

by Kelly St. John Regier



## Striving for success

Valley High School sophomores (left to right) Alexis Medina, Nathan Garcia and Afrosdra Delgado prepare chicken egg tacos in their culinary arts class.

### High School Inc. creates a world of opportunities for Santa Ana students on the path toward fulfilling careers.

**C**esar Amezcua may be just 17 years old, but the young chef has already won a title that will help him stand out when he enters the job market: national champion.

As part of a three-person team representing Valley High School, in Santa Ana, Amezcua travelled to Washington, D.C., and cooked up a crepe with raisins, cinnamon, powdered sugar and fruit. His team won first place in the national Cooking Up Change contest, an honor that students from Valley High have won for two consecutive years.

As part of the experience, his dish was even served to members of Congress.

"I always like to cook with my mom at home. Once I got into this program, I started working my way up into the kitchen," says Amezcua, who aspires to become an executive chef.

Amezcua's culinary training came through a unique program called High School Inc., a collaborative effort between Santa Ana schools, the city's chamber of commerce and the High School Inc. Foundation.

High School Inc. students join one of six "academies" that train them in 21st-century workplace skills as they complete their high school coursework. The program's aim is to help students in low socioeconomic areas graduate in larger numbers and realize their career dreams. Its academies were chosen to cover six sectors of the economy that will need skilled workers in the coming decades.

Research suggests that career-preparation classes like those offered through High School Inc. are a good investment. According to the California Department of Education, about 95 percent of high school students enrolled in the state's Regional Occupational Programs (ROP) secure employment or pursue additional education within a year of their training, making it "the most cost-effective delivery system for career preparation in California."

About 55,000 high school students and adults take ROP classes annually in Orange County, according to the county's Department of Education. But many of those students have to travel away from their home campuses or attend evening

sessions for their ROP classes, while courses at High School Inc. are offered at the home campus during the regular school day, says Patrick Yramazaval-Correa, Valley High School's principal.

At High School Inc., students who are interested in becoming doctors or nurses are enrolled in the Healthcare Academy, where they receive CPR and first aid certification and learn how to take vital signs, draw blood, give injections and help run a medical office. The school also offers dental classes with state-of-the-art equipment, so students can earn a dental X-ray certificate from the State of California and graduate ready to work as a dental assistant.

Students in the Global Business Academy learn office skills through summer internships at local businesses and organizations, while students in the Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction Academy have captured top honors in Raytheon's Annual Robotics Competition for the past three years.

Students in the New Media Academy learn digital photography and video production with a studio and green



*Cesar Martinez performs experiments using AC/DC electrical systems at Valley High School, in Santa Ana. The school has partnered with the Santa Ana Chamber of Commerce and the High School Inc. Foundation to bring in professionals to instruct and mentor students.*

room, while students in the Automotive, Transportation and Logistics Academy learn car repair skills such as changing oil, wheel alignment and brake repair; this en-

ables graduates to find work as light mechanics. Amezcua, the award-winning future executive chef, is in the Culinary Arts and Hospitality Academy.

Across all the academies, students also polish the "soft skills" needed to succeed in the workplace, such as critical thinking, public speaking, team building, business plan development and business etiquette.

About 60 percent of Valley High School's 10th-, 11th- and 12th-grade students participate in one of High School Inc.'s academies, says Yrarrazaval-Correa. And it's making a big difference in the educational prospects of students who come from one of Orange County's most impoverished communities, where, he says, 100 percent of the students qualify for the federal free- or reduced-lunch program.

"Across the board, the Academy students are doing better than our non-Academy students," Yrarrazaval-Correa says. "Their graduation rates, GPAs, attendance and high school exit exam passing rates are higher. They feel like they're not lost with a million other kids here."

"The academies work as kind of a family to wrap their arms around the kids, especially ones who are struggling," he

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continues. "They need more support than your average middle-class student."

A unique aspect of the program is the cooperation of local businesses that provide funds and equipment, host field trips, offer internships and encourage employees to serve as mentors. More than 200 businesses partner in some capacity with High School Inc., says David Elliot, president of the Santa Ana Chamber of Commerce.

"If you talk to most business leaders about what their concerns are, right at the top of the list is an educated workforce," Elliot says. "In education, we have to prepare students for the workplace with practical skills."

Donnie Crevier, founder of Crevier BMW and the president of the High School Inc. Foundation, says the organization has the potential to become a national model that helps not just students, but the country's economic future.

"It's incredibly heartwarming to see young people who are so excited with the prospects for better futures," Crevier says. "A lot of young people aren't getting the encouragement to take education

seriously. This is helping to get these kids to think more long term."

Last year, High School Inc.'s Automotive, Transportation and Logistics Academy became the first high school in Orange County to receive certification by the National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation. When its students graduate, they will have the chance to earn entry-level certification through the National Institute of Automotive Service Excellence and a Light Maintenance Repair Certification.

Graduates have landed jobs at local dealerships and auto repair shops, while others have pursued further study through programs at Santa Ana College or the Universal Technical Institute, says automotive instructor Danny Zook.

"I try to teach them what I think they need to know in the industry," says Zook, who has worked for 22 years in automotive repair. That includes, he says, the business and production side of transportation, in addition to repairs. Some of the school's graduates have landed jobs that pay \$50,000 to \$60,000 annually by their mid 20s.

"They're out there making good money," Zook says.

That's the goal of Cristian Campos, a 19-year-old senior who hopes to continue his training at UTI after graduating. His favorite skill learned so far is doing alignments, he says.

"I want to be an automotive technician," Campos says, adding that he will encourage his younger sister to try Valley High's Healthcare Academy when she reaches high school.

"It's phenomenal," Crevier says. "There's a huge shortage of auto tech workers. It was hard for us to find qualified people. This is a great filler for a lot of automotive centers in the area."

For Daniel Reyes, a senior in the Culinary Arts and Hospitality Academy, High School Inc. is opening up possibilities that once seemed unimaginable. For now, Reyes is working with other culinary students to improve the school's cafeteria food. "It has been wonderful," says Reyes, who hopes to one day own his own restaurant. "I never knew I would get such a great opportunity here." 