

Padres Unidos Case Study: Adams City High School Expulsions



Students in front of Adams City High School with their parents.

Photo courtesy of the Denver Post.

On February 8, 2005, shortly after noon, a fight occurred between two students in a park 3 blocks away from Adams City High School in Commerce City. As the students fought, a crowd of around 70 students gathered around. The fight didn't involve weapons or serious injury, and was quickly broken up by several other students.

On returning to the school, 17 students were suspended by the Dean of Students, Paul Garcia, for "leaving school without permission and assisting in a gang fight". Initially, the students were told they were suspended for 10 days.

When they returned to school, the students found that 10 days had been turned into a year-long suspension. Parents were told that their sons were "gang members", were not allowed to speak in Spanish to the dean, and weren't given any alternatives to continue their children's schooling. When they got together, the parents realized that they were all being pitted against each other by Mr. Garcia.

This went on for over a month. Then the parents were referred to Padres Unidos.

Nine of the families came to the first meeting. The parents and students were taken through the "Padres Approach": documenting the problem, laying out the effects, and making solutions. After a weekend of house visits and calls, the families' write-up of what had happened to them and their solutions were presented to the principal and the dean of students.

Press began to pick up the story, and photos of the students and parents appeared on the television and in newspapers. Parents and students organized pressure on the school district: passing out flyers outside of the school, testifying at meetings, going to the media. Padres Unidos was offered pro bono legal counsel from our allies at the Advancement Project, as well as research. Shortly, some parents were offered reinstatement for their children by the district; the parents, however, had all vowed that every student would go back or *none* would be back in school. The state Department of Education announced they were conducting a review of the district's discipline policy.

After a harried two weeks, the district folded: following two months out of school, the students were readmitted, all reference to gang membership was stricken from their records, they were allowed to retain the grades they had before the suspension, and would be provided with free tutoring to allow them to catch up.

The parents involved are now organizing the first Padres Unidos chapter in Commerce City, and Padres has been invited to sit on a commission convened by the Adams County 14 district which will evaluate current discipline policy and suggest reforms.