



Q&A: Monarch school principal

THURSDAY, JANUARY 22, 2009 AT 2 A.M.

<

Sarita Fuentes is in her fifth year as principal and chief executive officer of the Monarch School in downtown San Diego, which serves homeless and at-risk children up to 12th grade from throughout the county.

Monarch is operated under a partnership between the San Diego County Office of Education and the nonprofit Monarch School Project. Fuentes, 51, splits her time managing the school and the nonprofit. The Chula Vista resident, who has a master's degree in curriculum and supervision from Point Loma Nazarene University, dropped out of Montgomery High School in Otay Mesa when she was 16, but managed to turn her life around with the encouragement of an educator.

She is working on getting a new campus for Monarch, which has outgrown its current home on West Cedar Street. The plan is to raise money to build a larger school on the existing site.

We recently had a conversation with Fuentes about her life and her job.

QUESTION: Tell us a little bit about yourself.

ANSWER: I dropped out in the 11th grade. I had straight F's. And I did complete a GED. I was employed, gainfully employed, but I had an educator come into my life, Dr. Maida Torres-Stanovik. And she kept talking to me about the importance of education, and she encouraged me. She was the principal of a junior high school, and she encouraged me, 'Go back to school. You could be running this school.'"

So she talked to me for four years, over the course of four years. I finally decided to go back. I wanted to be like her. I wanted to be an administrator. So, that positive influence from an educator made me believe I have the potential and the ability to pursue higher education.

What's your job like?

It's a very unique position because I wear the two hats. I am the principal of the school, but I am

also the CEO of the nonprofit that supplements and supports the educational component.

No one knew what that was going to look like. They had brainstormed, and they believed that one person doing both would be the best way to operate the program and minimize the conflict of the principal wanting one thing and the CEO wanting something different. That was the idea, but it had not been in place before, it didn't exist.

No one really had a game plan. It was an enormous undertaking. I had the experience in education. I did not have the experience as a CEO, so to speak, and a nonprofit at that. It was a huge learning curve. The educational side of it, we started making immediate changes to strengthen and improve the academic program. It was work, but it was up my alley, and the nonprofit was where I received so much support from the board members.

How are plans progressing to build a new Monarch campus?

When I was hired I was told we're building a new school, so I expected it to start happening that year. So I am going on my fifth year, but we have yet to break ground.

The reason for that was the site we originally thought we were going to obtain and build, it didn't work out. We started looking at every possible viable site in the downtown community and finally, determined the best site was our current site.

We are starting over and building up so we became owners of the property last year, just last year.

The plans have been modified, and what we did was step back and do a cost analysis. We did a feasibility study and looked at what do we need to do to be in a position to actually start building. And there were a lot of things that we needed to work on. So we are in the process of doing that. But we have arrived at the conclusion, finally, that this site is the best site for us.

So are you in the midst of fundraising money for the school? How is that going?

We don't have a capital campaign because we have spent these past years looking at alternatives, viable sites and in discussions. We were even having discussions with another partner agency to see if we could do a joint-use project... We are hoping it's viable. Unfortunately, with what's happening in the economy nationwide, that has brought a lot of people to a screeching halt, and we are very aware of that.

How is the economy affecting your school's enrollment?

There have been several articles in the newspaper about the increase of the homeless population. We know that it's going to trickle down to us. Some of the shelters that are in the downtown area that are our primary providers, they have waiting lists. They don't have the

ability to expand and take in this newly homeless population.

So in that sense, the referrals we receive from them, those really can't increase. The population that we are seeing is the population that is going into the low-rent motels.

The other thing is we don't really advertise who we are. We don't go out and recruit. Our population finds us. Either the shelters inform them that we exist and that we specifically serve the homeless population or if they're moving into a low-rent motel and we have a family living there, the students will recruit. "Hey we have a special school, come to it."

How many students do you serve?


It fluctuates every week because they are a very transient population. We hover at 100 students at Monarch. I believe our enrollment today is 105. We've taken it as high as 140, where we were bursting at the seams.

But the transition, the turnover... on average a student can be here anywhere from six months to nine months. We have one graduate – she will be graduating this year – and she's been here for four years.

– *Helen Gao*

Find this article at:

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2009/jan/22/lz1cz22qanda195456-qamp-monarch-school-principal>

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.
