

Program trying to kick the odds; After-school soccer used as a way to address alarming dropout rate of Hispanic students

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SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 24

LENGTH: 521 words

After school is the highlight of the day for Daniel Gonzalez Jr.

Daniel and about 100 other kids in a Little Village soccer program called Nuestro Deportes ("Our Sport") look forward to 3:30. That's the time they get help to reach their goals on and off the field.

"I like it a lot," said Daniel, a 13-year-old eighth-grader at Junior High East in Cicero. "We can play outside in the soccer field, we get snack time and I have people help me with my homework, usually reading and writing."

For many low-income Hispanic kids, the stress of living with poverty and gang issues leads to dropping out of school. Thirty-five percent of Hispanic kids in Chicago and the metropolitan area -- compared to 18 percent of African Americans and 5 percent of Caucasians -- drop out of school, according to 2003 data from the Illinois State Board of Education. Hispanics make up a whopping 57 percent of all dropouts in the area.

But Nuestro Deportes aims to blunt the statistics, using soccer to inspire Hispanic kids to stay in school, get after-school tutoring and go on to graduate.

"Our kids are between 12 and 16 years old," said Francisco D'Escoto, the program's director. "Starting, then keeping them in high school is the main objective. We want to keep them off the streets and while we have them, prepare them for college."

ONLY PROGRAM OF ITS KIND

Often, students acquiring a second language coupled with parents who strive to provide but have little education of their own, add to a recipe for underachievement. According to a recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics, of the four largest racial/ethnic groups, Hispanic students are most likely to drop out of school, usually in their sophomore year of high school.

Started in September 2005, Nuestro Deportes is the only program of its kind in Chicago combining the cultural devotion to soccer and achievement in school.

It was created through the **United Neighborhood Organization**, a community development group, with state grant money and help from the Chicago Latin American Soccer Organization.

"We have a curriculum; we'll track all the students through the years, and if they participate all the way through high school there will be scholarship money for them," D'Escoto said.

Nuestro Deportes doesn't just focus on kids. Its philosophy is that parents must also have educational opportunities in order to help their kids succeed.

Daniel's mom, Irma Gonzalez, has benefitted from the program as well. "We had a specialist talk to us last summer about communicating better with kids. There are computer classes and English classes," said Gonzalez, 35. "We've talked to experts about buying a house, immigration and financial aid and scholarships for school. It's really helped."

The effort is already paying dividends for Daniel.

"I used to get D's and C's, and now I get A's," said Daniel, excited about getting up to \$4,000 in scholarships as a result of his participation in the program. "I want to be a professional soccer player, but now I know if I don't have the grades I can't play or if I break my leg, I'll still have my education."

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LOAD-DATE: May 30, 2007

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC:

Photo: Keith Hale, Sun-Times; Children play on a makeshift soccer field at 4115 W. 26th St. as part of the after-school program Nuestro Deportes. The program aims to inspire Hispanic kids to stay in school. ;

DOCUMENT-TYPE: News

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

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