

Oakland private school helps kids habla español

First Bay Area Independent to offer Spanish-language immersion focus

By Katy Murphy

Staff Writer

OAKLAND -- "Fire drill" was one of the few English phrases that Dolores Anguiano said to her 3- and 4-year-old pupils Thursday morning. She wanted to be sure the children knew, before it sounded, that the alarm was just for practice ("practica").

"Despacio. Despacio," Anguiano cautioned the children as they hurried into the hallway and out to the parking lot, some of them covering their ears.

Escuela Bilingüe Internacional, an independent, Spanish-language immersion school, opened this fall at the former St. Augustine School in North Oakland with about 80 preschool and kindergarten students. Its instruction, which eventually will extend through the eighth grade, is based on a program used by hundreds of international schools around the world from the International Baccalaureate Organization, a foundation based in Geneva, Switzerland.

Language immersion schools such as EBI have been around for decades.

Berkeley's East Bay French-American school opened in 1977 and San Francisco's Chinese American International School has been teaching children Mandarin since 1981. More recently, dozens of public schools, including at least three in Berkeley, have launched two-way immersion programs in Spanish and other languages.

Although Spanish is spoken at home by 28 percent of Californians, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2005 American Community Survey, EBI is believed by its founders to be the first independent school in the Bay Area offering a Spanish-language immersion focus.

One of the founders, Liza Sanchez, took on the project after an unsuccessful search for a Spanish immersion school nearby. Her teenage daughter attended the French-American school in Berkeley. Sanchez wanted her younger children to have the same opportunities with the Spanish language.

About half of EBI's students, including Sanchez's daughters, come from families with at least one Spanish-speaking parent. The other half came to school on the first day with little or no knowledge of the language.

The children receive strictly Spanish instruction in preschool and only one hour of English in kindergarten. By third grade, the day will be divided evenly between English and Spanish, said Graciela Lopez, the head of the school who also teaches kindergarten.

At that point, the students will start learning Mandarin as well.

“We want children to be fluent in different languages,” Lopez said. “That will open a lot of doors for them.”

In Lopez’s class, children sat or sprawled on a rug imprinted with a map of the world. They sang “La Araña Pequeñita” (“The Itsy Bitsy Spider”) and learned words that begin with “A,” “B” and “C” from a picture book.

When they reached “burro,” they practiced rolling their R’s, with mixed results.

Paola Laverde, a Colombian-born EBI parent, said she speaks only Spanish to her 2-year-old son, Marco Levine, so he will become bilingual. Still, she said his language skills have improved after just a month of school. “He’s hearing Spanish all the time,” Laverde said. “He’s hearing Spanish from Mexico, Spanish from Spain, Spanish from Argentina.”

Laverde, whose family lives in Berkeley, said she wants her son to be a “citizen of the world.” She also hopes he will be less likely to reject the Spanish language as she did when she was younger, an act of rebellion that prompted her father to send her to an international school in South America for a year.

“When I was 11, I told my dad I didn’t want to speak Spanish,” Laverde recalled. “Three months later, I was on a plane to Colombia.”

Like other independent schools in the area, EBI is not cheap. A family of five could fly to South America and back several times for the price of putting one child through a year of immersion at the Oakland school (\$9,000 for preschool; \$13,400 for kindergarten and up). Sanchez said 20 percent of EBI students receive financial aid, and the board’s goal is to allocate 20 percent of the school’s budget each year for that purpose.

Sanchez said some parents, before signing up, were concerned their children might feel uncomfortable or frustrated at first in a foreign language setting. Others, she said, expressed fears the children would fall behind in English or in other academic subjects.

“They say, ‘What is our child going to do on the first day of school? How are they going to adjust?’” Sanchez said.

Sanchez, who learned Spanish in college and earned a master’s degree in education at the University of California, Berkeley, said she tells parents that the comfort level of young children has more to do with a teacher’s demeanor and body language than with her choice of words. She assures them children are used to hearing vocabulary they don’t understand, and they learn much more quickly than adults.

Anne-Marie Pierce, a former international school head who runs a consulting business in San Francisco for independent schools, argues that dual-immersion language students aren’t sacrificing their knowledge of English. On the contrary, she said, they tend to develop a broader English vocabulary and a better understanding of language in general.

Pierce said during the 19 years she was head of the Washington International School in Washington, D.C. and, later, at the French-American School in Berkeley, she noticed a pattern: On standardized tests, her third-grade students scored either on par with or slightly lower than their private school peers in English. But by the time they reached sixth grade, she said, “they were floating off the charts.”

Sanchez said her oldest daughter, Alexandra, who graduated from the French-American school in Berkeley, consistently scored in the 99th percentile in English although she spoke Spanish and German at home and had little formal English training until the third grade.

“I can only say, ‘The more languages the better,’” Sanchez said.