



Learning centers at low-income apartment complexes helping students

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A local nonprofit that helps families in need opened a new learning center Wednesday. The idea is to take kids from the cradle to college. Organizers say test scores prove that it's really working.

Back in the 1980s, some students at the University of Texas thought that since the university offered affordable housing, wouldn't it be great to carry over that concept to families in need? As a result, **Foundation Communities** was formed.

Sierra Ridge, 201 West St. Elmo Road, near U.S. 290 and Congress Ave. in South Austin, was the first apartment complex it purchased. Twenty-one years and eleven complexes later, the most recent acquisition, Sierra Vista, sits right across the street.

Right in the middle of the Sierra Vista apartment complex, counselor Everett Allen works with students at the newly formed learning center. Just months earlier, that same room was a seldom used pool clubhouse covered in graffiti. Then foundation communities stepped in and bought the property.

"Our first step was to create affordable housing that was high quality and people were proud of where they lived," said Walter Moreau, the Executive Director of Foundation Communities.

While 2,000 families a year have taken advantage of the affordable housing, Moreau says more than housing had to be addressed.

"It was very apparent after some years, the next step was to work with the kids," said Moreau.

So Foundation Communities established learning centers, with a 10-1 student-to-teacher ratio, at each complex.

"We have about 600 kids now in learning centers and they got a 3.42 GPA in the last grade report period," said Moreau.

"We're expecting these children not just to be average," said Megan Elkins, who is the learning center site coordinator at Sierra Ridge and Sierra Vista. "We want to raise them ... to the top of the class. And I think we've succeeded in doing that."

Seven-year-old Juan Carlos Aguilar says he likes the learning center because it helps him help his mother Gloria.

"They teach me how to learn English, so I can teach my mom because she doesn't speak English so much," he said.

At Wednesday's dedication for the Sierra Vista Learning Center , with Thanksgiving approaching, students, like Isaac Perez, read aloud his thanks for his new found friends.

"I hope they are my friends forever," said Perez.

The residents provide 80 percent of the Foundation Communities' operating budget. The other 20 percent comes from city, state and private donations.