



PROJECT ACCESS: Luis Parra, known as "Bboy Energetic," 24, of Fullerton performs break dancing for kids at a workshop. SANG H. PARK, FOR THE REGISTER

Considering bigger goals

An education conference for teens from lower income communities encourages them to think about college.

BY ERIC CARPENTER
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

ANAHEIM • Jose Dominguez has heard the message repeatedly: Stay in school, it's a ticket to success.

He took that to mean finishing high school. But Friday, he spent the day thinking about a bigger goal — getting a college degree.

Dominguez, 15, a high school sophomore from Anaheim, was among 115 students from low-income neighborhoods across Orange and Riverside counties who attended the inaugural Project Access Teen Conference.

"Nobody in my family has gone to college, so I wasn't sure it was for me," said Dominguez, whose parents emigrated from Mexico in the early 1980s. "But now, I think, 'maybe.'"

Project Access, a Newport Beach-based nonprofit organization dedicated to helping families gain access to education, health and social services, organized the conference with a \$25,000 grant from the Draper Family Foundation.

The group hosted the event at its 1,700 square-foot family resource center at the Hermosa Village Apartments, a complex next to Disneyland that has been the subject of building refurbishment and numerous community outreach programs in recent years.

Project Access has 22 centers inside

Project Access
22 sites in California
\$15,000 or less — family income of many clients the program works with
\$1.2 million — project average lifetime income of high-school graduate
\$2.1 million — projected average lifetime income of a college graduate
Information: 949-253-6200 or www.project-access.org

apartment complexes statewide. It focuses on "low-income" communities — defined as families that make an annual income of 60 percent or more below the region's median income. Teenagers come to the centers for access to computers, books and advice from trained staff members and peers.

On Friday, students age 12 to 20 were bussed in from six Southern California sites to hear about the economic and social benefits of a college education and tips on how to pay for it.

"Many kids don't come from families who went to college. They don't think they can afford it, so they don't even think it's possible," said Lane Macy, Project Access president. "We're hoping to begin to change that."

Organizers hoped to get teens thinking about big issues in a fun environment.

The day also included frank discussions on sexually transmitted diseases, drug use and obstacles to reaching college. It ended with a performance by a rapper that turned into a dance party.

But amid the fun, they heard from college advisers, scholarship officials and role models who reminded them that college is open to everybody.

"I hope they take away from this that there are people who care about them and want to help them reach their full potential," said Juan Gonzalez, 27, a policy adviser for Orange County Supervisor Chris Norby.

Gonzalez, one of the event's featured speakers, said he hoped the teens saw that he came from a similar background and is about to earn his bachelor's degree in political science from Cal Poly Pomona University.

Urbel Mejia, 20, who lives across the street from the Hermosa Village Apartments, came to find out about scholarships. He hopes to study philosophy and history at Cal State Fullerton.

"I like that they are coming out to us," he said. "I'm not really sure if some of the younger guys are paying close attention. But now that I'm older and focused on going to college, I hope they're thinking about it early."

CONTACT THE WRITER: 714-704-3769 or ecarpenter@ocregister.com