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## **Catholic Bishop and County Superintendents announce partnership**

SAN BERNARDINO / RIVERSIDE – Bishop Alberto Rojas, San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools Ted Alejandre and Riverside County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Edwin Gomez discovered this year that they have several key areas of mutual concern, most notably the importance of early literacy to educational success.

The three leaders have committed to work together in providing a program to Catholic families to boost early literacy.

Bishop Rojas, who took leadership of the Diocese of San Bernardino in late 2020, met separately with Alejandre and Gomez this year to make acquaintances and discuss mutual priorities. What emerged was a shared desire to give families the tools they need to help their children get off to a good start in their educational journey. Both County Offices of Education offer the “Footsteps to Brilliance” early literacy program and the Diocese has agreed to help promote it across all its youth and educational ministries.

“We frequently hear from our Catholic families about their desire for resources at home to help their kids succeed in school,” Bishop Rojas said. “By collaborating with Dr. Gomez and Mr. Alejandre we can offer a great program that helps our little ones learn to read on time. What a blessing and a great new partnership in our communities.”

“We’re excited to partner with Bishop Alberto Rojas and Superintendent Ted Alejandre to promote reading across the Inland Empire and support literacy for our students and families,” commented Dr. Gomez. “As part of Riverside County Office of Education’s Literacy by Grade 5 Initiative, any child in Riverside County – including our private schools – has free access to Footsteps2Brilliance. We’re excited to work with the Diocese to ensure students in Riverside County Catholic schools can also take advantage of this powerful learning tool.”

Alejandre said the partnership with the Diocese and Riverside County Superintendent will strengthen an effort that his office began five years ago.

“Increasing early literacy opportunities for students across the Inland Empire is a primary goal of the San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools,” he said. “To achieve this objective, we have provided Footsteps2Brilliance to the students of San Bernardino County for free since 2017, and an incredible 6 million books have been read to date. Together, with Bishop Alberto Rojas and Dr.

Gomez, we are thrilled to expand access to this reading platform to even more families through our collaboration with the Diocese.”

To formalize their shared commitment each Superintendent has co-signed a Letter of Agreement with Bishop Rojas pledging to work together on issues of mutual concern. Other issues mentioned in the letters include mental health, college enrollment and high school graduation rates.

“We...share the ongoing belief that parents are critical co-partners in the education and formation of children,” the Letters of Agreement read. “So, we commit ourselves to serving families and providing resources for their success in education and beyond. “

The new partnerships got off to a great start this Fall when San Bernardino County Office of Education representatives gave a presentation on “Footsteps to Brilliance” to the Catholic Pre-School Directors of the Diocese. As a result, more than half a dozen Catholic schools have already begun to use the program either at school or provided it to parents as an at-home resource.

St. Hyacinth Pre-School in San Jacinto is utilizing Footsteps to Brilliance in the classroom setting. Students are invited to approach a smart board with images and touch the one that matches a word or letter that is being taught.

“It’s an early visual,” says Karla Cortez, Pre-School Director. “A lot of the students are really starting to see those words. And it’s a fun game for them. They really seem to enjoy it.”

The Diocese has partnered with the San Bernardino County Office of Education in the past, offering for several years a parenting class, “The 12 Powers of Family Business,” at parishes and the Diocesan Pastoral Center. This collaboration was done under the Diocesan Education Initiative (DEI), which included collaborative efforts with other educational and civic institutions in San Bernardino and Riverside counties, including Cal State, San Bernardino, the San Bernardino Community College District, the Consulate of Mexico and the Alliance for Education.

Bishop Rojas expressed his joy that the Riverside County Office of Education is now also part of the collaborative efforts and the renewal of the Diocesan Education Initiative. He said he would welcome participation from other Riverside County institutions, including the University of California, Riverside and Riverside City College.

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