

SPEECH FOR IMMOKALEE FAIR HOUSING ALLIANCE WALL SIGNING

Good morning, everyone! It is such a pleasure to be here on this momentous day, as the dream of affordable housing for low-income residents of Immokalee is a step closer to reality. I remember when I was here for the groundbreaking. I could tell then that this project would bring about a change in Immokalee. We are getting people's attention! And not for despair, but for hope and promise. I see it on the faces of the children we serve at RCMA. Our goal is to make the dreams of children in migrant farm working and low-income families come alive. We consider the great work of the Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance a partnership to the work we are doing. We make sure that anything that impacts a child's learning is taken care of. From early childhood education to health care assistance to supplying Wi-Fi hotspots and tablets for homework, we take a comprehensive approach that cares for the entire child. But it all starts with a place to live. If a child's housing is substandard, their chances at success in their education, and their future, are truly challenged. And with a project like this that seeks to eliminate substandard and overcrowded rental housing here in Immokalee, it provides a way to a better life for parents and their children. In short, affordable housing is needed to achieve good educational outcomes, and better educational outcomes are needed for improving the life trajectories of children.

According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Policy Development and Research, poor quality housing is a strong predictor of emotional and behavioral problems in children. In addition, the stress that parents experience due to living in poor conditions can translate to problems in their kids as well. Children whose families are forced to live in low-quality housing often struggle. And when they grow up in substandard or overcrowded housing, they tend to have lower math and reading scores, they complete fewer years of education, more commonly they fall behind in school, and the result is a child that is less likely to graduate from high school than their peers.

But growing up in a decent, affordable home can have a powerful effect on children. Studies draw a straight line between the quality and affordability of housing and a child's ability to thrive. And that is a key word: thrive! When housing quality and affordability are improved, test scores improve, students stay in school longer, and absenteeism decreases. Surveys of families with safe, stable and affordable housing also show fewer health problems, less psychological stress and improved school performance. Low-income children in affordable housing score better on cognitive development tests than those in unaffordable and substandard housing. Researchers suggest that is partly because parents with affordable housing can invest more in activities and materials that support their children's development. This is important for us at RCMA because a supportive and stable home environment can complement the efforts of our teachers, leading to improved student achievement.

We are doing what we can at RCMA, but we are all in this together. Even when optimized with high expectations, strong curriculum, and expert instruction,

schools are not powerful enough by themselves to compensate for the disadvantages associated with growing up in substandard housing. The old saying goes, “our children are our future.” If that is the case, providing a good education and a safe environment in which to grow can and will lead to successes for children and the community in which they live. Volunteer, donate, mentor! We all need to work together to provide safe and affordable housing, a strong education, and a supportive community. Providing a safe place for kids to grow up and learn gives them a chance to truly experience the American dream. This way, the community of Immokalee doesn’t just survive, but it THRIVES! Thank you so much for inviting me to be part of this today. On behalf of RCMA, continued success to the Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance.