



### MAKING AN IMPACT: The Plaza engages and empowers VPS families

Two evenings a week, families enter the gym at Roosevelt Elementary looking for education and personal connections. Upon arrival they're often greeted by Hilda Lail, Family Advocate with Vancouver Public Schools'

Family-Community Resource Centers (FCRCs). Lail oversees The Plaza, a high-impact District program designed for families from different cultural backgrounds to help improve skills such as English, while also increasing awareness of available resources and opportunities. During the events children of all ages participate in age-appropriate academic activities led by teachers, paraeducators, and volunteers.

The program started in 2009 as "La Plaza" as a way to help the District's large population of Hispanic families improve their English skills and better navigate the school system. The program has grown over the years with a current enrollment of roughly 110 children from 100 families, and about 60-70 people attending each event. The Plaza has also evolved to reflect the diversity within VPS, where 100 different languages are represented. Attendees come from Mexico, Ukraine, Cambodia, Thailand, Russia, Micronesia, and other countries. By connecting these often-marginalized communities to school and community resources, The Plaza helps families integrate and stabilize.

After the pandemic paused in-person school events, staff looked for an opportunity to bring The Plaza back and expand its reach. While the program receives funding for a small number of staff from a Federal grant, food and other resources are provided through donations. The Foundation for VPS stepped up to support the program by leveraging both community partners and financial gifts, including a \$5,000 donation from Amerigroup of Washington. "We were excited to work with the FCRCs to bring The Plaza back for our families. It is a dynamic program that holistically supports our families. In the wake of a pandemic it made sense to bring back a program that helped us not only strengthen our community, but build it as well," said Jenny Thompson, Foundation for VPS, Executive Director.

Lail is passionate about empowering the families she serves. As a non-native English speaker, she empathizes with parents who have difficulty understanding terminologies when navigating the school system, saying "I talk to our families the way I wish someone would have talked to me." The events typically include a presentation, often available in multiple languages, on topics of importance to the families. Recent topics have included students' rights, graduation, VPS Programs of Choice, Clark College Running Start, and citizenship. Lail says many parents and students don't know about available opportunities, aren't aware that they're available for them, or they get the information too late. "I want to make sure they hear about the opportunities we have, and take that opportunity."

Although The Plaza isn't a preschool, children are grouped by age with teachers and



### ENGAGING STUDENTS: Grant supports Jason Lee and Gaiser Middle Schools' combined orchestra concert

On December 1st, the Allegro and Presto Orchestras of Jason Lee and Gaiser Middle Schools performed in a combined concert for a crowd of 650. The concert also included Oregon Hall of Fame group 3 Leg Torso thanks to a Foundation for VPS Engagement Grant awarded to the schools' orchestra teacher, Ann Medellin.

"I'm excited for these opportunities for students who might not otherwise be exposed to professional music like that," said Medellin, who is also a professional violinist.

Medellin describes 3 Leg Torso's music as "an eclectic synthesis of chamber music, tango, klezmer, Latin, and Roma music."

Luci, a viola player at Gaiser enjoyed the experience, saying "I was listening to the 3 Leg Torso and they inspired me a lot. Orchestra is one of my favorite classes because I like trying new things and this was my first concert, so I was very excited."

In addition to bringing in 3 Leg Torso, Medellin used the opportunity as a way to inspire her 150 students and "elevate engagement, enthusiasm, and the confidence to perform for others." Leading up to the concert, her class discussed concert preparation and performance expectations, using the

## The Plaza, cont...

paraeducators to engage in learning activities while their parents are in classes. Lail notes that everything is based on games, so the kids are playing while also learning. Children as young as 2 and 3 are taught letters, numbers, colors, and phonics in English. Students preparing to enter kindergarten follow a path to proficiency. And current students are helped to stay on track with their peers. By utilizing learning and assessment programs, teachers can identify where a child is in their education and can focus on areas needing support. This year they purchased a computer program called Lexia to help students who are learning English. It tests the student when they begin and tracks their improvement. They are able to access the program not just during The Plaza, but also at school and at home. "It's amazing to see how the students learn. We have students who just moved to this country a month ago and they are already using English."

Another ingredient essential to the program's appeal supported by the Foundation is the community meal offered once a month. Highlighting a specific heritage for each dinner allows families the opportunity to celebrate other cultures while also sharing their background and experiences. The evenings also include a presentation about the culture. "To me it's important, because when the kids learn about another culture, they go back to school and they don't feel isolated, thinking 'I'm not from this country or I'm different'. They understand they are part of another culture and there are other kids from different cultures," said Lail. Because some of the families attending The Plaza regularly struggle with food insecurity, there is also a food pantry once a month. The pantry offers families an option to pick up food after work if they are not able to access one of the 8 monthly daytime VPS food pantries.

Moving forward Lail has a long list of goals for The Plaza, while continuing its current services. She would like to add additional staff to offer a teacher in each classroom along with a paraeducator. She would also like to offer tutoring and homework help for all students, offer internships for student volunteers, and expand partnerships to increase opportunities for adults like GED classes, computer skills, and job placement. In the meantime, she just wants people to know that all are welcome to The Plaza, which runs through June.

The Foundation for VPS supports The Plaza and other opportunities for family engagement which are shown to be successful in building connections between parents, teachers, students, and community resources. The Plaza, while providing practical assistance, also honors our community's rich heritages, helping new community members integrate and stabilize while retaining a pride and connection to their culture of origin.

## DONORS MAKING A DIFFERENCE: Ameriprise, Riverview Bank, & Beaches Restaurant support Read Across America



Each year students in VPS join in the nation's largest celebration of reading, Read Across America. Thanks to our community partners, there is a special tradition for first-grade students at 23 VPS schools.

Throughout the weeklong celebration nearly 1,800 first-graders and their families celebrated with a delicious breakfast provided and served by **Beaches Restaurant**. In addition, **Amerigroup Washington** along with **Riverview Bank and Riverview Trust Company** provided funds to the Foundation for VPS to purchase a book for each student. The books were available in multiple languages, supporting literacy in school and at home. Thank you to Beaches, Riverview, and Amerigroup for continuing to support our kids' love of reading!

## Gaiser and Jason Lee Orchestras, cont...

opportunity to reinforce what they wanted to accomplish in goal-setting.

Medellin also saw the event as a way for students and audience members to have a shared experience of live music after the pandemic delayed in-person concerts for students. "The power of music and having a common experience together is key! The hope is to inspire, build confidence, and relationship with others who enjoy this craft," said Medellin.

Each year the Foundation offers Engagement Grants to all VPS schools as a way to strengthen the engagement of students through enrichment projects and activities; mentoring programs and activities; and family engagement efforts and events. Since 1998, the Foundation for VPS has awarded more than one million dollars to fund innovative and exciting projects that enrich student learning.

Medellin expressed gratitude to the Foundation and donors for helping inspire her students, saying "The students at Jason Lee and Gaiser are so excited about playing music. It means so much to them. Thank you for this amazing opportunity to share music and great experiences with my students."

## Ways to engage:

- 3/19: Couve Clover Run
- 3/20: Burgerville Cashback Event
- 5/4: Bright Futures Annual Luncheon



Visit our website to learn more or to support our mission  
with a donation: [FoundationForVPS.org](https://FoundationForVPS.org)

FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA:    @FoundationVPS