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New academy's immersion classes dip young 'sponges' in Spanish



Teachers Rosa Linda Gonzales (left) and Ofelia Neeley lead students in an activity at Aragón Spanish Academy in mid-May. The academy is on the North Side.

ROBERT MLEKOV/STAFF

age to absorb one or more languages. Research has shown that waiting until high school to begin learning a second language is far more difficult. Speaking a second language provides children with a major advantage in an increasingly multilingual and multicultural society, Gonzales adds.

"Ten years ago, I don't think knowing Spanish was as important as it is now," he says. "A lot has to do with NAFTA, trade with Mexico and new census information that says, in the next 10 to 20 years, the majority of Texans will be Hispanic. (Speaking Spanish) will make anyone more marketable in the workplace."

Parents' motivation is both cultural and financial.

By RUDY ARTSPE
SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Erica Gregory is hoping her two children will grow up capable of doing what she has never been able to master: speaking Spanish.

Once a week, the 33-year-old mom takes her 2½-year-old son, Cade, and 16-month-old daughter, Laine, to Spanish immersion classes at Aragón Spanish Academy. The three are enrolled in Mommy and Me, a program that provides an opportunity for parent and child to learn Spanish together.

"I want my kids to experience the Spanish language," says Gregory.

Spanish is spoken about 98 percent of the time in Aragón Academy's immersion classes. English is used sparingly, he adds, "only to make sure a child understands an object or concept."

Luz Garcia-Martin, who oversees bilingual programs in the San Antonio School District, believes immersion programs can be effective.

"If you have a well-trained staff, parental involvement, good materials and visuals, and the child is motivated and already has a strong oral foundation of his or her (first) language, then you have an environment for the child to succeed in acquiring a second language," she says. "Children pick up things very fast."

whose maiden name is Chacon. "I also want them to have more opportunities available to them, not just in employment but in life."

Dawn Garza, 28, wishes the same for sons Jared, 5, and Aaron, 3. Both boys attend the Spanish Immersion for Preschoolers class.

"I feel ripped off," Garza says. "My parents speak Spanish, but they didn't speak it to us growing up. I'm Hispanic, and other Hispanics I meet expect me to know it."

Aragón Spanish Academy is the brainchild of Rick Gonzales, a 39-year-old San Antonian who knows first-hand the frustration of not being able to converse in the tongue of his ancestors. The disadvantage was made clear while on the job with a telecommunications company that required him to do business in Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Puerto Rico.

On a recent morning, instructor Ofelia Neeley is addressing a group of preschoolers in Spanish as she leads them through songs, dance, games and Bible stories. Later, Gonzales walks into the classroom to observe and sits on the floor next to 3½-year-old Madeleine Ruth Norman, who along with the other children sit in a circle, playing and listening to one of their favorite songs, "Chocolata."

"Hola, Madeleine," Gonzales says. "¿Como estas?"
"Bien, gracias," the girl replies.

During class, Madeleine and the other children have been learning their *colores*, *numeros* and words for different members of *la familia*. Many of the children have begun speaking Spanish at home.

"I really think kids are sponges," Gregory says of son Cade. "He knows the different colors, the numbers one to 10, and parts of the body in Spanish."

Gonzales also felt hindered by not speaking Spanish fluently when he served as president of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce from 1990 to 1993 and had to hire a private tutor to assist him.

"It always intrigued me when meeting people from Mexico and other Latin American countries, who had not spent a lot of time in this country, that they already knew English," Gonzales says. "I found out many of them had gone to immersion schools in Mexico or the country they were from. The thought occurred to me why isn't there something like that in San Antonio?"

Aragón, which opened its doors in January, offers immersion programs that focus on early childhood years, when, experts say, kids are at an ideal

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He'll break out into a Spanish song and do the movements."

Likewise, Garza is impressed with Jared's progress. "He uses Spanish at home every chance he gets," she says. "For instance, instead of asking for grapes, he'll say, 'Mommy, can I have some *uvas*?'"

Aragón Spanish Academy's classes for children ages 2 to 7 began June 7 at 18952 Redland Road. Designed for beginning as well as advanced Spanish-speakers, classes will be taught mostly in Spanish two to three days a week and last 45 minutes to an hour and a half. For more information, call (210) 496-0990 or visit www.aragonacademy.com.

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