

Education

Verde Elementary Book & Hoodie giveaway an example of school's positive evolution

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Dozens of giddy students at Verde Elementary streamed into the school's library to pick up their brand new hoodie and book as part of an annual holiday giveaway event.

The children not only received a nice boost to their education and future, but also met with some of the public servants who more than a decade ago helped launch a transformation of the school into a safe, clean and viable learning center. That was done through programs big and small, including community-driven events such as the Annual Verde Book & Hoodie Giveaway, which took place Friday morning for a 17th consecutive year.

The project spearheaded each year by Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia was initially launched as part of a series of steps taken by a North Richmond task force that was formed to improve the school and neighborhood. The task force comprised of city, county and federal officials who installed improvements at Verde from painting the school to identifying funds to renovate the campus.



The school today is a far cry from the one that was once monitored by sheriff's deputies, and which seemed to switch principals on an annual basis.

“It’s all about community participation,” said Theresa Talley Wilkerson, a retired city employee who attended Verde and was a member of the North Richmond task force. “We’ve had had so many different people participate — new sets of parents and teachers, community offices, the county. They keep coming back and help in this effort. You still see this going on.”

This year, West County residents and businesses banded together yet again to fund the Book & Hoodie Giveaway for more than 300 Verde students. Over \$7,000 was raised from more than 70 individual donors, with larger pledges from Chevron’s Richmond Refinery, Rotary Club of Marin Evening Foundation, the Irene S. Scully Family Foundation, Davis Chapel CME Church and Richmond resident Mark Howe.

The hoodies were bought from a local Richmond business, Leftside Printing, and the books were provided by West County READS, a local volunteer literacy advocacy organization, according to Gioia's office.

Wilkerson said she's happy to see the event ever-evolving. For the first time last year, the holiday giveaway that was once a Toy & Coat event became a Book & Hoodie giveaway. They are special hoodies imprinted with motivating phrases such as "think you can," "work hard," and "get smart." The idea to incorporate hoodies into the event, initially pitched by Verde Principal Eric Acosta-Verprauskus, was to unify students in a way that promotes education, according to Gioia.

"It really does show unity among students," Wilkerson agreed.

Gioia and school leaders also opted to feature books in place of toys to minimize landfill waste and provide students with more educational tools.

The one thing that hasn't changed about this event are some of the faces who return every year to support it. The very public officials who helped improve the school so many years ago were present Friday (some of them are pictured below, with John Gioia in the middle and Wilkerson on the right).

Even the person who dresses as Santa Claus for the event provides familiarity. Fred Jackson, the community advocate who has a North Richmond street named for him, used to play Santa every year before he passed away. On Friday, his brother Leo put on the Santa suit to greet the children and hand them book markers.

“There’s something special in us all sharing in the joy of giving,” Supervisor Gioia said. “The way West County residents support the children of North Richmond each holiday season is a testament to their strong and kind community commitment.”

