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Education, activism

Administrator teaches children of Latino migrant workers

FRENCH CAMP - Raul Mora's class called out vocabulary words in unison between taking turns reading about ancient Olmec and Mayan cultures in their social studies book at French Camp Elementary School last week.

"Continent."

"Migrated."

Students chuckled when Mora stopped to help a student practice sounding out the "v" sound in "variety."

But the jibes have no sting, because all the fifth- and sixth-graders in this summer class for the children of migrant workers know firsthand how hard it can be for native Spanish speakers to use the "v" sound when speaking English, he said.

"They know that we're playing, and it's out of *cariño*, out of love," Mora said. Mora, 38, would not be working at French Camp this summer if it were not for his affection for students. After all, helping elementary school students catch up on work they missed while on the move with their parents is not part of Mora's job description as dean of students at Manteca High School.

But students such as these who need extra help to succeed are just the kind of students Mora became an educator to help.

He made that decision when he was working as a campus monitor at Lodi High School and saw many young and smart Latino students struggling to stay in school, he said.

"They were dropping out like flies," he said. He thought he could help them stay.

The son of two teachers, Mora began teaching in the Stockton Unified School District in 1996 before moving to the Manteca Unified School District when he became vice principal at French Camp Elementary School in 2000. In 2004, he took a job at Manteca High School as dean of students, an administrative job that includes enacting discipline.

"He's a great guy. If you need help with anything, he's right there for you," said Marco Benitez, 17. Benitez did not like Mora before they met face to face, but they got to talking and became friends, Benitez said. "Every day, I used to go up and talk to him."

Benitez said Mora expelled him for fighting, but the two keep in touch.

"He's still involved in my education," Benitez said.

Mora said his parents and their devotion to education and community activism helped him make the decision to work in education.

They said they tried to instill in Mora that devotion, and they see it in his work.

"You have to give back to the community. ... You can't stop looking back, and you have to remember where you came from," said his mother, Linda Mora, program director at El Concilio, the Council for the Spanish Speaking, and president of the Coalition of Mexican-American Organizations.

"I think he understands the balance between education and community activism," she said.

When Latino students marched with thousands in San Joaquin County - joining the hundreds of thousands of protesters demonstrating against a bill House of Representative cracking down on illegal immigrants this spring - Mora helped students organize a rally at Manteca High.

It gave students a way to be heard without participating in unsupervised demonstrations - students at the rally presented a letter of their concerns to a representative of Sen. Dianne Feinstein's office - but it also gave students who chose to march a chance to be more informed, he said.

"That whole message of the assembly is that you need to educate yourself," he said. "Then you're going to be a part of your community."

In the future, Mora said he wants to organize a youth conference for students of all backgrounds.

He also helps students in the federal Migrant Education Program go on trips to Washington, D.C.

Mora is a "hands-on" administrator, said Bob Lee, Manteca Unified's director of secondary education.

"Raul really empowers his students to be active participants, not just participants," he said.

At summer school in French Camp, the first thing Mora did with his class was establish a connection to his students by asking them to write their autobiographies, said Adriana Solis, an aide in his classroom.

He is involved with the students, and they respond by learning the material, she said.

"He always does something to get them energized," she said.

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