

[← Back to Original Article](#)

Los Angeles

Tutoring Group Offers Haven to Ease Burden of Schoolwork

Homework House in Azusa helps children hone math and reading skills in a safe environment. And the services are free.

April 13, 2004 | Erin Ailworth | Times Staff Writer

The door to apartment No. 3 popped open and kids spilled through with backpacks bumping and sneakers churning as they flew up the stairs or dashed through the living room.

They don't live at 561 9th St. in Azusa, but the place has the feel of home and the children couldn't wait to start their homework.

The apartment is Our Neighborhood Homework House, a Christian-based nonprofit tutoring organization located in the middle of the residential neighborhood it serves. About 110 kids, ranging in age from 5 to 16, attend the free program to sharpen their math and reading skills.

It's unclear how many community tutoring programs exist because they are homegrown efforts. Wendy Hoppe, executive director of the Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, knew of just three in addition to Neighborhood Homework House, which her foundation helped fund. She called the program "atypical" because it is run out of an apartment.

The kids and their parents say the program is successful because the staff makes homework exciting.

There aren't any children saying "I don't want to go to Homework House," said Jeri Perkins-Robinson, whose 9-year-old daughter, Lanyice, attends the facility.

Retired schoolteacher Kerry Freeman started Homework House in 1997 after parents in the predominantly Latino and black neighborhood expressed a need for the service. At the time, community members said, the neighborhood was a hub for drugs, gangs and violence. The kids had nowhere safe to go after school.

The program started small and rotated from house to house until 1999, when it settled in a rented 9th Street apartment. Homework House opened its second location, known as the 6th Street Homework House, in January.

Sessions at Homework House begin with the kids sitting cross-legged on the floor for "Family Time," in which they talk about their experiences during the day and make prayer requests. After about 15 minutes, everyone disperses to join their tutors.

On a recent Thursday afternoon, 6-year-old Luis Granados-Saenz sounded out words while reading a story about the cartoon character Garfield.

"Ath-let," he said.

"Athlete," tutor Amanda Farrar, 18, corrected him, tapping the word on the page. "Someone who does sports."

"Athlete."

For many of the kids who attend Homework House, Spanish is the primary language spoken at home, so practice in reading English is essential to their success at school. Some of the tutors -- mostly students from nearby Azusa Pacific University -- speak Spanish fluently. Others know enough Spanish to assist with simple homework problems or to recruit a child's friends to help out.

Upstairs in the blue computer room, tutor Jessie Moore, 18, coached 6-year-olds Adrian Gutierrez and Briana Gonzalez through coloring worksheets designed to help them learn letters and words. The green marker Adrian used squeaked as he shoved it back and forth, coloring all the things that start with the letter Q. Soon the queen on the page wore a green robe.

Moore said she doesn't tell Adrian or Briana what to do, rather she tries to focus their activities. If they do well and follow the rules, at the end of the session both kids will receive the maximum four "house bucks," which they can use to purchase school supplies and goodies at the "house bucks store," located in a closet.

The rule is simple: one house buck is earned for completing homework, reading for 20 minutes, practicing math for 20 minutes and having a good attitude.

Many of the kids hoard the house bucks, saving for something special.

"The kids have been the best propaganda," said Elena Vasconez, project director of the 6th Street Homework House. "They just keep bringing friends from school or their neighborhood."

Parent Becky Cisneros said she's been helping to spread the word since her son, Anthony, 9, started flourishing at the 6th Street Homework House.

On a recent afternoon, Anthony sat in the sunny computer room and playfully went through a spelling list with his tutor, 18-year-old Azusa Pacific student Steven Todd McDonald. McDonald barely got out the word "uncle" when Anthony loudly proclaimed "U-N-C-L-E." The two giggled as they worked through

the word list.

According to Cisneros, Anthony was bringing home Ds on his report card until he enrolled in Homework House.

"He is just so enthused with this Homework House," she said. "I got [his] report card in February and was amazed at the impact. He brought home Cs and Bs."

Anthony explained the shift simply. The tutors, he said, "come and help us."

Joyce Montgomery, whose two daughters attend Homework House, called the program a godsend for single mothers like herself, who are pressed for time because of work and family demands.

Homework House also has given the kids a "purpose and a vision" where they had none before, she said. Now "they want to be firemen and doctors and lawyers."