



## Monarch School Educates San Diego's Homeless

By [Cara Davis](#) | May 18, 2011 at 5:05 am



For the past six years, **Sarita Fuentes** has served as the Principal and CEO of [Monarch School](#), a nonprofit school for homeless children in San Diego. We talked with Fuentes about the school and the achievements they've made. "We've been able to raise the bar for academic excellence at Monarch School with high school math, reading and writing test scores on a steady incline," she said. Today, the average student arrives at Monarch three years behind grade level, but for every six months a student attends the school, he or she progresses more than a year academically.

This year Fuentes, who now serves as Co-Principal and CEO, while Joel Garcia serves as Principal, says Monarch is breaking ground on new campus that will help them more than double their current student population. Youth homeless rates continue to rise, with more than 13,000 homeless students identified in San Diego County, and the need to provide a rigorous education and additional support to this underserved population is greater than ever.

***Where/how did a school model that specifically serves the homeless community originate?***

**Sarita Fuentes:** The idea for Monarch School first started in 1987 when the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE), realizing a dire need, funded a drop-in center for homeless children. Called The P.L.A.C.E., Progressive Learning Alternative for Children's Education, it had one teacher, **Sandra McBrayer**. This teacher helped the school grow, with her work earning her the title of 1994 United States Teacher of the Year. Sandra went on to serve as a national educational ambassador in 1996, and the school got new leadership from Susan Armenta and expanded to include junior high and high school students with tutoring, mentoring and ancillary support programs. In 1998, the students voted on a name change to Monarch School, and shortly after the Monarch School Project was formed as a California non-profit to supplement the public education with basic needs.

***How is it structured?***

Monarch School is a public K-12 school exclusively for students who are impacted by homelessness in San Diego. It's the largest school of its kind in California, formed by a unique public-private partnership between the San Diego County Office of Education and the Monarch School Project, a non-profit 501(c)3 organization. SDCOE provides funding to cover public school teacher and support staff salaries, curriculum, and rent. Through the non-profit Project, the school is able to provide additional support services to reduce the negative impact homelessness has on our students' education. This includes providing things such as academic support; tutors and mentors to further enhance learning; counseling and expressive arts therapy to address social-emotional needs; backpacks and school supplies; food; medical, dental and vision services; new and gently used clothing and shoes; and personal hygiene kits.

***What challenges are you facing in this economy?***

With the San Diego housing market hit the hardest in the U.S., we have seen enrollment of a few families who lost their homes to foreclosure. The unemployment rate has put a strain on agencies providing direct support as more and more families are reaching out for help. The non-profit Monarch School Project raises funds annually to support over 50 percent of the school's budget. With the recession we are expanding our outreach, and, thankfully, we have a large community of supporters who step up during tough times.



### ***What challenges do you face in general?***

We often face emotional and social challenges with students based on their background and living situation. Our program is designed to deliver standardized curriculum and support services to meet these challenges every day. Space is a challenge. Currently, we operate in 10,000 square feet with an average of 175 students. The new school addresses the space challenge with 51,000 square feet on 2.2 acres.

The new school will serve up to 350 students. We look forward to increasing our outreach to serve more of the 13,000+ homeless students here in San Diego County. By setting the example and continuing to provide a comprehensive school that meets the academic, social-emotional, and basic needs of these at-risk students, we will help end the cycle of homelessness . . . one student at a time.

### ***How can one help?***

For Monarch School, you can make a gift to our Annual Campaign or Capital Campaign that supports our mission. Our vision is to provide an excellent academic and supportive environment in which any student in San Diego County who is impacted by homelessness will receive a rigorous education and grow personally to become a highly motivated, contributing member of society. You can be an advocate for homeless youth. Do not allow them to go unnoticed in your community. Find an organization that is making a difference and get involved.

### ***How can regular communities seek to meet the education needs of its homeless population?***

Advocate for underserved students, volunteer with organizations that support students and families impacted by homelessness, volunteer to be a mentor with [Big Brothers Big Sisters](#).