



An inner city school with a global mindset

In a neighbourhood where murder is an everyday occurrence and even students face gun violence, Semillas Community Schools in Los Angeles are using IB programmes to transform lives

by SOPHIE-MARIE ODUM

With a combined membership of over 45,000 individuals, Los Angeles is notoriously known as the ‘gang capital’ of the US.

As violent crimes in the city increase for the second year in a row, parents live in fear of losing their child to gangs, drugs, or death.

Despite what goes on outside the school gates, an IB World School in a neighbourhood in east LA is committed to providing a loving learning environment for local children and those at risk of gang membership.

Anahuacalmecac International University

Preparatory of North America – part of Semillas Community Schools – became the first public IB World School in LA, in 2009. It offers the Primary Years Programme (PYP) and Middle Years Programme (MYP), and is working hard to transform the neighbourhood.

Semillas engages the indigenous Mexican community. Students learn to speak Nahuatl – language of the Aztecs – study Native Mexican mathematics and practice indigenous visual and performing arts. Students also learn both Spanish and English.

The organization started in 2002, in a recreational room in a city park, with 139 young students. Today, it teaches 374 students – approximately 300 study the PYP or MYP.

Semillas’ students are well equipped to help solve local and global challenges.

“Beyond changing the face of the local inner city *barrio* in which our school is rooted, our students have grown to understand how they can transform the world,” says Aguilar.

“For example, students have engaged in questioning the legacy of Christopher Columbus, protested the forced development of petroleum pipelines and danced at the steps of the White

“As a result of our work, our local community has reversed the impending tide of blight”

House, demanding climate justice in the face of crimes against our Mother Earth.”

IB World spoke to Semillas’ Executive Director and a co-founder, Marcos Aguilar, in 2011 and, since then, violence has increased in the area.

“A 14-year-old student in our after-school programme was recently shot 10 times near his home and left an inch from death,” says Aguilar.

“Two young girls were also recently murdered in our nearby park.”

The community maintains a united front to ensure students (and educators) remain safe and focused on learning, and don’t fall prey to the glamourized life of gangs and guns.

Semillas also works with the greater community, advocating for climate defense actions across the country, and campaigning for the survival of indigenous language.

Students have partnered with the United Nations (UN) to help address real-world issues.

While Semillas goes from strength to strength, finance and politics still remain the “greatest challenge”.

In the past, Aguilar and his wife Minnie Ferguson (Semillas’ Director of Education and IB

Programmes) have had to secure loans on their house to cover teacher salaries due to lack of funding, and this has stunted progress.

Back in 2011, Aguilar said Semillas was still a “decade away from reaching the beginning of its full potential as a transformative institution in the community.”

Six years later, Aguilar says Semillas may “always be 10 years away” from its full potential, but it will not be defeated. “As a result of our work, our local community has reversed the impending tide of blight and continues to build upon the rich cultural context of education our school provides.”

The organization is now partnering with schools in Mexico to develop a Nahuatl language immersion programme.

Aguilar explains: “This visionary programme aims to arrest the decline of Nahuatl language loss, both in Mexico and in our communities here in LA, as we cultivate language nests for our families and opportunities for pedagogical exchanges with Mexican educators.”

Semillas instigated a revolution in LA. Dozens of public schools in the city have since introduced numerous IB programmes. ■