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English classes for adults who tutor children seen as a \$50M proposition

Last in a four-part series.

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LIVE OAK -- Every Tuesday and Thursday night, Alejandro and Leticia Arredondo have a date. They gather up their 7-year-old son and 2-year-old daughter and head to Green Acres Elementary School to take classes to improve their English.

The Arredondos, who speak Spanish, are getting better at deciphering homework assignments for their son, a second-grader in an English-only class at Green Acres.

"We're finding out it's not so difficult to help," said Alejandro Arredondo, 26, who came to Santa Cruz seven years ago. Ron Unz, the author of Proposition 227, had people like the Arredondos in mind when he decided that the proposition should include \$50 million per year for 10 years to start free English classes for adults who promise to tutor children.

"It's pretty obvious," said Unz. "Children learn English most effectively when their parents also know English." Others such as San Fernando Valley Assemblyman Tony Cardenas are skeptical about the investment because the program failed to include provisions for accountability.

The Live Oak school district, which had never sponsored adult classes before, was the first in Santa Cruz County to take advantage of the money.

About 100 parents have enrolled in classes, which are offered in five locations, during the day and at night. One class teaches computer skills along with English. The district is spending \$41,000 from the state on the program and seeking money to do more.

"We're proud of it," said Bob Morgan, who supervises the program for the Live Oak district.

The need for adult classes is evident, he said.

About 20 percent of the district's 2,200 students are not fluent in English. When the district eliminated bilingual classes last year, 377 students formerly in bilingual classes were assigned to classes taught in English.

Even though students are exposed to more English at school, that is the only place some of them use it.

"At home, everybody talks in Spanish," said Juan Guevara, a fourth-grader at Del Mar Elementary.

Morgan views the parent classes as an important way to help students.

"There's only so much you can do in the classroom," he explained.

"Whether it's English, Spanish or Swahili, if you don't get parents involved, it's for naught."

Most of the adult classes are taught by district employees, but evening sessions at Green Acres Elementary School are staffed by volunteers. Parents in the class want to help their children and, at the same time, improve their own lives.

Aguilera, 39, came to Santa Cruz from Guanajuato. He was 15, but he didn't go to school.

"I had to work," he explained.

For 11 years, he toiled in the brussels sprouts fields. Now he's married with two children, ages 8 and 9, and works at a mushroom farm in Pescadero. He wants to get a job doing maintenance. To do that, he said, he needs better English, like his wife, who went to adult school and works at a deli.

David Fierro, 45, who is from Durango, also came here to work. He said he wants to write better and improve communication with his son, who is 16.

When children know two languages, they start "playing games" with their parents, he said. "You have to be bilingual, too."

Maria Guzman, 59, is taking advantage of this opportunity to learn English after living in Santa Cruz 28 years.

"Now is my time," she said. "It's never too late."

The most unusual class in the county was co-sponsored by the Live Oak district and Dominican Hospital. Not only did a dozen parents improve their English, but just before Christmas they took home a free computer -- an incentive offered to those who attended all 18 sessions.

The computers came courtesy of the Gateway Business & Community Coalition, a non profit organization that collects and refurbishes high-tech equipment that companies deem obsolete.

To get the computer, parents went twice a week to the hospital's computer lab to learn about word processing, the World Wide Web and email.

"It's very exciting," said Alejandro Arredondo, one of the few men in the class. "When you're going to get a computer -- that's the whole thing."

David Fierro, who attended the high-tech sessions as well as the night classes, got more than a computer for his efforts. He said the classes helped him get a new, higher-paying job at Plantronics.

"It makes you feel like you can do it," Fierro said.

Many parents from Mexico don't understand how American schools work. They tend to view education as the job of the teachers, not realizing the important role that they can play themselves. And many have grueling schedules, juggling more than one job along with family responsibilities.

"If they're not well educated, they're not as assertive," said Sesario Escoto, principal at Del Mar Elementary in Live Oak.

Escoto, who grew up in a neighborhood where high school graduation was a major accomplishment, said he sees more Latino parents helping their children with flash cards at home or setting aside time for reading.

But many of them don't expect as much as affluent parents who are college graduates.

Morgan's strategy for boosting Latino parent involvement includes offering a course on how to navigate the school bureaucracy. The district has hired the Parent Institute for Quality Education, at a cost of \$12,500, to teach an eight-week series of classes that started this month.

Starting the parent classes was not an easy task.

The demand was so strong that the Volunteer Center couldn't staff all the classes. The district ended up hiring instructors.

Other difficulties included finding space for classes at schools that are jammed full of students and recruiting a babysitter -- essential to attract parents with preschoolers.

Initially, the state Education Department ruled out spending Proposition 227 money for child care, but backed down after getting complaints from local school administrators.

While Live Oak's classes began almost a year ago, other districts are just getting started.

Santa Cruz City Schools, which already offers English as a second language in its adult education program, started a new class at the Neary Lagoon housing complex last year.

The turnout was poor because child care wasn't provided. In addition, the class attracted people whose knowledge of English varied so much that the instructor found the job difficult.

In November, with \$81,000 from the initiative, the district hired a babysitter and rented space at the Masonic Hall next to Branciforte Elementary School. The school, which has a large Spanish-speaking enrollment, had offered night classes to parents since winning a federal grant two years ago. Principal Mary Anne James had wanted to offer daytime classes, so children who accompanied their parents wouldn't come to school sleepy, but she didn't have an empty classroom.

About 20 moms drop their children off at school before going to class next door. A couple of dads come, too.

"You have to make it easy for people," said Assistant Superintendent Don Iglesias.

The Soquel district, which got \$21,000, offered a six-week adult class in the fall at Santa Cruz Gardens Elementary School. More than 20 parents enrolled.

The Pajaro Valley district, which has the largest Spanish-speaking enrollment in the county, didn't start any new classes for parents until January. The district's adult education program already offers English-as-a-second-language classes that enroll 3,000 people a year.

With \$669,000 from the initiative, the Pajaro Valley district opened a parent resource center at the new district office on Green Valley Road. The center includes a computer lab.

A new staffer, Francesca Hampton, is teaching a morning class on how parents can help their children succeed in school. Baby-sitting is provided. Hampton also will talk with the principals at all 24 of the district's schools to find out what else parents need.

"We're expecting miracles from this person," said Claudia Grossi, the director of adult education.

While Unz contends the new program "seems to be working out very well," with "tens of thousands of parents learning English," others are less certain. Hilary Novak, who oversees distribution of the money for the state Education Department, said she couldn't say whether the program is a success. That's because there is little state oversight.

"It's basically free money -- you just tell us you're interested and we put you on the list," said Novak.

This year, 404 districts of 1,047 statewide applied, down from 456 that got money last year. Novak isn't sure why.

State officials aren't keeping track of how many people enrolled in the new classes or whether they are actually learning English. Districts don't even have to report how the money was spent. Unz didn't require it.

“He didn’t know there should be more controls,” said Novak.

Legislators tried to remedy the situation by passing a bill requiring an audit and program evaluation, but Gov. Gray Davis vetoed the measure, citing financial concerns. The audit and evaluation could have cost \$500,000.

Some local school officials question whether the Unz program will live up to expectations.

“We’re helping parents, but it takes a long time before you’re literate,” said Iglesias of Santa Cruz City Schools. “The reality is the homework gets harder and it’s in a language you don’t understand.”

When Proposition 227 went to a vote, Alejandro Arredondo said he wasn’t in favor of it. The only part he had heard about was how it would change the schools. He didn’t realize it would bring him new opportunities.

Now he’s had a change of heart.

“It’s better for kids to learn English because that’s what they need to succeed in high school and college,” he said. “They’re not going to use Spanish.”

Arredondo, who used to make a living doing yard work, has a new job at a bakery.

“I don’t think I could have got that job before,” he said. “In the bakery, you have to know a lot of English.”
