

Neighborhood strengthening effort expands to free kindergarten prep for parents

BY RACHEL ALEXANDER
Of the Salem Reporter

When Whitney Contreras last talked to her son's preschool teacher, she got a promising report.

Her 3-year-old, Ivan, was learning quickly, easily recognizing patterns and hitting other milestones.

Contreras, 26, said it's thanks to toys and activities she's getting through a monthly online parent class, which are showing her easy ways to help Ivan learn at home even with a busy schedule.

"Anything that helps me to be a better parent, I'll do," she said.

Contreras is among more than a dozen Salem moms taking part in an expanded effort to reach the parents of preschool-age children and help them prepare their kids for success in school.

She participated in similar classes when her older children, now ages 5 and 6, were in preschool, but said having a refresher and access to new toys is helpful.

"It fits right in because my son is 3," she said.

The classes are the result of a new collaboration between the Marion Polk Early Learning Hub and Salem's Community Business and Education Leaders group.

It's part of a broad push to improve the lives of Salem kids, with a particular focus on those who historically haven't

had access to the kind of support needed to thrive in school and life.

That's reflected in kindergarten readiness data for local schools, which measures how well students entering school can recognize letters and numbers. Gaps in Salem are wide along racial and income lines, with children in more affluent and whiter schools generally recognizing far more letters than their peers.

Jim Seymour, the former executive director of Catholic Community Services, is leading the project, which began in earnest last year with the creation of a Hallman neighborhood council.

He said the philosophy behind the effort is that real change comes from parents and families recognizing problems in their own communities and identifying solutions, rather than poor families being seen as a problem outsiders need to solve.

"Quit trying to fix or save them and come alongside," he said.

Through that group, parents in the Northgate area, whose children generally attend Hallman Elementary School, meet regularly to discuss neighborhood improvements and ways to support families, like mental health classes and a walking group of moms who patrol Northgate Park after school to ensure kids walking after school get home safe.

Seymour is now working to expand councils to other Salem neighborhoods with high concentrations of families living in poverty, starting with the Auburn area in east Salem.

"We're just trying to create a sense of community where there is that individual resilience, community resilience, family resilience," he said.

The free parent classes are another piece of the effort. The collaborative, with funding from Mountain West Investment Corporation, pays for Leslye Garcia to facilitate monthly online classes in both English and Spanish.

(Disclosure: Larry Tokarski, Mountain West president, is also a co-founder of Salem Reporter.)

Classes were heavily advertised to



Whitney Contreras and son Ivan wave to a friend during the inaugural "Fun Fridays at Northgate Park" on Friday, July 9, 2021. BY AMANDA LOMAN/SALEM REPORTER

families in the Hallman area and through the parent council, though any Salem parent could sign up.

Garcia reaches out to families one-on-one to deliver activities and toys like Wikki Stix, small colored wax strips kids can fold into different shapes. Then, in a two-hour class over Zoom, she checks in with parents and explains the basics of literacy and child development.

A late February session in Spanish opened with some get-to-know-you questions as one mother signed in from her car, and another turned on her camera while feeding her son spaghetti and hamburger in his high chair.

"As busy moms, would you rather never have to wash dishes or never have to do laundry?" Garcia asked with a wide smile.

The moms relaxed into the class as they shared the details of their least favorite chores - a never-ending pile of dishes, for many - and to commiserate over their children's favorite toys.

"It's coming from their heart that they want to do something better for their children. A lot of these moms have already been moms in the past and they're like, 'I want better for my smaller kiddos,'" she

said. The atmosphere is calm and supportive. Garcia is energetic when she explains the purpose of the classes: giving parents the knowledge they need to play with their kids in ways that help prepare them for school.

Kindergarten expectations have increased in recent years, and kids who enter school not knowing the alphabet often struggle to catch up.

"It's better to get kiddos prepared for school before they start school," she said.

February's focus was on letter groups - explaining to parents that kids group written letters together by their appearance, rather than the sound they make. The class showed parents activities to help differentiate between curved shaped letters, like a, c, e, o and s.

"We want them to notice this before they start learning the letter names. This way they don't get them confused later on," Garcia explained.

Contreras said it's insights like that which make the class especially helpful.

"They make me feel appreciated as a mom," Contreras said.

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HOMINY	SEAT	ODA
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