

Beyond the BORDER

What a mill town in the Deep South might show the rest of the nation about integrating the newest wave of immigrants.

Story and photos by Christopher D. Lancette

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When the schools in his hometown faced a sudden influx of Spanish-speaking children, Erwin Mitchell came up with a creative solution.

ERWIN MITCHELL sits down in a pint-sized chair at the Roan Street School, an elementary school in the small north Georgia city of Dalton. Before the white-haired former congressman can say much more than hello, he is ambushed by twenty or so first-graders, most of whom are Hispanic.

When Mitchell “accidentally” mispronounces words as he reads aloud, the children giggle and show off their English by correcting him. “Oh yes, thank you,” he says, making them laugh even more when he pushes up the glasses they



Immigrant children in Dalton, Georgia are getting a better education thanks to an unusual partnership with a Mexican University.

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had watched slide to the tip of his nose.

This happy scene contrasts sharply with the situation Mitchell encountered in 1996 when he first visited Roan Street, where his daughter worked as a teacher's aide. Nearly everyone at the school was stressed and frustrated as the school grappled with a breathtaking change in demographics. Students couldn't learn and teachers couldn't teach as a huge surge in Spanish-speaking children took the school system by surprise. In twelve years, Hispanic enrollment in Dalton and neighboring Whitfield County schools has skyrocketed from less than 1 percent to 42 percent. Today, more than three-quarters of the students at some area schools are Hispanic.

These children are the sons and daughters of Mexicans and Central Americans drawn by abundant jobs in Dalton's carpet mills and factories. Without the Hispanic workers, this city of 25,000 would fall flat on its face. Some 80 percent of the carpet manufactured in the United States is made in and around Dalton, and the surrounding counties can only fill 50,000 of the 60,000 jobs needed on a daily basis.

Dalton is among scores of cities in the South and Midwest experiencing a new wave of Hispanic immigrants drawn to plentiful manufacturing jobs in a booming economy. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that Hispanics will become the nation's largest minority by 2005, accounting for more than 13 percent of the population. "Many areas throughout the U.S. are facing or are going to face what we have in Dalton," says Mitchell, a lawyer and revered civic leader, who, at seventy-five, bops around town with the energy of a man half his age. "They're going to have to figure out how to

work with these new Americans so that they make it through educational, cultural, and social changes."

And that is exactly what Mitchell and a handful of colleagues in Dalton are trying to do. When Mitchell looked around his daughter's classroom, he recognized the city's future, and he grew determined to help the children succeed. Using persistence, persuasion, and his legendary charm, he has pulled together an unusual collaboration to educate all of Dalton's children—and perhaps create a model bilingual community of the future.

The first step was hiring bilingual teachers. With none to be found in Dalton, Mitchell decided to look for them in Mexico, where most of the children had roots. His search led to the creation of the Georgia Project, an innovative partnership between Dalton and a Mexican university that provides the city with bilingual teachers, local educators with language and cultural training, and Mexican teachers with experience in American classrooms. Dalton hires Mexican university graduates as teachers to help immigrant children keep up with their studies and retain their culture as they adapt to a new environment and learn a new language. The university hosts a summer institute where Dalton teachers receive intensive Spanish language training and spend two weeks immersed in Mexican culture and education. In addition, the Georgia Project has established a dual-language curriculum for Dalton's eight schools and helped form the Latin America Community Alliance, an organization designed to promote leadership in Dalton's Hispanic community.

As cities and towns around the nation grap-

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ple with the complexities of bilingual education and the larger issues of integration, they might well look to Dalton for ideas and inspiration. "The Georgia Project is a unique example of the impromptu creation of policy to guide schools," says Ted Hamann, a research and development specialist at Brown University, who wrote his dissertation on the Georgia Project while at the University of Pennsylvania. "In this case, it is making it better for Mexican students and for Americans. The Dalton schools were forced to deal with a crisis [and] the school system found ways to educate the newcomers, but not at the expense of the kids who were already there. This kind of bilingual education could be a model for other parts of the country."

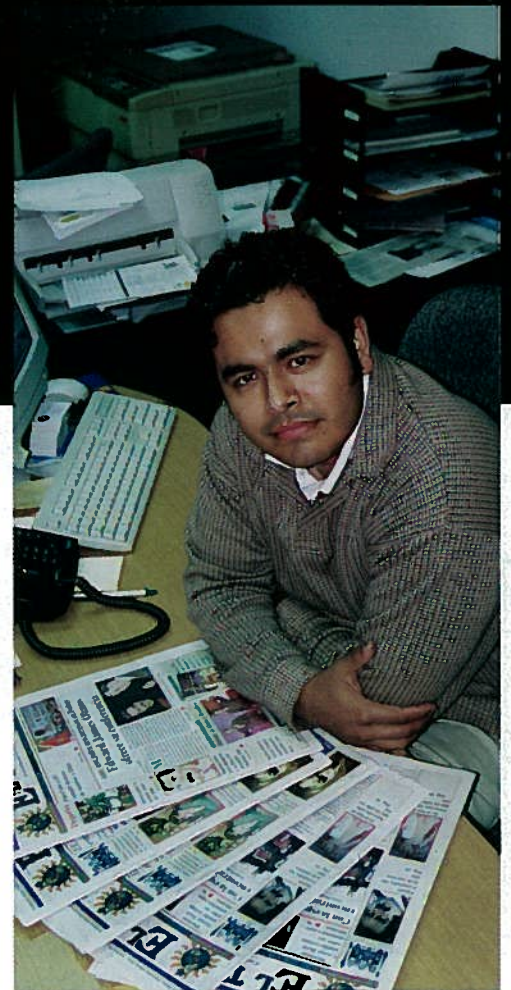
Altruistic as it may sound, the Georgia Project stems from a practical interest: saving the town. "This is not a noble undertaking," Mitchell says. "We're responding to a need by giving children with limited English ability an excellent education. This ensures the quality of our community for the future. I can't think of anything worse than turning our backs on the children of families our industry thrives on. Not educating their children would be a recipe for disaster."

BUSINESS, CIVIC, AND EDUCATION leaders quickly got behind Mitchell in 1996 when he suggested resolving the conflicts facing local schools. They had their work cut out for them. The Spanish-speaking students weren't learning because they couldn't understand their

teachers. Meanwhile, the rest of the students grew bored and sometimes disruptive as teachers struggled to bridge the language barrier. "We were going to find out what it took to teach in that kind of environment," says Roan Street principal Frankie R. Beard.

Among those Mitchell turned to for help in solving the school's crisis was friend and Dalton carpet executive Robert Shaw. As luck would have it, Shaw had Mexican business contacts who in turn connected Mitchell with the University of Monterrey in northern Mexico. Mitchell and school officials met with University faculty, who in turn traveled to Dalton. Both sides envisioned a collaboration rich with opportunities. The Dalton group saw a source of bilingual teachers who could give a great deal to the immigrant children. Faculty from the University of Monterrey saw jobs for their education graduates, who often faced dim prospects in Mexico. By the end of all the talks, e-mails, and faxes, the new program was outlined. It took its name from Monterrey officials who referred to it internally as the Georgia Project. In 1997, the two groups signed a contract called The Monterrey Accord.

That fall, fifteen graduates from Monterrey, hired on temporary work visas, began teaching in Dalton schools. Soon, the frustration and stress Mitchell had witnessed at Roan Street and other schools began to dissolve. The Mexican teachers freed the local instructors from having to struggle to explain concepts to Spanish-speaking children. Immi-



Homero Luna, editor of a Spanish-language newspaper in Dalton, says most of the Hispanic community supports the Georgia Project.

grant children, meanwhile, kept up with their peers because they could learn key concepts in their native language and make the transition to English. At the same time, the school added Spanish instruction for local students.

"One of the biggest changes is that all the children can actually be understood and listened to," says Paige Robertson, a teacher at Dalton Junior High. "A teacher can only get so far with hand motions. The teachers from Monterrey not only serve as translators but bring us large doses of competence, creativity, and compassion in meeting the needs of all our students," she adds. "Their presence also aids in facilitating the school system's quest for unity,

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tolerance, and understanding.”

Robertson's Mexican colleagues, who rotate through the classrooms in all Dalton schools, also see positive effects of their work. “I think the Georgia Project has made the Mexican children feel more secure,” says Dalia Martinez, a Monterrey teacher at Roan Street who has worked with the project from the beginning. “If they ask a question in English and it's not correct, they can use Spanish...and they feel confident in understanding the answer. It also helps because we [the Mexican teachers] can talk to the parents in their language about what's going on.”

That communication makes a difference with children and parents. At Los Reyes Mexican Restaurant, a waitress's eyes light up when she talks about the local school system. She has two kids in middle grades. “I love the schools,” she says in Spanish. “I came here eight months ago to visit, but my children were learning English so fast, I decided to stay here.”

Ultimately, Georgia Project collaborators aim to have all Dalton students able to speak English and Spanish by the time they graduate. Though it's still too early to know whether they'll succeed, they see signs of progress. “Go into our schools now, and you'll find kids who have been with us a couple of years speaking English with less of an accent than I do,” says Dalton Schools Superintendent Billy Bice with a regal drawl. He points to other measures of success—Scholastic Aptitude Test scores above the national average, and an array of honors won by Dalton schools and educators.

FOR ALL THE OPTIMISM around town, the Georgia Project is not without its share of hurdles—mainly prejudice and funding. Mitchell and others knew there would be opposition to helping Hispanic workers and their children, many of whom are not legal U.S. citizens. “In the beginning, there was a sizable group of people that didn't want money used for a purpose like this,” he says.

Still, Mitchell and others were surprised at how quickly the prejudice faded. “We still get some letters, but I've been impressed by the way Dalton has responded to the Georgia Project,” says

Gary Tanner, managing editor of *The Daily Citizen*. “The citizens wanted to do something to improve the schools and help students who don't speak English—and they did it.”

Meanwhile, some members of the Hispanic community say that the children should in fact be thrown into English to sink or swim, just as they did before bilingual education was available, according to Homero Luna, editor and publisher of *El Tiempo*, a Spanish-language paper in Dalton. “Latinos coming from places like California and Texas agree that it's important to learn English quickly,” says Luna, twenty-six, who arrived in Dalton penniless six years ago and worked his way up and out of a chicken factory. “They don't all agree that education should involve using Spanish in the classroom.” By and large, however, Luna says the Hispanic community supports the Georgia project.

Many local leaders say overcoming prejudice had little to do with high-minded speeches and a lot to do with the need for labor. “There's no getting around the idea that this is an economic issue,” says local chamber of commerce president and CEO George Woodward, who notes that 12,000 new jobs were created in the area from 1986 to 1993. “When you look at the fact that our unemployment rate here is 1.9 percent, it makes it difficult for people to say immigrants are taking jobs away from local people.”

The biggest problem Mitchell and company now face is funding. When Dalton signed the agreement with the university, it didn't have a budget for the Georgia Project. Searching hard, the school system won a \$500,000 grant from the federal government's Title VII System-wide Bilingual Education Program. The City of Dalton committed \$250,000 per year for three years, and private donations from carpet mill executives kicked in about \$200,000 more. All the money is pooled and essentially used to pay for salaries and expenses of Mexican teachers, the summer institute, transportation, and other costs.

Although the original funds are now running out, Mitchell remains undaunted. He and his colleagues are not only pursuing more federal funding to help keep the project going, they're also working with Georgia senators on trying to set up a new federal grant so

other communities can replicate the Georgia Project. At home, project collaborators continue to seek funding from sources including local manufacturers, who have the most to gain from a well-educated work force. The Dalton school system is also in the slow process of developing a program to “grow their own” biliterate teachers—finding promising youth and giving them scholarships in exchange for agreeing to work in Dalton when they graduate.

ERWIN MITCHELL is confident that community leaders will find a way to keep the Georgia Project going. He also has a track record as a fierce optimist who turns out to be right. In 1961, for instance, Mitchell didn't run for re-election to Congress so he could become a Georgia State Senator and fight against Ernest Vandiver—the governor who declared no black child would be served by the public school system. Vandiver lost when the tide turned on him.

“I never thought about it before, but there is an analogy there,” Mitchell says. “Back then, a lot of people in Georgia wanted to close the schools rather than open them to blacks. But the issue turned around.... Leadership came from outside the political world—from business and industry leaders, just like we're seeing now with the Georgia Project.”

If history unfolds Mitchell's way again, Dalton will produce generations of bilingual high school graduates ready to succeed in the local work force and in college. Until that's happening, though, he will have to spend more time championing the schools whose children he so loves to visit.

“We haven't solved anything yet,” he says. “We've just helped make Dalton better. The Georgia Project has had a dramatic influence on improving our teachers' ability to teach and our students' ability to learn. It has also helped to keep down the anti-immigrant sentiment that would come if Latino children were widely perceived to be a drain on the school system. They're not. They're bright children, and they will be our next judges, bankers, CPAs, architects, and educators in the years to come.” ▲

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