

Holton teachers is making the difference for Guatemalan students



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HOLTON — Flashcard facing her, Eulalia Baltazar was stumped.

The Holton Elementary School fifth-grader was working closely with Corrine Olsen, a retired home economics teacher, to try to figure out how many 7 times 8 made. Eulalia had been having a little trouble with the subject at school, so her teacher asked her to practice her multiplication tables at home.

But for many of the Guatemalan students and children of immigrants in the school, homework help at home is hard to get because of language and cultural barriers.

So teachers like Olsen stepped up to help.

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For the past decade, the Nueva Vida ministry at [Evangel Church](#) in Holton has helped those immigrant families, particularly in after-school tutoring and supervision with the help of retired teachers and tutor volunteers.

Pastor Hector Sanchez, the associate pastor in charge of the ministry, picks the students up from school two times a week in the church bus and brings them to the church's Family Life Center, where the volunteers feed them snacks and work through homework with them for about an hour.

Nueva Vida started as ministry to help Guatemalan immigrants and their children



It's been a natural extension of Nueva Vida's mission to serve the non-English speaking families in the Holton area, particularly about 350 Guatemalan immigrants who have come to work at the Johnsonville sausage processing plant.

"We opened our doors. We opened our hearts, so that these families could feel welcome," Sanchez said.

"Families, no matter where they come from, value their children as being the most important things in their lives, and the families who come to the church learn to trust in us and our people."

After the church started it in the early 2010s, Nueva Vida's after-school tutoring program grew to about 40 children receiving homework assistance. One of the program's first students, Maria Batz, recently received an Emporia State

University scholarship and is on track to be one of the first to attend college.

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But like with many other similar programs, the pandemic shuttered it for a few years.

When it resumed earlier this school year, about a dozen first- through fifth-grade students have attended the twice-weekly tutoring service, although Sanchez expects the program could still serve several more, especially as it looks to recruit new volunteers. Many of the program's original tutors — older, retired teachers — have felt uneasy about returning to regular public interactions in the wake of COVID.

"We hope that we make a difference," said Sherry Kuglin, a recently retired teacher who now manages the after-school tutoring. "It's not been long enough to know, but we hope it makes a difference in their schoolwork and with their teachers, to help them get caught up."

For volunteers, Guatemalan students' smiles of understanding are worth the world



Few of the tutors speak Spanish, but Sanchez said it's preferable to have the tutors help the students with their English skills, so that they in turn can help their parents learn the language. Although many of the families speak

primarily Spanish at home, some speak the various indigenous languages of Guatemala.

The children, then, become the family's foundations in building lives in America, Sanchez said.

"The children are American," the pastor said. "They grow up with American ideology, and they learn and speak English. What we want to do is influence them to finish college, and see themselves as being able to reach the same dreams any other kid in America has."

"It's wonderful to work with students from a different culture," Kuglin said. "Kids are kids anywhere in the world, but many of these kids are so loving and appreciative of being able to come after school and get the extra help they need."



Olsen, the retired home economics teacher, on Thursday continued her work with Eulalia.

As Eulalia struggled with 7 times 8, the volunteer tutor helped break up the math function into smaller bits, so that with a little bit of time, the fifth-grader was able to figure out the problem herself.

Who knew the number 56 could glean such bright smiles? "The children pick things up so quickly," Olsen said. "It takes a little bit of patience, but also just an understanding of where these kids are at."

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