

Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

# The Times-Picayune

June 21, 2007 Thursday

## School means hope in N.O.; Esperanza reaches out to Hispanic families

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**SECTION:** METRO; Pg. 1

**LENGTH:** 1246 words

Standing in line Monday afternoon, Guille Stentler was smiling. She'd come to register her 12-year-old son, Guillermo, for Esperanza Charter School.

He spent the past year in Monterrey, Mexico, but he soon will be back in New Orleans, his hometown.

"Esperanza, it's Spanish for hope," Stentler explained to 9-year-old Raven Mason, who was waiting in line with her mother, Tara Mason. "I have hope my son will do well here."

Esperanza is open to all students but makes a special appeal to those from Hispanic families. The curriculum will be entirely in English, and Spanish-speaking students will be placed in English immersion programs.

Set to open Aug. 14 at the former A.D. Crossman Elementary School at 4407 S. Carrollton Ave., Esperanza has room for 261 students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

On June 29, Guillermo will finish his classes in Mexico and return home to New Orleans. His mother, who has lived in New Orleans for 23 years, is optimistic that Esperanza will be the perfect school for him.

After Hurricane Katrina, she felt no such optimism.

"There was nothing here for him," she said. "He attended a good school in Baytown, Texas, but then my husband and I needed to come back, we wanted to come back, and still there were no schools." So Guillermo went to live with relatives in Mexico. "I've missed him every day," his mother said.

So she was thrilled in late May to hear an advertisement for Esperanza on a local Hispanic radio station. The school is being operated by the **United Neighborhood Organization** of Chicago, known as UNO, which operates six elementary and middle schools in Chicago and in 2008 will open its first high school there.

This week, after more than a year of planning, UNO staff and faculty began accepting registrations for their first school outside Illinois.

Open to all students

"We're going to be canvassing the neighborhood this week, letting the community know who we are and what kind of schools we run," said Jacob Perez, who along with several other Chicago-based staff members are in New Orleans to get the new school up and running.

"Contrary to what some might think, our school is open to all community residents," Perez said. "There's no need to speak Spanish. All of our classes are taught in English, with the exception of our foreign language classes."

Perez said the Chicago organization initially became interested in the idea of opening a school in New Orleans after seeing news reports about the Crescent City's growing Latino population since Katrina.

After hearing stories of Latino families who felt overwhelmed by bureaucratic demands and frightened by New Orleans school officials who questioned their legal status, Perez said, UNO officials decided to apply for a charter to operate a school.

For the past two months, he said, they've worked with Spanish radio stations, newspapers and social services agencies to spread the word that Esperanza "will be a place where every child, whether they speak English or not, will be accepted and understood."

The UNO staff, Perez said, were also disturbed by reports of special-needs students being turned away from other schools. Esperanza will be staffed with English-as-a-second-language teachers, language specialists and special-needs educators.

'Name is just perfect'

One of those teachers, Carol Reynolds, said she can't wait to meet the children she'll be working with for the next year.

"To me the name is just perfect for the school, because from all we hear in Chicago, New Orleans needs a little bit of hope," she said. "My whole philosophy is that all children can learn. As long as they're provided the resources to learn, I have no doubts they'll succeed."

"We've had some different challenges here in New Orleans, but parents and children should know this isn't something new for us," Perez said. "This isn't something we're creating out of the blue. We have a model, it's worked, and undoubtedly it will work again here."

Perez said that as word spreads about the school and what it can offer, he expects all 261 slots to be filled. And should all go well, UNO will consider eventually applying to add a high school.

"There's no question that every child deserves to be educated, and we want to be sure that happens," Perez said. "To the parents that don't speak English, it's very comforting to know that they now have an option to have their children attend a school where they won't run into language or cultural barriers."

In Chicago, the students at UNO's schools are largely Latino and African-American.

The schools' mission statement reads: "The UNO Charter School Network seeks to fulfill the promise of public education by proving that all children can achieve academic success, regardless of their backgrounds. UCSN brings a 'no excuses' philosophy to public education, focusing on strong management, structured learning environments and high expectations for its entire school community."

Demanding standards

Esperanza Principal Lawrence Perkins said he expects New Orleans parents will appreciate the school's strong stance on demanding academic excellence and strict discipline.

For the past nine years, the Chicago native has taught middle-school social studies and science. Offered the opportunity to be a part of the New Orleans charter school, he's excited about the chance to learn about the city's rich culture and to be part of its rebuilding.

Perkins is determined to make Esperanza a post-Katrina success story.

"Bring on the challenge, that's what I say," he said as he prepared to greet parents at Wednesday afternoon's registration session, which had to be moved across the street to Jesuit High School while the Crossman building underwent further renovations. "I grew up in inner-

city Chicago, where I learned going to public school wasn't always easy. I know we'll experience many similar challenges here, and I am ready for it. In fact, that's why I am here."

That's good news to Tara Mason, who lives near the school and whose daughter Raven has been attending Lafayette Academy since Katrina. She likes the idea of her daughter attending a school with a diverse student body and a neighborhood feel.

"To me it's a good thing that we're getting something different," Mason said. "She'd attended Crossman before, and we weren't too happy with the environment. From the information I read on this school, they're very serious about the standards of their teachers and their students, and I like that a lot."

Still time to register

Registration for Esperanza will continue today, Friday and Saturday from noon to 8 p.m. on the first floor of Jesuit High School, 4133 Banks St. Signs point parents in the right direction.

Parents should bring any documentation they have for the children they wish to enroll, such as birth certificates, immunization records and Social Security cards, but they shouldn't worry if they are unable to provide everything this week, Perez said. They also should bring any bills or pay stubs that show they live or work in New Orleans.

"We're definitely excited to finally be welcoming families," Perez said. "We're here to help. It may be a long process for us, and that's OK because this here is bigger than us. Esperanza opening is about us reaching out to the community and doing what it takes to fill their needs."

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For information on Esperanza Charter School, visit [www.unocharterschools.org](http://www.unocharterschools.org) or call (504) 251-1008.

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**LOAD-DATE:** June 21, 2007

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newspaper

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