

Real Stories



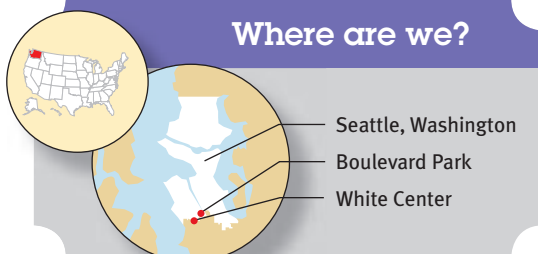
Meet the people who live in *Making Connections* neighborhoods

Jessaly Méndez/Community Schools

White Center and **Boulevard Park**

are neighborhoods south of Seattle, Washington, just starting to come back from decades of poverty, neglect, and crime. Home to a growing number of immigrant and refugee families, the neighborhoods reflect a rich blend of arts and cultures, new businesses, and a hard-won sense of optimism about the future. *Making Connections*, an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, works with the people of White Center and Boulevard Park to marshal neighborhood residents, community groups, schools, government agencies, and business leaders in an effort to improve the lives of children and families in the neighborhoods.

When 300 men and women from White Center met to talk about making changes in their neighborhoods, education was high on the list of priorities. Too many kids were falling behind, dropping out. Their parents—many of them immigrants and refugees—didn't feel welcome in the schools. They didn't share a common language with the mostly Anglo educators, and school policies and expectations often confused them. Here's how one woman, Jessaly Méndez, brought parents into the fold and helped a community invent a new kind of school for children and families.

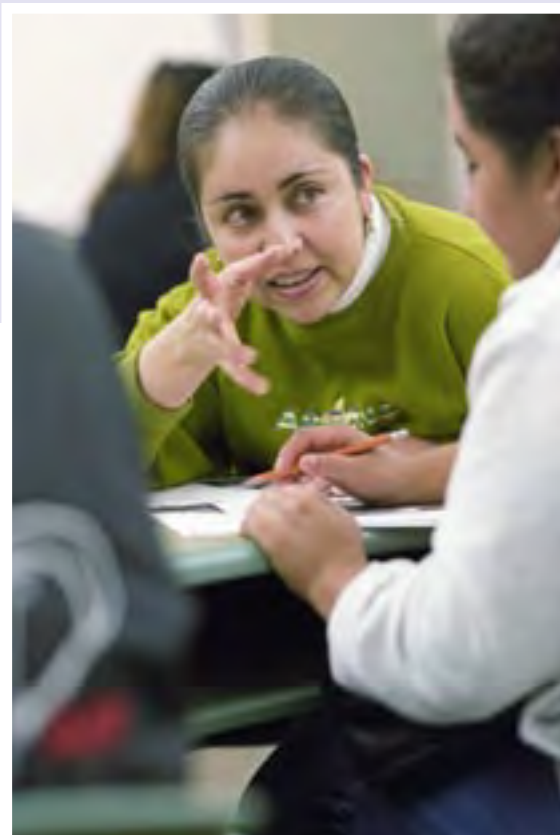


Jessaly Méndez knows firsthand what immigrant parents are up against. Jessaly and her husband came to the United States from Mexico, hoping to find good jobs. Jessaly now works as a caregiver in an assisted living home, a job she likes a lot. On top of her job, she spends two mornings and several evenings each week as a volunteer at her daughter's elementary school helping other Spanish-speaking parents connect with the school.



Four hundred children attend White Center Heights elementary school. Eighty percent of them are bilingual and speak a language other than English at home. “Their parents have jobs, go to evening classes, and drive old, unreliable cars, so it’s hard for them to get to the school,” says Jessaly. “And many don’t speak English.” Her aim is to get them involved in their children’s education. “School is the key to opportunities,” she says.

At a series of community meetings, people in White Center decided they wanted a new kind of school in their neighborhood.



They envisioned a school that was more responsive to families’ needs. A school that would involve parents in their children’s education and offer academic and cultural programs for the kids after school and during vacations. A school that would connect parents to social and health services and offer English classes. A place that would host family activities in the evenings and on the weekends. A school that employed

people who reflected the neighborhood's ethnic diversity. What the people in White Center really wanted was a "community school."

Neighborhood advocates and their community partners began to approach local schools to see if any administrators would be willing to embrace the "community school" concept. The principal at White Center Heights elementary school was enthusiastic, and they began there.





A year later, the community school has become a reality. Community advocates in partnership with the elementary school established Community School Partners, a new nonprofit group based in the school. Community School Partners recruited Jessaly as a volunteer liaison to reach out to Spanish-speaking families, and added a liaison to the Somali community as well. Jessaly spends many evenings on the phone inviting families to Family Nights, carnivals, and the parent-teacher group. She distributes flyers in Spanish about activities and services, and she is at the school when moms and dads drop by.

Monthly Family Nights are now jam-packed events. Spanish-speaking families participate alongside families from Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe, all sharing a meal and enjoying the entertainment and connections they make.

“It’s amazing how you can see all the faces, all the colors, together there,” says Jessaly. “And of course my daughter is there, too, and that makes me feel good.”



White Center Heights is the first of six schools in the district slated to become a Community School Partner. The elementary school and Community School Partners opened in a brand new school house in the fall of 2004. Parents are invited to attend English classes in the evenings. Summer programs, after-school mentoring, and weekend family events are now a regular part of school life.

The Community School is a lot of help,” says Jessaly. “Parents feel more comfortable and safe. They get important information in their own languages now, and that makes a big difference. They are giving us their ideas, and they see we actually do something with them. That gives them confidence.”

Snapshot: White Center and Boulevard Park

- 32,000 people live in White Center and Boulevard Park.
- One in three families does not earn a living wage.
- One in five children lives in poverty—twice as many as in the county overall.
- The percentage of residents born outside the U.S. more than doubled during the 1990s.
- People of color make up 49 percent of the population.
- More than three times as many people as in the county describe their English as “limited.”
- More than 40 languages are spoken by residents of the neighborhoods.



Just the Facts

- ◎ One in five children in the U.S. are the children of immigrants. [US Census]
- ◎ Immigrant and refugee children are more likely to go without health insurance, food, and adequate housing than children born here. Low wages paid to immigrant workers largely account for the hardships. [The Urban Institute]

Community Schools

- ◎ Community school students show significant and evident gains in academics and social development.
- ◎ Families of community school students show increased stability, communication with teachers, and involvement in their child's school.
- ◎ Community schools enjoy stronger parent-teacher relationships.
- ◎ Community schools promote better use of school buildings, and their neighborhoods enjoy better security and rapport between students and residents. [Coalition for Community Schools, Institute for Educational Leadership]

Get Connected

Want to learn more? Get involved? Get something going in your community? Here are some resources that can help:

Community School Partners

White Center Elementary School
Jeannie Hwang Bray, Director
Sharmu Luna, Site Coordinator
206-433-2357

Making Connections

Seattle/White Center
206-762-7760
www.mcskc.org

Nonprofit Assistance Center

206-324-5850
For information about the Trusted Advocates, resident leadership training, and technical assistance.

www.communityschools.org

A good place to start for information and links about community schools.

www.communityresourcebank.org

A virtual town plaza for immigrant and refugee communities and advocates to gather and share information. Chock-a-block with tools, resources, stories, and links.

www.refugeeweb.org

A portal for nonprofit associations representing refugee communities in the Pacific Northwest and providers of services, including ESL classes.



Making Connections

Making Connections, an initiative of The Annie E. Casey Foundation, works to improve the lives and prospects of families and children living in some of America's toughest neighborhoods. Common sense tells us that children do better when their families are strong, and families do better when they live in communities that help them to succeed. *Making Connections* works for real change in three areas:

- increasing opportunities for people to earn a decent living, save, and invest
- fostering close ties among family, neighbors, faith communities, and civic groups
- creating connections to reliable, respectful services close to home



The Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. Its mission is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that meet the needs of vulnerable children and families.

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