

In these crazy political days it can seem like nothing works, no one helps us, and that the government is totally incapable of chewing gum and walking at the same time. But that's not always the case. There are organizations and programs that work, that do help and that silently do an extraordinary job that is ignored by the media that predicts drama and bad news.

One of those programs is the Bilingual Head Start of East Harlem that serves 314 kids and their parents, mostly Latinos. These national programs were established in 1964 with federal funds to prepare children between the ages of 3 and 5 years old to enter in the first grade, and to provide additional health and nutrition services.

The success of these Head Start programs is the result of parent involvement, mostly mothers. No program for kids of this age could achieve its objectives without involving the entire family. In the Neighborhood for example, parents have access to classes that teach ESL, special projects for oral history (in which I have participated) and information about everything related to the well-being of children.

The effective trajectory of the Neighborhood's Bilingual Head start, associated with the East Harlem Council for Human Services, a non-profit organization, has managed to have the prestigious UCLA/Johnson & Johnson Health Care Institute, based out of the University of California in Los Angeles, choose it as the only Head Start in New York to offer a health workshop for parents.

This three day program, that doesn't cost anything for participants, will be at 116 Street East February 9-12. There, parents will learn what they should do when their child is sick, when they should call the doctor or take him to the hospital, and they will receive informational materials to take home once they have finished the sessions.

According to Rita Prats, the director of Bilingual Head Start, "This project offers preventative skills to the families of the Neighborhood, something we urgently need. According to the research, this knowledge results in fewer unnecessary visits to the emergency room and helps parents encourage healthy habits in the family."

One of the reasons that the Neighborhood's Bilingual Head Start was selected for this project is its excellent nutrition program that has encouraged the use of natural foods, without adding an extra penny to the budget for the children's lunch. With time, the parents and even the employees of the program have changed their eating habits to include more healthy foods in their everyday diets.

Latino children suffer a high level of obesity that affects their future in many ways. In particular, the Neighborhood has one of the highest levels of children with asthma in the country.

Programs like this are a ray of light at the end of the tunnel. They lift our spirits and remind us that the world can change, one child at a time.