language is one of their biggest challenges, but despite that, every teacher at Farr Elementary visits every single household of every child in their classrooms. They also have parent meetings once a month in which the parents are provided with activities, reading tips and other material to practice with their children.

"The Latino culture values education a lot," she said. "The big challenge is the language barrier, but we still have a lot of support. Visiting their homes makes us understand the living situation and allows us to get to know the child better."

Parents who were among those visiting the campus said bringing children even at such a young age can be nothing but beneficial.

"I like the idea because this way he can start realizing what his future may look like," said Maria Zavala, parent to a fifth grader. "This keeps him focused and motivated, he can start thinking about what he wants, to be and what he wants to study, and make him strive for a better future."

Hernandez Payne said it is very important to get children thinking about college this early on, so it doesn't go to the back of their minds.

"We want them to think that college is not something that you may or may not go to," she said. "It's actually something that will be the next step."