

# Big Brothers, Big Sisters seeking statewide impact

By Ryan Quinn  
Staff writer

Sara McDowell says she wants West Virginia businesses to foster a mentoring culture in their organizations, providing mentors for children and letting kids come into their workplaces to interact with employees.

The executive director of the youth mentoring nonprofit Big Brothers Big Sisters of South Central West Virginia spoke of a greater sense of community when she was growing up, when "everyone was a coach." She said this community sense helped recruit and retain workers.

Today, McDowell said, this sense of community is missing, just as children are losing the nurture of their own parents: she said about half of the youth in her program live with their grandparents.

At a Feb. 1 event at the headquarters of the Charleston Area Alliance business and community development organization, she announced the WV Mentoring Initiative, a statewide effort to recruit companies, nonprofits and individuals to



SARA MCDOWELL | Courtesy photos

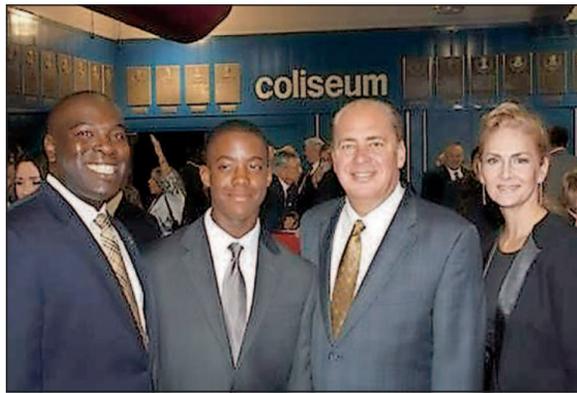
As part of Aviation Career Day, Big Brother Mark and Little Brother D check out a C-130 at the West Virginia Air National Guard. Big Brothers Big Sisters of South Central West Virginia has put out a call for more mentors, more funding and more business partnerships.

invest in mentoring West Virginia kids and teenagers.

"We want businesses to understand that they're investing in their future workforce, to make that connection that we're not just helping kids be happy kids," she said. "These kids grow up to be adults, so

let's create job opportunities for them."

She said that in 2014 there were five Big Brothers Big Sisters affiliates in the Mountain State, but now there are two, and her organization is the only branch that solely serves West Virginia. She said her



Big Brother Miles and his Little Brother I meet Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin and Sarah Halstead, president of Create West Virginia's board of directors.

nonprofit is supposed to serve 14 counties, but only has enough money to cover Jackson, Kanawha, Putnam and Raleigh.

"We get calls from Bluefield, from Princeton, from Morgantown, from Wood County, we had an email from Wood County last night," McDowell said at the event. "From Marlinton, Martinsburg, you name it, we get calls every day. And it's

incredibly difficult for me to say, and for any of our staff to say, 'We can't help you,' simply because we don't have funding."

Members of other community organizations — including Goodwill, the Girl Scouts and the West Side's Schoenbaum Family Enrichment Center — have expressed their support for the WV Mentoring Initiative.

The Charleston Area Alliance plans to get some of the few hundred members of its Generation Charleston program, which is aimed at attracting and retaining young professionals, to become mentors, and McDowell said the YMCA will allow bigs and littles to enjoy its facilities free of charge. Create West Virginia Board of Directors President Sarah Halstead said her nonprofit's members will also open up "co-working" spaces for "littles," the youth in Big Brothers Big Sisters, and "bigs," their adult mentors, to do work and be creative.

Halstead said Create West Virginia has official communities in several areas — Create Buckhannon, Create Fayetteville, Create Huntington, Create Richwood and the Princeton Renaissance Project — as well as unofficial collaborators.

To become a big or to enroll a little, visit [biglittlewv.org](http://biglittlewv.org). Call 304-746-7900 to donate.

Reach Ryan Quinn at [ryan.quinn@wvgazette.com](mailto:ryan.quinn@wvgazette.com), [facebook.com/ryanedwinquinn](https://www.facebook.com/ryanedwinquinn), 304-348-1254 or follow @RyanQuinn on Twitter.

# As immigration resurges, U.S. public schools help children find their footing

By Emma Brown  
The Washington Post

As U.S. presidential candidates fight over the best way to address the influx of Central Americans across the Southwest border — with debate about building walls and deporting immigrants — the nation's public schools have opened their doors, taking responsibility for helping tens of thousands of children find their footing here.

It's not an easy task.

Many of the new arrivals don't speak much English and are behind academically. They often come with scars, having fled desperate poverty or violence or both. Many endured difficult journeys, sometimes leaving their families behind or rejoining parents in the United States after years of separation. And U.S. schools, already strapped for resources, are trying to provide special services, including English language instruction and mental health care.

The schools have to, because it's the law: Children who are living in this country have a right to a public education, regardless of their immigration status. But for many educators it's also more than a legal obligation — it's the moral thing to do.

"The United States is founded on human rights," said Sandra Jimenez, the principal of High Point High School in Prince George's County, Maryland, a Washington suburb where the immigrant population has grown rapidly. "The only reason these people are here is because they are desperate. These people are coming to survive."

There were more than 630,000 immigrant students nationwide in the 2013-2014 school year, according to the latest federal education data available, which defines immigrants as children born outside the country and enrolled in U.S. schools for less than three years. That figure has grown since immigration across the southern border surged two years ago: Between Oct. 1, 2013 and Dec. 31, 2015, federal officials released more than 95,000 unaccompanied minors into U.S. communities, virtually all of them entitled to enroll in public school.

High Point, like many other schools flooded with foreign students, has had to adjust. A school with enrollment of 2,400, it has registered 282 new immigrants so far this school year. Last year, it took on 396 new immigrants; the year before that, 307. Some of them immigrated legally, and others did not.

Many arrived from December to March — a time of natural transition, because the Central American school year ends in December, Jimenez said.

"This is normal for us," Jimenez said. "We plan for the influx from the beginning of the year."

Newcomers are enrolled in classes with other newcomers, and Jimenez changed staffing so that some teachers had room in their schedules to add classes as more children arrived. She hired bilingual staff members in key positions, including administrators, secretaries and security guards. There are evening workshops on family reunification. When students need housing or health care, counselors work to connect them with community groups that can help.

She can speak at length about language acquisition, the peda-



Photo for The Washington Post by Astrid Riecken

Maura Salguero (sitting, center) processes her daughter, Jennifer Garcia Salguero, 12, (left) at the International Student Counseling Office at the Judy Hoyer Learning Center of Cool Spring Elementary School in Adelphi, Maryland.

gogy of teaching English as a second language and the importance of children learning grade-appropriate vocabulary in math, science and social studies — such as "commutative property," which new arrivals were practicing in a math class on a recent weekday morning.

But Jimenez said that the most powerful thing that the school has done is to show its new immigrant students that they have support and that they are safe. "We have built an oasis. School is the place where people have your back," she said. "If you don't feel safe, you can't learn."

Advocates agree that schools play a key role in shaping the path that students take after they arrive. Many students are not only poor, struggling with English and navigating without a lot of support at home, they say, but also often are under pressure from gangs seeking new recruits.

"They have all these other factors and pressures going on. It's critical for schools to provide a holistic, comprehensive support system," said Zorayda Moreira-Smith of CASA of Maryland, an advocacy group. She said Prince George's County, and High Point in particular, have gone to unusual lengths to let students know they are welcome, including by issuing public statements opposing immigration raids in recent weeks.

"I am deeply troubled by the fear and uncertainty that exists in so many of our school communities as a result of the actions of the Department of Homeland Security," Superintendent Kevin Maxwell said in a statement in January, when officials said that the raids had caused a drop in attendance. "To our PGCPSS students and families: We stand with you."

Not everyone believes that the nation's tax dollars should be used to educate immigrants who arrive in the country illegally, and others argue that forcing school districts to take on the challenge it isn't fair when resources al-

ready are stretched too thin.

"Congress should not allow the Obama administration to incentivize illegal immigration and human smuggling by rewarding those who participate," Jessica Vaughan, of the Center for Immigration Studies, told a House Judiciary subcommittee Thursday, arguing that youths and other immigrants should be detained near the border. In an email to The Washington Post, she bemoaned the effects: "The cost of meeting the educational needs for the kids who are arriving illegally as part of the surge is the main way that the administration's policy is burdensome to state and local governments."

Services for immigrant students have caused tension in Prince George's County. In 2014, school system officials announced that they planned to create two high schools for English language learners; the NAACP objected, arguing that other students also have academic needs that deserve attention.

Daniel Domenech, executive director of AASA, the school superintendents' association, said that in many cases of immigrant influxes, class sizes rise and school districts are faced with providing additional services without more funding.

"It's a problem," he said. "Having said that, I have to tell you that just about in all cases, districts will bend over backward to accommodate and provide for these students whatever services they need."

About 8,000 international students enrolled in Prince George's County schools last school year, and half of them were new to the United States, coming not just from Central America but also from nations as varied as Cameroon, Ethiopia, the Philippines and Jamaica. They all registered through an intake center meant to evaluate their English skills and place them in a suitable school.

ther and two younger half-brothers crowded into a small room where she received her assignment to a county middle school.

Yenifer had just arrived from Guatemala and hadn't seen her mother for a decade. How was she feeling about school, about being in the United States? "Nerviosa," she said. Nervous.

High Point began confronting those nerves two years ago by hosting "talking circles" with its new immigrant students — a chance for them to share where they are from, what they are afraid of and what they want to achieve.

Suzanne Tchouomtseu Tochie, 19, a senior who arrived from Cameroon in 2014, said that the circles helped her feel connected at a disorienting time.

"People tell their story. They

talk about what they're going through," she said. "You get to know the real person."

Social worker Beth Hood and counselor Jessica Jackson held a talking circle one recent morning, inviting a dozen students to scoot their desks into a circle inside a High Point science classroom.

The students were new immigrants from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, and most had been at the school for a few months. One girl said it was her second day. They listened quietly as one after the other answered the teacher's questions: What did you imagine about the United States before you arrived? How do you feel now that you are here?

One thought he would be living at the beach, he said in

Spanish, and here he was in suburban Maryland. But then the conversation deepened, with some saying they were worried about their immigration cases. Others said they had come to the United States to earn money and hadn't expected to go to school until immigration officials told them it was required.

Many said they had expected that they would finally be able to spend time with their parents after years apart but that they hardly saw their parents, who were always working. The girl on her second day at High Point said she had been crying because she missed her mom, who was still in El Salvador.

"You have our respect," Hood told the students in Spanish. "You are not alone in your experiences. This stage of getting used to everything is not forever."

Hood had invited a 20-year-old junior, Wilson Santos, to offer hope and advice. He had worked on a farm in Guatemala in grinding poverty until three years ago, when he saw no other option than to come to the United States. He walked across the desert, he said, and was stopped by immigration officials while trying to cross the U.S. border.

He never expected to go to school, he said, and yet school became his anchor. He now is a legal resident, he said, and is working a construction job on weekends. He expects to graduate from High Point next year and hopes to own a business someday.

"I feel more than anything proud of myself," he told his fellow students, speaking in Spanish.

Many students drop out before they get a diploma, and High Point's on-time graduation rate — though it has climbed in recent years — is 64 percent, far lower than the national average of 82 percent.

Hood, the social worker, said that the figure masks the important progress that students are making in school — including those who drop out. She said they are learning English, learning how to access services and advocate for themselves and learning how to survive.

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