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## Local author gets books into Chicago public schools

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July 18, 2009

By **ANDRE SALLES** [asalles@scn1.com](mailto:asalles@scn1.com)

When Robert Renteria heard that school kids in Chicago were stealing copies of his book, he knew he was on the right track.

"To get a kid to want to read a book, let alone steal it?" he said, laughing. "We're on to something here."

» Click to enlarge image



Barrio

It's been 17 months since Renteria published "From the Barrio to the Boardroom," his first-person account of growing up poor in East Los Angeles and working his way to success.

Renteria, 48, of North Aurora, owns WashPro USA, a company that sells new laundry equipment, and is president of Midwest Laundries, which distributes used laundry equipment.

But it won't be long, he said, before he transitions out of those companies and devotes himself full time to spreading his book's message. He's found some innovative ways to do that, including developing a curriculum to teach the book in classrooms.

So far, that's been a success -- "From the Barrio" is now used as a teaching

tool in Chicago public schools, and some teachers are using it at East Aurora High School.

"I'm trying to teach kids that the secrets to success are hard work, dedication and education," Renteria said. "There are no shortcuts."

That's an important message, he said, in a culture where "making it" means becoming a superstar, not setting your own goals and enriching your own community. Renteria hopes his story can serve as an inspiration, though even he is surprised at the response to his book -- there are now about 7,000 copies in circulation, he said.

"From the Barrio" details Renteria's time in the gangs of Los Angeles and his efforts to escape that life. He nearly backed away from writing it a few times, he said, because of the shame he feels over things he did and said. But he stuck to it, and he said he has seen kids relate to the stories in the book and come away from it inspired.

To help get his story out to more people, he's started the From the Barrio Foundation, and through that he's worked with schools, youth prisons and other organizations. He developed the curriculum with the help of teachers in Chicago's public schools, and in May those teachers started using it in their own classrooms.

The "From the Barrio" curriculum, which Renteria described as a "road map," is available for free at his Web site, and he's been working to get the book into as many hands as possible. Last year, he donated 3,000 copies of "From the Barrio" to schools and social service agencies, including 1,000 to the East Aurora School District.

According to spokesman Clayton Muhammad, the district handed out free copies of Renteria's book to every graduating senior last year. Since then, eight East High teachers have started using the book in their classrooms, and Muhammad said the district would be making

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Since then, eight East High teachers have started using the book in their classrooms, and Muhammad said the district would be making more efforts to get students into Renteria's message.

"The most potent thing is he's accessible," Muhammad said. "Students have numerous role models, but how many can they actually talk to? The fact that he is here and he is accessible is priceless."

Renteria hopes to keep expanding, getting his book out where it can do the most good. He plans to release a Spanish-language version in August, and he continues to tour and speak about his experiences. He said if you had told him two years ago that spreading the message of "From the Barrio" would soon be his life, he would have bet against you.

But now, he said, his life has completely changed, and he plans to devote the rest of it to helping as many as he can.

"I get to see the impact of (this story) in real time," he said. "It's so humbling. This book works."

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