

Party politics gets elementary

By Jim Morrill

PUBLISHED IN: POLITICS

Toni Morales sat at the cafeteria table this month with a second-grader named Alejandro, moving around colored plastic blocks to help him visualize a math concept.

Nearby, a handful of her colleagues were doing similar exercises with other students.

Morales, 29, works in intergovernmental affairs for the Democratic National Convention Committee. She's one of more than two dozen convention staffers who spend an hour each week tutoring kids in math at Charlotte's Allenbrook Elementary.

"They make much more of a difference than just in math," says principal Celeste Spears-Ellis. "It's the personal relationships they develop."

The DNCC and the Charlotte host committee have developed a relationship with Allenbrook, a high-poverty school of 430 students in northwest Charlotte.

"From the very beginning, we have always wanted to come here not just to do a job but become part of the community in real ways," says convention CEO Steve Kerrigan. "We just feel it's a very important part of giving back."

Tutoring is one way staffers are trying to connect with the city that many have moved to in the run-up to September's convention. This month they filled 500 care packages with items such as candy, gum, sunblock, soap and toiletries for N.C. troops serving overseas.

In Tampa, staffers with the Republican National Convention are pitching into the community as well. They've prepared meals for the homeless at Tampa's Metropolitan Ministries and raised money for the Children's Cancer Center.

Community service projects have become a fixture at conventions themselves.

- [The HEART tutoring program](#)

The program, for Helping Ensure Academic Results through Tutoring, uses a specialized activity-based curriculum to help kids learn basic math concepts.

The program tutors 100 students at five Title I schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. To learn more, contact Susan Daniel at Social Venture Partners at sdaniel@svpcharlotte.org.

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In 2004, Republican delegates cleaned up a Harlem park. Four years later they cleaned up shelters near the Twin Cities.

Democrats held the first Delegate Service Day in 2008 when they fanned out across Denver to participate in more than 30 community activities.

In Charlotte, convention staffers have worked with Second Harvest Food Bank, the Marines' Toys for Tots and other projects. But they've virtually adopted Allenbrook.

"They were looking for something to do (and) this fits well," says Will Miller, a former interim executive director of the host committee who brought the school and convention staff together.

The tutoring program -- known as HEART -- is a project of the Charlotte chapter of Social Venture Partners, a nonprofit that Miller started a few years ago. It's designed to help second-graders in struggling schools learn basic math concepts.

"If we don't fill their learning gap by the time they finish second grade, we're in for a train wreck in third grade," says principal Spears-Ellis. "One-on-one attention is crucial."

Especially at schools such as Allenbrook, where 98 percent of students qualify for free-and-reduced lunch. Convention staffers are also looking at other projects including a media center upgrade and new school garden.

"We're excited about Allenbrook; they're great kids," says Kerrigan, who also tutors. "We provide them with some good skills but they also warm our hearts. It's a give-back in both directions."

Morales agrees. "They're excited and hopeful and happy to see us each week," she says. "And that's a good way to start the morning."

Morrill: 704-358-5059



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