

Albizu Campos Supports Paseo Boricua Business District

By: Matthew Rodríguez, Principal

What is a school for? Of course, many would reply describing the improvement of test scores, safe zones and skills building, which are all true. Others would add, casting arguments supporting a school's role in building strong democracy, in helping students think critically and challenging students to act socially to make the world a better place, all still true. Can a school also play a role in stabilizing a community? I would emphatically argue, yes!

A community is comprised of people, families, homes, streets, institutions, organizations, businesses and more. How those components look, behave, interact and see the world, are distinctly different depending on a community's location physically, ethnically and socioeconomically. What can a school do to help build and stabilize a community outside of helping grow the next generation of people that understand their role in society? A school can truly recognize the community that it is in and find ways to support the community in one or more of its component parts.

Historically, Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Puerto Rican High School (PACHS) has had an initiative to support the Paseo Boricua Business District. This initiative has several components including: curricular connections of urban agriculture to eradicate the reality of a food desert, where students are growing produce to sell in the local "Cosecha" market; ongoing beautification of the neighborhood with community clean-ups and planting of aesthetically beautiful plants that are indigenous to the area; after school programming that helps students and families understand what is happening in the community; cultural promotion through participation in major events and activities that take place throughout the year; and identifying local businesses and restaurants to provide healthy snacks and a nutritious lunch for our students.

The last element mentioned, regarding the school lunch, is the latest addition to our work to support the Paseo Boricua Business District. After listening to our students and families, it became clear for us that the catering companies that have historically provided food for students were not helping our students stay healthy. Eating lunch at PACHS, a crucial part of building health and a stronger 'sense of community', has been transformed this school year. Whereas in the past, our lunch period was a dreaded part of our school day, because the lunch food was not desirable, now our lunch is one of the most anticipated parts of our school day.

After much hard work, completing the bidding process and all the paperwork for the Illinois State Board of Education, our school was able to successfully contract with a the local Puerto Rican restaurant called "La Bruquena". Each day now, students' lunch has been unique. The menu has included everything from "chicharón de pollo con arroz blanco y habichuelas", "lechón con arroz con gandules y ensalada", "albondigas con arroz blanco y vegetales", to "sopa de vegetales con tostones y pan", and more.

Students now line up for the food. They enjoy the food and look for seconds and thirds. There is hardly a crumb left after lunch, and students are able to finish the day with full stomachs, healthy bodies and strong minds. Our effort to engage our local businesses is with the same intent – that they will be able to stay strong to withstand the ongoing push for gentrification, and finish each day knowing that they are supported.