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All Students Matter: Palo Alto volunteers make a difference for kids in East Palo Alto

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By Aisha Piracha-Zakariya



Photo by All Students Matter.

In 2008, three resourceful Palo Alto moms-Sharon Purcel, Ann Carter & Carol Chalmers had a revelation: they should stop battling other parents to get on the sign up sheets in their children's PAUSD classrooms, and figure out a way to give their time and energy to schools in East Palo Alto, where parents did not have the luxury to volunteer.

While it's common in Palo Alto public schools for teachers to turn parents away because there are too many eager volunteers, just a few miles away, schools in Ravenswood City School District struggle to find even a few parents who can take time off of work to help out in the classroom or chaperone a field trip.

This disparity is even more jarring when you consider the need differential: the majority of Palo Alto students come from affluent homes and are meeting standards, while 97% of students in Ravenswood are considered low-income and their academic results are far below those of their peers in Palo Alto. A shocking 20% of Ravenswood children are categorized as homeless, reflecting the exorbitant cost of living in Silicon Valley and the difficulty many working class families have in finding affordable housing.

Inspired to help children in East Palo Alto, Carol, Ann and Sharon founded an organization they decided to call "All Students Matter" (ASM) to reflect their belief that every student matters and deserves individual attention, not just those who are privileged.

ASM and Ravenswood Education Foundation: A partnership that works

Over the past five years, ASM has impacted the lives of thousands of students in East Palo Alto (EPA) and eastern Menlo Park by providing mentoring, 1:1 tutoring, classroom materials, and emotional support.

ASM works in partnership with the Ravenswood Education Foundation (REF) (similar to Palo Alto's Partners in Education, PiE) to ensure that their volunteers will have the maximum impact. REF helps ASM identify where they can best offset Ravenswood City School District budget shortfalls in terms limited staffing and scarce resources for school supplies.

The organization currently supports 1,000 students in three K-8 schools: Belle Haven School, Brentwood Academy and Cesar Chavez/Green Oaks Academy. They will soon begin working at Willow Oaks School, which will help the organization attract volunteers from Menlo Park. All of the children targeted by ASM are in need of additional academic help: 76% are English language learners, 53% are math deficient and 62% read below grade level.

All Students Matter focuses on kindergarten through fourth grades, and volunteers choose to spend their one hour per week commitment in one of two ASM programs: (1) InClass Volunteers – working under the direction of the teacher helping with in-classroom support, or (2) One-on-One Reading Tutors – working directly with students in a structured reading program designed by the district and educational experts from Stanford University. For those unable to commit time, they can provide donations of much-needed school supplies via the Helping Hands program.

Carolyn Blatman, ASM executive director, began as an ASM volunteer and was quickly ‘hooked’ on the experience of volunteering in East Palo Alto schools to support children who need academic help and attention. Armed with business skills honed while working in the computer software industry for 20 years, Blatman has been instrumental in increasing the number of ASM volunteers from 20 when she began to 130 today.

ASM volunteers give a little time to make a big difference

“What’s unique about our program is that the volunteers have to commit one hour per week through the school year,” Carolyn emphasized. “There’s no other organization working in East Palo Alto that has the same level of long term commitment from volunteers.”

There are just over 40 volunteers in each of the three schools, who are recruited before the school year begins and receive training from ASM about what to expect in the classroom and how to work with students. Volunteers also meet with the teachers they are supporting to go over expectations, schedule and student needs. Almost all ASM volunteers are women.

ASM provides ongoing volunteer training, and leadership sessions with speakers from the Stanford Children’s Health Council to engage, inform and get feedback from volunteers.

To ensure strong connections with the classroom teachers



that ASM supports, the organization has a volunteer

Cesar Chavez student. Photo by All Students Matter

Site Director for each of the three schools they serve, along with a Directory of Literacy, Heidi Mickelsen.

As a former middle school teacher, Mickelsen was inspired to start a literacy program after her experience as an ASM volunteer for five years. “I felt strongly that we should do early literacy and prevention efforts,” she explained. “By the time students are in fourth grade, if the material is over their heads, they become disengaged and overwhelmed.” The ASM early literacy effort serves students from kindergarten through third grade at Brentwood Academy through a specially designed Reading Tutor program.

ASM creates meaningful impact in East Palo Alto classrooms

ASM volunteers have made a significant impact on student learning over the past eight years, contributing to a rise in reading scores at Belle Haven, Brentwood and Cesar Chavez/Green Oaks Academy. ASM tutors also provide crucial support to teachers, which has helped increase teacher retention in all three schools.

“Whether working one-on-one or in small groups, my ASM volunteers support my students’ specific literacy needs, taking great pains to get to know each child, their likes and dislikes, and how they learn best,” Belle Haven teacher Cindy Buenavista said. “They work tirelessly to increase each student’s vocabulary, reading fluency, and comprehension. Above all else, each of my All Student Matter volunteers have created lasting, caring connections with my children, some of which have carried over from year to year. What makes this organization truly effective and special is that they nurture the whole child.”

ASM volunteers not only provide academic support, but their presence has also helped students feel happy and safe, as seen on this video on the ASM website. This sense of personal connection and efficacy has made it easy for ASM to recruit and retain volunteers, and there are a number of women have been giving their time in Ravenswood for five to six years.

Fariha Hilaly, an ASM volunteer from Palo Alto, worked with a little girl who began the school year not knowing a word of English but made incredible progress in part through her weekly reading sessions. “I wanted to do something to give back which was manageable with my schedule,” she said. “I like how ASM was started by local moms who have found a way to help local communities.”

ASM plans to grow to help more children in need

In partnership with the Ravenswood Education Foundation and new fundraising initiatives, ASM is looking to grow its volunteer corps by 20% each year, with a goal of eventually having 230 volunteers working in all five elementary schools by 2019. “I have a big vision of where the organization can go,” said ASM Literacy Director Heidi Mickelsen. “But expansion is slow as we rely strictly on volunteers and have limited funding.” To address this gap, ASM has started to raise funds from philanthropic donors to support its expansion plans.

When asked why she dedicates her free time to children in East Palo Alto, ASM ED Carolyn Blatman recounted a story about third grade boy she tutors named Tony, who faces challenges at home that are common to the students served by ASM and almost impossible to imagine for most children in Palo Alto. To her, it embodies the jarring 97% income statistic of the Ravenswood district:

“Tony looked tired one morning, so I asked him what time he had gone to sleep. He said 1:30am. When I asked why he stayed up so late, he said, ‘I had to babysit my little cousins, and brothers and sisters, and then we cooked hot dogs for dinner and then I had to do the dishes. Then I needed to make sure everyone did their homework, and I had to do mine. Then I thought how my Mom cleans houses all day in people’s homes and she goes to these big buildings at night to clean, so I thought I’d clean our place and stay up until my Mom got home. She was so happy to see me, she cried.’ Overcome with emotion, I picked Tony’s favorite book series, *The Magic Treehouse*. ‘Put your head down,’ I said, ‘And I’ll read to you.’”

To learn more about **All Students Matter** or sign up to volunteer, visit their [website](#).

Photos courtesy of All Students Matter

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Aisha Piracha

Aisha has a passion for hunting down and sharing stories which stir the hearts and minds of her readers. She was born in Pakistan and grew up in East Asia and Connecticut, and received her BA from Smith College in Massachusetts. Aisha worked on Wall Street for many years before turning to her creative calling - content design and writing! She is a marketing and media design professional, and has been living and raising her family in Palo Alto since 2005.

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