

**THERE'S A WHOLE LOT OF CHARACTER AT RMS... AND IT COUNTS!!**

Surpassing all expectations of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Grant Initiative, Rivera Middle School administrators, staff, and students are pulling out all the stops to do "whatever it takes" to take the Character Counts! Program to the max. In fact, RMS School Site Coordinator, Aracely Valenzuela, says that those words, "whatever it takes," is what they all live by to encourage students to succeed to their highest potential.

When the grant-sponsored program was presented to the team from RMS, they embraced it not only whole-heartedly, but began immediately to implement creative and meaningful ways of bringing the concept of character into their school life. And the trained adult team members brought the kids onboard at the outset so that the Six Pillars of the Character Counts! Program became a personalized peer program as well. As the school year continues to unfold, students are excitedly taking charge of making this program the best that it can be by incorporating the Pillars into monthly by-words, posters, Students of the Month – even t-shirts are getting into the act!



The Six Pillars at RMS are represented by "mascots": Caring Carlos, Ronnie Responsibility, Frankie Fairness, Rachel Respectful, Celeste Citizenship, and Tina Trustworthy. Six students auditioned to be the Pillar mascot role models to be displayed on posters throughout the building. Every month, each grade level nominates two students for Student of the Month honors; teachers then select one student best exemplifying the current Pillar characteristic. That student's photo is

prominently displayed on school bulletin boards.

Instead of the traditional 8th Grade "best" attributes showcased in the yearbook, such as best dressed, best hair, etc., RMS went looking for Most Responsible, Most Caring, Best Citizenship, and so on. Colorful Tees displayed for sale touting "Your Character Counts Everywhere...all the Time at Rivera Middle School." Even the teachers are wearing them!

Another innovative idea is the weekly Friday drawing for prizes. Individual teachers monthly nominate students they believe represent that month's Pillar. Every Friday, a student from each grade is drawn from that pool of nominees, winning gift certificates from community businesses. In addition, a colorful bracelet is given to the winning Pillars of the Week as additional motivation for living a character-driven life.

Ms. Valenzuela says one of the ways they've been able to help students "own" a character trait is through the referral system the school uses to modify inappropriate behaviors. If a student is written up for a rules violation, he or she is referred by the teacher to one of the school administrators. Once a resolution to the problem has been reached, or a consequence meted out, the student is asked to reflect on which of the Six Pillars of Character they think they have violated, thus allowing the student to be more aware and responsible for the perceived character lapse. The new practice also helps open up dialogue among all staff members who interact with the student.

El Rancho Unified School District is extremely proud of the efforts being made at Rivera Middle School to bring the Character Counts! Program to a high level of understanding and participation from staff and students alike. Cheers for RMS – Your character counts and it's showing!



**Elizabeth Renteria**  
 Mental Health Counselor



Elizabeth Renteria, a longtime member of the Pico Rivera and Whittier community, is now the mental health counselor for El Rancho Unified School District under the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Grant awarded to the district last year. As such, Ms. Renteria serves as a member of a district-wide response team, managing various mental health issues and crisis situations at all school sites. She also provides counseling to individual students and their families in addition to coordinating and facilitating parent education and staff development programs throughout the district. Adding to her busy schedule, Ms. Renteria is a Certified Trainer of Trainers for the Too Good for Drugs Program, a trainer and consultant for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and a facilitator of the Birth and Beginning Years Program through the Mothered Foundation. Before coming to the District under the SS/HS grant last year, Ms. Renteria was the school counselor at Rivera Middle Schools for three years.

Upon graduation from Pioneer High School in Whittier, Elizabeth Renteria earned a B.A. in Latin American & Iberian Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She entered the AMERICORPS program in Northern Arizona as a way to serve her country by becoming a mentoring coordinator in small rural communities. It was this eye-opening experience that spoke to her social conscience and need to continue in community service. With this resolve, Ms. Renteria went to the University of Washington to complete a Masters in social work. She says, of all the helping professions, social work most aligned with her values of the worth, dignity, and social justice for all people. Consequently she became a Licensed Clinical Social Worker to fulfill this personal quest, and found herself in education, probation, mental health, homeless family programs, and services for the developmentally disabled.

It is safe to say that Elizabeth Renteria never stops looking for ways to foster her love for the profession. After establishing a partnership with CSU Long Beach School of Social Work, she serves as their field instructor and clinical supervisor for Bachelor and Master level students pursuing fieldwork experience. Currently, there are four CSULB students working with the SS/HS grant in the ERUSD under Elizabeth's guidance.

We may wonder if this educator has any free time leftover to pursue personal interests, but indeed she does make time for those things that are closest to her heart: international service work that translates to Habitat for Humanity International. Elizabeth has been on Global Village Team builds in Argentina and El Salvador. Just last year she led her first Global Village Team to Costa Rica and is slated to lead another team this summer. To keep fit for her myriad projects, Elizabeth enjoys running, yoga, and hiking. Reading is a favorite pastime and she loves foreign and independent films and documentaries. Elizabeth has yet other big plans underway this summer – she's marrying her college sweetheart in Oregon! Congratulations to a fine educator, counselor, and social worker who is following her passion. ERUSD is fortunate to have the dedication and heart that Elizabeth Renteria brings to district school children and their families.

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