

Healthy Start gets straight A's

State program brings dentists, doctors to elementary schools

By ELISA ROCHA
Bee staff writer

Modesto Bee
11/7/93

Sounding more like a sage philosopher than an 11-year old waiting in a dentist's chair, Hugo Martinez pondered the value of good health.

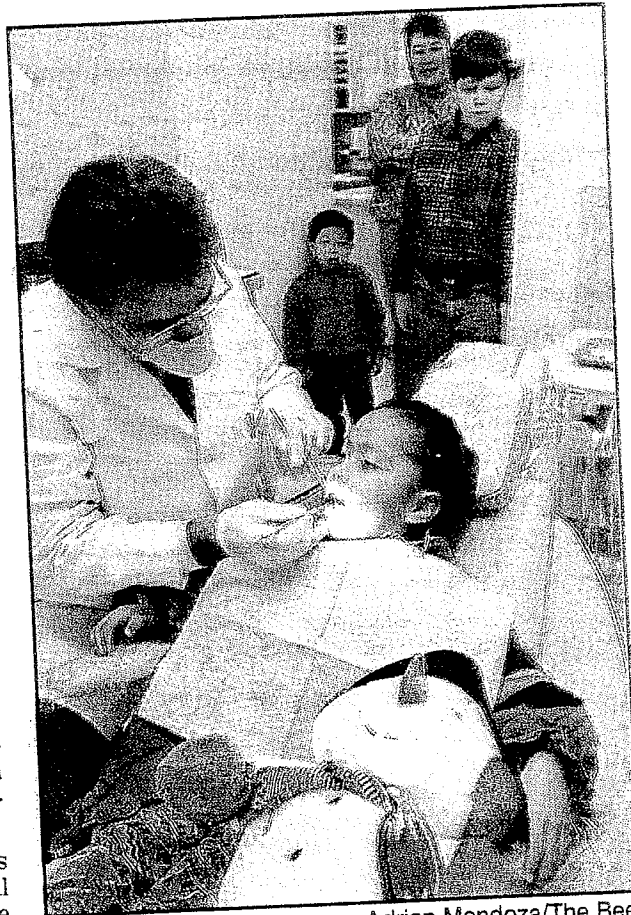
"All human beings in all schools are supposed to have the same good things like medicine," Hugo said. "It was hard getting to the dentist before. I like having a dentist at school because it makes it easier. I have a good dentist. He calms me down when I feel uncomfortable."

The dentist's office is located a kicked-ball away from Hugo's sixth-grade classroom at Robertson Road Elementary School in west Modesto. So are other medical services that comprise the Healthy Start Project, an ambitious school-based program that aims to provide affordable health care to low-income students and their families. The idea is that healthy kids have a better chance of succeeding at school.

The Healthy Start Family Resource Center's new offices will be dedicated Monday with a ribbon-cutting ceremony. Gov. Wilson and a host of other state, county and school dignitaries will attend.

"It's exciting that the governor will be here," said Claudia Epperson, project coordinator. "He has been very supportive of Healthy Start. He understands that our emphasis is on serving children and their families on a day-to-day basis. Our main concern is meeting the needs of our children."

Merced Family Health Centers, which operates the West Modesto Health Clinic, provides medical and other staff to the project. Hanshaw Middle



Adrian Mendoza/The Bee

Dr. Antypas checks Norma Martinez' teeth.

See Back Page, **HEALTHY**

HEALTHY: New program for families

CONTINUED from A-1

School has a similar program.

The project offers physical examinations, diagnoses and treatment of minor illnesses, diagnostic tests, vision and hearing screening, immunization, prenatal care, prescriptions for medication, and a range of other medical, dental and mental health services.

"The medical part is essential," said John Campopiano, Hanshaw's principal. "We certainly can't expect kids to learn very well when their jaw is aching with a toothache."

Norma Ruiz, whose sons attend first-grade and the day care program at the school, has used the dental and counseling services at Healthy Start.

"I used to have to go Stockton for the dentist," Ruiz said, explaining she had trouble finding a local dentist who accepted Medi-Cal. "And the counseling really helped my son. He really needed it. Our family needed it. It has really made our home more stable."

The low-income Ruiz household, while not on welfare, is typical of families in the Robertson Road area. The school qualified for a start-up grant for the project because 60 percent of its families receive Aid to Families With Dependent Children, 90 percent qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches and 58 percent speak limited English.

The project's early success can be linked to its partnerships and support from the Modesto City Schools, the Stanislaus County Department of Social Services, Public Health, Mental Health, the Probation Department, Housing Authority, Stanislaus Medical Center, Center for Human Services, and the Modesto Police Athletic League.

Those agencies and other community organizations share the program's goal of encouraging greater parent participation at school and throughout the community, Campopiano said.

"Our kids are wonderfully appreciative of school," Campopiano said. "Our parents are not as involved as we would hope them to be. Like all schools, we have a nucleus of parents who are very involved, but we want to involve the parents in the community based on what they perceive their own needs to be."

The needs among Robertson school's 670 students are tremendous, Campopiano added. The area seems to be geographically isolated, almost like an island.

"We're tremendously excited the kids and the whole family can really receive the services they need, which enables them to do better in school and in leading more productive lives in the community too," Campopiano said.

Much of that centers around the parent program at the school.

"Getting involved in the parent programs with the school really helped me," said Ruiz. "I take part in a lot of things now. Before I used to just stay at home. This has given me confidence to try new ideas."

Ruiz has been invited to attend the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Meanwhile Dr. Joseph Antypas, Hugo's dentist, explained his vision of the project.

"We're trying to save kids," Antypas said. "The plan is to visit the school and give kids an explanation in the classroom about dentistry. You can't be a part of the project and be just a dentist. You have to have a relationship with the parents and kids."

When Antypas finished with Hugo, he tapped Hugo's shoulder and demonstrated the art of flossing.

"Like this, son," Antypas said in Spanish. Hugo imitated the dentist and smiled.