

## **TO TOUCH THEIR HARPS OF GOLD**

*By David A. Watson, Pearland, TX*

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“It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old,  
from angels bending near the earth, to touch their harps of gold.”

*“It Came Upon the Midnight Clear”, words by E.H. Sears*  
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I stepped off the big yellow bus that Friday morning not knowing quite what to expect from the Keeble Early Childhood/Pre-Kindergarten Center in the Aldine Independent School District. I was there with a group from the Texas Association of School Boards to observe and learn how this economically disadvantaged, largely Hispanic district has steered itself onto a path toward academic excellence, something that as recently as a few years ago many said they could not do. We were greeted warmly and funneled toward a bright and welcoming space filled with rows of small chairs, where we grabbed the obligatory coffee and cookies and settled ourselves for some sort of program. Curiously, in the front of the room sat several harps; some large, some small, and one very elegantly adorned with copious gold filigree. I’m not sure what I thought I might encounter, but I knew it wasn’t this. If Aldine’s approach to bilingual early childhood education included classical musicianship, then the day looked intriguing indeed. More about this momentarily. Let me spend the next few paragraphs exploring some factors that impact educational success.

It has long been recognized that education begins in the home. A new report from the National Center for Educational Statistics indicates that poverty, lack of one or both parents, and use of a primary language in the home other than English are all important risk factors for pre-school aged children. In such environments they are less likely to be

read to, a deficiency strongly correlated with decreased academic achievement. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress demonstrate that both parental involvement and academic achievement decline as the poverty rate increases. Parent involvement at all grade levels is important, yet the data show that it drops precipitously as children grow older. Among sixth through eighth graders, more than a quarter now care for themselves before or after school; the way in which this time is spent can have a major impact on learning. By ninth grade, some 17 % of parents have no involvement at all with the schools, nearly 50 % no longer attend parent-teacher conferences, and only about one-quarter continue to volunteer in schools.

Is there, then, a single best answer for how to improve achievement? Perhaps not. The reality for many low income families is that work is the reason they are not more involved with their children. Creative solutions can make a difference, as they do in the Aldine schools. Courses for parents, such as English as a second language and basic computer skills, are offered to parents in the evenings and on Saturdays in exchange for volunteer hours in the schools. True empowerment, as I saw first-hand, means helping people to help themselves. It means that young Hispanic parents can learn English at the same time as their children do, increasing opportunity for two generations at once. Dr. Rodriguez, principal of Keeble, told us that parental involvement is vital to the success they enjoy. She leverages every possibility for learning against whatever resources she can corral; one great example is a music teacher who also happens to be a classically trained harpist.

As I finished my goodies, in trouped a line of very young and very proper little ladies, all dressed alike, and all with their hair in curls and ribbons. One tiny gentleman

was included, grinning from ear to ear (alas with one tooth missing), and outfitted in coat and tie to match the otherwise all-female entourage. They gracefully seated themselves at the harps, with some at the half-sized versions. Their teacher readied herself to play the beautiful gilded instrument, and slowly counted for them: one...two...three. The next few minutes were filled with quite possibly the sweetest sound I've ever heard. Teacher and pupils were meticulously coaxing from the harps the first Christmas songs any of us had heard that season, "Silent Night", and "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." It was for me the true meaning of Christmas. I was happy in the knowledge that a small knot of children representing a demographic we as a society largely ignore and often have already given up on by age four or five could be (and very obviously had been) taught to play beautiful music. Tears of joy snuck into the corners of our eyes; the moment was sublime, timeless, and unforgettable. My wish this holiday season is that you too will find your own "sweetest sound", perhaps made by Cub Scouts out caroling on a foggy evening, or maybe by a seventh grade band playing proudly, if somewhat ponderously, for beaming family members. Merry Christmas to all!