

## **How Schools can Adopt Fortalezas Familiares**

JOSE VASQUEZ: Having 2,000 students coming to a school is considered large. They bring unfortunately many challenges that they face in their homes and in their family situation. In our particular case, again, being 99% Hispanic, one of the most obvious ones that is present with us is that we do serve a large number of undocumented children.

We don't know this by requiring them to answer, but just by the fact that we know our families that a large number of them are undocumented. Or there's a combination of a parent that is documented and maybe another parent that's not or other combinations. Because of the economic status of many of our families, many of them hold multiple jobs. Many of them, the vast majority are what I would consider to be service industry kinds of jobs, hospitality kinds of jobs, or not very high paying kinds of jobs.

So there's some financial stress with our families, and we're very fortunate in that we have not seen much or heard much of drug and other kinds of addictive behavior. But we do know there is some of that, so we have families that are here under all sorts of different circumstances. And some of those circumstances do lead to some type of emotional or other kinds of stresses that are happening in their home. And unfortunately, those do come into the classroom.

What drew my attention to Fortaleza were essentially two things. One was, number one, that it was working with Hispanic families around the issue of stress and how to help them developing coping mechanisms, methods to hopefully themselves address those stressful situations. The other thing that also was very attractive to me was the fact that this was still a research program, so to speak, in the making. And for me, that presented an opportunity.

And the opportunity was, is this a program that, if we are able to bring it here to St. Anthony School, that our staff is provided some level of training? So that once the program is completed through the university, our staff can will remain, but be trained or have been trained. And therefore, we're able to continue the program.

We quickly realize that in order for Fortaleza Familiares is to be successful is that we have to develop external partnerships or other relationships in order for us to have a successful program here. Fortunately, here at St. Anthony School, one of the things that we have had for some time is a partnership with the 16th Street community health clinics, a federally funded health clinic here in the city of Milwaukee that is present in our school.

They have assigned full time nursing staff, nurse practitioners. And fortunately, they are able to serve the entire family. Not only the children while they're in class or in school, but also, if necessary, their parents or siblings.

So that partnership has been very successful with us. And it became very clear that we needed them to be part of this initiative on our part relationship with Fortaleza. Because they brought what was very apparent to us, the clinical component to it, the trained, the experienced, the licensed or certified professional staff that we at St. Anthony's School did not have.

The thing about Fortaleza Familiares is that it has helped us at St. Anthony School become more sensitive to the many different emotional, and in some cases, psychiatric psychological needs of both our students, as well as also their parents. So we have learned a lot from Fortaleza Familiares as the need for us to become even more sensitive to that. We also have learned that we really need to develop strong partnerships, if we are not able to create the internal resources.

In other words, if we're not able to hire ourselves, which in St. Anthony school, we're not able to hire the clinical kind of staff that we need. Then we clearly need to partner with an outside provider of those services, and what we're finding is that they are also interested. They're also desiring to come into schools and provide these kinds of services.

So that was an invaluable lesson that we learned that we need to understand the depth of some of these problems that are happening with our families. And I think we have developed and continued to expand our knowledge of that. We need to be very serious about having the appropriate kind of staff to be able to help these families, whether it be through us or through some external partner. In our particular case, that will happen through an external partner, and that there are willing partners out there that are interested in coming into schools and work with us to help these families.