

# Desire for pastor's prayers unites rival high schools

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WESLACO—In a town of 50,000 with two high schools, rivalries run deep. But one thing united Weslaco High School and Weslaco East High School—student athletes' desire for Joe Aguilar to pray with them.



Joe Aguilar, pastor of First Baptist Church Weslaco en Español, and his wife, Blanca

Aguilar was youth pastor nine years at First Baptist Church in Weslaco, before he became pastor of the church's Spanish-language congregation in 2016.

Several years ago, a member of the football team at Weslaco High School asked Aguilar if he would pray with his team before their games. Before long, members of the Weslaco East team extended him the same invitation.

After that, Aguilar said, other sports teams asked, "What about us?"

Aguilar can't remember exactly when he started praying with the high school teams, but he knows his willingness has opened doors of opportunity

for expanded ministry.

## **Availability creates opportunities**

“If you make yourself available to the schools, they will take you up on that offer,” he said.

Now, Aguilar coordinates with coaches to visit with students during training. After training, he sometimes leads Bible studies off-campus, attended by the majority of the athletes.

Student athletes also have asked him to help coordinate convocations where students share their Christian testimonies and worship together.

“I am on campus two to three times a week,” Aguilar said.

He understands “being there” for students, means he has to be available when the unexpected happens. For example, because school administrators and coaches know how much students trust Aguilar, they have called on him to offer support when students are dealing with difficulties, such as the death of a respected faculty member.

“A couple of my kids have gone through personal issues, and they feel comfortable talking to him,” said Griselda Fino, Weslaco High School girls’ basketball coach.

Sometimes Aguilar can talk to athletes about issues they may not share with her, Fino said.

Coaches are glad to be able to call on Aguilar, because they know their players have lives beyond the field of competition.

“The coaches know there has to be character in the lives of the students,” Aguilar said. “Otherwise, the team is not going to work.”

# Relating to rivals

Since Aguilar started working with student athletes, he insists he has seen students become better people—and to learn how to relate to their athletic rivals.



Girls on the East Weslaco High School and Weslaco High School basketball teams pray with Joe Aguilar before a game. (Photo courtesy of Joe Aguilar)

Teams from both high schools in Weslaco—concerned about trouble the longstanding rivalry between their schools might spark—called on Aguilar to help them promote positive competition and “prevent bad blood,” he said.

Aguilar met with both teams several times to foster harmony, and on the morning of the game, he attended a “Breakfast of Champions” with both teams.

On game night, players from both teams came out together with arms around each other.

“You could have heard a pin drop when they came out together,” Aguilar

said.

Fans were shocked by the harmony both teams showed, he added.

Aguilar has a special way of connecting with people, Fino said, but she notes other people could imitate his service to the students.

“Something like an outreach program with coaches would be helpful,” she said.

Coaches interact with students who are going through a lot, she noted. Anyone who could help coaches understand how to communicate better would be offering a valuable service, she said.

“I have seen my students go through everything,” Fino said. “It would be nice if we had direction on how to relate with students who are going through difficulties.”

For Aguilar, working with students and coaches is not about pursuing a personal agenda. It’s about being available to meet needs.

“You have to serve in whatever way they need,” he said.