

San Lorenzo kindergartners make big strides in mastering language

By Rebecca Parr, 12/06/2014

SAN LORENZO --

"We are learning collaboration," a group of Colonial Acres Elementary School kindergartners read out loud Friday as their teacher pointed to the words.

The San Lorenzo kindergartners have explored their community, taking a field trip to the library, walking around the neighborhood and being visited by firefighters. Using what they had learned, the 5-year-olds built miniature towns, giving "tours" of their works to parents and staff Friday.

"I'm surprised and amazed at how much they have learned," said Veronica Ruiz, mother of Ricardo Lieba, who proudly pointed out the Ashland Community Center replica he had constructed. "We read a Dr. Seuss book last night, and Ricardo could read every word. He loves to read and go to the library now," Ruiz said.

On a board in the classroom were some sentences students had written. "Firefighters extinguish wildfires," one read. Many of the children wore toy firefighter helmets.

"Most of these students didn't know their letters at the beginning of the year," kindergarten teacher Tammy Braun said.

The 112 students in five kindergarten classes are taking part in a Sobrato Family Foundation pilot program to help them be literate earlier, said Colonial Acres Principal Linda Santillan. The program integrates reading and spoken and written language, with a lot of writing and focus on language, she said.

The Sobrato Family Foundation started its Sobrato Early Academic Language program in 2008 to help Spanish-speaking students develop language and academic skills so they can succeed.

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The program is based on the work of educator Laurie Olsen, considered an expert in English learner education. Most of the program is in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties, where more than 25 percent of students entering public schools are English learners.

This is the second year the San Lorenzo Unified is taking part, and the early language is being phased in at all its schools. The Sobrato program includes preschool through third-grade students, with the goal of closing any academic achievement gap by the beginning of the fourth grade.

Of the 700 students at Colonial Acres, more than 60 percent come from homes where English is not the primary language. The number is even higher -- more than 80 percent

-- for students through the third grade, most of them Spanish speakers.

"We are addressing the problem of long-term English learners" who never master the language, said Katarin Jurich, San Lorenzo Unified director of assessment and English learners programs. In the past, the schools had inconsistent instruction for those students, she said. The goal is that by the end of third grade, all students will be fluent in English.

All San Lorenzo kindergarten students, not just English learners, take part in the language project.

The children are learning more than just phonics vocabulary words such as "hat" and "cat," Santillan said. They are being taught academic language, or words they are going to encounter later in school.

"When they enter ninth-grade science and see the word 'crustacean,' they'll say, 'Oh, I learned that in kindergarten,'" Braun said.

The students studied what firefighters, custodians and librarians do, Santillan said. But their model towns also included churches, supermarkets, a courthouse and other landmarks. One town had a Kaiser hospital with a paper nurse in front, her face a girl's cutout school picture.

"That's me!" Adriana Camarena said. "I drew the gloves; I want to be a nurse. But sometimes I like being a vet," she said.

Friday's open house was a swirl of excitement; in one room, children read sentences out loud to their parents in one area, children sang as Braun pointed to the words and others put stickers with their names on a hand-drawn map of the community. Maps of their classroom that teams of children had drawn hung in the hallway outside.

"Collaborating is when people are listening to each other and they work together," kindergartner Layla Valle said, her soft voice almost drowned out by the noise from all the activities around her.

"It's really powerful in terms of what the kids have learned in such a short time. They're 5, and they know how to use some really big words," Santillan said.

"They're learning academic language that will help them understand content. At same time, they're learning to read -- not just words, but long words with big chunks of Latin roots."