

Jumpstarting A College Education



A central component of Operation Jump Start's programs is its college-access mentoring program, which pairs trained adult mentors with low-income eighth-grade students who aspire to be the first in their families to attend college. Pictured, from left, are Program Assistant Mayra Alvarez; Case Manager Samantha Lang; Executive Director Dara Cerwonka; Development Coordinator Jhofelle Estrada; and Program & Resource Development Coordinator Noreen Cruz. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

■ By **THYDA DUONG**
Senior Writer

"It's really about social justice. It's about providing access to a resource that makes a huge difference between a life of poverty and a decent middle-class life."

— **Dara Cerwonka**
Operation Jump Start

Founded in 1994 and guided by a mission to help disadvantaged youth reach their full potential through a college education, Operation Jump Start (OJS) bases its programs on a youth development model that examines the requirements for young people to develop into healthy, productive citizens. The theory contends that there are three cornerstones to positive youth develop-

ment: strong character, connectedness to communities and competencies.

"Those experiences or assets, if you will, are things that are naturally developed in the experiences of, say, middle-class kids," says Executive Director Dara Cerwonka. "However, someone living in poverty doesn't have access to the same experiences."

OJS therefore provides meaningful experiences that target those goals. The backbone of its operations and a central component of its strong outcomes is the organization's college-access mentoring program, which pairs trained adult mentors with low-income eighth-grade students who aspire to be the first in their families to attend college.

“The data tell us that if you go to college, that’s your best chance of escaping a life of poverty, if you come from an impoverished background,” Cerwonka says. “So that’s really the goal for us – to steward them through the process and help them not get lost, help them get to college.”

Mentors commit to a five-year relationship with the student and spend a minimum of six to eight hours a month with their student.

The relationship continues through high school graduation – and most mentors and students stay in touch much longer.

While OJS typically serves between 50 and 55 students every year, it is currently expanding to serve 60 students this academic year. And given that the price tag to provide services to one student and a mentor hovers around \$6,000, OJS diligently works to stretch its roughly \$300,000 annual budget.

The organization provides age-specific educational workshops, tours of local and regional four-year colleges and social activities that connect students from various backgrounds. “There’s so much ethnic tension in Long Beach and, certainly, there’s lots of school rivalries that we really want them to develop friendships across those boundaries,” Cerwonka says.

To further development of students, OJS offers enrichment activities that expose participants to different cultures and various forms of cultural expression, such as opera performances; community service activities; leadership development through its Youth Leadership Council; and individualized education-management programs that help students with course selection and appropriate planning.

And the outcome is in the numbers. Every year, OJS tracks its students’ high school graduation rates, college admission rates, and whether they attend a four-year or two-year college. Data shows that all OJS students graduate high school



Dara Cerwonka is executive director of Operation Jump Start, a nonprofit organization created in 1994 to provide structure and resources to disadvantaged youth. (Photograph by the Business Journal’s Thomas McConville)

on time, and 97 percent go on to college immediately following high school – of those, about 81 percent attend a four-year university.

“We are basically a global society now; globalization is a reality. We’re also a highly technical society now, and the skill level that future workers need is much higher than it used to be,” Cerwonka says. “To have the workforce that we need, we really need to get more students into college. So this organization, in addition to helping each and every one of the students it’s working with, really benefits the community over time, and specifically Long Beach.”

OJS is always looking for community volunteers interested in mentoring, tutoring or running workshops. For more information about Operation Jump Start, call 562/988-2131 or visit www.operationjumpstart.org. ■