

# Hummel Report: Shaping Young Minds Through Soccer



Antone Botelho Photography

On a Friday afternoon at 4 o'clock - when most kids would want to be anywhere but school - dozens of boys and girls are in classrooms at Calcutt Middle School in Central Falls.

Not because they have to be... because they want to be.

And that's because after 90 minutes of homework or tutoring they hit the gym with top-notch soccer coaches and former professional players to work on their skills and to play a game they love.

Project Goal was founded a decade ago with just 20 kids at a Providence middle school. Now it's grown to 80 student-athletes weekly with dozens on a waiting list. The middle and high school students come primarily from Providence, Pawtucket and Central Falls.

"These kids think they're in a soccer program," says Peter Whealton, a co-founder of Project Goal.

"They're not. They're in a personal responsibility program, I like to call it."

They gather Tuesdays and Fridays at 3:30pm sharp. If the kids don't get to their classroom on time it delays their getting down to the gym or field by the number of minutes they are late. "With Project Goal you can't belong to a gang; we make the kids sign a contract, they have to bring their work," Whealton said. "We're your gang. And to stay in the program you've got to keep your nose clean, you've got to do your work."

Javier Centeno, another co-founder, knows first-hand how crucial keeping up the academics can be. His family moved to Central Falls from Columbia when he was 11.

"Everything I knew was soccer, soccer, soccer," Centeno said. "I was not putting too much effort into my school and it became very detrimental. Why? Because, you know, I moved on to the high school, Central Falls High School, I graduated from there in 1985 and I made All-State as a soccer player. Providence College and URI they were willing to give me a scholarship, but when they saw my grades they were not good, so I couldn't go to a Division 1 school."

He believes if Project Goal existed back then, things would have been a lot different.

Over the past decade, 30 Project Goal students have gone on to private schools, almost all with scholarships. A total of 500 boys and girls have gone through the program over the past decade. The budget is about \$100,000 a year, all from donations and grants. Project Goal hires seven teachers and three coaches, many bilingual. The kids pay nothing.

Darius Shirzadi, another co-founder who played with Ceneno on the Rhode Island Stingrays soccer team, has two boys of his own in the program. "I was thinking about how awful it would be for my own

kids not to be able to participate in something because we just didn't have the money or we couldn't get there... if it was something they really wanted to pursue, especially if it could create opportunities for them down the line, whether it be through sports or academics."

Anna Cano Morales, the head of the Central Falls Board of Trustees, grew up in the city and has a 6th-grade son in the program. It's his second year with Project Goal. "I have seen a kid who is an introvert by nature, his personality is not like his mother's, I'm very much an extrovert. He's much more guarded, much more reserved, shy. His confidence has blossomed."

Shirzadi says he has been pleasantly surprised by how effective the program has been. "The impact that we've been able to make, particularly in this community where you see some of the data and percentages of kids who graduate from high school and don't - that pretty much everybody that comes through the program and completes it through high school - they graduate."

Whealton says it's an amazing sight to see.

"You can't spend any time with these kids and not want to spend more time with them. You can walk into a Project Goal classroom and see on a Friday afternoon, after school, the kids have been in school all day long. They've got their heads down they're doing their work, you've got a mentor from college sitting next to them in many cases, working on their school work so they can go play soccer later."

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