



OF, BY, AND FOR THE COMMUNITY

The Story of
PUENTE Learning Center

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By William Wong

Spring 2005

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FOREWORD

PUENTE Learning Center is achieving its mission of strengthening families in the neighborhoods of East and South Los Angeles. That's the major lesson to be learned from the pages that follow, chronicling PUENTE's twenty years of work and multitude of partnerships.

PUENTE has done this by:

- *being clear and focused on its mission and the value that this mission adds to the lives of families;*
- *generating broad support from the families it serves and the community organizations and funders who support it; and*
- *running a first-class, culturally sensitive organization staffed with individuals who are of, by, and for the neighborhoods they serve.*

PUENTE's impact on the families it serves spans its preschool and charter kindergarten, its after-school services for young people, and its adult education programs.

*It is, as its name indicates: **P**eople **U**nited to **E**nrich the **N**eighborhood **T**hrough **E**ducation.*

PUENTE faces new challenges as it embarks on its next decade of service. But it does this based on a sound history of listening to families, respecting their heritage, and serving their needs and those of their young people. That's a great foundation on which to build as it continues to strengthen families in the neighborhoods of East and South Los Angeles.

Bruno V. Manno

Senior Associate for Education

The Annie E. Casey Foundation



INTRODUCTION

In theory, the “American Dream” of personal freedom and economic prosperity is available to anyone who will work to achieve it. In reality, however, numerous obstacles can hinder individuals from reaching their full potential. Foremost among these impediments is the lack of formal education, which often results in illiteracy.

For many people, life circumstances outweigh the need for an education. In urban areas like mostly-Latino East Los Angeles, for example, the problems of illiteracy and poverty are compounded by language barriers, while conflict in the racially bifurcated neighborhood of South Los Angeles forces residents to worry more about their safety than their schooling.

Individuals living in districts like these may begin to view themselves as second-class citizens. Although numerous programs exist to address poverty and educational needs, assistance often comes in the form of cast-off items, outdated equipment, and low-budget or run-down facilities. Eventually, program participants feel unworthy of the top-quality services that mainstream America takes for granted.

In the midst of these challenges, PUENTE Learning Center has had great success in giving underprivileged people hope for the future. Housed in technologically cutting-edge buildings in East and South Los Angeles, PUENTE offers programs in literacy, English as a second language, job training, and computer skills to adults who previously had limited access to education and technology. PUENTE also helps children and young people build a solid foundation for success with high-quality preschool, kindergarten, tutorial, and college preparation programs.

PUENTE’s name is an acronym for the organization’s mission: People United to Enrich the Neighborhood Through Education. In Spanish, *puente* means “bridge,” a word that captures the organization’s goal of helping young and adult learners move from poverty to a life that is sustaining and enriched on many levels.

PUENTE’s approach encompasses the following strategies: an emphasis on education; needs-driven, integrated programming; innovative uses of technology; high standards and expectations for teachers and students; top-notch facilities; an atmosphere of dignity and respect; strong leadership; talented, committed teachers backed by adequate support; parent and community involvement; community collaborations; and accountability.

These priorities have produced admirable results for PUENTE and its constituents, and the organization has been recognized as a model by other communities facing similar needs. To share PUENTE’s knowledge and to commemorate the center’s first twenty years of service, The Annie E. Casey Foundation commissioned this report on the learning center’s genesis, development, and accomplishments. The report draws on information gleaned from visits to PUENTE’s two campuses; interviews with students, staff, parents, and external stakeholders; and a review of written materials.

HISTORY & CONTEXT

The extensive and successful array of programs that comprises PUENTE has resulted from years of hard work by deeply committed individuals responding to communities' emerging needs. These very local circumstances continue to influence PUENTE's work today. Thus, this story must begin with the learning center's history and context.

THE NEIGHBORHOODS

Boyle Heights, located immediately east of downtown Los Angeles, is a neighborhood adjacent to the unincorporated area of Los Angeles County known as East L.A. It was established in the late 1800s as the first residential neighborhood outside the city center. At first, Boyle Heights residents were almost exclusively Anglo, but in the early 1900s they were joined by a stream of Armenian and Mexican refugees, Japanese "picture brides," Jews, and African-Americans. Through the first half of the 20th century, Boyle Heights was considered the most heterogeneous neighborhood in Los Angeles.

World War II and the decades that followed brought a significant shift in the population. Japanese-Americans were forced to leave for internment camps; economically successful Jewish families moved to the burgeoning suburbs; and the 1960s brought an influx of Mexican workers.

Today, Boyle Heights is primarily Latino, home to both Mexican-Americans who have lived in the United States for generations as well as recent immigrants and refugees from Central and South America. The 2000 U.S. Census recorded the population of Unincorporated East Los Angeles at 124,283. Slightly more than 60,000 of those residents, almost 49 percent, were born outside the United States—a proportion that is about eight percentage points higher than for Los Angeles proper.

Boyle Heights is distinguished both by cultural richness and economic poverty. Many of the institutions built to serve Russians, Armenians, Japanese, and Jews remain vibrant hallmarks of the community. However, almost 90 percent of adult residents lack a high school diploma, and about one-third

of families earn less than \$15,000 a year, which is below the 2005 federal poverty guideline of \$19,350 for a family of four.

South Los Angeles, formerly known as South-Central L.A., lies about 15 miles south of downtown Los Angeles. It has a notorious reputation for poverty and gang violence. Like most stereotypes, however, that image is simplistic. The neighborhood is also home to many law-abiding, hard-working, and middle-class families.

During the middle of the 20th century, South Los Angeles was a predominantly African-American community that included the Watts neighborhood, known for its civil disturbances in the mid-1960s. By 1980, the neighborhood had acquired roughly equal proportions of African-American, Latino, and Anglo residents, but the Latino influence grew exponentially during that decade. Racial tensions intensified and occasionally exploded; the 1992 riot following the acquittal of four police officers of the beating of Rodney King is a well-known example.

Today, the resident population of South Los Angeles is 47 percent Latino and 45 percent African-American. Like Boyle Heights, the area's rich ethnic heritage is undermined by poverty, unemployment, and crime. The mean household income in South and Southeast Los Angeles, as calculated by the 2000 U.S. Census, is \$25,000 for Latinos and \$22,000 for African-Americans. Between 30 and 40 percent of families have incomes below the federal poverty guideline, and 13 to 17 percent of adults are unemployed.

PUENTE'S INCEPTION

PUENTE Learning Center was formally established in 1985, and has continued for two decades as a labor of love led by Jennie Lechtenberg, a nun of the order of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. "Sister Jennie," as she is known, was born in Arkansas in 1935 and her family moved to Los Angeles soon thereafter. She eventually obtained a B.A. in Education from Holy Names University in Oakland, California, and spent three decades as a teacher and administrator in Los Angeles-area Catholic schools.

IDENTIFYING A NICHE

During a sabbatical in 1983, Sr. Jennie began tutoring programs for low-achieving first- and second-graders at several public schools in Boyle Heights. She focused on improving the students' language skills, and enlisted volunteers from a local seminary. Four young seminarians, including 18-year-old Luis Marquez, responded. Sr. Jennie also recruited Sr. Helena Gleeson, an elementary school principal and long-time friend.

At first, the seminarians seemed a risky bet. Barely out of high school, they weren't skilled at tutoring young children, and their knowledge of educational theory was incomplete. Sr. Jennie had faith, however. Their efforts, while inexperienced, were promising.

Sr. Jennie quickly realized that the children struggling the most came from homes in which parents had not had the opportunity for basic education, and/or lacked English proficiency. To enable parents to assist their children academically, she initiated an English-language-acquisition class for adults, which served

as the foundation for PUENTE as an intergenerational, family-oriented educational organization.

Within two years, the number of both children and adults attending sessions had dramatically increased. Based on these initial efforts, PUENTE Learning Center was founded in 1985 to offer East Los Angeles residents the educational resources needed to succeed in school, acquire economic stability, and broaden their options for the future.

ACQUIRING SPACE IN BOYLE HEIGHTS

Sr. Jennie was determined that her pupils would feel valued and capable, and her interactions with them underscored that resolution. The physical setting of the program, however, sent the opposite message. School hallways and janitors' closets were the only spaces available to tutors, and the growing number of young and adult learners quickly outgrew that environment. Sr. Jennie went looking for more, and more appropriate, space.



PUENTE's first two formal classrooms were established in the balcony of a former Masonic Temple on East First Street, which was owned by the Community Service Organization (CSO). As demand soared and the staff grew, Sr. Jennie gradually acquired additional space in the building. Learning carpentry along the way, she fixed ceilings, removed an ill-placed wall, and spent evenings and weekends sprucing up the space with curtains, carpets, and lighting solicited from local merchants, converting badly neglected rooms into clean, safe, and dignified classrooms for learning.

The need for space grew as quickly as Sr. Jennie and her team could respond. When a barbershop in the same CSO building vacated its storefront, Sr. Jennie acted quickly. Even before the landlord officially agreed to Sr. Jennie's request to expand, she had cut into the wall to begin work on another new classroom. The additional space also allowed for an office and several classrooms on the second floor.

DEVELOPING PROGRAMMING & CAPACITY

The next four years brought a significant increase in enrollment and the initiation of new programs in response to community needs. When a teenager mentioned he might not graduate from high school, Sr. Jennie approached his principal about tutoring him in the necessary subject. The principal said he had 25 other students in the same situation. "Send them over," Sr. Jennie replied, and a high school tutorial program was born.

Soon classes were added to help adults obtain their high school diploma. In 1987, far ahead of the technology wave in most schools, PUENTE's leaders decided to supplement classroom instruction with computers. Initially, the center transported students daily to a computer lab at the downtown *Los Angeles Times* building. Recognizing the need for PUENTE to have its own computers, the *Los Angeles Times* donated a 12-station on-site lab. Shortly thereafter, The Riordan Foundation matched that donation with a lab designed specifically for children.

State-of-the-art technology quickly became an essential reinforcement for the traditional instruction at the learning center. PUENTE purchased the Computer Assisted Language Instructional System (CALIS) from Duke University so instructors could write customized, technology-based language-

acquisition lessons that related to the materials used in conventional, oral-skills classrooms.

FORMALIZING THE PROGRAM

Until Sr. Jennie and her colleagues moved into the CSO building, the tutoring program had no name. As word spread and demand escalated, Sr. Jennie realized that her group would have to raise money for expansion. To raise funds, they needed to establish a nonprofit organization; and to do that, they needed a name.

Sr. Jennie asked her friend and mentor, Sr. Helena, for ideas. Sr. Helena wanted the name to capture the learning center's goal. The objective was to promote education—and the main strategy for doing that, Sr. Helena noted, was "to help people help themselves to help their children." That priority suggested the concept of a bridge, and the neighborhood's predominant language prompted Sr. Helena to focus on the Spanish word for bridge, *puente*.

The purpose of promoting education was to enrich the lives of neighborhood residents. So Sr. Helena and Sr. Jennie decided to treat "PUENTE" as an acronym for their overarching mission: People United to Enrich the Neighborhood Through Education.

ESTABLISHING A PERMANENT SITE IN BOYLE HEIGHTS

By 1989, PUENTE had outgrown its space in the CSO building and its lease was expiring. Sr. Jennie, always searching for new opportunities, spotted a vacant lot six blocks away. The 2.2-acre property had become a local dumping ground, but it had a clear view of the downtown skyline and was big enough for a large building.

Sr. Jennie called Los Angeles attorney and businessman Richard Riordan, who served with her on a computer-literacy committee sponsored by the *Los Angeles Times* and was impressed by PUENTE's work. Would he consider buying the lot for a new learning center? Sr. Jennie asked. Riordan investigated the property and agreed it was a good investment. He negotiated a selling price of \$2.1 million and the lot became available for PUENTE's future home.

An interim solution was needed until the necessary capital could be raised to build on the lot. Sr. Jennie was about to lease a former bank building when the owner canceled the deal; another client had agreed to pay more. Working quickly, she convinced a local high school principal to provide space for summer adult classes. IBM agreed to store the program's computers, and Sr. Jennie used her home as a temporary administrative office. It was still uncertain where classes would meet after that summer, and PUENTE was running out of time. It was June 1990, and the full program would resume in August.

Sr. Jennie decided to lease 10 doublewide trailers and place them on the lot purchased by Riordan. The plan would solve the immediate classroom problem but would cost a hefty \$400,000. Moreover, there was little time to obtain city permits for a temporary school on the site or to move the trailers into place, install power and sewer lines, and remove five trees that stood in the way. Amazingly, Sr. Jennie pulled it off—with help from board members, staff, volunteers, and friends, including Riordan. It was, Sr. Jennie says, "a miracle."

PUENTE operated in temporary trailers for four years while Sr. Jennie and her staff raised \$10 million. It was a daunting task; the U.S. economy was just beginning to emerge from recession. With support from the board and PUENTE's fundraising capabilities, however, the Boyle Heights building opened, debt-free, in 1995. The interest and response from the community were tremendous, drawing in over 1,800 students that academic year. The stunning, technologically sophisticated facility, designed by Stephen Woolley & Associates, Architects, has garnered numerous architectural awards in addition to the praise of a grateful student body and neighborhood.

EXPANDING TO SOUTH LOS ANGELES

In 1992, after a jury acquitted the defendants in the Rodney King beating trial—a case that highlighted inner-city racial strife—rioters destroyed many South Los Angeles structures. One was an ARCO gas station on the corner of Century Boulevard and Western Avenue.

In the tense days following the riot, Russell Sakaguchi, then-president of the ARCO Foundation, called Sr. Jennie with an intriguing proposition. "We have a burned-out property and



AN INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH TO EDUCATION

Sr. Jennie's initial tutoring program for struggling elementary school students was motivated by a desire to provide children with a foundation on which to build future success. While believing strongly in the formal education process, Sr. Jennie understood that the primary support for a child's academic development should be found in the home. Thus, the goals of the organization progressed naturally to include encouraging parents and caregivers in the role of "first teachers."

"Without a family that is actively involved, it is difficult for children to truly excel," maintains Sr. Jennie. "If parents and older siblings do not place value in education, how can a child be expected to take schoolwork seriously?" Conversely, the enthusiasm of young learners can inspire older students to remain dedicated to their own studies. "Helping families help each other," emphasizes Sr. Jennie, "is what PUENTE is all about."

we want to do something with it that will help heal the community," Sr. Jennie recalls him saying. "Do you think you could put up a center?"

Sr. Jennie immediately agreed to look at the site. She went to the ARCO corner and watched traffic pass, paying special attention to ethnic groupings, transportation options, and general ambiance. She saw a community that was comprised primarily of African-Americans and Latinos. Although she was ambivalent about starting a second campus while in the middle of a major capital campaign for the Boyle Heights building, the need in South Los Angeles was so great that the opportunity was too significant to ignore.

than 24 hours to settle. Within days, PUENTE's architect drew up plans for the classrooms. Instructors in Boyle Heights began to plan a new curriculum, based on their successful model but taking into account the differences between the two communities. While South L.A. and Boyle Heights both have a larger proportion of low-income individuals and people of color than Los Angeles as a whole, the cultures of the two neighborhoods are distinct. South L.A. is a well-established African-American community with a growing population of Central-American immigrants; Boyle Heights, on the other hand, is dominated by Mexican and Central-American immigrants. PUENTE's leaders understood that ESL classes, while still an important component, would be less central to the program structure at the new campus.

The embers were still warm, and the total damage had not been tallied. We wanted somebody to provide hope and relief to that very visible corner. We wanted an organization that wasn't going to flounder, that was sensitive to the shock in that community [and] had faith in its ability to deliver.

—Russell Sakaguchi
Former President, ARCO Foundation

"You can probably build two classrooms on that lot, but you will need parking," Sr. Jennie reported to Sakaguchi that afternoon. "Can PUENTE do it?" he responded. Sr. Jennie barely hesitated. "If you give us the title after cleaning up the site, and, in advance, operational expenses for three years, we'll do it." Sakaguchi accepted the offer.

TAILORING THE MODEL

Despite PUENTE's success in Boyle Heights, there was no guarantee the learning center could be replicated in a different neighborhood. "We knew it would take time," Sakaguchi remembers, "[but] you have to realize the climate: we had just undergone the largest urban riot in the U.S. We [were] struggling. Speed was of the essence. We needed someone who knew what she was doing, who had a design, who had a curriculum ready. This was what we were looking for, not a feasibility study, planning grant, or construction budget."

The agreement to expand into South Los Angeles, which instantly generated \$750,000 in funds and a site worth \$250,000, took less

Sr. Jennie knew the importance of involving the community when introducing a new program, so she and Luis Marquez (at the time PUENTE's director of academic programs but soon thereafter promoted to vice president overseeing the South L.A. campus) spent hours walking through the neighborhood to assess the residents' needs. Some they spoke with wanted to achieve fluency in English; others wanted to learn Spanish to communicate with their new neighbors. Some wanted help preparing for jobs and learning computer skills. "You've got it," Sr. Jennie said each time, giving residents an immediate sense of ownership of the plans.

In July 1994, PUENTE began operating out of two trailers on the former ARCO lot, offering two sessions each weekday in both ESL and computer applications. The South L.A. temporary classrooms were packed, as the first 50 students quickly grew to 200 and then to many more. Meanwhile, Sr. Jennie and her staff raised an additional \$5 million to complete the South L.A. building. Construction began in early 1998 and the new campus opened in the fall of 1999 with expanded services. In 2001, a multi-purpose room was added when the hotel next door sold its property to PUENTE.

As the building took shape, residents of this long-disinvested neighborhood watched with amazement. "They took bungalows away, then they started building this beautiful building. That impressed me," says resident Lynette Hurd, who lives around the corner from the South L.A. campus. "It was so pretty, all that coming out of that rubble like the Phoenix rising up."

Sr. Jennie notes, "It didn't seem right to go into that community, which already has so many challenges, with a temporary situation, when we ought to say, 'We're here [for the duration]'. That building will say we're *here*."

PUENTE LEARNING CENTER TODAY

Twenty years after that first tutoring session in a school hallway, PUENTE now serves 3,000 people each day at two sleek, modern buildings equipped with flexible data-communication infrastructures that support the widespread use of computers. Students can be as young as four years old, and there is no upper age limit. There are no admission requirements, and students may continue their studies as long as they attend faithfully, abide by the dress code, and interact respectfully with their classmates and PUENTE staff.

All programs—with the exceptions of job training for adults and preschool and kindergarten for children—are open-entry, open-exit, meaning an individual can begin at any time during the academic year and "graduate" whenever he or she masters the material. There is no limit on the amount of time a student may take to complete a course. Most are eager to progress as quickly as possible, but, as Sr. Jennie explains, "Some of the older students are here not because they want a job, but they become a part of our community, and [PUENTE affords them] a social life."

Along with the growth of programs over the years, PUENTE's administration has adapted in other ways to continually increase the neighborhoods' sense of ownership in the organization. For example, because students have proven to be more committed if monetarily invested, a nominal \$20 fee is assessed each academic year, and students are responsible for buying their books and occasionally other materials.

PUENTE leaders further cultivate community pride by keeping the facilities spotlessly clean. "You can go in at any time and there

A SNAPSHOT OF PUENTE'S CAMPUSES TODAY

BOYLE HEIGHTS

- 40,000 square feet of work space
- 15 classrooms
- 2,000 students of all ages
- Majority of students are Latinos of Mexican and Central-American origin

SOUTH LOS ANGELES

- 30,000 square feet of work space
- 10 classrooms
- 1,000 students of all ages
- Two-thirds of students are Latino, one-third are African-American

is never a speck of paper on the floor; never a mark on the wall. Trash isn't overflowing. The carpets and furniture are clean," says Reading Is Fundamental's Patt Zimbelman, who regularly presents programs at PUENTE in support of family literacy. Although PUENTE operates in neighborhoods plagued by graffiti, neither building is a target. "This is a shrine," Zimbelman continues. "People in the community understand how important this is. That is not a miracle; it's a lot of hard work."

That hard work has positioned PUENTE as a respected institution that makes a real difference in the communities it serves. Jonathan Allen, a South L.A. resident since 1975, expresses the gratitude of many when he observes, "I was surrounded by gangs and dope dealers, but I have never seen a lot of unruly stuff around this school. It remains clean and nice. That has affected people's minds. It's a respect they have for this corner. It's like a bright light that has lit the corner up."

CORE COMPONENTS

Educational programs are similar at both PUENTE campuses: a lively mix of youth and adult classes offering challenging curricula with an intergenerational approach to learning.

PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH

During the school year, PUENTE operates five programs for young people between the ages of 4 and 18: Preschool Readiness, Charter Kindergarten, After School Enrichment (ASE), Youth English Immersion (YEIP), and High School Tutorial (HST). Through a partnership with Kaplan Learning Services, PUENTE also offers high school students a preparation course for the SAT.

PRESCHOOL READINESS

PUENTE's Preschool Readiness program has the capacity to serve 120 four- and five-year-olds—60 at each campus—from 12:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday. The program focuses on preparing children for school through reading, writing, computer literacy, English-language, and social activities.

Each site devotes three adjoining classrooms to the program. Groups of 20 students spend 45 minutes in each room, and then rotate. The first room, called the “circle room,” has no chairs or tables; it hosts movement, dance, music, and storytelling activities. The second room holds 20 computers, which are used to introduce students to technology while they practice English and math concepts. The third room, known as the “academic room,” is the site of more traditional reading and math lessons. Activities in each of the three rooms are designed to reinforce both academic and social learning.

The teachers also rotate in a manner that ensures each teacher instructs each student multiple times throughout the week. By serving in all three classrooms, teachers gain valuable knowledge about the progress of all 60 students. The children, meanwhile, benefit from a secure and structured learning environment and collaborative teaching techniques.

CHARTER KINDERGARTEN

PUENTE's kindergarten, established in the fall of 2002, is a charter school of LAUSD. It is accountable for achieving student outcomes specified by the district, but it has extra autonomy and flexibility in developing programs. In 2004-05, the charter kindergarten is serving 120 children, 60 at each campus. Classes are held from 7:45 a.m. to noon, five days a week.

Kindergarten teachers plan their curriculum as a team, with supervision from Sr. Jennie and the administrators of the school. Their goal is to ensure that children: 1) become conversational in English; 2) build a strong foundation in reading, writing, and math; 3) become familiar with basic computer skills; and 4) learn to listen effectively, follow directions, and interact appropriately with classmates.

The kindergarten is structured similarly to the Preschool Readiness program, with teachers and students rotating throughout the day between the circle, computer, and academic classrooms.

AFTER SCHOOL ENRICHMENT

The ASE program operates from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m., Monday through Thursday, during the school year. It draws first- through sixth-graders from 53 public and private schools across Los Angeles. In 2003-04, the PUENTE campuses had a combined enrollment of 381 after-school participants.

ASE aims to help students meet the academic goals of their regular schools. Students are divided into three classes, each of which has one instructor and one volunteer assistant. Each class devotes two-thirds of the time to completing homework and one-third to enrichment activities such as storytelling, language arts exercises, computer practice, and music.

All PUENTE youth programs have a larger purpose beyond homework help: motivating students to stay in school. This mission addresses the continuing problem of high dropout rates among low-income Latino and African-American students.

YOUTH ENGLISH IMMERSION

YEIP, which targets students in the fifth through seventh grades, began in 1999 as a summer session for 30 students who needed extra help developing English proficiency. It has continued as a program offered during the school year, 3:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday. The entire session is devoted to teacher-directed instruction that aims to improve students' phonemic awareness, reading comprehension, and grammar usage.

HIGH SCHOOL TUTORIAL

The HST program helps participants improve their academic performance in school. The program operates during the school year from 6:00 p.m. to 8:15 p.m., Monday through Thursday,

Mom and dad are a child's first teachers. There is more dignity and more integrity to inviting the first teacher to become [an educational] support because they are also the lifelong teacher.

—Luis Marquez
Vice President, PUENTE Learning Center

and serves nearly 250 students in the seventh through twelfth grades. Most students are considered economically disadvantaged and at risk of dropping out or joining a gang. Some perform below grade-level because they lack English proficiency.

Each tutorial class has one instructor and one volunteer aide, who help students primarily with math and language arts homework. Algebra, calculus, poetry, and creative writing are other subjects for which students frequently request assistance.

For six weeks in the summer, ASE, HST, and YEIP operate as enrichment courses. For two to four hours a day, four days a week, over 150 students participate in thematic projects, field trips, mathematics, language arts studies, and financial literacy instruction (i.e., strategies for budgeting and saving).

PREPARATION FOR THE SAT

In partnership with Kaplan Learning Services (a national for-profit academic testing organization) and with funding from an anonymous donor, PUENTE helps 60 high school juniors and seniors

prepare for college each academic year. The program has three components: a five-month, intensive course of lessons and strategies to prepare for the SAT; visits by students and their parents to local colleges and universities; and workshops on topics such as obtaining financial aid, managing time and stress, writing application essays, and understanding the admissions process. Many of the students served by this program are the first in their families to apply for college.

PROGRAMS FOR ADULTS

Each day, PUENTE serves more than 2,500 adult learners from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Adult students typically want to acquire skills that will improve their communication, increase job opportunities, and enrich their quality of life.

Staff members approach adult learners somewhat differently than younger students. “Each adult student brings a wealth of experience,” Sr. Jennie explains, “and we want to build on that. In this way, we avoid the label ‘remedial,’ and begin to advance an adult's learning from the base of his or her understanding.”

PUENTE's adult classes include English as a Second Language (ESL), Spanish as a Second Language, Effective Parenting, High School Diploma/GED Preparation, Computer Applications, Computer Repair, Job Training, and Public Speaking.

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

ESL classes are offered at six levels of fluency. The open-entry, open-exit classes operate every weekday from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. to meet the high demand. On average, 1,500 students are enrolled each semester in daily classes.

Classes range in size from 20 to 40 students. California-credentialed teachers help their students gain English proficiency through a combination of oral, reading, and writing exercises.



Many ESL lessons are computerized, so students learn basic computer skills while acquiring English proficiency. Instructors use the Computer Assisted Language Instructional System to construct lessons that correlate with what is being presented in class. Once a lesson is created, it can be saved for future use.

ESL teachers often incorporate life-skills within the English instruction as well. Thus, a lesson may revolve around opening and maintaining a checking account, filling out medical forms, or reading road signs.

SPANISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

At the South L.A. campus, PUENTE offers Spanish as a Second Language as a way to help native-English speakers communicate more effectively with Spanish-speaking coworkers, customers, and neighbors. The course format is similar to that of ESL, providing students opportunities to learn and apply Spanish in daily activities. One noteworthy structured activity is a bilingual lunch, where only English is spoken for the first 15 minutes and then Spanish is spoken for the last 15 minutes.

EFFECTIVE PARENTING & PARENT AND CHILD TOGETHER ACTIVITIES

PUENTE offers several programs to help parents support their children's learning. Effective Parenting is a video-based class that guides parents through their children's educational, emotional, and physical development. Course requirements may be fulfilled at home by checking out videos and completing the accompanying assignments.

Parents and children engage in home-based activities together, too. Parent and Child Together (PACT) is a program adopted by PUENTE instructors to encourage intergenerational learning at home. Participants attend weekly PACT classes where they are given theme-based reading and art exercises to complete at home.

Students and parents also participate in the Read With Me/Lea Conmigo program, in which children receive a backpack each week filled with six books that they take home to read with their parents. The backpack also contains informational pamphlets on parenting topics for the child's caregivers.

ADULT READING IMPROVEMENT

In 2003-04, 70 students enrolled in PUENTE's Reading Improvement program, which is designed to help adult learners improve reading and writing skills before taking the GED exam or entering the Job Training program. Classes, which meet 10 hours per week, focus on building vocabulary, improving reading speed and comprehension, and developing a love for reading. Instructors utilize small-group activities, computer programs, and creative writing to reinforce the concepts they teach. For example, after reading Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven" in class, students compose and present their own poems.

ADULT HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA/GED PREPARATION

Adult learners who do not have a U.S. high school diploma can take a course to prepare for the General Educational Development (GED) test. Students who already have a GED certificate also have an opportunity to attain their high school diploma. Some GED students go on to college or enroll in PUENTE's Job Training classes.

COMPUTER APPLICATIONS & COMPUTER REPAIR

Among PUENTE's most popular offerings is the Computer Applications course. Five hundred ninety-six individuals enrolled in Computer Applications classes on both campuses in 2003-04. Students work toward mastering programs including Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Access.

A computer repair class is taught each semester as well, to help adult learners understand basic computer hardware and identify and resolve common problems. Students begin by taking apart a hard drive and then reassembling it. Technology instruction focuses on Microsoft Office programs and is aligned with Microsoft Office User Specialist course standards. Internet-based instruction, including website design, is integrated into the curriculum.

The computer repair course is an example of how PUENTE's programs grow organically. Hector Espinoza, a computer applications student, became an apprentice of sorts to PUENTE's technology coordinator, and was soon qualified to teach others about PC maintenance and repair. Espinoza knew many of his classmates would benefit from similar training, and

PUENTE's administrators agreed to let him develop a new class for that purpose.

JOB TRAINING

PUENTE's Job Training program encompasses several interrelated classes in business English, business math, office procedures, and computer applications. Students also hone their résumé-writing skills and participate in mock job interviews.

Job Training students are further supported by the Job Referral Office. Students' skill levels and interests are assessed by the placement director, who connects them with an appropriate employment opportunity. Since its inception in 1993, this strategy has successfully placed 80 percent of participants.

PUBLIC SPEAKING

PUENTE's Public Speaking course helps students acquire essential interpersonal-communication skills and increased

confidence speaking in public. This class—ten hours weekly, spread over four days—helps PUENTE's adult students with their job searches and continuing education.

ON-SITE JOB TRAINING

In the past, PUENTE has offered on-site job training programs to small businesses in the community. For a limited time, PUENTE trained entry-level employees, using a mobile computer laboratory supplied by the *Los Angeles Times*. This program was discontinued because it became too costly to maintain. Moreover, some employees of those small businesses began to enroll in adult programs offered at PUENTE's campuses.

LEADERSHIP INFRASTRUCTURE

PUENTE's Board of Directors represents a spectrum of corporations, local government, and nonprofit organizations. Glenn Bozarth is the current chairman, and Sr. Jennie serves as

president. The 22 board members have fiscal responsibility for the organization and oversee the work of the executive director.

The board includes an executive committee comprised of the chairman, president, vice chairman, secretary, and treasurer. Members of the board sit on various committees, including development, finance, nominating, community relations, and strategic planning.

As PUENTE's executive director, Sr. Jennie leads the day-to-day management effort. She is assisted by two vice presidents. Sr. Jennie also is well-connected to resources outside PUENTE's immediate sphere of operations. She has served on several local and national advisory councils and nonprofit governing boards,

Two directors oversee the teachers, one for children and youth programs and one for adult programs. The directors preside over frequent teachers' meetings, where academic and operational issues are discussed and best-practices are shared.

COLLABORATIONS

PUENTE's leaders continually expand the learning center's resources and reach by collaborating with other educational initiatives and by training staff from other nonprofit organizations. PUENTE's collaborations include the following:

- **BOYLE HEIGHTS LEARNING COLLABORATIVE (BHLC).** The collaborative, created in 2002 with a grant from The

Reading, writing, and arithmetic are not the only things that enhance a person's life. We place equal value on learning to function in society and internalizing a good work ethic.

—Sr. Jennie Lechtenberg
Executive Director, PUENTE Learning Center

including the Literacy Roundtable Advisory Council, California State Task Force on Illiteracy, and *Los Angeles Times* Literacy Lab Advisory Council.

The charter kindergarten also has a Governance Advisory Council that meets bimonthly. Two administrators, the teachers, and two parent representatives discuss a variety of operational and academic concerns, such as attendance patterns and the introduction of new programming components.

STAFFING

PUENTE has a staff of 50 full-time employees, which includes 21 instructors, 21 administrative staff, 3 aides, and 5 maintenance personnel. There are also 5 part-time instructors, 5 part-time aides, and 18 volunteer tutors.

Eighty percent of the instructors have California credentials. All teachers have at least a bachelor's degree, and those without credentials are working toward that goal. Teacher turnover is relatively low; the average length of service at PUENTE is 10 years.

Annenberg Foundation, is a network of educational organizations seeking to improve learning opportunities in Boyle Heights. Partners include PUENTE, the Los Angeles Unified School District, the East Los Angeles Community Corporation, and Families In Schools (see below). Sr. Jennie co-chairs the collaborative with Jose Huizar, the president of the LAUSD Board of Education.

BHLC's structure allows member organizations to share resources and advocate for effective practices while remaining autonomous. One of its first activities was a community book fair, and other collaborations include sponsorship of tutoring and art programs, an education conference for public school principals, and a technology-rich parent education class.

- **FAMILIES IN SCHOOLS (FIS).** This nonprofit organization helps parents advocate for their children in the schools. One of its main programs is *Read With Me/Lea Conmigo*, a service that collects and shares children's books. FIS provides PUENTE with backpacks filled with books suitable for preschool and kindergarten students, and instructions for parents on how to read with their children. Every week, the learning center sends a backpack home



with each child in its early education programs; students return and exchange the books the following week. FIS and PUENTE also collaborated on a summer computer literacy program for fourth- and fifth-graders at Breed Street School, which has expanded into a similar program in math.

• **LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (LAUSD).** PUENTE has had a relationship with LAUSD's adult education division almost since the center's inception, when Sr. Jennie and then-principal Lupe Reyes agreed to share space in the CSO building. LAUSD funds many of PUENTE's adult-program teachers, using state funds allocated on the basis of average daily attendance, while PUENTE provides the facilities and equipment.

with the media and the public. After the conferences, PUENTE staff offered follow-up consulting either at PUENTE or at the participants' headquarters.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

PUENTE sends a clear message that it is an organization of, by, and for the community. Neighborhood organizations are invited to use the learning center's attractive facilities for meetings and conferences, and many do. For example, the Los Angeles Human Relations Commission used three PUENTE classrooms to train community residents in conflict-resolution strategies, and hosted a forum on proposed

Communities and schools need organizations like PUENTE. When you have this kind of an opportunity in your community, it should spark interest in school districts to do things differently.

—Maria Casillas
President, Families In Schools

• **READING IS FUNDAMENTAL (RIF).** Reading Is Fundamental is a national program that promotes literacy among children by providing free books and literacy volunteers. In 1988, in response to a request for extracurricular support, RIF began sending instructors to PUENTE, typically 10 times during the school year, to encourage children and their guardians to read together.

• **KAPLAN LEARNING SERVICES.** A partnership between Kaplan and PUENTE (described on page 11) provides high school juniors and seniors with college preparation services.

From 2000 to 2002, PUENTE also conducted an annual training program on effective practices for nonprofit organizations across the country. Called "Neighborhood Partners in Education," these two-day conferences attracted participants from an average of 56 organizations each year. The nonprofit leaders who attended the conferences heard from PUENTE staff and donors, media representatives, and elected officials about topics such as building and working with governing boards, raising funds, bridging technology gaps, managing human resources, forming community and political partnerships, and interacting

legislation to ban bilingual education in public schools. Another organization conducted a workshop on racism for area high school teachers, and the League of Women Voters held seminars on reforming the city charter. The Los Angeles City Council, the Commission on Animal Regulations, and the LAPD have held similar community events at PUENTE.

Its young students further link the learning center to the neighborhood by spending time at a local retirement community and by participating in events at partner institutions, such as the grand opening of the Getty Information Institute, which had sponsored Internet workshops at PUENTE.

PUENTE also opens its doors to nonpartisan events that educate residents about American politics. During city elections, for example, PUENTE invites all candidates to hold debates and community forums at the learning center; 1,000 people attended a mayoral debate held there in 2001. In 1996, former U.S. Education Secretary Lamar Alexander and the Commission on Philanthropy and Civic Renewal, of which Sr. Jennie was a member, held a forum at PUENTE's Boyle Heights

campus. And in 2000, presidential candidates George W. Bush, Al Gore, and John McCain each visited PUENTE.

In addition, PUENTE teachers incorporate the importance of community participation into regularly scheduled lessons. For example, in the adult ESL classes she taught during the California gubernatorial recall of 2003, Sr. Carol Baetz talked with students about the meaning of a recall election, the responsibility to vote, and even what it means to have an opinion. "You formulate a lesson to teach a value," says Sr. Carol—in this case, the core value of active civic participation.

RESOURCES

PUENTE's financial resources include foundation grants, corporate gifts, individual donations, public funds, income generated by special events, and earned interest and dividends.

PUENTE has always operated without a deficit or debt. Thanks in part to a full-time vice president for advancement whose responsibilities included fundraising, PUENTE's financial resources increased dramatically throughout the 1990s and have remained stable into the 21st century. In fiscal year 1991, the learning center's revenue was \$291,189. By 2004, revenue grew to \$4.5 million, with operating expenses of \$4 million and net assets of \$25 million, of which \$10 million was in buildings and furniture.

Eighty-five percent of PUENTE's budget covers programming costs, which include the salaries for the staff of each program. Sixty-nine percent of the entire budget is assigned to staffing, including the salaries of administrative and maintenance personnel. Of the monies distributed to programs—\$3,446,843 in fiscal year 2004—57 percent supports adult education while the charter kindergarten receives 15 percent, the preschool is given 7 percent, and youth programs account for 6 percent.

The allocation of resources among PUENTE's programs is not rigid. PUENTE leaders adjust the budget each year to meet the constantly changing educational needs of the learning center's community members. Beginning with the 2003-04 school year, for example, the children and youth programs now receive additional monies to support a music component that enhances their academic studies.



THE PEOPLE OF PUENTE

Two individuals who have made lasting contributions to PUENTE Learning Center are Sr. Helena Gleeson (pictured above, left) and Pam Mullin (above, right). Gleeson's creative talents and academic knowledge were essential to developing the new center. She also coined the acronym PUENTE for the fledgling organization. Community philanthropist Pam Mullin joined the project in its early days as a member of the board of directors. Her vision, dedication, and financial support helped establish the learning center as a viable institution.

Both Gleeson and Mullin embody PUENTE's most vital resources: the energy and commitment of individuals. It is the people of PUENTE, from the board of directors to the teaching staff to the volunteer tutors, who make it possible to stretch sometimes limited capital to ensure that every student receives the individualized instruction and support needed to foster academic success.

PUENTE'S STRATEGIES

Many community-based organizations have components similar to PUENTE's, although not always available concurrently and in the same location. What are the key components that make this organization so effective at strengthening its communities? PUENTE's strategies for success include: a tightly focused mission; adherence to high standards and expectations; an atmosphere of dignity and respect; strong leadership; talented, committed, and well-supported teachers; community-driven programming; parental involvement; collaborations; integrated programming; state-of-the-art facilities; use of technology; and accountability.

A TIGHTLY FOCUSED MISSION

The learning center's mission, People United to Enrich the Neighborhood Through Education, pervades all that the organization does. It keeps PUENTE focused on education in the following areas: academic development; language fluency; life skills; and literacy in the written word, computer applications, and finances.

"Sr. Jennie has an unwavering vision and dedication to a rather straightforward plan—to prepare young children so they can read when they go to school," explains Board Member Bill Niese. "It expanded to adults, but she still has this one clear objective. It has expanded [in breadth] but not in principle."

Moreover, PUENTE remains clearly focused on the people it serves. Recalls Vice President Luis Marquez, "A visitor to PUENTE once told me, 'You [PUENTE] are a model.' I went to Jennie and said, 'We're a model.' She then explained that 'our focus is not to be a "model" but to educate people; this is where we must focus our energies. And if we do, others may perceive us as a model, and that's fine. But we must keep our focus on helping others to have a little better life by offering them quality educational opportunities.'"

Because of its sharp focus, PUENTE is able to address issues even more fundamental than racial disparities or cultural differences, Marquez continues. "Our mission is not about any

particular ethnic group; it's about people. It goes way beyond ethnicity and race. It's about humanity."

ADHERENCE TO HIGH STANDARDS & EXPECTATIONS

High standards for student and staff behavior, and for the physical environment, reinforce PUENTE's expectations for success in education and the workplace. The behavioral standards bring out the best in students, better positioning them for future endeavors. "Students learn more and feel good about themselves because their own standards have risen," a former PUENTE executive explains.

Standards for cleanliness and order set the tone for a productive learning environment and underscore the idea that "even" economically poor communities are entitled to high-quality facilities. Enforcing high standards makes offering classes to develop self-esteem unnecessary, PUENTE leaders say, because the habits that encourage self-respect are already embedded in PUENTE's curriculum and culture.

During orientation sessions for new students—both youth and adult—and parents of preschool and kindergarten children, PUENTE leaders outline their expectations for student behavior: Be punctual. Attend regularly. Dress and act appropriately. Don't chew gum. Faculty and staff then model the standards for attire and behavior: Men wear ties; women wear professional business apparel. Jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers are not allowed. Parents even requested that the preschool and kindergarten have a uniform, so now those students dress in white tops and blue trousers, shorts, or skirts.

Staff, volunteers, students, and parents are expected to make building maintenance a priority. Food and drink are allowed only in the multi-purpose room or outside. Students at all levels are consistently reminded to clear desks and turn off computers before they exit a classroom, and at the end of each session they are provided with supplies to give the rooms a more thorough cleaning.

Students who don't uphold the standards risk losing the privilege of attending classes, at least temporarily. Paula Martinez, a PUENTE alumna who now works at the Center for Non-Profit Management, once was reprimanded in class for chewing gum. "That was embarrassing," she remembers. "Now you won't find me chewing gum or disrespecting my boss. I learned my lesson."

The key to maintaining high standards is attention to detail, explains José Cole-Gutiérrez, PUENTE's director of academic programs. "The building, the blinds, the floor panels, cobwebs...if we take care of these details, the big picture takes care of itself."

AN ATMOSPHERE OF DIGNITY & RESPECT

Dignity and respect infuse all interactions at PUENTE. Staff, administrators, and instructors greet visitors warmly. Students of all ages welcome classroom visitors with smiles and, often, polite questions. Instructors don't automatically brand troubled students as troublemakers, and children don't talk back to their teachers.

Respectful behavior begins with PUENTE's leaders. They make a point of honoring "ordinary" community members at events that feature dignitaries and donors, and they commend students and teachers publicly at assemblies. "I call it the PUENTE spirit," says volunteer Patt Zimbelman. "It's part of the culture. Everyone feels they are part of the team. You are made to feel [like] the most honored person who has ever been there."

PUENTE leaders emphasize dignity and respect because those values instill pride, demonstrate affection, and promote responsibility. Students want to meet the learning center's high standards so they will deserve the respect they are shown, and because conducting oneself with dignity promotes self-respect. Deferential acts also help to close cultural gaps in a city as diverse as Los Angeles.

Luis Marquez explicitly encourages cultural respect during orientation sessions for new students at the South L.A. campus. "Look around, we are diverse," Marquez says. "We celebrate the diversity—of gender, generation, ethnicity." He then segues to the broader tenet of mutual respect. "Does everybody value respect?" he asks. So far, not one person has answered, "No."



SISTER JENNIE MAKES A POINT ABOUT STANDARDS

PUENTE's standards are especially high when it comes to instruction. When the teenaged Luis Marquez volunteered to help Sr. Jennie with tutoring in 1983, he got his first taste of her high expectations. After greeting Marquez and three other young volunteers at her makeshift headquarters, Sr. Jennie asked them to sit down. Marquez thought perhaps she was going to offer some refreshments, but instead she distributed pencils and paper and asked them to print the alphabet. She then collected the sheets and began marking them up. The young volunteers each had their own style of writing.

Sr. Jennie reminded the volunteers they would be working with children learning to write English for the first time. "These children need consistency," she said, "and that includes correct writing techniques." Recalls Marquez, "I knew then that this was a woman who knows what she stands for."

STRONG LEADERSHIP

People who are familiar with PUENTE attribute much of its success to the leadership of Founder and Executive Director Sr. Jennie Lechtenberg. They characterize her style of leadership in the following ways:

- **NURTURING.** Sr. Jennie works to cultivate her colleagues' skills and abilities. "She specializes in people development," observes Vice President Luis Marquez. He recalls that 19 years ago, when he was weighing whether to continue preparing for the priesthood or stay with PUENTE, she advised him to get his teaching certification—just in case. Marquez hadn't considered becoming a teacher, but he took the test and passed. A few years later he was ready to join PUENTE permanently, first as a teacher and then as a senior administrator.
- **SAVVY.** "She is no-nonsense," notes Bruce Newberg, a businessman and long-time PUENTE supporter. "She is very bright and knows how to get things done."

- **VISIONARY.** "Jennie has kept it simple, but it's still a very powerful vision," says Maria Casillas, President of Families In Schools, a PUENTE collaborator. "Many of us would never dream of creating a building like she did on that piece of land."

- **BOLD & DECISIVE.** Sr. Jennie is a person of action who seizes—and often creates—opportunities. "Sr. Jennie does not hem and haw," says Russell Sakaguchi, former president of the ARCO Foundation. "She listens to everybody, then makes up her own mind. And she never lets anyone talk her out of her vision for change."

- **WILLING & UNAFRAID.** It is well known that Sr. Jennie will be the first to offer help if someone has a problem. "She jumps right in. It doesn't matter if you're a millionaire or on welfare," a close observer says.

- **CHARMING BUT SINCERE.** Stories abound of Sr. Jennie's lack of pretension and her gentle, disarming approach. "She can charm anybody, but it's not a charm without substance," says

Melinda Binder, a former public school teacher who volunteers at PUENTE. "You wouldn't do business with her [just] because she's charming, but you'd probably do more business with her because she's disciplined and charming," agrees Rob Smith, president of the Carrie Estelle Doheny Foundation.

- **EAGER TO LEARN FROM OTHERS.** Sr. Jennie is a skilled teacher, and she is always ready to incorporate other people's good ideas into program design. "She asks people, 'What is the best approach for this?' She is always looking for better ways to do things," says LAUSD official Lupe Reyes.

What drives Sr. Jennie's leadership? Her faith, in part, although PUENTE is not affiliated with any religion. "Intrinsic in Jennie's motivations are deep spiritual beliefs about how you live your

Teachers describe these administrative leaders as responsive, supportive, and team-oriented. "I don't feel alone," says one. "The [top administrators] have a big picture [and] are willing to be flexible to achieve it. You know your work is not taken for granted, so you are willing to go the extra mile."

TALENTED, COMMITTED & WELL-SUPPORTED TEACHERS

PUENTE hires instructors whose qualifications and experiences make them especially well-suited to working with immigrants (mostly Latino), children of immigrants, and—in South Los Angeles—African-American children and adults. Its teachers must exhibit academic preparedness, a commitment to service, and a high degree of professionalism. In addition to these

Foundations that help PUENTE primarily are interested in the empowerment of the disadvantaged. [Sr. Jennie] takes the disadvantaged and changes them into people who are ready to work. She accomplishes for us what we are trying to accomplish with our foundations.

—Rob Smith
President, Carrie Estelle Doheny Foundation

life," observes Debbie Dillon, PUENTE's former development director. Yet PUENTE isn't about "otherworldly eternal rewards," Dillon adds; it is firmly focused on the practical goal of literacy.

Additional leadership comes from PUENTE's board of directors, which works closely with Sr. Jennie and senior administrators. The board has been developed with careful attention to PUENTE's needs and strengths, says Lee Walcott, the managing director of The Ahmanson Foundation. "The board respects her, and she respects the board," he adds. Members have been drawn from a broad cross-section of both public and private entities, mostly in the Los Angeles area. The result is a very powerful lineup of allies, with networks across the country, who are committed to furthering PUENTE's mission.

Members of PUENTE's management team play another important leadership role. They oversee day-to-day operations at both campuses, including academic programs, fundraising, finances, and human resources.

credentials, teachers often have deep roots in the communities PUENTE serves. In some instances, PUENTE's staff and teachers began as students at the center.

Many of the teachers say that receiving competitive compensation and benefits are only part of why they value their time at PUENTE. Also important is the nurturing and supportive environment in which they work, as well as the opportunities they have for pedagogical creativity, professional growth, collaboration, and autonomy. They also cite high levels of classroom and administrative support as factors that make PUENTE an appealing place to work. Key supports include:

- **TEACHER'S AIDES.** Aides give teachers extra time for individualized instruction and help children use their time efficiently. "I can put one child to work with the 'B' sound [while] other children work on lower and capital letters...[and] pull out one or two who are having difficulties. I can work with them in depth while my aide monitors other students," explains





PUENTE STUDENT BODY YIELDS GIFTED TEACHER

Jorge Rodriguez knew he needed a change, and that change would require more education. In 1994, unemployed and aimless, Rodriguez—who came to Los Angeles from Mexico in 1980—enrolled at PUENTE as a math and English student. He didn't have a high school diploma.

Rodriguez had been working for a moving company, but after an extended illness he didn't want to return to what he describes as a physically challenging and stressful job. "I just came [to PUENTE] and enrolled in whatever," he admits. After completing his math and English classes, he enrolled in the Job Training program and eventually achieved his high school diploma equivalency. He learned touch typing, business English, business math, and computer applications as well.

Still, he didn't have any long-term goals. As new people enrolled, Rodriguez, by now an experienced PUENTE student, helped them through their early days of jitters and transition. His teachers noticed his affinity for helping less-experienced adult learners, and he was hired as a teacher's assistant in the Job Training program in 1997.

As PUENTE grew, an opportunity presented itself for Rodriguez to become a full-time computer applications instructor in 2002. Now, the stress he once felt when he thought of going to work in the moving business has disappeared. "I feel good coming to work!" he exclaims.

So good, in fact, that when one of his students wanted to help him prepare a retirement plan, Rodriguez told her he is never going to retire. "She asked, 'What if you get a better job?' I said, 'There's no better job.'" When he first joined PUENTE, Rodriguez was single and adrift. Now, he is married and has a daughter who attended preschool at PUENTE. "PUENTE has helped me grow," Rodriguez concludes. "I was taught to lead by example here, and that is what I do. PUENTE has changed my life."

preschool and kindergarten teacher Angel Giles. "They are all actively engaged in intentional study, not just being kept busy. It's targeted learning."

- **TEAM STRUCTURE.** In PUENTE's preschool and charter kindergarten program, the three teachers jointly plan curricula and instruction for 60 children, divided into groups of 20. Every hour, the groups rotate between classrooms. Although each teacher on the team aims for the same goal—to have students reading at a first-grade, second-semester level—the frequent change in environment keeps students engaged and exposes them to a variety of teaching styles.

- **AUTONOMY.** PUENTE's teachers feel they have creative freedom in the classroom with few administrative dictates, as long as they meet the academic goals and the learning center's standards. PUENTE gives teachers time during the school day to work together, to share methods and ideas, and to try out new techniques. The creative autonomy teachers feel promotes a camaraderie and a culture of working together.

- **CLASSROOM TECHNOLOGY.** PUENTE has 300 computers available for use by all students. Instructors also have access to the Internet and ancillary components, including scanners, to help with lesson preparation. "Who wouldn't want to work in an environment like that? It's a teacher's dream," says Diana Juarez, who teaches in both the preschool and kindergarten programs.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN PROGRAMMING

Sr. Jennie and her colleagues assume that students come to PUENTE because they have high goals for their education and employment. They realize the people living in PUENTE's neighborhoods want to grow, be educated, become self-sufficient, and contribute to their community.

Out of respect for those dreams and a desire to cultivate local ownership, PUENTE leaders have always been attentive to people's needs as they implement programs. For example, the requests of South L.A. residents played an integral part in planning the second PUENTE campus, resulting in a solid lineup of basic-skills courses that prepare more community members to acquire living-wage jobs. Classes are also offered at the times most convenient to workers with odd schedules.

PUENTE has also become a vehicle for bringing additional resources to the neighborhoods. "A foundation becomes something in the community through its investments and grantees," stresses Wendy Hoppe, executive director of The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, which generously supports the learning center's programs. "We feel privileged that PUENTE has given us the opportunity to invest in the community."

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parents, guardians, and other primary caregivers of PUENTE's youngest students also are involved in some way with the learning center. This involvement takes many forms—enrolling in classes, attending monthly parents' meetings, and volunteering in special activities—depending on the parent's availability and skills. Parents who don't speak English or have little formal education themselves are still encouraged to facilitate their children's learning; to take them to the library, for instance, and to make sure they get to school on time. All of these efforts are designed to cultivate a parent's sense of responsibility for his or her child's education.

COLLABORATIONS

PUENTE's many collaborations (see page 15) illustrate its leaders' strategy of connecting with the communities' major organizations and players in order to achieve greater impact. By co-chairing the Boyle Heights Learning Collaborative (BHLC), for example, Sr. Jennie has helped make parental involvement a priority for the entire local education sector. The BHLC sponsored a hugely successful reading fair in 2003 and, in addition, put on two community-wide education conferences. Reforming public education, building the capacity of institutions, and trying to affect systems are all very difficult tasks, observes BHLC member Maria Casillas, but "Sr. Jennie has proven that she wants to be a part of a learning community through her engagement in this particular collaborative."

INTEGRATED PROGRAMMING

Programs at PUENTE are interrelated and mutually supporting, partly because they evolved organically. The initial first- and second-grade tutoring sessions led to ESL classes for the children's parents; the need to serve the children's older siblings



PARENTAL SATISFACTION AFFIRMS PUENTE'S SUCCESS

The parents of children who attend PUENTE express heart-felt gratitude for the learning that takes place there. Luz Fernandez's appreciation is typical. Fernandez is a single working mother, born in Los Angeles to Mexican immigrants who spoke no English. Her son, Andrew, completed both the preschool and kindergarten programs at PUENTE.

Fernandez was impressed that her son learned to write his name while in preschool; that his knowledge of the English language grew quickly; and that he brought books home to read with her. PUENTE's standards for attendance and behavior helped Andrew, too. He earned certificates for perfect attendance, and he learned to listen to other people without interrupting.

"Andrew went in [to first grade] with a leg up," Fernandez gratefully reports. "PUENTE's rules [and structure] worked for me."

led to the ASE and HST programs, which led to SAT preparation and youth English-immersion classes. Similarly, the adult ESL program spawned GED preparation and job training courses, which in turn sparked a public speaking program and the creation of a job referral office.

STATE-OF-THE-ART FACILITIES

PUENTE's insistence that its centers be state-of-the-art and make an architectural statement illustrates Sr. Jennie's firm belief that the people of its communities deserve the best.

The two campuses are the most obvious example of this strategy. Architect Steve Woolley recalls that Sr. Jennie wanted buildings that would make residents proud—structures that were comparable to anything found on the more affluent west side of Los Angeles. Although some Boyle Heights neighbors initially wanted an Arts and Crafts-period design, reflecting the neighborhood's predominant style, Sr. Jennie held out for something more distinctive. No one seems disappointed.

"[If] you are a good neighbor, you want to make a statement that lives well in that environment," Woolley acknowledges. "The buildings stand out but they're not obnoxious." PUENTE's leaders believe the buildings impart a sense of permanence, hope, and respect, sending the message that residents have an opportunity to grow and learn equal to that of any other citizen of Los Angeles. Recalls volunteer Robin Rickershauser, "One student—a low-income, middle-aged Latina—said when she was given PUENTE's address she kept walking back and forth, passing the building each time. She couldn't believe she was supposed to go into such a beautiful new building."

USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Teachers incorporate computer technology into learning experiences for all students, regardless of age, on the premise that everyone needs to be comfortable with technology. Even in Sr. Jennie's earliest ESL classes, in the mid-1980s, students used a computerized program to learn English while also acquiring the keyboarding skills needed for an office job. This early usage of computer technology was introduced and funded by the *Los Angeles Times* through the efforts of Publisher Tom Johnson and Associate Editor Jean Sharley Taylor:

Today, computer-based lessons help adults learn English and workplace skills, help elementary and high school students learn keyboarding and use the Internet for research, and engage preschool and kindergarten students with math and reading games. All students use computers at least every other day.

PUENTE campuses use a high-speed, server-based network to deliver a wide range of educational services and resources to the classroom. Collectively, the two PUENTE campuses house more than 300 Pentium III and Pentium IV desktop and server computers. All computers have high-speed Internet access, which is used as an educational resource by students and teachers alike.

This computer technology enables educators to serve a large number of people as efficiently as possible. It would be impossible to teach 2,000 students at one center for the same cost—roughly

A lot of donors are frustrated because they give money to [a program] and the problems don't go away. Jennie can show results; you can see you've spent your money wisely.

—Fred Ali
President, Weingart Foundation

\$900 per student—without computers, says Board Member and Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca. "It's proof that technology and [self-motivated students] can provide the answer to learning. Sr. Jennie was ahead of the curve" when she infused technology into the curriculum, he points out.

In 1996, the President's Summit on America's Future demonstrated a videoconference hookup between the Summit in Philadelphia and PUENTE, some 2,500 miles away. That same year, PUENTE won an Innovative Partnerships in Distance Learning Award from the International Distance Learning Conference in Washington, DC.

ACCOUNTABILITY

PUENTE embraces five types of accountability: (1) to children, who must become ready for elementary school and beyond; (2) to young people, who need to learn good study habits, attain better grades, graduate from high school, and pursue higher

education and/or stable work lives; (3) to adult learners, who need to learn English, acquire basic job skills, obtain jobs, and find the path to economic self-sufficiency; (4) to the communities in which PUENTE is located, which are entitled to high-quality, friendly, responsive services; and (5) to donors, who must see the results of their investment.

The strategies described throughout this report enhance PUENTE's accountability to children, young people, adults, and the community at large. In addition, PUENTE leaders use the following strategies to demonstrate their accountability to donors:

- **AN OPEN-DOOR POLICY.** Sr. Jennie invites PUENTE's supporters to visit either campus at any time to see that their money is well spent. Agency and community leaders often stop by to discuss ideas and issues.

- **A FOCUS ON RESULTS.** PUENTE leaders specify intended targets in their grant applications and report progress in achieving them. For instance, a proposal to the Weingart Foundation described the outcomes teachers hoped to produce—improvements in children's listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills—and the methods they would use to measure change. After receiving the grant, PUENTE administrators reported progress data to the foundation.

- **THE JUDICIOUS USE OF RESOURCES.** Close observers can't identify one instance in which PUENTE's directors wasted funds. Donors feel assured that contributions go directly to programs and services. Occasionally, circumstances change between the time a proposal is written and the time the funds are received. PUENTE administrators always ask permission before re-directing any donations. "We try to be very straightforward with somebody else's money and not misuse it," Sr. Jennie affirms.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

PUENTE has accomplished many things during its first twenty years of service. It has demonstrated an impact on students—actual changes in the well-being of children, adults, families, and the communities served by the learning center’s two campuses; it has had an influence on ideas and practices across the country, as others try to replicate the organization’s success; and it has leveraged its influence to raise considerable public and private resources on behalf of two underserved neighborhoods.

IMPACTS

For the 2003-04 school year, PUENTE reported the following results, by program area:

PRESCHOOL READINESS & CHARTER KINDERGARTEN

- **High attendance rates.** The 123 preschool students had an average attendance rate of 86 percent, while the average rate for the 114 children in kindergarten was 94 percent.
- **Competence in basic skills.** Ninety-three percent of preschool students were able to read and write in English and demonstrate mastery of basic computer usage, such as familiarity with the keyboard, directional arrows, and use of the mouse.
- All kindergarten students advanced to first-grade reading instruction, and all finished the year able to read and write in English and demonstrate basic computer skills.
- **Parent participation.** One hundred percent of preschool and kindergarten parents actively participated in their children’s education through attending Effective Parenting, adult education, or Job Training classes, or volunteering weekly in the classroom as aides.
- **Ability to speak English.** All of the students who entered preschool or kindergarten speaking little or no English ended the year functionally bilingual.

- **Continuity of education.** Sixty-two of the “graduating” preschoolers signed up to continue their education at PUENTE by enrolling in the charter kindergarten.

AFTER SCHOOL ENRICHMENT

- **Broad reach.** Three hundred eighty-one students, representing 53 elementary and middle schools, participated.
- **Academic stability.** Because of tutoring help, all after-school participants remained enrolled in their regular schools.
- **Computer literacy.** All participants improved their computer skills through age-appropriate educational software programs such as Spell It Deluxe, Math Rabbit, Reader Rabbit, The Magic School Bus Exploration Series, Grammar Games, and Kid’s Zoo, a science adventure with several activities involving reading and writing exercises integrated with a science theme.

HIGH SCHOOL TUTORIAL

- **Broad reach.** Two hundred thirty-nine young people between the ages of 12 and 18, representing 92 area schools, participated.
- **Improved test scores.** Students improved nearly two grade levels, on average, as measured by pre- and post-tests in reading, math, and language arts. Several students gained nearly four grade levels in one year.
- **Academic stability.** One hundred percent of students remained enrolled in school, and were promoted to the next grade level or successfully completed high school. Typically, almost half of the Latinos in these neighborhoods drop out or fail to graduate from high school.
- **College preparation.** Sixty high school juniors participated in the PUENTE/Kaplan SAT preparation program; their scores increased an average of 125 points. All students who enrolled in the program made plans to attend college in the fall at schools such as California State University-Northridge and UCLA.

In some ways, PUENTE has the greatest impact on adult learners because it offers them a much-needed sense of possibility. “People look to PUENTE as a beacon [of] hope in the community,” says volunteer Patt Zimbelman. PUENTE helps these constituents “see a way out and a way up,” she says. One of the main pathways, not surprisingly, is English-language acquisition.

ADULT ESL

Pretests are administered in ESL classes to assess students’ proficiency and facilitate placement at the proper level. Of the 1,830 adults enrolled, 85 percent completed at least one level of ESL instruction during the year. All ESL students used computers to reach their language-learning goals.

ADULT READING IMPROVEMENT & PUBLIC SPEAKING

Adult Reading Improvement, which prepares adults to enroll in the GED and Job Training programs, enrolled

70 students. Participants’ reading abilities increased by an average of two grade levels, as measured by CASAS reading tests. Public speaking classes helped an additional 59 students speak effectively and confidently in both small- and large-group settings.

ADULT HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA / GED PREPARATION

Students enter this program with varying numbers of credits earned toward the 120 needed to graduate from a California high school. Of the 272 adults enrolled in this program, 16 received high school diplomas and 16 passed the GED.

COMPUTER APPLICATIONS & JOB TRAINING

A combined total of 596 adults enrolled in Computer Applications classes at both the Boyle Heights and South L.A. campuses. Of these, 60 earned certificates of competency in at least one core office application, such as Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Access.



Nineteen students held workplace internships at such locations as the East Los Angeles Community Corporation, International Institutes of Los Angeles, Second Street Elementary School, Hollenbeck Middle School, Boyle Heights High School, and the Plaza Community Center.

From 2000 through early 2004, approximately 465 PUENTE students were eligible for placement through the Job Referral Office. The office placed about 365 of them, for a placement rate of 78 percent. Employers include schools, department stores, financial service firms, banks, medical offices, manufacturers, hotels, health spas, and other companies in the Los Angeles area.

INFLUENCE

Organizations around the country have begun looking to PUENTE as a model for teaching English to adults. One of the largest replications is Poder Learning Center in Chicago, which serves about 1,000 Mexican and Central-American immigrants in the city's Pilsen neighborhood. *Poder* is a Spanish word with two meanings: "to be able" and "power." Like PUENTE, Poder Learning Center aims to empower residents through education.

Poder Learning Center opened in January of 1997 under the leadership of Daniel Loftus, a former high school bilingual-education teacher. After some initial growing pains, Poder became so popular that it had to add classes and staff.

Much like PUENTE's creators, Poder staff and volunteers rehabilitated a building and created their own administrative offices, teachers' lounge, classrooms, and computer lab. Poder also incorporated PUENTE's respect for adult learners by recognizing immigrants' accomplishments and developing a curriculum that meets the needs they have articulated.

PUENTE's kindergarten offers a second potential model for education in low-income communities, especially as the charter school movement continues to grow nationally. PUENTE is community driven, has close and continuing parental involvement, is committed to high educational standards, and holds itself accountable for results—crucial attributes for a successful charter school. Leaders from other communities and from private education initiatives increasingly look to PUENTE as a source of information about best-practices.

LEVERAGE

PUENTE's fundraising strategy is relatively simple: build strong relationships with donors, primarily by giving a transparent account of how money is spent, and use those relationships to attract more support. From 1998 through 2004, that approach generated over \$25.7 million from 1,560 public and private sources.

Public money represents roughly 20 percent of PUENTE's funding; it comes through LAUSD's support for adult ESL teachers and the charter kindergarten. Thus, PUENTE's leaders have become skilled at attracting and leveraging private support. Again, the strategy is simple:

- **Help donors see the mutual benefits of investing.**
- **Invite donors to see the learning center first-hand to observe how their money is utilized.**
- **Make reasonable requests.**
- **Build trust by demonstrating sound management, developing a strong staff, and cultivating a well-connected board of directors.**
- **Hire skilled grant writers who can portray the organization accurately and completely.**

PUENTE's leadership strives to develop relationships that prove so positive and productive that donors are motivated to advocate on PUENTE's behalf. For example, after the successful construction of PUENTE's South L.A. campus, Russell Sakaguchi, then-president of the ARCO Foundation, brought PUENTE to the attention of Wendy Hoppe at The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, which has generously funded requests for equipment, staffing, and facilities for the learning center since 1992.

Similarly, when the Times Mirror Foundation invited Sr. Jennie to join a committee on literacy and technology, she connected with fellow committee-member Lee Walcott of The Ahmanson Foundation, who was impressed that she was "seriously interested in literacy" for the Latino population. Beginning with a modest grant in 1990 to help the center move from its temporary trailers to a permanent building, The Ahmanson Foundation has become a consistent and generous supporter of PUENTE.



A LESSON IN LEVERAGING

The establishment of PUENTE's first classrooms yields a notable example of Sr. Jennie's leveraging strategy. At the same time that PUENTE was outgrowing its space in the CSO building, Sr. Jennie's religious community needed a new automobile. She noticed Sierra Leasing next door, and when she stopped in to inquire about a car, she met the owner, Rob Smith. Sr. Jennie mentioned she worked with PUENTE, and Smith invited her into his office for a more in-depth conversation.

Her description of the tutoring program fascinated Smith. She told him she was looking for help to rehabilitate an old barbershop space. Smith asked Sr. Jennie how much the rehabilitation would cost, and she estimated \$5,000. He then asked how she was going to finance the project. With her hands and the hands of volunteers, she answered. Coincidentally, Smith was—and still is today—the president of the Carrie Estelle Doheny Foundation, and he said the foundation would donate \$5,000 to PUENTE's cause.

"A month later, I called and said, 'Rob, I want you to come and see what we did with your money,'" Sr. Jennie remembers. When Smith saw the impressive results of his investment, it cemented a relationship with the Doheny Foundation that continues today.

The donation from the Doheny Foundation was important, but Sr. Jennie's friendship with Rob Smith proved significant for another reason as well: He knew Richard Riordan, the wealthy businessman and benefactor who later became mayor of Los Angeles. Sr. Jennie asked for an introduction, and although Riordan's busy schedule made it difficult to arrange anything, Sr. Jennie was undeterred. "In the end, Jennie talked him into meeting with her for ten minutes, and he ended up [donating] the property where PUENTE is now," Smith marvels. By taking advantage thusly of even chance encounters, PUENTE's administrators focus on building the organization's funding base one relationship at a time.

LESSONS

PUENTE Learning Center's core components and strategies add up to more than the sum of the parts. They also boil down to a set of useful lessons for others interested in planning, implementing, and funding effective education programs in low-income communities with high concentrations of immigrants. Those lessons are as follows:

- **STAY TRUE TO THE ORGANIZATION'S MISSION**

PUENTE's leaders frequently are asked to expand the organization to include a full elementary school and even a K-12 institution. Admirers also ask them to help apply the model to related social service systems. The learning center does initiate new programs, but only ones that align with the core mission of People United to Enrich the Neighborhood Through Education, and that respond to the genuine educational needs of its neighborhoods.

By staying consciously focused on the mission, PUENTE's leaders keep their programs deep enough to achieve solid results and resist program dilution or "drift." As Board Member Bill Niese sees it, "The essence of PUENTE is its simplicity. It doesn't try to be all things to all people."

- **RECOGNIZE AND ADJUST TO THE NEEDS AND THE TIMES**

Many of PUENTE's programs came into being through the recognition by PUENTE of unique opportunities, which in turn were dictated by the needs of the constituent communities. This takes commitment, courage, perseverance, and the skill to follow up—but it pays off in terms of community engagement and donor support.

- **RELY ON HIGH STANDARDS TO BUILD A CULTURE OF SUCCESS**

PUENTE's commitment to upholding high standards underscores the all-important culture of dignity and respect, and

it reinforces the message that all students can achieve success. "We expect 100 percent from our students," says instructor Andrew Bleeden, and, he reports, they have responded. "Instead of being daunted by the challenge, they see it as a gesture, a belief in them, a respect."

- **VIEW EDUCATION AS A LIFELONG PROCESS**

PUENTE's leaders believe in educating neighborhood residents, of all ages, in ways that stimulate lifelong learning and self-improvement. Thus, for example, adult programs teach the basic building blocks of workplace success. This approach ultimately has the greatest chance of helping residents become economically self-sufficient and ending their cycle of poverty.

- **THINK QUALITY**

The components of PUENTE's success don't come cheaply. As donor Russell Sakaguchi observes, "If you want good outcomes, you are going to have to pay." Although Sr. Jennie and her colleagues have been frugal with resources, they have not cut corners on any essential aspect of the learning center. This means they must continuously look for more funding. Leaders must be ready and willing to make bold demands of donors, cultivate relationships with a broad support base, and hire capable fundraising professionals.

- **POSITION THE ORGANIZATION AS A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS**

"We are not asking for charity," Sr. Jennie insists, and she impresses on donors that they are investing "in the people who are our communities, who are our society." This is especially important when dealing with the inclination of some funders to look for a new "good cause" after seeing how effectively PUENTE uses their donation.

"Our response is, 'If you personally were going to invest in a company and the company were doing great, would you pull

out your money and invest in something questionable?'" says Paul Millman, a former vice president at PUENTE who oversaw fundraising. "Or would you invest where you know there is going to be a delivery on what's promised, a benefit? Everybody says, 'I would go with the sure thing.' That is what we need people to think: 'PUENTE is a sure thing.'"

- **DEVOTE ENERGY AND RESOURCES TO STAFFING NEEDS**

Robin Rickershauser, a long-time volunteer and former staff consultant, credits the strength of the learning center's staff to Sr. Jennie's "incredible ability to hire fabulous people. She doesn't do it by the bureaucratic ways. She has a genius for picking top-quality people who are very committed. Her quality as a person and her high standards attract people with high standards."

"We go through painstaking efforts to hire people in the development department that have exemplary writing skills," adds Millman, "because we know that corporate and foundation grants are so critical to us and to our financial stability." Similar care is given to filling staffing positions at all levels.

- **ESTABLISH SINCERE, AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS WITH DONORS**

Sr. Jennie has a straightforward description of how she raises funds for PUENTE: "I just meet one person through another person, through another person. The main thing is, I ask people to come here. I like people to see where their money is going." Showing donors that their money is utilized wisely is key, says Debbie Dillon, who served as PUENTE's first development director. "PUENTE uses its resources extremely judiciously," Dillon maintains. "Giving money to PUENTE, you are assured it's going into programs and services. Jennie is a master of [inviting donors] to see PUENTE in action and saying, 'We will tell you how many students we helped through your contribution.' There is a lot of power in that."

Maria Casillas, president of Families In Schools, concurs. "Honest philanthropy," she says, "comes out of honest, authentic relationships. [Sr. Jennie] tells them what she needs, and she is willing to be held accountable. With Sr. Jennie, what you see is what you get."



TURNING CLIENTS INTO STAKEHOLDERS

While PUENTE is at heart a service organization, its leaders view the learning center as a business rather than a charity. As with many businesses, PUENTE strives to give its client base—the students—a sense of ownership in the enterprise. The more invested students become in the center, the more responsibility they feel to ensure its future success. One way PUENTE cultivates this accountability is by organizing an annual student-giving campaign.

Just as development officers appeal to outside sources for donations, instructors and administrators explain the needs of the organization and ask students to contribute. Younger children take letters home, so that even the littlest learners can participate. Although the actual amount collected may be modest, the proportion of individuals who give is consistently near 90 percent, an indication that PUENTE's clients have indeed evolved into concerned stakeholders.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

PUENTE Learning Center is constantly growing and changing. As it moves beyond its 20th anniversary, this dynamic organization will face several challenges: leadership succession, achieving financial sustainability, and staying current with community needs.

LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION

Jennie Lechtenberg remains PUENTE's undisputed leader, but she won't hold that position forever. Sr. Jennie, the staff, board members, and financial supporters of PUENTE openly discuss this issue. They know that organizations established by charismatic leaders can flounder under a successor unless the original vision and practices are well-institutionalized.

Sr. Jennie "realizes that in order to help the organization continue to live, the seeds of life [have to be] sown," observes long-time friend and colleague Sr. Helena Gleeson. Sr. Jennie is developing the management skills of all staff, and she persuaded The Ahmanson Foundation to establish a \$500,000 endowment so PUENTE can attract a qualified replacement upon her retirement.

There is precedent for leadership succession within PUENTE. Over the years, Sr. Jennie promoted Luis Marquez from volunteer tutor to director of the second campus and vice president. When Marquez took over the South L.A. program, Sr. Jennie let him manage without interference. And when Sr. Jennie took a three-month sabbatical in 2003, PUENTE's senior management team continued operations with minimal interruptions.

The care with which Sr. Jennie selects her senior managers bodes well for PUENTE's sustainability; all deputies share Sr. Jennie's commitment to helping disadvantaged people help themselves, and to the key strategies outlined above.

One nagging question is whether donors will continue to support PUENTE at their current level after Sr. Jennie has left. Sr. Jennie is making sure that major donors know her vice presidents, and most observers believe that the organization's concepts and results will prove as great a magnet as Sr. Jennie's charm.

ACHIEVING FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

PUENTE is uncommonly successful at attracting both capital and operational support. Still, all nonprofit organizations are challenged to find sufficient funds for continuing operations. PUENTE's development staff has experimented with "signature" fundraising events, including gala banquets, a golf tournament, and a downtown food-and-wine festival, but they have not yet found the perfect vehicle.

Future fundraising will focus on taking full advantage of available corporate/foundational support, and will incorporate innovative techniques to bring the story of PUENTE to the attention of more individuals.

STAYING CURRENT WITH COMMUNITY NEEDS

PUENTE's reputation, and its success, rests on its responsiveness to community needs. It is essential for the organization to stay aware of those needs as the community changes, and the leadership knows it must remain vigilant to survive in a dynamic culture. As Vice President Luis Marquez explains, "If you respond to their needs, they give you a chance by walking into a classroom."

For twenty years, learners of all ages have been well-served by PUENTE's culture of achievement and message of hope. "PUENTE's effectiveness is so demonstrable," observes Wendy Hoppe. "They are investing in people who are working hard to be self-sufficient. They've created an organization with a culture and value that will sustain them. Leadership does matter, but [so does] the overall strength of the organization. I am very optimistic about PUENTE's future."

Russell Sakaguchi agrees. "I have absolute faith in PUENTE," he affirms. "It is self-propelling. I looked at the quality of the interaction between the staff and the students and the way they were delivering [the educational mission] with the use of the latest technology. When you put those things together, you begin to understand why I think PUENTE will sustain itself."





PHOTOS

Foreword, facing page: PUENTE's youngest students enjoy learning in a safe, structured, and creative environment.

Page 2: PUENTE's Boyle Heights campus is located just east of downtown Los Angeles.

Page 5: From the beginning, PUENTE has offered parenting classes as well as English lessons for both adults and children.

Page 12: A computer repair course provides PUENTE students with hands-on experience.

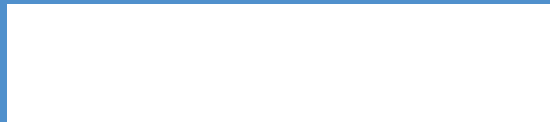
Page 14: PUENTE students hone their presentation skills in Public Speaking class.

Page 20: Students of all ages utilize PUENTE's technology resources in class at least every other day.

Page 27: Computer applications classes are at the heart of PUENTE's adult program.

Page 33: Built in the aftermath of urban unrest, PUENTE's South L.A. campus is a testimony to the strength of community.

Page 34: Graduates leave PUENTE with the expertise and confidence they need to forge successful futures.



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