

Ezequiel Tafoya Alvarado Academy

Building Bridges for Future Latino Leaders

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The tagline for Ezequiel Tafoya Alvarado Academy (ETAA) is “a school for smart kids.” And this impetus fuels the charter’s focus on empowering economically underprivileged Latino children in Madera, Calif., through education. These efforts are intended to breed future leaders in the state’s extremely large Latino community, where children often attend underserved public schools.

“I wanted to create a school where we could prove that very low income students could have academic achievement,” says Dr. Nicolas Retana, who holds a doctorate in education and is ETAA’s co-founder and executive director. “Most traditional schools, they don’t believe it, they don’t manifest it, and they don’t create an environment where Latino kids can have success.

“We’ve proven that [we can]; we’ve had very high test score gains,” he continues.

Dr. Retana’s approach is one of intense structure and academic rigor that intends to teach students that they are in control of their own lives. “We really emphasis taking ownership and responsibility for your own life,” he says. To do this, ETAA encourages competition and discourages excuse-making and complaining, he adds.

Leadership from A to Z

The charter receives its name from the Latino educator, activist, and inspirational figure, Ezequiel Tafoya Alvarado, a Mexican-born immigrant who moved to Texas as a child and eventually received his master’s degree in Theology from the University of Southern California. Appropriately, ETAA has a unique, Latino-centric strand of leadership that it weaves into its curriculum, which teaches kids about concepts of what leaderships is, as well as gives examples of good leaders.

“We give our students many opportunities to be the leaders in their classrooms,” explains Robin Retana, co-director and longtime educator. Ms. Retana uses a recent career day as an example, where fourth graders came dressed in their desired profession and gave speeches to their fellow classmates.

“We teach them how to maneuver the politics of life, how to speak well, [how to be] assertive,” shares Dr. Retana, adding that he’s had a lot of parents commend him for how he inspires the children at his school to continually become better learners, athletes and people. He says that one of the best ways to engender success is through competition. “It’s important that our young men and women compete,” he says. “We compete at a high level, competition is good, and we don’t fear competition.”

In addition to athletics, the school has female students participating in a girl scouts program to encourage further leadership and responsibility. The school also offers “student of the month” awards that pupils can receive for attending class every day, completing their homework





and having good behavior. At the end of the year, all students who received this accolade for five months out of the school year are taken on a field trip. ETAA's faculty promotes the field trip and student of the month award often, and both school leaders say it has infused the school with a good kind of peer pressure, in that it encourages kids to be winners.

In general, focusing on the positive is how ETAA strives to teach kids. The school has zero discipline problems. "Our parents know our expectations and it doesn't take long for the students to honor the environment that has been created for them," he adds.

"We want to create a new generation of leaders," shares Dr. Retana. "It just creates a beautiful atmosphere for learning."

Defying Statistics

The city of Madera has a modest population of 60,000 and ETAA has 348 full-time children, a number that has grown by about 50 each year. Every child at the school speaks both Spanish and English and most of their parents work in the agriculture or service industries, says Dr. Retana. Many families live below the poverty line.

Yet, despite such overwhelming statistics, the school's daily attendance rate hovers between 98- and 99-percent. The school has a "tremendous" parent involvement program and each family is obligated to provide up to ten hours annually in service of the school. Also, the school's reputation is widely known in the California education community. For less than 10 initial teaching slots, Dr. Retana interviewed nearly 100 people. "We really take it serious," he says of choosing his faculty, many of whom have master's degrees and all of whom speak Spanish. Dr. Retana believes that in every kid, no matter the economic standing of their parents or the color of their skin, there is endless potential. With Ezequiel Tafoya Alvarado Academy, his goal is to create a Latin community in California that realizes this truth.

"We don't want our kids to think that just because they are from poor families that they can't achieve success," he stresses. Thanks to his vision, ETAA's time for success is now.

A VISION REALIZED

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