

Parent mentors celebrate graduation, program expansion: ‘Each day I know I accomplish something’

BY [ADESHINA EMMANUEL](#) - JUNE 7, 2019



Chicago School Board President Miguel Del Valle greets parent mentor graduates on Thursday, June 6, 2019.

When Hermosa resident Laquita Simmons got hired as a parent mentor at McAuliffe Elementary School last year, she relished the opportunity to keep an eye on her fourth-grade daughter while also earning a stipend and lending a hand to students at Chicago Public Schools. But Simmons, who had been unemployed at the time and bouncing between retail gigs, also found her calling.

“I always wanted to do something that just made me proud, I wanted to leave at the end of the day knowing that I accomplished something,” said

Simmons, 31, who was promoted to parent mentor coordinator at McAuliffe. “Each day being a parent mentor I know I’m accomplishing something, because I see it in the smiles of my students and my co-workers.”

Simmons was among the 937 parents listening at Schurz High School Thursday when new school board President Miguel del Valle delivered the commencement speech at their graduation from the Parent Mentor Program. Organizers with the program say he was critical in helping establish it more than 20 years ago as Illinois’ first Latinx state senator.

Del Valle’s appearance came near the close of a school year where many parents complained of a widening gulf blocking them from volunteering at their children’s schools [due to stringent background check policies](#) spurred by the district’s student sexual abuse scandal.

Parents have also complained about a lack of access to and engagement with school board members. But Thursday, Del Valle spoke with warmth and familiarity to the crowd, which included many community groups and organizers from brown and black neighborhoods, and a strong immigrant presence.

“I do have a long history working with the parent mentor program, and of supporting the [community schools model](#). . . that ensures that parents have a leadership role within their schools,” he said to cheers. “I refer to that leadership role and the involvement of parents as an essential component of our educational system — and it’s a component that needs to grow.”

Hermosa resident Laquita Simmons, parent mentor coordinator at McAuliffe Elementary School.

The parent mentor program is run by the Parent Engagement Institute, a collaboration between the Logan Square Neighborhood Association and Southwest Organizing Project, and partners with community groups and schools in Chicago and



across the state. It provides parents with the training, coaching, curriculum and instructional practice to volunteer in classrooms as mentors and support staff who help students learn and also who build relationships and provide emotional support.

The parents typically volunteer two hours per day and receive a stipend once they reach 100 hours of service. With next year's state budget for the program increasing 40% to \$3.5 million, the program is slated to expand to more schools and serve more students. Families and educators in Chicago have called for more support staff at schools, an issue that the Chicago Teachers Union has pressed as it negotiates a new contract with the district.



Nightingale Elementary School parent mentor Erika Mendoza, a Gage Park resident who graduated from the program Thursday.

Nightingale Elementary School parent mentor Erika Mendoza, a Gage Park resident who graduated from the parent mentor program Thursday, was introduced to the program through a friend's referral and connected with it via the Southwest Organizing Project. She works with kindergartners on reading, math and writing. She's noticed their grades and confidence improve throughout the year. But the mother of seven has also noticed an impact on her household from the program.

"It has helped [my children] with their self confidence, with their leadership, and has helped them to show more respect and acknowledge strength in themselves," she said.

Stevenson Elementary School Principal Paul O'Toole spoke at the graduation, giving the parent mentor program rave reviews after its inaugural year at Stevenson. The school, located in the Ashburn community on the Southwest Side, partnered with social service agency Metropolitan Family Services and Southwest Organizing Project for the program and paid for it with help from a [Sustainable Community Schools](#) grant from the school district, which the Chicago Teachers Union won in its last round of contract talks.

O'Toole said the program offers parents a firsthand view into the classroom that helps them understand how they can help their own children do better academically.

"It also gives them newfound confidence and skills they can use beyond the classroom," O'Toole said.

He could be talking about Rebecca Moore, a parent mentor at Bass Elementary School for third-graders, whom she helps with vocabulary, math, reading and science.



Three weeks ago, the Englewood resident graduated with an associate degree in education from Kennedy King College.

"I'm excited for myself," said Moore, who was connected to the mentor program via community group Teamwork Englewood.

Englewood resident Rebecca Moore, a parent mentor at Bass Elementary School.

"This is offering me the opportunity to strengthen myself in a field that I would like to go into, which will eventually be counseling —

dealing with our youth — mainly in our community. My goal is to give back."