

Fall 2011

Dreamers Are College Bound

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Laura (2011) "Dreamers Are College Bound," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 8 : No. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol8/iss2/7

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Dreamers are college bound

From the school reader board, to t-shirts, to signs in the hallways, one thing is clear at Alder Elementary School – Alder students are college bound. These days, it's a mantra that rolls easily off the tongues of both students and teachers alike. *And it started with a dream.*

Paz Ramos '84 is principal at Alder Elementary in the Reynolds School District, the first school in the nation to be adopted by the "I Have a Dream" Foundation and one of Oregon's most impoverished schools. Nearly 75 percent of the 580 students at Alder speak English as a second language, 94 percent receive subsidized meals and 120 are homeless. The school hosts a food bank, a community garden and a clothing exchange program to help students and others in the community.

The numbers are staggering. But Ramos, in his second year at the school, is determined to change the culture. Ramos tells his students barriers are just excuses.

"There had to be a different culture in this building to get them to believe in themselves," he said. "We must set the bar high and they will reach for that bar."

With the hope of instilling a culture of college into students, Ramos lined a "Hall of Dreams" with college pennants and hung college banners from the gym ceiling. Signs proclaim "What college will you attend?" and "Alder is where college begins."

"We want to ingrain that into their hearts, into their minds," he said. "You will go to college. It's an expectation. My kindergartners know they will graduate from college in 2027."

Now, with the "dreamer" school designation, all students receive year-round mentors and academic enrichment, giving them the support and skills necessary to get into and graduate from college. Planning teams tackle obstacles that can get in students' way, addressing jobs, transportation, housing, after-school care and summer school.

The program's goals include boosting state test scores, at least doubling high school graduation rates and helping 80 percent of the students earn a college degree or post-high school certificate. The students' progress will be tracked for more than a decade after elementary school.

Ramos has already taken fifth graders (class of 2022) for an overnight visit at Linfield. The college has also adopted the fourth grade class, and the long-term relationship may include mentorship, volunteer work and a connection with

the Linfield nursing program to provide health education to Alder students and their families.

"They have to actually see a college before the concept becomes real," Ramos said.

College became real for Gabi Nygaard '13 as a fourth grader at Echo Shaw Elementary in Cornelius when her class was designated "dreamers" by the I Have A Dream Foundation. She chaperoned Alder Elementary students during their visit to Linfield in June.

"I was once in their shoes," said Nygaard, who will be the first in her family to earn a college degree and hopes to pursue a career in public relations. "Not only do they have a voice telling them they can go to college, they are expected to attend college. IHAD showed me that someone believed in me and made me believe that if I committed to it and worked hard I could achieve my goal."

Ramos' struggle to earn a college education has given him a fierce determination to help children envision a life beyond their neighborhood. He grew up in a migrant family, harvesting fruits and vegetables throughout the West. He and his brothers and sisters slept in ditches on the way from one farm to another, and he experienced racism and poverty firsthand.

"The fields just got longer and longer and it was hard at times for me to see beyond that life," said Ramos, who can relate to his students, many of whom live across the street from the elementary school in a large apartment complex. "It's hard for them to see beyond those apartments."

Dreams of higher education began for Ramos in the eighth grade, when his coach, Mike Springer '72, told him, "You're going to college." He remembers his mother's tears when he received his college acceptance letter.

"My SAT scores weren't that high, but Linfield gave me the support I needed," said Ramos. "I'm so grateful for my college experience. My professors and coaches trusted me and invested in me, and they gave me hope. That's what we want to do for our kids at Alder." 🌱

– Laura Davis

Paz Ramos '84 is principal at Alder Elementary School in Portland, the first school in the nation to be adopted by the "I Have a Dream" Foundation. Linfield has committed to a long-term relationship with Alder Elementary, adopting the fourth grade.

