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English language tutoring program celebrates successful first year in Norwalk

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Peter Shaker, founder of the Academic Support Program to Inspire, Reinforce, and Empower, or ASPIRE, congratulates an English Language Learner student at Norwalk High School for completing his first year in the ... [more](#)

NORWALK — For the past school year, Alexander Perez has been meeting with four other students to learn English with a language specialist at Norwalk High School.

The group of mostly Spanish-speaking students met during their study hall two times a week, honing their pronunciation and vocabulary skills during a 90-minute period.

And on Tuesday, they celebrated a milestone inside the library where their tutoring sessions were held: completing their first year in the Academic Support Program to Inspire, Reinforce and Empower, or ASPIRE.

It is designed to help English Language Learner students pick up basic language skills at a faster pace and to make graduation and participation in post-secondary programs more likely for them.

Perez, 18, is a sophomore and moved to the U.S. from Guatemala in 2015.

"I just want to say thank you," Perez said to ASPIRE teachers and board members Tuesday. "I'm so happy to be learning English."

Perez was a part of this year's pilot program, created by the group English Learner Support Services of Fairfield County in collaboration with Norwalk Public Schools' ELL Department through a \$25,000 grant from the Fairfield County Community Foundation.

In the past five years, the district's ELL population has increased from 1,304 to 1,782 students – now representing 15 percent of the overall student body in the 2017-18 school year.

Helene Becker, ELL instructional specialist for Norwalk Public Schools, said the program aims to address this growing need and is part of the district's overall plan of meeting students where they are so they can move forward.

"We have students who are new to the language and some of them have gaps in their education. They haven't had opportunities in their home country to have a good education," Becker said, noting most students in the ASPIRE program come from Central America. "So we want to give them as much help as possible so they can be successful, graduate from high school and move on to either college or career."

Carola Osses, an ELL teacher and department head at Norwalk High, helped identify students in need of the program. She thanked the students for their hard work and the many hours they invested in the program, despite the struggles and hardships they faced.

"I can say that I know it has helped you," Osses said Tuesday, before certificates were handed out. "I have seen you in class after you reviewed things with the tutors. So I think that it was absolutely an excellent investment."

Peter Shaker, a former Peace Corps volunteer who founded the English Learner Support Services of Fairfield County, said he didn't realize the great need for a program like ASPIRE until he started tutoring ELL students in Stamford.

That's when he noticed a large population of students were falling behind because they didn't have the financial resources to hire private tutoring, and he realized the same applied to Norwalk ELL students. And so, he wanted to create a program that addressed this disparity – starting with the area he lives in.

"We want to help them communicate much better in English and gain confidence through the process," Shaker said. "And we couldn't have had a more successful, I think, experience this year considering this was our first year running this program. So this was an overall positive experience for everyone and we think we have a good foundation to continue the program in the future."

Moving forward, Shaker said the hope is to continue the program at Norwalk High and to eventually expand it to Brien McMahon High School if they're able to receive more funding.

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