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EVENING NEWS

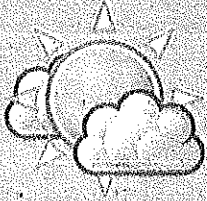
MONDAY, JANUARY 4, 2010

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TODAY'S QUOTE

"An optimist is a fellow who believes what's going to be will be postponed." — Kin Hubbard

TOMORROW'S WEATHER



Partly sunny.
High 31
Low 18

WINNING LOTTERY NUMBERS

MASS. DAILY NUMBERS drawn Friday afternoon were:
3-7-1-6

MASS DAILY NUMBERS drawn Friday night were:

Three kings party is set

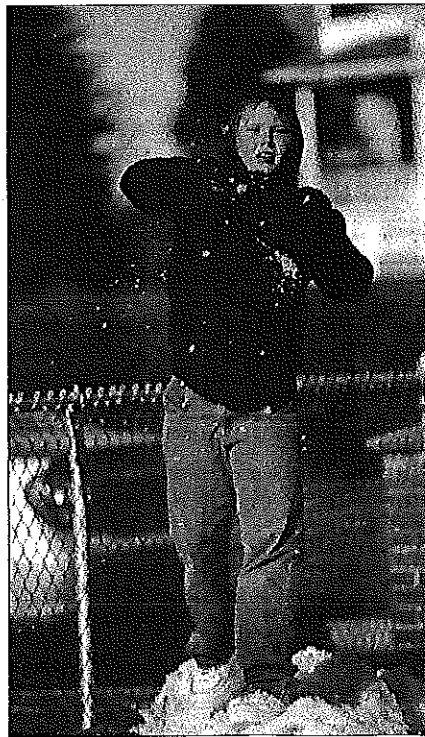
KICKS OFF ASPIRA EFFORT IN COMMUNITY

BY GUS STEEVES
NEWS STAFF WRITER

SOUTHBRIDGE — Those that aspire to do things in the community usually need money, and ASPIRA is no exception.

The new organization, which morphed out of Citizens for Latino Educational Excellence a few months ago, has some far-reaching objectives it hopes to implement to perk up local student achievement. To start them rolling, it's hosting a fundraising

VACATION'S A (SNOW)BALL!



Shawn Kelley photo

SOUTHBRIDGE — Jacob Briard, 12, of South Carolina took part in a snowball fight with cousins as he visited relatives in town over Christmas vacation. Students head back to class today.

Fiesta de Reyes launches ASPIRA effort in town

FIESTA

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Fiesta de Reyes' party Jan. 9.

"If you look at the MCAS scores, there's always a gap — 20 to 30 points — between the white kids and the Latino kids. We're trying to narrow that gap and boost achievement for all students," said Fran Fajana, an ASPIRA board member and lawyer at the Mass. Law Reform Institute in Boston. "... We've sort of decided we need to do three or four things."

The group's "really labor intensive" core project "is something we're calling a Saturday Academy," she said. That will provide MCAS, SAT and other tutoring, financial aid, CLEP exams, a six-to-eight-week summer program, job exposure and various other things (some of them fun), but the group is still deciding which grade it should target. Ideally, it'll match a volunteer with no more than four or five students to act as a mentor and tutor.

"If we had one volunteer and 20 kids, we're just replicating

what's happening in the schools, and that's not optimal to me," Fajana said. "... It's hard to take 20 kids and really give each one meaningful attention, especially in a 45-50 minute class period."

Initially, ASPIRA hopes to raise funds to hire someone to coordinate that effort, buy supplies, and so forth. It's other two starter goals don't really require much money, she observed.

One is a youth club being organized by one of the group's younger members, 2009 Southbridge High graduate Zuleika Vazquez, now at Quinsigamond Community College. That will coordinate cultural events and "help develop leadership" via a nationwide curriculum, Fajana said.

The other effort, being run by Luisa Ugarite, is to promote parent involvement in the schools, "particularly [among] non-English-speaking parents."

According to Vincent Siberon, executive director of ASPIRA's Connecticut chapter, that kind of outreach is crucial — and difficult.

"We weren't really prepared for the amount of work that

needs to be done in the Latino community," he said. "... The work is so enormous and funding is so limited."

Siberon said his agency, which was born in 1989, quickly found that many of the target students have trouble reading Spanish, never mind English, even when they can speak both languages. In its six cities, the public schools often have majority-Latino populations with high dropout rates and not much support from the community. That has typically helped create "a brain drain" of well-off students, who leave town, and more studious Latinos, who often go to magnet schools.

"You're left with the some of the more struggling kids," some of whom have disabilities and can't read, but end up being socially promoted anyway, Siberon noted, adding that the school districts themselves are "overburdened with the amount of need there is."

"When we ask who's going to college, they all raise their hands — but don't have the foggiest idea how to get there," he observed. "... People don't seem

to be aware of what a detriment to the future there is if we don't educate Latino kids."

Siberon noted his ASPIRA chapter was formed primarily by people with social-service backgrounds, and that made some of its efforts more difficult than they could have been. He praised the Southbridge group for being a "good cross-section" of expertise, which includes retired educators, two lawyers, an engineer/town counselor, a state rep., and others.

To him, a key approach involves getting parents interested in their children's schooling as early as possible — even before kindergarten, if possible. As late as middle school is usually helpful, but if the group waits until high school, that's typically too late. By then, Siberon said, both the teens and the parents tend to see the students as being independent and not wanting extra parental involvement.

The most important grades are sixth and ninth grades, when transition to a new school is typically a "shock," he said.

"If they 'check out' intellectu-

ally in sixth grade, they'll often 'check out' physically in 10th grade," Siberon added.

ASPIRA's national records, however show that when its programs can reach those students, 82 percent of them go to college. The Latino population's average is just 54 percent.

Fajana said her group has spoken with the Connecticut chapter and plans to meet with them in more depth, while also talking to several other state chapters. In three to five years, she said, ASPIRA hopes the Southbridge group will be able to reach out to other Latino population centers, but initially the plan is just to "get a foothold and be sustainable" in Southbridge.

ASPIRA's fundraiser on Saturday runs from 7 p.m. to midnight at 12 Crane St. and features a buffet of Latino food, live jibaro folklore music, dancing, raffles and more. Tickets are \$10, \$15 at the door, to reserve some, call 508-764-8128 or e-mail severina.rios@aspirana.org.

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