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# English-at-home program aims to increase adults' skill

## Business group, school districts initiated English Works to improve language in Santa Ana workforce.

By **ERIN CARLYLE**

The Orange County Register

SANTA ANA – Delmy Monico, a 43-year-old immigrant from El Salvador, wants to double her salary. Monico, who fled her war-torn country 12 years ago and became an American citizen in November, makes \$9.50 per hour at a job caring for older adults. To reach her goal of making "at least \$17 per hour," Monico explained in Spanish, she needs to improve her English.

Last week Monico beamed as she clicked across Valley High School's auditorium stage in her high heels, dressed up to receive a

Limited English Proficiency certificate from the Santa Ana Unified School District and state Legislature. A friend snapped photos as Monico's 8-year-old daughter, who already speaks English, proudly accompanied her mother across the stage.

Monico is one of 996 people in the first class of a new home-study English as a Second Language, or ESL, program for adults. The Greater Santa Ana Business Alliance initiated the program, known as English Works, in collaboration with the Rancho Santiago Community College District and Santa Ana Unified School District, to improve English language skills in the Santa Ana workforce.

Monico and the other graduates used "Sed de Saber" (or "Thirst for Knowledge" in Spanish), a record-and-playback learning device, to move through six chapters of language instruction at their own pace. Santa Ana Unified loaned out nearly 1,000 devices to parents of school-aged children, and intends lend 2,000 in upcoming terms. Some schools already have a waitlist, said Teresa Mercado-Cota, district spokesperson.

The district's goal, said Patricia Gomez, parent and family coordinator at Santa Ana Unified, is to improve parents' ability to communicate with the school, enable them to assist their children with homework, and prepare them to attain better jobs.

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Retention Education, a Newport Beach company, developed Sed de Saber. Students can focus on general English or vocabulary specialized for hospitality or construction jobs. If they practice 20 minutes per day, students can complete the program in four to six months, said Dave Henninger, executive vice president of Retention Education.

In addition to the portable device, graduates received an initial English assessment and four 30-minute phone tutoring sessions, a final assessment and a graduation ceremony. With tutoring, the program completion rate is 75 percent, Henninger said, compared to a nationwide 20 percent completion rate for ESL classes.

A 2004 survey commissioned by the Santa Ana Business Alliance confirmed that a dearth of English language skills is a major issue for Santa Ana's businesses and workforce.

"The number one demand from the local Latino population within Santa Ana was to learn English so that they could get a job," said Michael Metzler, alliance president.

Sed de Saber expands ESL learning options within Santa Ana, from classes only to an at-home system.

"I think students prefer to be taught in the

classroom," said Nilo Lipiz, dean of instruction and student services for the School of Continuing Education at Santa Ana College. "However ... many students are unable to go to class because it's not offered during the time they are off, or because they have two jobs and are unable to go, period."

English Works' annual budget is \$300,000, Metzler said. Of that, \$200,000 comes from the community college for the English classes; \$100,000 comes from the members of the alliance, including \$25,000 from AT&T. State Title I CBET funding, for Community-Based English Tutoring, provided \$700,000 to Santa Ana Unified for the one-time cost of 2,000 Sed de Saber kits. Each new kit now costs \$400; technical support for each learner costs \$400.

Local branches of Carl's Jr., Del Taco, Jack in the Box, and Hilton are also using the kits for employees. Alliance staff hope that landscape and construction companies and hospitals will also use the kits, said Vince Brantley, chief operation officer at the alliance.

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