

NEA president visits first Las Cruces community school

LAS CRUCES – The president of the nation’s largest labor union was in Las Cruces Thursday for an assembly and ribbon-cutting at the city’s first community school. Lily Eskelsen Garcia, president of the National Education Association, spoke to a gym full of students at Lynn Middle Schools about the importance of taking back their education and the impact community schools can have.

“I’m here today because I promised someone I would find you,” Garcia told the students, as local dignitaries, school officials and business leaders looked on. “I promised a man who is in his last day on the job today – the President of the United States, Barack Obama, asked me to find you.”

Garcia said she had met with Obama in the Oval Office, and felt as though she had been called into the principal’s office.

“He said, ‘You guys talk about how we need to do more than standardized test, and I get that, but you have to show me what it could look like if we actually had a school that was really (designed) around the whole student,’” Garcia recalled. “He said, ‘It needs to go beyond the whole student, it needs to (serve) the whole family, or the whole community.’”

Garcia said Obama pointed out that taxpayers pay for the schools, and the community should feel they have a stake in educating children.

“He said, ‘You’ve got to find me something like that, so I can talk about it.’ And here it is, his last day on the job, and I got to send a note to President Obama,” Garcia said. “I said, ‘You have got to come to Lynn Middle School,

because they have found a way.’”



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National NEA President Lily Eskelsen-Garcia, answers questions from Lynn Middle School Students in the Media Magnet Program during her speech to the middle school student body about being the first Community school in Las Cruces, Thursday January 19, 2017. (Photo: Josh Bachman/Sun-News)

Community schools

“This is a huge day for Lynn Middle School,” first-year Principal Rey Gomez told students at Thursday’s assembly.

The vision for the community schools project, spearheaded by Ngage New Mexico, is to bring improved access to health and social services, youth and

community development and educational opportunities into neighborhoods around Las Cruces by converting each of the district's 41 school sites into community schools, open to everyone — all day, every day, including providing a variety of services on nights and weekends.

The Las Cruces initiative, which began more than a year ago, brought together more than 20 local agencies, businesses, educational institutions, teacher unions and nonprofit organizations to come up with a solution.

Vanessa Mendez, the brand new community school coordinator at Lynn, began work on Tuesday. The position is funded through a U.S. Department of Education 21st Century School Fund grant.

“I really want to make sure that I listen to what the needs are — from the parents, students, teachers and community,” Mendez said. “I want to listen to them and learn what their vision is, rather than imposing my vision for the school upon them. I want to create something with them that helps the students succeed and reach their fullest potential.”

Mendez believes, in doing so, the community will become more inclusive and supportive.

“Everyone ends up winning,” she said.



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The Student body of Lynn Middle School clap as National NEA President Lily Eskelsen-Garcia as she them about meeting with President Obama and reporting to him about Lynn being the first Community school in Las Cruces, Thursday, January 19, 2017. (Photo: Josh Bachman/Sun-News)

Expanding services

Organizers knew going into the project that transforming Lynn Middle School into a community school would be a gradual process.

David Greenberg, assistant director for Ngage New Mexico, said hiring Mendez should expedite the process.

“The community has just come together around this idea in such a

remarkable way,” Greenberg said. “Everyone, and I mean everyone, has come together to make this happen. We’ve got the union, the school district, teachers, students, elected officials and all three chambers of commerce coming together and building something together. With their help and participation, we’ve now built the grassroots structure and can begin offering the programs and services the community school needs.”

At Lynn, the school has recently introduced after-school programs, including archery and engineering. The City of Las Cruces has offered to help the school district provide free meals on the weekends for qualifying children, Greenberg said. Families and Youth, Inc. has offered to form a mobile unit at Lynn to do case management.

“There are countless other agencies that have offered up their services, but we’re still in the community-assessment phase, working to identify the needs of the community,” Greenberg said. “We don’t want to simply offer services because we can; we want to offer services because they’re needed.”



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National NEA President Lily Eskelsen-Garcia, shakes hands with Nathaniel Garcia, 9, before heading into the gym at Lynn Middle School, where she spoke with Students in about being the first Community school in Las Cruces, Thursday January 19, 2017. (Photo: Josh Bachman/Sun-News)

Shared leadership

Garcia spoke to students for about thirty minutes about the value of education and doing good in their community.

“Don’t wait for someone to tell you you’re important,” Garcia said. “You are important, powerful human beings right now. If you see something that’s not right, what are you going to do to fix it? What are you going to do about it? You don’t have to wait for someone else to fix it. You can do something to

make the world a little bit more just. And it starts in your school. It starts in your community.”

Matthew Montoya is an eighth-grader at Lynn. He said he is looking forward to the progress being made on the community school project, and believes that the programs and services will benefit the neighborhoods around the school. Matthew said he enjoyed the assembly.

“It was a good presentation, and I agree with a lot of stuff she said,” Matthew said.

Gomez said one of the greatest challenges so far has been explaining what a “community school” means.

“It’s important that we spread the word about all of the good stuff that we have planned,” Gomez said.

The community school project is built around the principle of shared leadership.

“It means that I’ll work with our community school coordinator, my admin team, the staff and the students. When we make decisions, it will be a collaborative effort based on a lot of conversations,” Gomez said.

Alleviating poverty

At the core of the community schools initiative is the desire to reduce the impact that poverty and external factors can have on a student’s education. School Board President Maria Flores said teachers often try to do what they can to help struggling students.

“Children come into the classroom every day, sometimes not ready to learn, and we don’t really know why,” Flores said. “If they’re hungry, we might send

them to the cafeteria. If they haven't slept, we send them to the nurse's office. But community schools provide a greater variety of support services. If a student slept in a car last night, we can help the student and his or her family get the support they need for the child to succeed.”

Damien Willis may be reached at 575-541-5468, dawillis@lcsun-news.com or [@damienwillis](https://twitter.com/damienwillis) on Twitter.