

Whole & Healthy Children

By Reagan O'Hare

In an effort to transform the city of Houston, Mission Houston has recently launched the Whole and Healthy Children Initiative. The goal is to enlist volunteers to serve as mentors to students, to raise money for educational resources, and to participate in beautification projects for at-risk elementary schools in Houston Independent School District (HISD).



After much prayer, study and conversation with community leaders, research amplified the need to provide a service to the next generation of Houston- -the students, Mission Houston Executive Director Steve Capper said.

"We have schools in greater Houston where 60% of the students are at risk. We think there is a massive cost to Houston. The education sector impacts all of the other sectors of Houston: the job force, the government, education, science, business and public safety," Capper explained.

In March of 2008, the process of serving such schools began. Mission Houston will recruit volunteers to serve in six areas initially including: Alief/Sharpstown, Atascocita/Humble/Kingwood; Bellaire/Southwest Loop; Cy-fair; Missouri City/Fresno/Arcola; Sugarland/Stafford; and West Memorial/Westheimer areas.

"We are asking mentoring to take place at the school to demonstrate we are mentors making an academic contribution," Capper said, "An at-risk student's greatest need is to know that they are loved and who better to do that than those that are captured by God's love?"

The idea is that people from all denominational lines and cultures can come together to unite the city and make radical changes to the city for the future generation's benefit.

"We asked what if the body of Christ worked together in just one segment of our city?" Capper said, "We will either prove the theory that there is more we can do together or we can prove that working separately is better.

"It will be a sustained commitment of ten years because unless you do it over a period of time, you don't know the impact," Capper explained.

Mentors will be trained and asked to abide to school policies, but most of all, they will be required to be a consistent contribution to the students, both academically and socially. "The single thing we want to bring is to tell the students that they are loved, and to show up every week," Capper said.

Marcos Leon, Mission Houston ministry associate, recently finished his mentoring with a mentoring program from Second Baptist at Spring Branch Middle School. The program began in January and ended in May. He said it wasn't easy, and the reality is that the need is there for mentors to be consistent and most of all to be "real" with the students.

"In this program a partnership was created between the school district who developed the program," Leon explained, "The school matched the mentors with their mentees and facilitated the times for mentoring; the church recruited and 'managed' the volunteers from the congregation.

"This first experience has been so far successful and will continue next year. Ninety per cent of the mentees will continue with the same mentor," Leon explained.

As Capper explained, it is not about using preachy words since many of these students are tired of hearing lectures. "We would say Christ is made known in every school whether we use the words or not," Capper explained. "We preach the gospel in part by showing up and being loving."

Leon agreed. "For me, this was the first time I mentored a student. I did it in order to serve, learn, and experience personally some of the realities we will find in the future with the Whole & Healthy Children Initiative. My experience was useful and valid . . . not easy, but real."

Mentors can give a first person testimony about their faith, if a student asks. Brian Gowan, who was one of the original Mission Houston staff members, spent eight years to help put the Community Service Area teams together. These teams are making the commitment to "adopt" local elementary schools which will include recruiting and training mentors.

Gowan, who recently accepted a staff position with a local congregation that has a strong history of investing in unity of the church and of community transformation, said "Mentors are expected to have a sense of calling to mentor, be a good listener, have the ability to encourage students, be willing to work with school systems and to be consistent."

Leon agreed that mentoring in general is not easy. "Young hearts are hardened early. We may have the best intentions, but it requires a lot more than that.

"It's not just about showing up, which is by the way, very important. It's about getting rid of prejudices, in-authenticity and impatience for 'fixing' them with the gospel. We know Jesus will transform any life, but His message is received in the context of some degree of trust and relationship. These students don't need another adult telling them what to do. . . they need a real relationship with an adult that is real, responsible, reliable and relevant for them. This does not always happen fast or easily," Leon said.

Gowan said it is really about loving the students and the schools. "We get a chance to be Jesus with skin on. There are lots of students who need the gift of encouragement. These are the high-risk students. We just want to be responsive to the Isaiah 58 calling not to just pray, but to do something for someone who needs hope and needs a lift."

For more information on how to become involved, visit <http://www.missionhouston.org>.

**Mission Houston Makes
Four Commitments
to the "Adopted" Schools**

1. 100 mentors each spend 1 hour per week with 1 at-risk student for an entire school year
2. \$10,000 in money, or in-kind gifts, as requested by the faculty/staff to further the academic offerings of the school
3. An annual campus facility improvement project to address needs requested by the school staff
4. Organized, multiple persons involved in daily intercessions for each student, teacher and staff member