

Interview with Rubén Degollado
ESL Teacher at Poynter Middle School

What has been your involvement with our Hispanic population?

I've been in the district for the past five years, and in that time I have done a lot of things...taught ESL classes for Hispanic parents from Poynter, we've had a few Spanish literacy nights, we've had some Latino authors come in to visit our school to talk to our families, and then recently the Office of Hispanic Outreach was formed and we also formed a Hispanic Outreach committee and so I've been on that committee for this year and we've done a lot of activities where we've reached out to our Latino families, talking to them about different issues, having them at Parent Nights, making home visitations to get parents into the school and that's some stuff we offer to them to learn.

Tell me a little more about the Office of Hispanic Outreach Program.

The Office of Hispanic Outreach was formed this year and it is part of the District's strategic plan—Strategy Three—to reach out to the Hispanic families and the Office of Hispanic Outreach is led by Olga Acuña. She just moved to Century as a teacher on special assignment this year. In partnership with them, the Hispanic Outreach Committee is a committee of about seven or eight members on there: teachers, assistants, a couple of people at the district office, mostly consultants who are interested in improving the relationship between the District and our Hispanic families. So, it's been really cool to see that strategy of our strategic plan implemented into the office and we're seeing some good results.

What methods are used to transition Hispanic ESL students into the mainstream classes?

It's a process where we gradually get them ready for moving into regular education. Beginning students start out where the focus is really heavy on language, really heavy on acquiring vocabulary, getting the culture of the American society. And then we move students into an intermediate level where they learn content. They have an ESL science, an ESL math, an ESL social studies, where they're learning content—they're learning their subject matter—but they're also learning English at the same time. So as kids move through the program—they move through that intermediate program—and then they go into an advanced stage where they only have one language arts class that's ESL and the rest of the classes are, they're in other classes with regular education, kids—mainstream is what they call it. And in those classes, their math classes, science, or social studies, we try really hard to have those teachers have a bilingual assistant available to help them in the class and to help the ESL kids in the class. So then they're at that advanced state, then after that the hope is that we can take away the supports, we can take away the staff holding, we can take away the assistant, we can take away...we can take them out of an ESL language arts class and we can totally move them into a regular education.

How long does it take [for students in ESL to fully learn English]?

How long does it take? It can take...really there's no formula. Some kids can move through the program in three years, other kids it may take six years, it may take even seven. That's all depending on what kind of education they received in their country. If a kid has more education from their native country it's very easy for them to move through because they have literacy skills, they have academic skills, and it carries over. So, you know, if you were to go into a different country, and you knew how to learn, you knew how to read, you'd pick it up quick, you'd pick up that other language. If you went into a country and you didn't have any schooling, it'd be harder. So that kind of student takes longer. And also it has a lot to do with movement—if kids...you know, a student can be here in Hillsboro since kindergarten, but from kindergarten through seventh grade, they may have had two months at a time, three months at a time, gaps in their education, to where they really only have maybe four years of education because they took off to Mexico for crops when the crops left here they had to go back over there to Mexico to move to make a living for a while. So, it really depends, the students, the quickest I've seen students move through, two years. We had some students come in fifth grade, and then seventh grade we had students basically exiting out because they had an education in their native country.

So is there—because we were learning a little bit in class about how they're, I think with along with what you were saying how much education they received, I mean they come here and they don't really know the academic language. They know Spanish, but they don't know the academic language in Spanish. Do you see what I'm saying, is that kind of hard to...?

Yes, it's true, because there are two types of English and I don't know if you've heard this if you're studying ESL. There's two types of English: there's what's called BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills), and that's everyday language, what you and I speak, in the cafeteria, in the playground. And then there's the other kind of language, which is cognitive, it's CALPS (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills). And that's basically in both any language you speak you have those two types of language, so kids have their BICS, they have regular Spanish that they know, and then a lot of them don't have that other kind of Spanish, that academic language because they haven't spent enough time in school. So if they have higher CALPS when they get to school they're going to be more successful.

Yeah, that goes along with what you were saying about the education and all that...so I guess you already answered that one. So, what are the parents' reactions to the academic outreach programs that are provided?

What are parents' reactions?

Like are they supportive...?

Education for kids?

Yeah, education for kids.

Seem to be generally supportive. I've had, a lot of that is cultural. Parents coming from Mexico trust teachers, trust administrators. So they really believe in what we're

doing, and a lot of that comes in, even the word *maestro* has different connotations, different meaning than *teacher*. *Teacher* is teacher, but to them *maestro* means more like a master, like this is someone I trust with my child, so really we don't get a whole lot of, if people are displeased with what we're doing, we hear about it, but it's not like there's this overall feeling of, you know, dissatisfaction or whatever. I have always gotten positive feedback with what we're doing here at our school and can't say the way it is in other schools but I really feel like the parents are happy with what we do just from the amount of parents who come to the school and I have, because I share the same culture that their parents do they're very comfortable talking to me when there's any kind of questions or any kind of concerns that they have, so I've heard very few in my five years here. So, that's the way it at my school and I'm pretty sure it's pretty similar in other schools.

Yeah, within the District, yeah. So did you yourself go through the ESL program?

No, I don't have a true first language. My...I learned Spanish and English at the same time, so it's like I would hear Spanish spoken to me by my grandmother, and I couldn't respond very well in Spanish, but I knew what she was talking about, so then I would tell my mom what I...my answer to my grandmother's question and then my mom would tell my grandmother what I had said in Spanish. So, you know, growing up I heard both spoken simultaneously. I could never really respond in Spanish until later on that I started practicing more, and actually my Spanish has gotten better here living here in Hillsboro than it did from Texas where I grew up.

Oh, you grew up in Texas?

Yeah, I grew up in Texas; I forgot to mention that. So, no true first language; it's kind of like both are my first languages. I'm more comfortable in English just because I speak more of it and it's spoken by a lot more folks I hang out with on a regular basis. And then, like, all my family speaks, we call it Texmex, or Spanglish; it's Spanish and English just all thrown in together. There's no true one language spoken, and I slip into that dialect every time I hang out with my family, every time I go to visit. So, I think that answers your question.

One of the District's goals is to recruit and retain Hispanic staff. What efforts have you seen in trying to achieve this goal? Such as, I think she [my teacher] mentioned "Unión América?"

Well I'm evidence that our efforts, the District efforts, have done a pretty good job at that. I was recruited mainly by Mario Alba, he's the principal at J.B. Thomas. Five years back I went to a teacher fair and he was the person, the first person that I met from the Hillsboro School District. So he was very active in putting me out there and recruiting me and getting my name to different principals, they had openings at that time, and that was for the school year 1999-2000. So that has been really instrumental. The other thing with Unión América is that we have, we've been very active in helping each other, like retention; one problem with Latino teachers is retaining them. And Unión América, we've done a really good job of retaining our teachers, keeping our Latino teachers here and keeping them plugged into each other. And that group is unique, there's no other group like that in the state that I even know of, or in the Portland Metropolitan area. If

you looked at the number of Hispanic or Latino administrators in Hillsboro, we have a lot more than even a district the size of Portland public schools. I think Portland public schools has one, and they're roughly I think four or five times our size.

That's pretty small.

Yeah, it's pretty small, and we have one, I'm going to be one next year. Me, Gus Balderas and Adelia Scollfield [sp?], Mario Alba, and Carlos Perez, so there's like five of us. So that's pretty good, and we're, there's a lot more in the wings waiting. They're going to school around here, yeah there's a couple of elementary folks that are interested in the administration. A couple of teachers, a couple of Latino teachers in Unión América that Carlos, Mario, and Gus are mentoring, and they've mentored me in the administration. So I think we do an awesome job. I mean, I think we have room for growth, I think everyone does, but we've exceeded what other districts have done in that area.

So, did you choose to work in this district, or they just kind of placed you here?

I did, I, when I came up to that teacher fair, I walked away with two interviews, one was in Hillsboro, and the other was in Woodburn. And after those two interviews I had two offers, so I had to choose between Woodburn and Hillsboro. And one of the things that made me interested in Hillsboro, that made me choose Hillsboro was my principal, Mike Scott, just how much he encouraged me that there would be opportunities for me to grow. And then when I heard about the stuff that was going on with the different Latino administrators and the folks that were out here, that's really why I chose Hillsboro. Part of it was location, too, but that had something to do with it.

Oh, because are you, like, from around here, or do you live around here?

Well, my wife's from Oregon, but this seemed closer to Portland to me, and I wanted to be closer to the city.

So, would you recommend, like, this district to other Hispanic educators?

I would, and moving into administration I've had a chance to go to recruitment fairs where, you know, for, new teachers coming out of programs and I always, I always, look for—did you say Hispanic educators?

Yeah.

OK. I would most definitely recommend other Hispanic educators to come here just because of the sheer number of folks that we have here already, we have that friendships, we have that kind of opportunities, like if, because there's issues that we deal with that not every other teacher deals with, being a Latino teacher, and it's really good to have Unión América as a support group, as a group that we can sit down and just brainstorm together and talk about our ideas, what kind of challenges we're facing, so every time I talk to teachers or other Hispanic educators I always tell them that as a really big selling point when I talk to folks, so most definitely I would recommend our District for other people.

Did you write a poem in there, the Unión América, in September 2003?

I did. It wasn't for that one specifically, for the newsletter specifically, I had written but Carlos Perez had asked me, because he had found out I was a writer, so he had asked me to submit a poem, some kind of little vinnete or something, so I sent him an "I am From" poem, I think it was. So, that was pretty cool, just so you get to see yourself, even if it is in a little newsletter, it was fun.

Yeah, my teacher has that; I haven't gotten the chance to read that just because the information's all scattered right now but I will definitely read that. So, this is a good one, to what extent do you think mainstream teachers—like in this building—are prepared to meet the needs of Hispanic students?

I think people here generally get the needs that our ESL kids have. Over my time here in the past five years I've been pretty deliberant about offering them tools, offering them training as much as I could, sharing the ideas I got from my endorsed ESLL endorsement program, sharing all the strategies that I learned there with our teachers here. So, I think they're pretty prepared, I would like to see more training, I would like to see our mainstream teachers with ESL kids, which is basically every mainstream teacher in our building, I would like to see them endorsed, I would like to see them receive training from the district staff, because it's hard for a teacher to offer training to other teachers, because that's the only kind of training they get. So, I'd like to see district first be able to do that. And I think we're moving in that direction.

So, through all this, like, ESL program and all that, do you guys receive, like what kind of feedback do you receive from the students about these kinds of programs?

About their programs?

Yeah, the ESL programs.

Every year we do a survey, an ESL survey where kids, you know we do like a, kind of like a small...I mean we don't get like the whole student body, ESL student body, but we do a survey where kids get to give any input into what they think could be better, what are some improvements we could make as far as what they're learning is, what we offer for them. And then I've always had a very open-door policy with my kids and I think students, my ESL students, feel very comfortable talking to me and we have, there's been times where kids tell me, "Hey, maestro, what about this, this class doesn't work for me, can we do this, can we change this in my schedule...?" So any time a student has any kind of problem or they want to change schedules or, I'm always available for that.

That's good. So what are some reoccurring issues for the students, for the Hispanic students?

Reoccurring issues? Let me think about it. I think one of the main issues that our kids are facing is having the time to complete homework. I think the family life of our kids, I don't think it's very conducive a lot of times to completing homework. They get home and a lot of times their parents are still working until five or six, they have to take care of their brothers, because they're middle school kids so they have to take care of their elementary brothers and sisters who are doing their homework, they have to do their chores when they get home. And then, as you can probably attest, a lot of being able to

do your homework and feel good about it is having your own space; I have my own desk at home where I work, I sit down and get down to business. A lot of our kids don't have that. They're living in apartments, they're living in two-bedroom apartments; they may not have access to that. Another barrier for them is technology; some homework that they've been assigned is technology-based (having access to the internet), you know some of our families don't have that. So that's been a reoccurring issue is our teachers, you know some of them have gotten frustrated with our kids not doing homework, so that's a reoccurring issue. So what we've offered is an assisted studies class, a study hall, where kids—mainly it's those other kids we talked about who are transitioning out of ESL who are needing more homework support—so we have a class everyday where they can come and a teacher can help them and have assistance in the classroom helping them doing their homework to give that space and that time to complete the homework. And a lot of kids, you know, take advantage of it, and a few of them don't. It's just the way it is; some kids don't, some kids will. We just want to offer them some extra help.

Yeah, Century has that too, actually. I help with the afterschool tutoring program; it says “tutoring” but basically they can come there for an hour afterschool and study and there’s a bus that takes them home and everything. And like you said, some go and some don’t, but the ones that do go they generally, they receive a lot of help. So, do you think there are any improvements—I know you probably kind of answered this already—but any improvements, I guess the District in general, could make to help the students?

Some improvements that I would like to see...for our ESL kids some things I would like to see...we do Spanish literacy here, we were talking about kids having Spanish academic language, I would like to see more opportunities to provide Spanish literacy, to provide kids, Spanish speakers with a chance to maintain their own language. Because what I've noticed happening is these kids are moving further and further through the ESL program, they lose their academic Spanish, and if we want our students to be—and I wish I had had this opportunity; I mean I took regular Spanish, but I wish I'd taken more advantage of it—as we see those kids moving out of Spanish literacy, they're losing the ability, or they're not even *gaining* the ability to read and write in their own language well. Because a lot of our Spanish-speakers speak *way* better Spanish than I do, but when it comes down to writing it, and reading it, it's really low skills. So, if kids could maintain that, I really think it would go further to helping them acquire English, not only to acquire English, but also helping them to maintain their own language and to even help them be leaders in the future. Like, “Hey man, I speak Spanish, not only that but I can read it and write it.” And if kids could do that I think it would really help them out in getting jobs and being able to work with other Latino kids in the future, or other Latino people period.

To be educated in both languages.

To have that ability to switch back and forth with the spoken languages, in both languages.

What is the greatest obstacle, do you think, that students have out of everything?

What's the greatest obstacle? I just try to imagine myself coming into another country, trying to learn the language. Really, the language is the greatest obstacle that there is. So obstacles...I think that is really the biggest one. Again, the other one is alluded to, certainly I refer it to, just the, when kids are moving. The mobility, kids are moving. It's really hard for a kid to keep up with another student who isn't moving. Because anytime students move from here even to another school district they're losing out on their education, and there's always at least two weeks of just transitioning into a new school. So all that—

It adds up over time.

It adds up over time. So the mobility rate of kids moving from district to district, state to state, here to Mexico, hurts them and then you have, and put on top of that you have language. So those are, those are two really key things, challenges I think our kids are facing.

OK. So do you think that adjusting to the culture has anything to do with, you know, that type of—?

Of being challenged?

Yeah, of like in school in general. Like when they first come here, think about the fact that, the adjusting to the culture, does it affect how they're learning?

Yes, there's been some research done at Virginia Collier on, it's called a culturating. The more culturated students are the better they're going to do in school. So when they come into school there's a process where by they have to learn the rules of the society, they have to learn the rules of the school culture and until kids get those rules and are comfortable with those rules a lot of times academics are going to fail because that's not what's important to them at that particular moment. Sure they want to do well but "How do I get in the lunchroom in the cafeteria?" is more important to a twelve-year-old kid at that particular moment. You know, "How am I going to tell the lunch lady that I want a hamburger and fries instead of pizza? Or if she gives me pizza, how do I tell her I really wanted a hamburger?" Just getting the culture in, and a lot of that's language but a lot of that is also just knowing the culture of, "This is the way the line works, this is the way the bells work, when I'm here..." and just learning those processes is just huge. And I think we do a good job here at Poynter when new students come here we get bilingual students to tour them around the school and explain. And Century does it too, and most of the people I've talked to in our district do that. It's just, you know, kids go around and show, "This is the cafeteria, this is the gym, you're going to here a bell, here's your locker, this is the way your locker works." Just giving them a bilingual person to walk around with, make them feel a little bit comfortable. And then those new ESL kids that get here, Charlene is one of the first, Charlene Rivera, our home school consultant, a bilingual person, she's in the counseling center, so she's like one of the first people they meet. And then if they're ESL students I meet them as well and talk with them about their schedules and we figure out where they're going to go from there so I explain things to them. So I think both of us, sharing their culture, sharing their language, it gets them an easier transition.

So are there any programs to help the parents learn the language? Does the school offer any? Because I know Century has something called “Survival English,” two nights a week for the parents. Does the school offer any?

The past two years we’ve had a grant, the Project Task Grant, actually for the past three years. For the second two years of that grant we offered some English classes a couple nights a week. I was the parent ESL teacher and Lorena was one of our assistants, she also taught but she assisted me as well. So we offered that for the past few years. But then our grant money ran out so we don’t have money to offer the classes, but we have Century classes actually are accessible to our parents. So anytime parents ask me, “Are there any ESL classes or English classes?” we send them to Century.

Oh, I thought it was just for the Century parents, but I guess—

It is, but it’s been a really good thing to be able to say, “Oh, they have classes at Century; let me give you a number; just call over there, or I can call ahead if you want and you can go over there.” It’s not as easy for them to get to, because Century’s...for our families around here it’s quite a bit further for them. But it’s off the bus line so, you know, it’s accessible if they want. But it’s been a bummer, you know; I wish we could do parent classes here again, because people, parents still ask about it. The word got around in the community; I had uncles and aunts of our kids coming in, I had grandma coming in, just coming in for the class, I had little kids coloring, they would bring their kids in, just...it was a really cool time. It’s hard to see it go but now it would be a completely voluntary thing and we don’t have money for any resources anymore, you know, we bought all the books, we bought all the materials through the grant money that we had. So yeah, it’s been really hard.

So do you think there’s a possibility that it’ll be opening up anytime soon, or how far out do you think?

There’d be a possibility of it, it’d just be a matter of finding access to grant money, and that’s a pretty time-consuming process. I just haven’t had time this year to do that.

So have you yourself worked a lot with the Hispanic parents, the parents of the Hispanic students to help them? Or, to help them help the students?

Yeah, to help them help the students. Done a lot more of it this year with the parent meetings from the migrant ESL office in partnership with the Office of Hispanic Outreach. A lot of topics we’ve had through, we’ve had a lot of guest speakers come in and speak to how to help their kids, speak on the importance of homework, speak on the importance of getting involved in extracurricular activities, we’ve had folks come in from Oregon Partnership focusing on substance abuse issues, focusing on any kind of literacy activities that they can do at home. So the guest speakers, we’ve had some pretty good successes; we’ve had two of our parent nights here at Poynter this year. So that’s been our education piece, and then again just having that access to ESL classes at Century.

So you keep a good contact with the parents, basically?

Yeah.

That's pretty good. So is there any thing else you'd like to add?

Anything else I'd like to add? I just think Hillsboro is—and this is from how I've seen other districts, contacting the other districts, contacting the other people, other ESL folks—I think we are, I think we have one of the best ESL programs in the state. Just in how comfortable a lot of our kids are in our school, just in the way that we are really conscious about ESL issues, all issues ESL, I mean it's at the forefront at most people's minds. I mean it's not perfect, there's always room for growth, not everyone's on the same page, but when it's a part of your strategic plan, when your deputy superintendent is supportive of creating an Office of Hispanic Outreach that no other district in the state has, that says a lot to me that we are moving forward. And we've been nationally recognized by NEA (National Education Association); we work in partnership with them all the time. So all the stuff that we're doing with the Office of Hispanic Outreach Committee, NEA is in on all of that, and we've even had representatives from NEA come to our parent meetings and they are just, we are now at a place where we are, for NEA, we're a showpiece, we are, "Look at what Hillsboro is doing." So people are talking to us about modeling their own programs after what we've done. So we're blazing new trails.

Wow, you guys are doing pretty good then.

Yeah.

Programs mentioned in interview:

- Office of Hispanic Outreach Program
- ESL
- Unión América
- Survival English (for parents)