The students emerge from their classrooms to upbeat music and cheers from SDCOE employees staffing what may be the most unique educational program in the country.

The location is the San Diego Convention Center, a million-square-foot building that normally hosts events like the world-famous Comic-Con. Since March 2021, it’s been home to about 1,450 unaccompanied children between the ages of 5 and 17 who have traveled to the United States from countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Welcome to Futuro Brillante, or Bright Future, SDCOE’s newest educational program.

Increased numbers of incoming migrants along the southwestern border have strained federal capacity and capabilities. As a result, the federal government has established emergency influx centers like the one at the convention center to house the children until they can be placed with a sponsor by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. The objective is to provide safety and security for the youth, while meeting their basic needs and addressing their health and well-being.

Knowing that San Diego County would be home to a center for unaccompanied children, state and local leaders contacted San Diego County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Paul Gothold to request that SDCOE provide an educational program for the youth. While there are influx centers in other cities and states, the San Diego location was the first to offer a formal educational program.

“SDCOE is uniquely positioned to do this work,” said Gothold. “We operate the regional migrant education program and have experience working with unaccompanied immigrant youth through our Juvenile Court and Community Schools.”

A team of employees from across SDCOE turned their focus to ensuring that the students would have access to a quality education while they are in our region. This education was guaranteed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1982 Plyler vs. Doe ruling, which forbids states from denying students a free public education because of their immigration status.

SDCOE initially put out a countywide call for volunteers, but soon learned that student instruction would occur during traditional work hours and Futuro Brillante could be staffed exclusively by SDCOE employees and contracted substitutes.

Human Resource Services identified employees who were able to work at the convention center and moved quickly to process additional substitute teachers. As a result, employees from programs as disparate as Outdoor Education, Education Technology, and Early Education have contributed their skills and their passion for helping students.

Employees from SDCOE’s
Innovation, Juvenile Court and Community Schools, Learning and Leadership Services, and Student Services and Programs teams developed curricula in English and Spanish that support students’ English language development, geographical awareness, and social and emotional health. Communications assisted with proofing Spanish-language instructional materials translated by the Multilingual Education and Global Achievement team.

The Integrated Technology Services division also contributed to the effort, with Media and Creative Services printing packets of instructional materials for daily and weekly delivery to the convention center. The Technology Architecture Services team sourced devices initially for the staff and later for students, and provides on-site tech support.

Internal Business has been instrumental in the contracting process as well as helping process purchases to support the program.

“One Monday morning in late March, we were charged with the task of putting the educational program together and were challenged to have the program up and running as soon as possible,” said Dr. Gloria Ciriza, assistant superintendent, Student Services and Programs. “That very same day, a small but mighty team of SDCOE staff put their heads together about how to go about tackling this important task. Within a week, more than 20 dedicated SDCOE staff members were creating, designing, and planning an instructional program that would be up and running in days.”

“In all my years as an educator, I have never seen such dedication and compassion to face the challenge at hand as I did with the SDCOE team. Everyone showed up, ready to do their part in support of this important work. I have watched individuals from all levels of the organization roll up their sleeves and work seamlessly with leaders from SBCS [formerly known as South Bay Community Services], the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and other local organizations to put a child centered, supportive program in place.”

Because of the strong collaborative spirit, the team did not miss a beat when the population housed at the convention center shifted from teenage girls to coed sibling pairs, with children as young as 5 staying at the site.

For Beto Carrillo, who is serving as the lead administrator at the convention center, the program is personal.

“Helping our students at Futuro Brillante means a lot to me because my father had a similar experience when he first came to our country. To be a part of an organization like SDCOE that embodies the concept of ‘all means all’ means the world to me. Our students are on their way to a bright future that will open up possibilities in their new home.”