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## Community Leaders Hope to Model Holistic Approach to Education

Visits to programs in New York City and Los Angeles may be the genesis of a Carpinteria project



Local community and education leaders Paul Cordeiro, left to right, Vishna Herrity, Michelle Robertson, Alfonso Martinez, Lois Mitchell, Erika Felix, Jeremy Tittle, Paul Didier and Jon Clark traveled to New York to learn more about the Harlem Children's Zone, a program they hope to model in Carpinteria and eventually throughout the South Coast. (United Way of Santa Barbara County courtesy photo)

By [Lara Cooper, Noozhawk Staff Writer](#) | Published on 07.15.2009

The differences among three schools in New York City, Los Angeles and our own Carpinteria could not look more different on the surface. But thanks to a trip taken by a group of community and education leaders to schools on both coasts, the similarities and best practices may be more alike in the coming years.

The group, made up of individuals from about a dozen organizations, traveled to New York City and toured the [Harlem Children's Zone](#) for two days in early May. It's an internationally recognized organization that focuses on children and their parents from a 100-block area in the city.

HCZ takes a holistic approach, and starts with mothers when they're pregnant and stays with children until they're in college. The children work through a massive lineup of 22 interrelated programs, all with the goal of creating a supportive network of adults for the children as they work their way through school, and ultimately toward college and a bright future. And it's all free to participants.

Paul Didier, president and CEO of [United Way of Santa Barbara County](#), was part of the trip and able to witness the Children's Zone firsthand. "We were taken aback by the breadth and depth of the programming," he said. "It was jaw-dropping, all that they do in order to produce their results."

Didier said the group spent two full days visiting sites, giving presentations, and talking with the directors and the kids while in New York City, and "walked away with an appreciation for their model."

"Harlem has a variety of problems and issues that are unique to Harlem, and yet they have other problems that are common to other communities," he said. "We were trying to look at what pieces fit."

Harlem's system is expensive to operate. The Children's Zone has a \$40 million budget for this fiscal year, and spends about \$3,500 per child per year. About one-third of the money comes from various school districts, one-third comes from foundations and corporations, and one-third is raised by its 16 board members.

After their experience on the East Coast, members of the group traveled to Los Angeles to witness work being done within the [Lennox School District](#). The district itself is right under the flight path of neighboring [Los Angeles International Airport](#), and "in some of the lowest-income, poverty-riddled, crime-ridden parts of Los Angeles," Didier said.

The district's student population is 95 percent Hispanic and almost entirely low-income, and 70 percent of its students are English language learners. The district has been able to reduce high school dropout rates, and test scores have been on the upswing. At Lennox, Didier said a partnership between the district and a number of nonprofits makes most of the programming at the school possible.

The content was similar between schools, but the delivery models were different. Didier said the model at Lennox would be more feasible for the South Coast.

Members of the group will put what they learned into a pilot project with the [Carpinteria Unified School District](#), which will aim to give children a more comprehensive set of programming, including pairing children with reading mentors, which Didier said is crucial to the program. They'll focus on a volunteer reading program for children — prenatal through third grade.

“Research shows that disadvantaged children have only heard one-third the words in their lives as middle-income children,” he said. “Disadvantaged families do not use words with the frequency that wealthier families do.”

Didier acknowledges that it would be a large project, and with 50 organizations working together, it could be the largest collaborative project in the county.

The goal is to start by January, based on funding. United Way has hired the grant writer from the Lennox School District to do a two-phase project.

Carpinteria was chosen because of the combination of political and school leaders, and the community expressed a willingness to participate and be a case study of sorts for what could be done throughout the South Coast if proven effective.

“The interest here is to create a success that can be duplicated,” district Superintendent Paul Cordeiro said. Starting as early as possible with the children is critical, he said, and the district will be working with the newly staffed Main Family Resource Center in Carpinteria to make the programs happen.

“The big picture here is that we have to expand the reach of the school district in order to reach needy kids,” Cordeiro said. “They need more. If you strip away the opportunity for a linguistically rich environment at home, you’re missing a lot.”

Didier said: “This is for every single child in Carpinteria. Our ultimate goal is that every single family and child is able to make the decision to go to college.”

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