



Good People

By Patrick Daugherty | Published
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Monarch principal Joel Garcia's priority is ensuring "the safety our kids."

It's going to take a little while to get there — "there" being the sports side of things. But, on the happy side of the street, we're already two sentences closer.

I'll begin with Joel Garcia. He's the principal of Monarch School, which can be found on Cedar Street in Little Italy. I got to Monarch School, and therefore Garcia, by way of researching a column about a swimmer (the sports guy) who was going to swim the San Pedro Channel from Catalina Island to the mainland — 21 miles. He wants to raise \$10,000 per mile, \$210,000 total, and give a chunk of it to Monarch School. Why?

Principal Joel Garcia is on the phone. Turns out Monarch School is unique in San Diego County, on several counts. It's a partnership between a nonprofit, Monarch School Project, and the San Diego County Office of Education. The school serves homeless children and children affected by homelessness. It's a kindergarten-through-12th-grade fully accredited school. Besides an academic program, Monarch provides counseling, health care, clothes, food, an afterschool program with art therapy, dance, music, photography, trips to the YMCA, and more, the whole deal running from 7:00 a.m to 6:00 p.m. The Office of Education picks up the basic education tab, about 45 percent of the budget, and the nonprofit covers the rest.

This makes so much sense, is so righteously the right thing to do, it's hard to believe that an Office of Education would ever sign on. So, I asked Garcia, "Who's in charge?"

Garcia says, "The [San Diego] County Office of Education has the final say for hiring teachers. They handle certification and payroll. All the curriculum, all that is from the County Office of Ed. through the school district.

"The nonprofit provides the other services. When kids show up, they're often in crisis, lost their home, living out of their vehicle, just moved into a shelter. It's common for there to be issues of domestic violence, among others. We have to address those issues before we can expect to see academic performance.

The nonprofit "funds an expressive arts therapist who sees students on an individual basis, sometimes two or three students at a time. We have an after-school program funded by the nonprofit. The first hour it's academic focus. Then, there are different enrichment opportunities, depending on the needs of the student. We also have an alumni-support program through the nonprofit. Kids are eligible for college scholarships."

I ask, "What about parents, drugs, and alcohol. How do you deal with a parent who shows up under the influence?"

Garcia says, "It happens...not regularly, but it happens. Our biggest priority is to ensure the safety of our kids. Depending on the situation and the gravity of it, it could be getting Child Protective Services involved. If it's something urgent, it's maybe getting the police department involved. We're a school first. We have all these wraparound services, but education is essential. Everything that we do is geared toward stabilizing that child and that family so they can focus on academics.

"Upon enrollment, we do an initial student assessment. We get their history, what school they're coming from, what grade they were in, how they were doing academically...do they have special education needs? Are they GATE [Gifted and Talented Education] certified?

"Sometimes families come and don't have any paperwork. We still enroll them that same day. We do a computer-based assessment for English-language arts, reading comprehension, grammar, and math. That will tell us what level the child is at. What we've seen is, on average, kids are coming in two to three grade levels lower than they should be for their age. Then, we do this assessment every 100 days to see what progress they're making.

"What's also crucial is having the teacher and teaching assistant working with the student from day one. Is the student able to comprehend what's going on? Are there other issues? Are they where they should be for their age?"

“You have 20 kids in the classroom, but they’re all going to be working at different levels. Our teachers are masters at making sure they know those kids who are struggling — those who are on target and those who are higher up. They’re taking a different approach with each child based on that child’s academic needs.

“When a student graduates, they get their high school diploma. It’s a real diploma. We’re a real school. That’s the bottom line.” Okay, next week the Box will do swimmer guy, the man who’s swimming San Pedro Channel to raise money for the above forementioned kids. Then circle back and finish up with Monarch School. Call it a Good People trifecta.