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Orosi students succeed in face of poverty, gangs, fear of ICE

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In the week leading up to qualifications for the National Speech and Debate Tournament, the members of the Orosi High speech team were deeply superstitious: at any mention of winning, they rapped their knuckles against the wood of their desks in unison.

The juniors and sophomores on the three-year-old team are valley champions who relish taking trophies from their bigger and better-resourced opponents, something they often do. But despite their successes, they were anxious for reasons beyond regular competition worries.

The rural district has the unfortunate distinction of being one of the poorest in California, so the students were worried about fundraising for the big trip out-of-state (rap rap rap). For some, just leaving town carries its own risks.

“What if I get home and they’re gone?” junior Dennis Flores says of family members who live and work in the United States without documentation. “Everyone has their own background situation they’re dealing with. For others, it’s like, ‘Am I going to make it home this time?’”

“And we’ve been thinking about that all our lives,” sophomore Milca Altimirano Torres says. “No kid at 5 years old should be thinking about that.”

The speech team members and their peers at Cutler-Orosi Joint Unified face a triple-threat of challenges, each of which has been linked to poor academic outcomes, and the cocktail of which would be daunting to any school district.

First, there’s the poverty: the district has the third-highest rate of poverty of any unified school district in California, a factor repeatedly linked to low test scores, high dropout rates and more.

On the heels of poverty is the gun and gang violence in the community, which seems to make headlines every month. And most recently, there’s the growing threat of ICE in a community where many young people are citizens, but their parents are not, leading to fears of family separation.

For some students, it all comes to a head on the walk home from school: they may dodge a gang member on the sidewalk by cutting through a field, only to come face to face with ICE.

But in spite of these factors, the district's high school produces graduates who are ready for college at rates comparable to schools with half as many students living in poverty, like El Diamante in Visalia Unified or Bullard in Fresno Unified.

Even compared to a school with a similar enrollment and poverty level like McLane High, Orosi has a 95 percent graduation rate to McLane's 88 percent, while 48 percent of Orosi grads are ready for college to McLane's 35 percent.

COJUSD students also meet the University of California A-G requirements – the basic prerequisites for UC admission – at higher rates than any other students in Tulare County. And the district boasts a laundry list of other honors, from the perennial success of the speech and debate team to designations as a model school from national organizations of all stripes and even enviable double-digit gains in its Smarter Balanced Assessment scores from 2017-18.

Superintendent Yolanda Valdez says it's no accident.

“We want to be the place where people come and see what poor kids can do when given opportunity,” Valdez says. “Poverty is not an excuse.”

A no-excuses approach to poverty

Part of the reason for this academic success is that the district has been able to leverage funding to directly address the issues its students face.

With 97 percent of students living in poverty, the school received nearly \$13 million in supplemental and concentration funds from the state, or about \$3,250 per student, which was spent on counselors for low-income youth, parent education programs and more.

The nonprofit Cutler-Orosi Family Resource Center, which acts as an extension of the school district, uses another several hundred thousand dollars in grant funding to provide everything from cash assistance for rent and utilities to clothes and food and psychological services to families who live within COJUSD's borders.

And when the grants aren't available, the district turns to the community: Orosi High principal Robert Vaca says the school raised \$60,000 to fund paid internships for health career-track students who otherwise would have turned down those opportunities to instead earn money through fieldwork.

Agriculture is a \$6 billion industry in Tulare County that employs over half of the population of Cutler and one-third of the population of Orosi, but the average household income for both towns is in the low \$30,000s. For some students, the blossoming pink-and-white orchards where their family members work are actually something of a threat.

“My mom has brought me to the orchards before and said, ‘Do you want to work here?’” senior Yudit Garibay says. “Because that's what happens if you don't go to school.”

With no city government in either Cutler or Orosi, the school district functions as the center of community life. Meetings between healthcare providers, county representatives and other community groups take place monthly at the district office. The result is that school officials can hear directly from groups who may be able to provide basic necessities, mentoring, internships and more to their students.

But there are also downsides to a district trying to do it all, the most pressing of which is the lack of public transit, resource center director Cyndee Garcia says. Many students walk to and from school, which can mean several miles in the dark through rural areas. And offering services isn't effective if the people who need them can't get to them, Garcia says. The resource center responded by purchasing a fleet of vans that can be used to bring people to the English, parenting and citizenship classes offered onsite.

Some solutions are less formal, but just as effective. When a family came to the center in need of furniture, Garcia says, she called a guy who called a guy, a Realtor, who was able to arrange a donation of beds and couches from a model home.

"We know our kids are part of families, and when they succeed, the kids succeed," Garcia says.

Beyond practical needs, the poverty levels mean that schools and teachers must keep in mind that students' families may not have the know-how to help their kids fill out FAFSA applications or nudge them toward extracurriculars. In response, Orosi High has enshrined into the curriculum a series of requirements that make its graduates stand out to UC and California State University schools, like mandatory community service. Vaca added that 95 percent of courses at Orosi High are A-G accredited.

Each freshman must also take a semester of speech and debate in order to fulfill a district goal that students leave as good communicators. But the classes also serve as a recruiting pool for the speech and debate team, coach Karson Kalashian says, which in turn leads to trophies and honors to add to a college application.

Working with students from high poverty backgrounds presents its own challenges, Kalashian says, like ensuring that kids have time to practice when they may be facing pressure to work after school. The team practices instead during school hours as a class period. And in some ways, speech is also an ideal extracurricular, Kalashian says.

"Debate maybe takes more preparation, you need the suit and the laptop, but with speech, it doesn't matter," Kalashian says. "You can get up there and speak just like anybody else."

Gun and gang violence

The poverty and isolation of the two towns is a direct contributor to gang violence, according to Mike Alvarez, a retired corrections officer turned founder of a nonprofit that serves at-risk youth. With their parents at work from sunrise to dusk, kids are often on their own and far from neighbors, creating a vacuum for belonging, Alvarez says.

“The scary thing about it is that there are certain areas in the community where they can’t go out and enjoy and walk,” Alvarez says. “So we wanted the ranch to be somewhere where they can be kids.”

His nonprofit ranch, Mending Fences and Changing Minds, is multipurpose, functioning as a rehabilitation space for students deemed at-risk by the school district, as well as an event center for birthday parties for kids in need. Alvarez says he felt compelled to start the charity to give back to the town he grew up in.

“I wanted to educate these kids on the ramifications of their decisions, because it’s not just them, their parents are responsible, too,” Alvarez says. “And when there’s an immigration issue, gang enhancements can make it worse.”

Students are referred to the ranch by the school district, and those who are fulfilling community service requirements are put to work building sheds and caring for horses. Alvarez says he hopes the kids take away practical skills from their time at the ranch, but also the ability to work well with anyone they may encounter.

“I want them to learn respect for one another, I want them to gain some self-esteem, so they can take it out into the community,” Alvarez says.

Other after-school programs seek to fulfill a similar purpose, giving teenagers a place to go and something to do after school. At TECH Connect, a program run by the Tulare County Office of Education, students learn to repair computers, do taxes and analyze media, like looking at the placement of tobacco ads in films. Some even become IRS-certified through the course, offering free tax prep to the community in turn.

TECH Connect director Miguel Castaneda shows students how to take apart computers and put them back together to prepare them for possibly repairing computers for community members. Aleksandra Appleton aappleton@fresnobee.com

TECH Connect director Miguel Castaneda has run the program for the last decade, and says he worries that the violence prevalent in the community is getting worse. Students are targeted for gang recruitment as early as middle school, with administrators at a recent community meeting voicing their concerns about 13- and 14-year-olds aspiring to join up instead of finishing school.

“Through this program they can become a family,” Alvarez says. “And we tell them, ‘Don’t let anyone out there scare you.’”

Still, even with safe spaces, it’s not possible for the district to shield students from all violence. As recently as late March, Cutler Elementary was placed on lockdown due to an hours-long standoff just blocks from the school.

Immigration fears

Vaca says the political developments of the past two years, including the pause on DACA applications and the recent family separation crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border have led to a nervousness among students and families that's hurting motivation.

"They think, 'Why should I keep going, if it's not going to matter?'" Vaca says. "But what we tell them is if you're going to go before a judge, you want to have been your best."

The school cannot keep records of how many students are undocumented, but it's a significant enough population that counselors have the know-how to help with DACA applications, and presentations by immigration attorneys are consistently well-attended. Some students may not know for sure themselves, Vaca says, finding out only when it's time to apply for college.

"They go home and say, 'OK, I need my Social Security number,' and then that's when the conversation happens," Vaca says. "Sometimes they find out and it's too late for us to help."

For students who are citizens or DREAMers, the fear is more about being separated from parents or family members who aren't. In an attempt to warn others, community members sometimes post sightings of immigration authorities to social media channels as a kind of whisper network. And while ICE did not reply to a request for data specific to Central California, the department has shared that apprehensions and deportations have risen since 2017.

Jay Fox, who assists with TECH Connect, says she tries to inform students of their rights should they get stopped by immigration authorities. Her classroom walls feature posters outlining what students can do if they're approached by immigration authorities, like remaining silent or asking polite questions.

Fox says her students have told her that they've been discouraged by peers or even their own family members from attending TECH Connect classes because of their socioeconomic or immigration status. Others have said that in order to get home, they face a choice between walking on the sidewalk where a gang member might be waiting, or walking through an orchard, where they may be confronted by an ICE agent.

Still, Fox says that while the vast majority of her students would like to leave Cutler-Orosi to go to college, or to travel, they're not interested in abandoning their families or hometown entirely.

"It's not necessarily about getting out of this community," Fox says. "Many of these kids, they go, they get educated, they get successful, then they come back and help the next group of kids. When you're strong, when you've built yourself up, you can come back."

A success story

Alejandra Rodriguez-Perez is one of Orosi High's success stories. She says her background is like most everyone else's: she's the daughter of farm workers who didn't have a formal education, but encouraged her to do well in school.

“When I was young, going to college meant I would never have to work in the fields,” she says. “Now, it means I get to help other people in the long run.”

But before she could get there, she says she had to find out what it meant to prepare for college, including learning about FAFSA and the SAT.

“I had to grab onto those people who would show me,” Rodriguez-Perez says, crediting Orosi High’s counselors. “I couldn’t ask Mom, ‘How do I apply to college?’”

Alejandra Rodriguez-Perez, a graduate of Orosi High, who has since returned to the community to work at Dinuba Children’s Services. Aleksandra Appleton aappleton@fresnobee.com

Rodriguez-Perez graduated from Orosi High in 2013 as valedictorian of her class, enrolling in UC Santa Barbara as an accounting major. But she soon decided that she wanted to do social work instead. Though the average UC student needs more than four years to graduate, and nearly one-third of undergraduate college students change majors, Rodriguez-Perez says she felt that she couldn’t waste time and money trying to find a course of study that would suit her better. She started taking classes at Fresno City instead, focusing on sociology and hoping to work with the deaf community.

Now a master’s student at Fresno State, Rodriguez-Perez is back in her hometown pulling double duty as a cashier in Orosi’s only grocery store, and an intern at Dinuba Children’s Services, where she works with students who attend her alma mater.

“When I worked for Clovis Unified, parents were on their students all the time about ‘Where’s your personal statement?’ and ‘Let’s get you a tutor,’” Rodriguez-Perez says. “Parents had that social capital to teach their children, versus for us, we’re relying on the school to show us.”

Rodriguez-Perez says she hopes to see more and more families engaged in their children’s education. By returning to work in Orosi, she says she wants to help bridge the language barrier that makes accessing counseling and academic resources more difficult.

“I answer questions, but also share my story and tell them higher education is a possibility,” Rodriguez-Perez says. “I want to show students there’s something else out there.”