

## Looking forward

Preschool says 'bye' to grads

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**EYE ON THE DIPLOMA:** Using her diploma, 4-year-old Joanna Ortiz of South El Monte looks for her family during her preschool graduation at Para Los Niños Preschool in South El Monte on June 13.

(Photos by Sarah Reingewirtz / Staff)



**NO SMALL FEAT:** From left, Jose Figueroa, Enrique Morales, and Geovanni Arenas line up with their Para Los Niños class before their preschool graduation at the South El Monte school on June 13.

Five-year-old Cassandra Huerta may still have a long road to college, but she and 37 other Para Los Niños Preschool graduates already have a taste of what it feels like to be a Trojan or a Bruin.

Classrooms at the El Monte preschool are dubbed USC, UCLA and Cal State Los Angeles to get students thinking about college at an early age.

On June 13, proud parents cheered and cried as they watched their children, donned in bright blue caps and gowns, file excitedly down the aisle.

"This is so important because she's been in school since she was 18 months," said Angelica Velasco, Cassandra's mother. "All kids should have the chance to do preschool."



Assemblymember Mike Eng talks to the graduates.

With her cap grasped tightly in hand, Cassandra lined up with her fellow graduates before the ceremony. "My favorite part of school is playing and learning," she said. "I have a lot of friends here."

fairs for Para Los Niños.

Assemblymember Mike Eng and South El Monte Mayor Blanca Figueroa were both in attendance for the preschoolers' graduation.

"Having these classes named UCLA or USC, these children's parents can say `yes, they will graduate from one of these great colleges,'" said Figueroa. "We want to start to implant in our children, `I have a bright future.'"

Eng agreed with Figueroa, adding that the opportunities provided by Para Los Niños are especially needed in South El Monte.

"We have a very high rate of working families in this city and a lot of poor people," he said. "Preschool is very important. Students learn early on about the importance of education."

The ceremony was sponsored by Preschool California, a nonprofit advocacy organization striving to increase access to high-quality preschool for all children.

"We're hoping they see this graduation as a step for another graduation, a high school graduation and then a college graduation," said Preschool California representative Yvette Martinez. "We hope they see this as the first step to lifelong learning."