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English class for parents

Sunnyside district sends computers home so moms, dads can help kids

By Andrea Rivera

Maria Tomaine didn't want to be the only person in her home not to speak fluent English.

Her husband, Paul, doesn't speak Tomaine's native Spanish, and her children's primary language is English as well.

So Tomaine took advantage of a free program her children's school district offers because it believes parents who can speak English can more comfortably navigate the educational system and help their children with their homework.



Maria Tomaine picks up her three kids, Melody, far left, Sabrina and Paul from Los Ranchitos Elementary School. Maria took advantage of a free program offered through the Sunnyside school district to help parents learn to speak English, in part so they can help with homework.

Tomaine was among the more than 60 people who completed the Sed de Saber, or Thirst for Knowledge, program offered to parents with children at Los Ranchitos, Drexel, Los Amigos, Ocotillo or Rivera elementary schools. Her children attend Los Ranchitos.

The six-month pilot program concluded with a graduation ceremony in August. Some of the participants saw a 32 percent growth in their English skills by the end of the program.

The program resumed last month with some 80 new participants.

Sunnyside program self-paced

Sunnyside is the only school district in the Tucson area to use Sed de Saber, but school districts in the Phoenix area also are using the program.

It's self-paced and uses an electronic LeapFrog Quantum LeapPad — a device more commonly used to teach young children how to read — to familiarize parents with English. Parents get to take the computers home and use them at their convenience, and even share them with other family members.

"It's a very interesting device," said Meylin Orellana, the Sed de Saber tutor. "You can practice pronunciation. You press one button and the machine pronounces sentences and you can record your own voice."

"I wanted to learn better English because I wanted to help my children with their homework. My husband wants me to learn more English for the future." Maria Tomaine, who took part in a program that's free for some Sunnyside parents

Did you know
About 4,000 students in the Sunnyside Unified School District are classified as English-language learners. Approximately 18,000 students are enrolled in the district.

When, where to take classes Sunnyside has partnered with Pima Community College to offer free English classes for people living in the Sunnyside district. Others are welcome to enroll in the course, but Sunnyside residents have first priority. Here's when and where the classes are offered:

- Santa Clara Elementary School, 6910 S. Santa Clara Ave., 8:30 to 10:30 a.m. Monday, Wednesday and Friday through Dec. 19. New students will be accepted Nov. 17, Jan. 12 and Feb. 16.
- Mission Manor Elementary School, 600 W. Santa Rosa St., 5 to 8 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday through Dec. 18. New students will be accepted Nov. 20, Jan. 15 and Feb. 19.
- Sunnyside Administration Building, 2238 E. Ginter Road, 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday through Dec. 18. New students will be accepted Nov. 18, Jan. 13 and Feb. 17.
- For information about any of the English classes, call 884-8628.

Each parent involved in the program is loaned a LeapPad, which has a record and play-back feature, and receives six books containing interactive English-language lessons designed to teach more than 500 words and 340 phrases.

"I enjoyed it a lot because the lessons were in English and Spanish," Tomaine said. "It repeats the words and sentences in English, and if you want to hear it in Spanish, you can."

The district used federal money to buy 85 LeapPad kits, software and licensing fees and support for the program from Retention Education Inc. at an initial cost of about \$60,000. The district paid an additional \$72,000 in licensing and support fees for the 2008-2009 school year.

Goal is parental involvement

The program's goal is to help parents take a more active role in their students' education.

Participating schools in the program were targeted because they have the highest number of English-language learners.

In addition to the five schools that participated in the pilot program, Mission Manor and Summit View elementary schools received kits for parents to take part in this semester's program.

The district used federal Title I dollars to fund the current program. It's willing to invest the money because if parents speak English, they will be more prone to call the attendance office when their child is sick, or to volunteer in the classroom.

"All the research says that the more parents are involved, the higher the effect they have on student achievement. So if parent involvement goes up, student achievement goes up," said Andrea Foster, who works in Sunnyside's federal programs department. "It only makes sense that we work on getting parents involved because ultimately it's going to help the students."

Federal money helps parents

Title I is a federal program that distributes money to states, which release it to school districts to supplement the education of students attending schools in high-poverty areas.

According to federal guidelines, at least 1 percent of Title I money must go toward resources for parents, said Peggy Weber, Sunnyside's director of federal programs. Sed de Saber is just one phase of the district's plan to involve more parents in the educational process.

Sunnyside spends 11 percent of its \$7.8 million in Title I funding on resources for parents, Weber said.

Sunnyside has partnered with Pima Community College to offer free English classes in a traditional classroom setting at three sites in the district.

Foster would like parents to take advantage of the free English classes after they've completed the Sed de Saber program.

Parents are required under Arizona law to show proof they are in the United States legally to enroll in one of Pima's adult-education classes. Proof of legal residency is not a requirement for participation in Sed de Saber because school districts are not allowed to ask about residency.

"I wanted to help my children"

Parents were selected for Sed de Saber based on the recommendations of parent-involvement assistants who work for the district helping parents and families.

"There's a lot of things parents can do at home to still be engaged and involved in their child's education," Foster said. "Things like Sed de Saber help them to make sure their children's homework is done and that they follow up with teachers and ask questions. And attend parent-teacher conferences."

Tomaine knows she has an obligation to her children to learn English. "I wanted to learn better English because I wanted to help my children with their homework," she said. Her children — Sabrina, Paul and Melody — and her husband all encourage her to improve her English. "My husband wants me to learn more English for the future," she said. "He supports me and so do my kids."

After completing the program, Tomaine said she is more comfortable at her children's school, and completing everyday tasks, such as visiting the doctor or shopping for groceries, are easier.

Rita Hernandez is part of the current program, which is expected to end in December. She has a kindergartner at Los Amigos Elementary School.

"I want to learn to communicate with teachers and people in the community," Hernandez said in Spanish, adding that she'd also like to ask basic questions about prices when she's grocery shopping.

Participants take a test at the beginning of the program to determine their English proficiency. Most of the 80 or so current participants tested at a low or intermediate level, Orellana said.

The adult students speak by phone with Orellana, the program's tutor, once a week to go over the content of the six different books. The parents also take midterms and final exams.

Orellana, who is in Orange County, Calif., and works with Retention Education, said parents thrive in the program and more parents should consider participating in Sed de Saber.

"We had parents who knew nothing or very little English at the beginning of the program, and once they finished, we had parents going to their doctors not needing interpreters," she said.

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