

## Program drives home importance of education

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As Pablo Lara mapped the salaries of high school dropouts and degree holders, his own reality was underscored. In a sense, it was he, a Hispanic man who never graduated from high school, who should have taught the lesson.

The Clovis father works in the fickle construction industry, his pay fluctuating from job to job. His income alone cannot support he and his four daughters, so his wife works, too, for little more than minimum wage at a local store.

The couple are students of the Family Leadership Institute, a federally funded program offered through the Clovis Municipal Schools.

“Our jobs don’t pay good enough,” said Lara, who attended Saturday’s lesson with his daughters in tow, his youngest asleep by his side in a car seat, his wife away at work. “I want my daughters to keep going to school. To go to college. Be a nurse or a lawyer.”

The Family Leadership instructor Lucy Cantu spent about three hours Saturday with Lara and more than 100 other local parents. Her aim was to impart the dire importance of education.

Armed with striking statistics, it wasn’t that difficult. Forty-four percent of Hispanic adults born outside the United States, Cantu said, are high school dropouts; 21 percent born inside the U.S. never complete high school.

“We should really be concerned about the dropouts rates in this country,” said Cantu, who lives in the Dallas area, but travels around the country with the Family Leadership Institute.

While she teaches, she often slips back and forth from English to Spanish. “Education is the key to success,” she tells those who have assembled in the impromptu classroom, an elementary school cafeteria. “Que hace una llave? What does a key do? It open doors. It gives us the freedom to make choices and have a better quality of life.”

About 15 women were clustered in the back of the cafeteria. They do not speak English. Because Cantu’s lesson is taught predominately in English, they wore headphones to hear her words translated into Spanish by another Family Leadership Institute employee.

But it was for parents like them the institute was designed, according to the FLI Web site.

Retired Army Lt. Col. Consuelo Castillo Kickbusch, founder of the program, grew up in a poverty stricken barrio on the southern border of the United States. Her program, according to her Web site, is “focused on providing immigrant (and) migrant Hispanic families, primarily of Mexican origin, with knowledge, tools and inspiration to help their first and second generation children succeed in school and life.”

Those enrolled in the Clovis Family Leadership Institute were called to participate in the program because their children attend the school district’s federally funded pre-school program; others were referred by the local Children, Youth and Family Department. Attendance is mandatory. The program consists of 10 lessons, and parents are midway through the course. It is a diverse group, ethnically and otherwise.

Family Leadership student Kelli Foster never completed high school, but the rewards of the institute, she said, are not tied to education level.

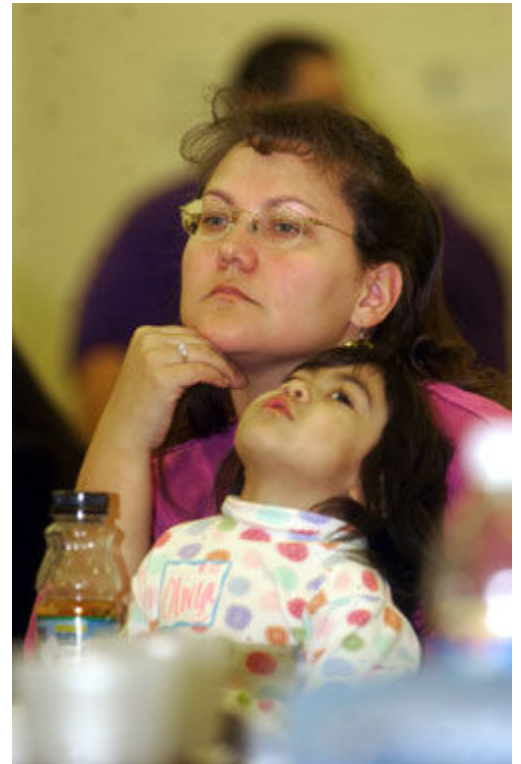
“I think everyone needs to learn how to deal with their children’s needs, to understand their children better,” the mother said.

Her parents never encouraged her when she was a student. She hated school. But she wants to be there for her two children, and learn how to better navigate the school system, she said.

“Everyone wants their children to be better than they were,” Foster said.

The program is in its second year of implementation in Clovis. There are no concrete reports of its success, but the testimony of parents such as Lara and Foster have convinced David Briseno, Clovis Municipal Schools director of federal programs, of its value.

“We hope to see the fruits of our labor in the coming years. But it is just one of those things. It takes time to happen,” Briseno said.



*Nikole Trujillo of Clovis holds her 3-year-old daughter Olivia as she listens to Saturday’s Family Leadership Institute conference at Parkview Elementary. (Staff photo: Eric Kluth)*

