

EDUCATION IS POWER

Rocio del Castillo's journey as an educator started generations before her in Peru.

By MELISSA RUBALCABA RISKE | Photo by JANET KAY, NANCY MERKLING PRODUCTIONS

Like most immigrants to America, Rocio del Castillo faced challenges, from mastering the English language to understanding a new culture. She knew she'd have to work hard to overcome these challenges.

And she knew the key that would open the doors to success lie with education.

"Education is power," del Castillo said. "Latinos understand education is the tool to having a better life."

It's a philosophy ingrained from an early age. Her mother and grandmother were teachers in Peru, and her father spent time as a college professor in addition to his successful career as a lawyer. She already had earned a degree in clinical psychology and established a successful career, when she decided to follow her heart and move from Lima, Peru to the United States to be with now-husband, Joel. Next year will mark their 20th wedding anniversary.

They settled in the northwest suburbs to raise their two children, Nicholas and Isabella. When her children were still in diapers, del Castillo decided to return to school to complete two additional master's degrees. In 2017, she completed her doctoral degree. She has continued to advance her career, beginning as a teacher working in dual-language classes, to now overseeing large staffs and programs.

Last year, she was named Assistant Superintendent of Special Services for Huntley Community School District 158, where she

oversees special education, bilingual education and educational equity. Last year, she spearheaded the district's Equity Action Coalition, working with fellow educators, staff, parents and board members to build a multiyear plan and goals.

"I have to be an advocate for people who do not have a voice," del Castillo said. "Education is power."

Dan Armstrong, Huntley 158 Director of Communications, said del Castillo's work in advocating for educational equity is focused on ensuring that every student, regardless of background, is welcome, respected and provided with the resources needed to succeed in school.

She is a role model to her fellow educators as well as her students and their parents, Armstrong said.

"She fulfills a vital representational role, as an example of an expert leader in a field where immigrants and people of color are historically underrepresented," Armstrong said. "She also serves as a role model for her fellow staff members as someone who is a tireless advocate for equity, an energetic educational leader, and an administrator who fully lives out the district's motto of 'All Students Always.' Her willingness to take the reins of challenging projects, work extra hours and tackle issues head-on, inspires her colleagues to achieve the best for all students."

While her professional role is demanding, del Castillo makes it a priority to serve others, through her role on professional organizations, such as the



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National Association of Bilingual Education. She is also involved with the League of United Latin American Citizens. In 2019, she graduated from the Leadership of Greater McHenry County.

And, she even continues her role as a volunteer firefighter for Lima. As a young adult, she decided to enter a year-long training program, and every year when she returns to visit family and friends, she continues to make time to serve a few shifts in the firehouse.

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