

In Solidarity with English

School helps Spanish-speaking preschoolers become fluent

by Bob Balgemann

November 28, 2008

Most of the 3-year-olds entering the Solidarity School in Sandy Springs don't know a word of English.

But when they start the second year of the pre-kindergarten program, they are conversational in their new language.

"The children we send to kindergarten are in mainstream classes," said Jamie Arthur, the head of school. "The majority are thriving in public schools."

She said the 7-year-old program focuses on "the intellectual, spiritual, moral, aesthetic, social and physical development of each student." Further, the Solidarity School emphasizes "the importance of each student becoming a committed member of a larger community that includes family, school, church and neighborhood."

The school was established for disadvantaged children living within the parish of Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Sandy Springs. While the program is independent of the church – it is supported primarily by philanthropic gifts – one of its goals is to provide a Catholic education for those who cannot afford it.

All of the families pay tuition based on what they can afford.

The Solidarity School, with five teachers and five assistants, is based at the Mission Village in a former strip shopping center off Northwood Drive. It has classrooms, a media center, a chapel and a cafeteria.

Instruction for the 3-year-olds is in both English and Spanish, though directions such as "stand in line" and "go to the bathroom" are only in English.

In a less structured environment, those youngsters are "introduced to a lot of things, including such basics as washing their hands, sharing, sitting at a table, cutting with a scissors, holding a pencil and respecting each other," said Martha Manrique, the assistant director, who facilitates daily operation of the school.

They sing, they pray, they color, they trace letters of the alphabet.



Eduardo Muga and his class of 4-year-olds sing "Bingo," the popular song about a dog, at the Solidarity School. Instruction is in English only for the class. The school provides a Catholic education for those who otherwise couldn't afford one. ([click for larger version](#))



Instructor Geraldine Dew helps Brian Ordanista trace letters of the alphabet in the class for 3-year-olds at the Solidarity School for Hispanics. The children in the class study one letter, one number and one shape each week in English and Spanish. ([click for larger version](#))

The 3-year-olds also study one letter of the alphabet, one shape and one number each week.

Instruction is only in English for the 4-year-olds, who spend a lot of time reviewing what they learned the previous year. They study math, handwriting, reading and religion.

Volunteers are important to both age groups. A psychologist helps out free of charge, along with students from Holy Spirit Preparatory School, fifth-graders from Holy Innocents' School, and students from The Lovett School and Pinecrest Academy.

Two women also work with the teaching assistants.

"The whole concept of immersion (into the English language) at this age, it just works," Arthur said. "By 4 years of age they are ready for instruction in English. They can carry on a conversation in English when they enter the 4-year-old class."

Without the foundation in English, Manrique said it would take most students five or six years to catch up with their classmates.

Progress reports are given three times a year to parents of both age groups.

The school began in 2001 with 12 students. Today there are 65 students, mostly of Hispanic heritage.

"I know this program works," Arthur said. "It would be very beneficial if the state made pre-kindergarten (classes) available to all children." Currently, pre-K instruction is based on funding and is not available to everyone.

The 2008-09 term has brought changes to the Solidarity School.

First, it no longer has a program for kindergartners because of its proximity to the new Lake Forest Elementary School, which opened in August and serves a large number of Hispanic families.

Arthur said Lake Forest has the same instruction as the Solidarity School, with the exception of religion, and can offer more resources because it has more money. Busing is also available.

The recent introduction of an after-school literacy center provides religious teaching as well as tutors in various subjects for youngsters 5 to 12 years of age.

Catholic Charities and Pan Asian are sponsoring the center, which is not associated with the Solidarity School.

Arthur said those organizations "created the structure, developed the curriculum in reading and math, and are funding this program."

Tutors are available weekdays from 2:30 to 5:30, with religious instruction following. Children also are fed a snack, watch movies and play games.

Ultimately, Arthur said, the hope is to expand the program to include middle and high school students.