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Parents teaching parents bridges cultural divide

Intercambio
seeks to expand
language program

By Erica Meltzer
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Alma Herrera has tried to learn English before, but something always got in the way. She worked jobs that didn't let out until late at night. She had her children to raise.

Now she's making real progress with help from a fellow parent at Casey Middle School, where her older children are in the sixth and eighth grades.

Herrera and Barr Hogen, who also has a son in eighth grade at Casey, were matched through "Intercambio and Schools Together," an initiative of Intercambio de Comunidades that aims to help immi-

grant parents improve their language skills and become more involved in their children's schooling.

Hogen goes to Herrera's house two days a week for an hour-and-a-half study session at a time that works for both women. Sometimes they work through chapters of an English-as-a-second-language book. Other times they talk about things that have come up in daily life.

"This is better because she comes to my house and gives me all her attention, and if we need to change

See PARENTS, 17A



Cliff Grassmick | Camera

Alma Herrera holds her 15-day-old son, Angel David, with the rest of the family, Sandra, 11; father, Julian; and Brenda, 13. Alma Herrera has been studying English with Barr Hogen through the "Intercambio and Schools Together" program. The two mothers both have children at Casey Middle School.

Parents teaching parents bridges cultural divide

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something, we change it," Herrera said in Spanish, of studying with Hogen.

Herrera said speaking English still is difficult, but she understands a lot more already. When she was in the hospital recently, she could understand what the nurses and doctors were saying.

"That was a big change for me," she said, with a laugh.

Intercambio de Comunidades aims to help immigrants learn English and integrate with the communities they live in. The nonprofit social service agency provides free and low-cost English classes, intercultural events and community resource workshops.

In 2007, Intercambio started "Intercambio and Schools Together," which matches English-learning and English-teaching parents in the same school communities, with two related goals in mind.

Students do better when their parents are more engaged in their studies, and language barriers make it more difficult for immigrant parents to help with homework, talk to teachers and other school officials and get involved in the broader school community.

By helping non-English-speaking parents improve their language skills with help from another parent, "Intercambio and Schools Together" hopes that school communities will be more united and immigrant parents more en-

gaged, leading — in the long run — to better outcomes for Hispanic students.

"Intercambio and Schools Together" is now in four Boulder County schools. Organizers hope the program will be in eight to 10 schools by the end of 2010, and they're seeking a \$15,000 challenge grant from the Community Development Foundation to help make it happen.

The organization also wants to develop its own curriculum that teaches parents about the American school system — from Parent-Teacher Associations to standardized tests and why they matter.

Eliberto Mendoza, program director for "Intercambio and Schools Together" in the Longmont area, said finding the time — either to volunteer or to learn — is the biggest challenge in getting more families involved in the program.

Hogen, who is president of the PTA at Casey, said she hopes the program can bridge some of the cultural divide at the school.

"I want the parents of the Latino kids to feel that the school is just as much theirs as it is ours," Hogen said.

Doug Young, a software consultant who volunteered through the program last year at Casey, said it helped open communication between English- and Spanish-speaking parents, at least for those who participated.

Hispanic and non-Hispanic

parents usually keep to themselves at school functions, but when he sees Angel Tapia, his recently graduated student, they have plenty to talk about, even though they come from different worlds. Young lives in Sunshine Canyon, Tapia in east Boulder.

The pair took eight months to do what could be a four-month course because the lessons often drifted away from the book.

Young said his eyes were opened to the many ways immigrants have to adjust in the United States when Tapia asked him to look at a letter he'd gotten in the mail. Tapia said he had read it several times and wasn't sure what it meant.

"He handed me a three- or four-page typewritten letter, and it was the kind of letter that would strike fear into the heart of any native speaker," Young said. "It was the explanation of benefits from his insurance company."

Young said he's not a language person and didn't know anything about teaching, but the training provided by Intercambio prepared him to help Tapia achieve his goals. Now that Tapia is more confident with his English, he's planning to take vocational classes at Front Range Community College.

"I'm just tremendously proud of him," he said.

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