

LEARNING, GROWING

GEDs, workforce skills, English classes are helping to build solid futures for families

STORY *Maggie O'Brien*



COURTESY PHOTO
Maria Rosalba Salazar with
her youngest child, Alice.

Maria Rosalba Salazar has always wanted her daughters to succeed. Now she hopes to inspire them.

"I would like to be an example, to encourage them to achieve their hopes and dreams," the 29-year-old Omahan says.

Salazar, whose children are ages 7 and 1, is taking adult education and workforce development classes offered by the Learning Community. GED and Workforce classes are a new choice for parents like Maria. She has completed three years of classes to become fluent in English as well as more confident in her parenting skills and in her ability to help her children in school.

The classes are offered only at the Learning Community's centers in North and South Omaha. In South Omaha, classes are already full.

Many families struggle as economic realities interfere. The program is an answer for parents who realize they need something more to build a solid future for their family. If parents are struggling as providers, the stress at home can negatively affect kids' academic performance.

"One of the largest predictors for how students perform on a standardized test is poverty," says Learning Community CEO David Patton. "Just think of the huge impact that educational opportunities can create for the family."

Parents across the Learning Community's 11 school districts had

asked for help in building workforce skills, earning their GEDs and learning English.

"We listen to parents and they've told us what they need," Patton says. "We're sharing this opportunity, and their input will help guide how these classes grow."

Suk Tamang is an Omaha dad of three, ages 3, 6 and 12. The carpenter from Bhutan came to the United States after living in a refugee camp for 21 years.

Tamang is taking Parent University classes in the Learning Community's North Omaha center to learn English and improve his job skills so he can enter the workforce in the hopes of providing a better future for his family. His wife works at a local plant, and Tamang cares for the children. He is in class about four hours a day.

"The classes here have everything I need," he says. "I like this place."

The parent program is connected to six Omaha Public Schools elementary schools, including Conestoga Magnet, where two of Tamang's children attend. When his youngest is not in preschool, she is close by with caregivers in a child learning room.

Tamang is making friends and building business skills. Making sure his children have a strong education is very important to him.

"Learning English makes it easier to help my children," Tamang says. "Helping with homework is not so difficult now. And I have homework too, so we (do it) together."

In South Omaha, the Learning Community expanded a workforce skills pilot program in partnership with Metropolitan Community College. Parents say they are excited to earn valuable workforce certifications and quickly gain confidence in their own resourcefulness and career strengths.

Salazar is participating in the pilot program with Metro.

"All of my classmates are so nice and we support each other," she says. "We work together to make our families' lives' better. I would like to work so I can help my husband, buy a house and help my parents."

By earning a GED or workplace certifications, Salazar and her classmates will be prepared for better jobs and continuing education.

Education — and resilience — among parents and children lead to stronger families and thriving communities, Patton says.

"I think about the opportunities this is going to invite for our families, whether they need to get their GED, build a resume or learn interview skills," he says. "All of those things improve the lives of a large part of our population that hasn't been exposed to the opportunities in our community. We hope to change that."

Find out more about Learning Community programs for families, parents, teachers and students at learningcommunityds.org.