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## REC goes quietly about its mission

By THE DAILY SENTINEL

Amid the furor over Mesa County Valley School District 51's reorganization — which resulted in more administrative positions and higher pay for those jobs — a small nonprofit with ties to the district is set to make a bigger impact on D51 students.

The Riverside Educational Center was conceived to provide low-cost, after-school tutoring to elementary and middle school students in the Riverside neighborhood.

The center's founder, former teacher Mary Spirio Gonzales, saw first-hand the limited academic support many Riverside students were receiving at home due to factors such as parents holding down more than one job, parents whose primary language was Spanish, or students coming from single-parent homes.

With support from the Riverside Task Force, the center started serving low-income and at-risk students in 2006. That first year REC volunteers helped 22 students with their homework. By last school year, that number had grown to 130 with REC officials wishing they could serve more. But that was as many students as REC's small budget could accommodate.

Thanks to a five-year \$750,000 grant from the Colorado Department of Education, REC will expand to five schools in Mesa County this year and nearly triple the number of students it can serve. This is REC's largest-ever expansion in services and is possible through partnerships with School District 51 and other local groups.

REC is much more than an after-school tutoring program. It's more of a mentorship program where an entire neighborhood or community steps up to show kids that they matter — that people care about them and that there are no limits on what they can achieve in life. The buy-in is strong. Students who were tutored in elementary school are becoming REC youth leaders in high school who assist with the younger students' programming.

The grant will allow REC to reach more kids, but success at any one of the new locations will depend on community engagement. As REC Executive Director Joy Hudak told the Sentinel's Katie Langford, "REC can get the money, but impact and sustainability is going to come from the people who are involved."

Luckily, REC has a blueprint for success from years of trial and error at Riverside. It has grown from tutoring to include a variety of enrichment programs with an emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) based topics. Outdoor programming is supported by strong partnerships with other organizations within the Grand Junction community. The center provides summer programs, service learning, case management and more.

It's good news for the schools that are getting REC programming. REC provides stability and hope to students who need it most. It's a program that succeeds because volunteers recognize that one of the most valuable things they can give is their time. That time gives kids a chance to not only sharpen their reading and math skills, but to see a world beyond the limits of their current circumstances.

With the expansion, REC is going to need a lot more volunteers. To find out how to become one, visit [rec4kids.com](http://rec4kids.com).