



"A Little Like Family" Solidarity School shows how community can teach its own

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Back before government-run schools were created in this country in the 1840s, residents of our great nation banded together to provide children an education. Women's groups, charity organizations, ministries, craftsmen, political groups and ethnic neighborhoods formed schools. In many parts of the country, abolitionists formed schools to educate black children who in some states were forbidden from learning to read.

In Sandy Springs, a grass-roots effort has emerged to once again embrace the idea that a small community should educate its own. With a donation from a local family and active participation from parents, businesses and civic groups, the Solidarity School has opened to serve north Fulton County's new immigrant Hispanics.

This wonderful little private school in a strip shopping center on Northwood Drive off Roswell Road offers 55 poor children in kindergarten through third grade an alternative to public schools. Most of the children live in Sandy Springs, and their parents jumped at the opportunity because public schools have a bad track record of educating minorities.

An example: On this year's Criterion-Referenced Competency Test, about 11 percent of Fulton County's white children failed to meet the fourth-grade reading standard; about 60 percent of its Hispanic pupils didn't meet it.

"We heard in Mexico that public schools in America don't give a lot of attention to Hispanic children," parent Adriana Fierro said through an interpreter. Her 5-year-old son Angel is enrolled in kindergarten at Solidarity. "I feel very satisfied with this school. It's a little like family here."

Parents such as Fierro are given scholarships to cover the \$4,300 a year it takes to educate each child. The school then asks parents to donate time or if possible, \$5 a week. Many of these parents are day laborers, maids, construction or fast-food workers. When they don't have money, they donate food or time to clean the school or help with other chores. One parent has a taxi service and shuttles children to field trips in his van.

Solidarity also provides English-immersion, phonics-based learning. School lasts until 4 p.m. and the school year is extended, with only a four-week break in summer. Uniforms are required, which has contributed to a disciplined atmosphere.

Sandy Springs volunteers provide rides for children who need them. Local grocers and restaurants provide lunches and snacks. Teenagers in the area offer after-school tutoring. It's a grand illustration of what a community can do when it gets together on a mission to educate its children.

Because of the demand, Solidarity will add a pre-kindergarten and fourth and fifth grades next year. The waiting list has already started growing for the 2002-03 school year. Several parents who weren't sure if they would return to their country have now committed to staying because of the wonderful opportunity Solidarity provides.

Public opinion polls show strong support among poor parents for school choice across America. Poor children of all races are the ones stuck in our worst public schools. That reputation has spread across our borders.

Solidarity makes the case that with a publicly funded scholarship program in each state, the country would do a much better job of providing an equal education to all children.

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