



Comal County, Texas

Preparing for life after high school

By Frank Walter

Maria Maldonado overcame many obstacles on her way to graduating from high school in New Braunfels, Texas, and becoming a nurse. She moved from Mexico to Texas at age three with her single mother. When she started 1st grade, she still knew few words in English, and her family struggled financially.

This is when she first encountered Communities In Schools (CIS) of South Central Texas, a nonprofit program that works in 17 Comal Independent School District schools and in partnership with hundreds of community organizations to provide a range of supports to meet the academic and nonacademic needs of at-risk students. The sprawling 600-square-mile Comal County, which is 30 miles north of San Antonio and has a population of 124,000, is one of the fastest growing in the country.

"Communities In Schools provided me with school supplies, clothes, just about anything we needed," Maldonado said. "In middle school, my vision was starting to fail. With help from the Communities In Schools' coordinator I got glasses. In high school, I was bullied for being from Mexico. It was hard to take. I often would lean on my coordinator, Miss Liberty. She was always there for me. Her goal was not just to get me through high school but also into community college to study nursing."

Miss Liberty is Liberty Nicholas who runs Project Success, a CIS program that helps high school students plan and prepare for college, careers, or service in the

military. Project Success coordinators take high school students on field trips to colleges, businesses, hospitals, and other locations to learn about career options. They help students fill out college and financial aid applications. During the summer, Project Success alumni lead an eight-week boot camp — including a wilderness camping experience — to prepare about 45 high school graduates for life after high school. Site coordinators stay in touch with students after graduation as well, meeting with them at area colleges, texting them frequently, and keeping everyone connected through a Facebook page.

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Maldonado is one of those alumni who gives back to the program by mentoring recent high school graduates. "Many of the students are first-generation kids like me," said Maldonado. "They don't have someone who knows about college. We tell them what it will be like and how to study."

The Greater New Braunfels Chamber of Commerce secured state and local funding to introduce CIS in three schools in Comal County in 1993. Initially concerned about excessive absenteeism, which threatened



Left: Site coordinator Carolina Navarro chats with Lovely Brown, a junior, who has been active in Project Success and a mentoring program at Canyon High School in Comal County, Texas. Below: During breaks between classes, students frequently check in with Navarro. Photos by Grace Pfeiffer.



state funding for local schools, the program eventually morphed into providing broader services for students and families, including those aimed at preparation for post-high school life. “While the program’s focus was on dropout prevention, little did we know the wide-ranging impact Communities In Schools would have with the children it served. The program deals with students’ needs outside of the classroom, giving teachers the time they need to teach. It has proven to be widely successful in helping raise graduation rates and getting kids off to a great career start,” said chamber president Michael Meek.

Today, Communities In Schools of South Central Texas has school-based support coordinators in nine elemen-

tary schools, five middle schools, and three high schools in Comal County. Coordinators provide supports to some 10,000 students and offer case-managed services to about 1,200 at-risk students. In the past school year, Communities In Schools documented 8,877 services to students and families, including clothing assistance, direct health services, basic needs and food assistance, health and safety awareness activities, and transportation to health services.

CIS of South Central Texas reported that 99% of the students it served in grades 7 to 12 stayed in school, 96% were promoted to the next grade, and 100% who were eligible to graduate received a high school diploma or GED.

Carolina Navarro, the CIS site coordinator at the 2,800-student Canyon High School in New Braunfels, sees her job as being an advocate for students. “I work with students who often have a history of failing core classes,” she said. “I get to know them by building relationships. I meet with them once a week. I make sure they are turning in assignments, check on their grades, talk to their parents, get them thinking about college and staying involved with Project Success.”

Last year, 100% of the seniors she case-managed graduated from high school. Most are now enrolled in college or community college while one entered the military. “I’m excited to be here for four years and see all my students graduate. It is such a great feeling,” added Navarro.

“Project Success is a good fit for the Communities In Schools’ mission,” said Chris Douglas, CEO of the South Central Texas program. “Our emphasis is on building relationships to change students’ lives. When kids trust you, they will open their hearts to you, and they will share their struggles so you can help them with whatever they are facing.”