

These Kids Are Alright



BY JENNIFER DUBIN

Robert Villarreal, 12, lives in Corpus Christi, Texas. His favorite subject is science and he loves PlayStation 2. When he grows up he wants to be a policeman, be a scientist, or work with computers. As with many kids, the dream changes depending on his mood. Pamela Perez, 13, lives in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City. She likes to read vampire novels and is already thinking about college and a career in forensic pathology.

Though they've never met, Robert and Pamela share a common bond. They both attend community schools—and that means they have supports that students in typical schools don't have. If they can't see the blackboard, they receive eye exams and glasses. If their families can't afford food for the week, they receive nonperishable goods to see them through.

In fact, both these students, and their classmates, have a skilled coordinator who makes sure they get what they need to focus on succeeding in school. In Robert's case, that coordinator is Brenda Salinas. When he struggles with homework, she tutors him. Afterward, she gives him a ride home from school. In Pamela's case, that coordinator is Marinieves Alba. She runs the after-school activities that Pamela enjoys: flag football, soccer, and Youth Council. The strength of community schools lies in the work that these women do.

Jennifer Dubin is the assistant editor of American Educator. Previously, she was a journalist with the Chronicle of Higher Education.

A Case Manager in Corpus Christi

For seven years, Brenda Salinas has worked at, but not for, George Evans Elementary School in Corpus Christi. She works for Communities In Schools. A national nonprofit, Communities In Schools tries to eliminate the myriad barriers that contribute to students dropping out of school. To that end, it coordinates health and social services as well as academic supports for more than 3,200 schools in 27 states and Washington, D.C. The group works with schools at the request of a school's principal. In Corpus Christi, Communities In Schools partners with 16 schools.

The majority of students who attend these partner schools are from low-income families. This includes Evans Elementary, where Robert Villarreal goes to school. Within a mile of his fifth-grade classroom are the mix of public housing units, five homeless shelters, and rundown one- and two-bedroom houses that Robert and his peers call home. The neighborhood is in the neglected north side of town. Businesses that once thrived here have moved to the more affluent south side, leaving abandoned buildings and vacant lots in their wake. On the north side, many residents are unemployed or earn the minimum wage. In 2008, 97 percent of the 347 students at Evans were classified as "economically disadvantaged."

When Robert's mother, San Juana Villarreal, enrolled him in



Left, Robert Villarreal in Corpus Christi and Pamela Perez in New York City both benefit from attending community schools. Above, Brenda Salinas, case manager at Evans Elementary, pulls a pair of shoes from the shelves of “goodies” she has crammed in her office. Right, Salinas tutors Robert in mathematics.



prekindergarten eight years ago, she learned that Evans had a case manager, Brenda Salinas from Communities In Schools. Inside her windowless office, Salinas has crammed an enormous, yet never sufficient, amount of what she calls “goodies”: not just papers, pens, and pencils, but also book bags, toothpaste, pretzels, T-shirts, sweatshirts, socks, and underwear. Students who need school supplies or a change of clothes know to come to her.

Like the teachers and administrators, Salinas works at Evans full time. As the case manager, she solicits the donations that fill her office, and she coordinates medical and social services—counseling, dental appointments, and eyeglass fittings—that students may not have access to outside of school. In most cases, she refers them to the free clinic down the street. Sometimes she brings in a speaker to discuss a specific health issue. This spring, she invited a dental hygienist to talk to students about the importance of brushing their teeth. At the end of the visit, students received toothbrushes, toothpaste, and tongue cleaners. A few years ago, Robert benefited from the vision referral. Salinas gave him a voucher for a free eye exam and a pair of glasses when his parents couldn’t afford them. They have since paid for his most recent pair on their own.

If students need more than eyeglasses or a one-time donation of food or clothes, parents can sign a consent form that allows the case manager to coordinate services for them. Robert’s mother signed this form after her son’s first-grade teacher recommended that he work with Salinas. Robert recently had been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD); he had to repeat first grade. His teacher could see that Robert would need extra support.

Once Salinas had the referral, she created a file containing Robert’s report cards, checklists detailing specific goals, and information about progress he has made. The file also includes information on his parents’ financial situation, so she can help determine what government services they should receive. Each year, she works with roughly 60 kids, meeting with them at least three times a month. For some students like Robert, she also tutors them three times a week.

Salinas coordinates with the parent liaison—a paraprofessional employed by the school—to schedule workshops for parents. Some of the topics have included juvenile diabetes, the importance of reading to your child, and how to enroll in health insurance programs like Medicaid. When parents express interest in getting their GED, Salinas offers to tutor them.

Brenda Salinas walks through the neighborhood surrounding Evans on the way to a home visit. Brenda is often in the community, checking with and offering support to parents whose children have been absent, securing parental consent for health matters like immunizations, and trying to build relationships.



At least once a day, Salinas gets behind the wheel of her silver Pontiac Vibe to make home visits. If a student has been absent for several days and the parents have not called the school, Salinas goes directly to the home to find out why. She also makes home visits if a student's immunization shots are not up to date and the school has been unable to get parental consent for a new set. One other person, whether it's the principal or school nurse, always accompanies her. For safety reasons, she never goes alone.

Salinas regularly drives to the local Communities In Schools office less than three miles from Evans, where staff members and volunteers manage a food pantry, write grants, plan summer camp, and keep track of outcomes, such as the number of students who have stayed in school. Veronica Trevino, the executive director of Communities In Schools in Corpus Christi, says the philosophy behind this support system is simple: "If students are hungry, they're not going to learn."

A Community School Director in New York City

For nearly two years, Marinieves Alba has worked at, but not for, the Mirabal Sisters Campus, which houses three public middle

schools in New York City's Washington Heights neighborhood. She works for the Children's Aid Society. A nonprofit that has long served New York City's low-income children, Children's Aid has partnered with 21 schools in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island to form community schools. The organization also works with schools nationally and internationally to help them adopt the community school model. In New York, the schools all share a similar setup. A team of Children's Aid employees works in an office in the school building to provide afterschool programs for students and evening classes for parents. Children's Aid also employs a dentist, a nurse practitioner, and social workers who work in the school full or part time. Although the programs at each school vary, depending on the students' needs, one position remains the same: a full-time community school director.

At the Mirabal Sisters Campus, the community school director is Alba. She works with all three schools, including the Maria Teresa Mirabal School (M.S. 319), where Pamela Perez is a student. Each morning, Pamela walks a few blocks from her family's two-bedroom apartment to this school. Nearby storefronts reflect the largely Dominican community that has settled here: Ernesto's Hardware Store, Tu Sabor Latino Restaurant, Liberato Food Market, to name a few.

Many parents speak Spanish at home. Many work as taxi drivers, home health aids, hairdressers, and small-business owners. One parent runs a hot dog stand up the block that students flock to after school. Often, parents work more than one shift. Some hold more than one job. The numbers of English language learners and students enrolled in the school's free or reduced-price lunch program reveal the community's linguistic and economic





Above, Marinieves Alba, the community school director at the Mirabal Sisters Campus, is constantly in motion as she coordinates the work of roughly 30 full- and part-time employees of the Children's Aid Society. Right, Pamela Perez attends a meeting of the Youth Council, which she is president of this year.

challenges. The most recent data are from 2007–08: of the 472 students enrolled at the school that year, 29 percent were English language learners and 98 percent received free or reduced-price meals.

Children's Aid seeks to alleviate the socioeconomic problems facing families by providing comprehensive services in the school. Alba and her staff of roughly 30 full- and part-time employees run the afterschool program, summer camp, parent involvement program, adult learning institute, school-based health and mental health services center, teen pregnancy prevention program, and performing arts program. They also oversee an emergency grant program for needy families. If parents can't pay for the school's \$90 uniforms, Children's Aid will pay for them with funds raised by the *New York Times*. If a family can't afford food, Children's Aid will provide vouchers to a local grocery store. In extreme cases, Children's Aid will help with housing costs, if families have been evicted from their homes.

At the beginning of each school year, Alba and her staff meet with M.S. 319's administrators and teachers to make them aware of the services. They also provide them with applications for the afterschool program and medical consent forms to give to students. Pamela has received an application each school year. In the fall, when she began eighth grade, she signed up for Youth Council—a student advocacy group—and soccer, two of 30 activities that Children's Aid coordinates as part of its afterschool program.

For some of these programs, Children's Aid has partnered with other nonprofits that send representatives into the school. For instance, staff members from Recycle-A-Bicycle teach students bike repair skills. Professionals from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater teach students dance. During the week, afterschool programs run from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. On Saturdays at the school, some of these programs run from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Children's Aid holds classes for parents, too. In the evenings,

the school is open until 10 p.m. so parents can attend GED and English classes, as well as classes in culinary arts, cake decoration, or curtain design. Anywhere from 15 to 30 parents enroll in the classes. They must pay a \$50 registration fee for a 12-week course. Some parents use the skills they learn to start home businesses. One parent who took the cake baking and decorating class several years ago has opened a bakery four blocks from the school.

Alba and her staff coordinate services in an office down the hall from the school's entrance. A reception desk and small couch greet visitors. Pamphlets with titles like "How to Enroll in Medicaid" and "How to Apply for a Green Card" are stacked on a shelf just past the door.

Around the corner is the school-based health center where Pamela, if she doesn't feel well, can visit the nurse practitioner. A health educator also works here two or three days a week to answer students' questions about sexual health. If students want to share other problems, they can see one of four social workers in the mental health office a few feet away from the health center.

The services don't end there. Across the street at P.S. 8, another community school that partners with Children's Aid, a full-time dentist and hygienist staff a dental clinic. The Children's Aid office schedules students' appointments, and on the day of their appointment, an escort walks them to and from the dental clinic. This way, parents don't have to miss work and students spend less time out of class.

While students and parents appreciate these services, teachers do, too. "Just having those things here makes a difference in their lives, and it makes a difference for us in the classroom," says Tiffany Braby, an English as a second language and social studies teacher. "It makes a difference in attendance because the kids are here, in school."

"Robert Has Come a Long Way"

In Corpus Christi, Robert Villarreal likes that he lives across the street from his school. "You can wake up at 7:45 a.m. and not be late," he says with a smile. A skinny boy with thick, black hair and the beginnings of a faint mustache, Robert is soft-spoken and

Right, Brenda Salinas walks with her arm around Robert Villarreal, a fifth-grader she has worked with since he had to repeat first grade. Below, Salinas meets with Robert's mother, San Juana Villarreal, to discuss her son's progress.



shy. His teachers describe him as sweet. Three days a week Salinas tutors Robert and his friend, Eric, another fifth-grader, from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m.

One afternoon in March, Salinas helps them with word problems for math class. For one problem, Robert forgets to write down the steps he takes as he tries to calculate the answer. "You can do it in your head, which is awesome," Salinas tells him, as they sit at a small table in her office. "Ms. Guizar, she wants you to show your work." A few minutes later, Salinas reminds them not to rush through the problems. "Remember guys, you've got to read that question not once, not twice, but three times."

Robert needs such reminders. With his ADD, he loses focus easily and is sometimes rambunctious in class. At the beginning of this school year, he got in trouble for silly stuff. "He would go into the bathroom and throw toilet paper wads at the ceiling," says Anna Guizar, Robert's math teacher. But after she talked to Robert's mother, the bathroom antics stopped.

The academic struggles continue, especially since Robert also has dyslexia. His report cards this year show mostly 70s, and a few 60s and 80s. Lately, he's been forgetting to turn in his homework, which has led to some lower grades. Still, Salinas is undeterred. She has redoubled her efforts to make sure Robert hands in homework. Salinas now escorts him to his teacher's box after school so she can see that he does turn it in. "Robert has come a long way," she says. With her help, he has not had to repeat another grade. However, state standardized tests remain challenging. In third and fifth grades, passing is crucial for moving on to the next grade. Robert has passed these tests, but it has not been easy. This spring, he had to retake one of the state tests.

Just as important as the academic improvement is the bond that Salinas and Robert share. He, like many of his peers, visits her throughout the day. An hour before his tutoring session, one afternoon in March, he comes to her office. He's about to take a test, and Salinas tells him to read each question carefully.



"When you finish, I need you to go back to number one and just read it again," she says. To Robert, it must sound like the hundredth reminder. From the way he smiles and puts his arm around her, it's clear he doesn't mind.

Salinas relates well to her students and their parents. She herself grew up poor. Her grandmother raised her in Kingsville, Texas, after her mother died when Salinas was 8 years old. She worked her way through college and was a special education teacher before taking this job. She's also a single mom.

Over the years, she's gotten to know many families—the Villarreals especially, because they are engaged in Robert's and his younger brother's education. Their father, also named Robert, attended the school's "Donuts with Dads" breakfast held one morning in March. Their mother, San Juana, volunteers at the school.

The parents work hard to make ends meet.

Robert Villarreal is a chrome plater for crank shafts. San Juana is a cashier at Burger King. Both attended Evans Elementary as children. While her husband graduated from high school, San Juana dropped out senior year. At the time, she took a job at Long John Silver's to help support her family. She regrets her decision and wants her children to graduate from high school. She also wants them to go to college, something that she and her husband never did. "We want them to have a better life than what we have now," she says.

While her own parents were not involved in her education, San Juana has made it a point to engage in her sons'. As soon as they walk in the front door, "they know homework is the first thing they have to do," she says. So Robert can focus on his schoolwork, she limits his time on PlayStation 2 to weekends.

She is thankful for Salinas not just for helping with Robert's academics, but for helping with her personal life. Salinas has encouraged San Juana to get her driver's license—she recently started learning how to drive—and to get her GED, which she plans to do. When Robert's grandfather died after a lengthy illness, Salinas suggested his parents tell Robert over the weekend



Left, Brenda Salinas meets with school nurse Linda Narvaez and principal Arnoldo Barrera Jr. to discuss students on her caseload. Below, Narvaez takes a student's temperature. Bottom, Veronica Trevino, the executive director of Communities In Schools in Corpus Christi, keeps an office food pantry so case managers like Salinas can ensure that students do not go hungry over the weekend.



instead of during the week, when he had to take a test for school. Salinas thought the news would upset him and prevent him from focusing, and that the weekend would give them more time to explain the loss. The Villarreals followed her advice.

Not all parents do. One morning in March, Salinas and the school nurse make a home visit to a mother who for three weeks had refused to send her child to

school. Salinas parks her car in front of the family's dilapidated apartment building. Cigarette butts litter the lawn and the window frames hold no glass. Salinas knocks on the front door, on which someone has scrawled "#2." The boy's mother opens the door and steps outside. She doesn't seem surprised to see the two women, just indifferent. "Where's Armando?" Salinas asks. "He's in bed," his mother says. "He's running a fever."

Salinas and the nurse remind her to send doctor's notes to the school to explain his absences.

Otherwise, if he misses too many days, he may not be promoted to first grade. The mother shrugs and says she'll send them in soon. "OK," Salinas says good-naturedly. "Let us know what we can do to help out." The two women walk back to Salinas's car. Although they clearly are frustrated, they made an obvious effort to be nice. "We try to be as friendly as possible," Salinas explains, "because we are not the enemy." If Armando continues to miss school, Salinas and the nurse will visit again soon. They also will stay in touch with Child Protective Services, which the women have already notified about parental problems in the family.



waiting for the afterschool program to begin. It's a Monday, so in a few minutes Pamela will meet with the Youth Council. She's the president of the student group, which works on advocacy issues in the school. Recently, the students met with school lunch officials to suggest ways to improve the "school supper," the meal that students in

the afterschool program are served. Such issues are important to students and also prepare them for more serious work.

This spring, the Youth Council tackled a statewide issue. Members of the group traveled to Albany to persuade state senators not to cut funding for afterschool programs. The students even wrote letters to Senator Bill Perkins to show their support. "Afterschool is an escape from the bad influences of this world," Pamela wrote. "To achieve unbelievable things, we need to be safe, and we need to be here, in afterschool."

Pamela has clearly benefited from the program. Mondays and Wednesdays she meets with the Youth Council. Tuesdays and Thursdays she plays soccer. Friday is a free-choice day; usually she picks flag football. Children's Aid coordinates the activities, so students have a place to go if their parents are not yet home.

When the school day ends, Pamela's parents are still working.

Pamela Thrives in the Afterschool Program

One afternoon in April, Pamela Perez, wearing a blue polo shirt and her hair in a ponytail, sits with her friends in the cafeteria,



Above, a nurse practitioner takes a student's blood pressure inside the school-based health clinic at the Mirabal Sisters Campus. Above right, students participate in a dance class, one of 30 afterschool activities. Right, parents in the cake decorating class watch as their instructor ices a cake.



Her mother packages perfumes in a factory and her father drives a taxi. Because she participates in the afterschool program, she says her parents don't worry about her—and she doesn't worry about herself. "I thank the afterschool program for supporting me," she says. "It's really easy to get addicted to things, get in trouble, and go to jail."

Ysidro Abreu, the principal of M.S. 319, echoes that sentiment. Some parents in the community, he says, begin to disengage from their children's education in middle school. Parents may feel that at this age children are old enough to start taking care of themselves. Abreu tries to convince them otherwise. "As a Latino, I can say that the streets could end up taking your child." By "the streets," he means drug pushers and gangs.

Pamela's parents participate in her education as much as possible. But both are immigrants from the Dominican Republic, and their English is limited. Pamela says her mother understands English but doesn't speak it, while her father knows some words. Pamela says that her older sister, who attends City College, helps her more than her parents do. "Because she knows English, she can communicate more with me." Pamela's sister attends her parent-teacher meetings and encourages her to keep up her grades. Pamela usually earns 80s, but says she aspires to earn 90s. Noting the school's rigorous curriculum, Abreu says, "To get a 90 average is hard."

There's more to Pamela's education than just report cards, though. And that's where Children's Aid comes in. Although Pamela does not need all the services that the organization provides, the afterschool program has enriched her life. She has participated in sports and taken on leadership roles in student groups—activities that middle-class children take for granted. "Where we've worked with Pamela is in helping her to get out of

her shell," says Marinieves Alba, the community school director. "She's very articulate, very bright. But as with a lot of children that age, she's still growing into herself. And so, through a lot of the afterschool activities, we've actually been able to stimulate her growth further and really encourage her development as a young leader."

Helping low-income students become well-rounded individuals is what attracted Alba to the position of community school director. She says that working for Children's Aid is her way of giving back. The job requires her to build relationships with just about everyone she meets. Most days she interacts with students in the afterschool program, meets with the principals of all three Mirabal Campus schools, exchanges ideas with members of her staff, and of course, helps families in need of services. Hers is no mere desk job. Alba walks through the building regularly, so people are familiar with her face and feel her presence in the school.

Alba and her colleagues spend most of their time talking about individual students and looking at all the factors that may prevent them from succeeding in school. The answer is never just "they need to study more," Alba says. Of course, academic support is important, and Children's Aid can provide that. But other challenges often contribute to a student's poor perfor-



Above, parents attend an evening GED class at the Mirabal Sisters Campus. Above right, social worker Michelle Kohut high-fives a student in her office. A Children's Aid employee, Kohut supervises three social workers at the Mirabal Sisters Campus. Right, Pamela plays soccer in the afterschool program.



mance: a lack of food at home or a loss in the family.

If teachers suspect students are struggling with such problems, they can refer them to Michelle Kohut, who works in the mental health office. A Children's Aid employee, Kohut supervises three social workers who each meet with 25 students every week. Kohut, a social worker herself, also meets with students. Working in the school building enables social workers to do a better job helping students, she says. "We can talk directly to their teachers—with permission, of course." Following privacy laws, Kohut and her staff must keep information confidential. But they can ask students if it's OK for them to talk to their teachers. The kids, she says, always say yes. "Kids want us to talk to their teachers because they need help talking to their teachers." But if "we were at a community clinic, we would never be talking to their teachers." It's more difficult for social workers to cultivate relationships with teachers if they don't work in the same building, she says.

For instance, Kohut works closely with Nick Tillman, who teaches seventh grade. When one of his students was struggling academically, both Kohut and Tillman met with the boy's mother to devise a plan. They decided to use basketball to motivate the student to do better in school. Tillman suggested the mother supervise her son doing his homework, which he had not been turning in. If he did his homework for two consecutive weeks, he could participate in basketball after school. His problems, however, are more complicated than homework. His parents recently

separated, and he misses his dad. And he's been identified as needing special education services. As a first step, basketball seems to help. "All I really did was facilitate" the communication between a parent and a teacher, Kohut says. Although she downplays her role, facilitating is crucial in a community school.

What Lies Ahead

Pamela graduates from M.S. 319 in June. Ysidro Abreu, Pamela's principal, and Marinieves Alba, her community school director, believe that her transition to high school will be smooth. Her experiences both in class and in the afterschool program have laid the foundation for what should be a successful high school career.

Robert's last day at Evans Elementary is also in June. In the fall he'll attend a middle school that does not partner with Communities In Schools, which means that someone like Brenda Salinas won't be there to support him. Robert won't have another case manager until he attends his neighborhood high school, a Communities In Schools partner. In the meantime, Salinas has promised to tell the guidance counselor at Robert's middle school to look out for him.

Robert doesn't explicitly say that he will miss Salinas. Boys rarely say such things. But it's evident that he will miss her when he and his friend Eric, whom Salinas also tutors, start to talk about their schedules next year. While elementary school starts at 8 a.m., middle school doesn't begin until 9 a.m. Robert looks at Eric and does the math in his head. "We have an hour to come and visit," he says to his friend. □