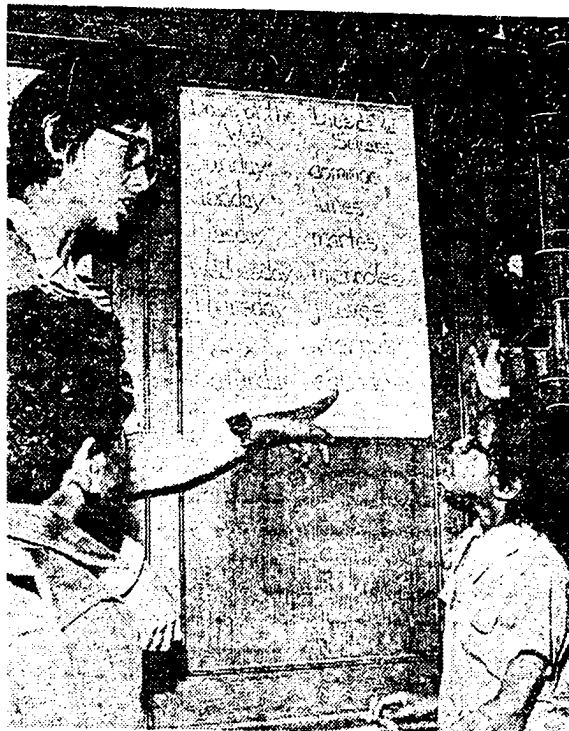


Puerto Rican Children Getting Bilingual Education at La Escuelita

PAPIRNO, ELISSA

The Hartford Courant (1923-); May 28, 1973; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Hartford Courant

pg. 33



Learning Language Twice

Youngsters at La Escuelita—Hartford's bilingual school—learn in both English and Spanish. In left photo, Sandra Marro, left, and Nancy Cecilia learn to sing the Star Spangled

Banner with the second grade teacher, Mrs. Aracelis Limeres. In second photo, teacher Barbara Sturtevant listens as Ernesto Matos recites the days of the week in a combined

second-third grade class. The next photo, teacher Mrs. Lynette Stelly helps Nilda Domenech with an English reader. In right

photo, teacher Yolanda Rodriguez reviews English workbook lessons with second grader David Felix (Courant Photos by Anthony Bacewicz).

Puerto Rican Children Getting Bilingual Education at La Escuelita

By ELISSA PAPIRNO

"Puerto Rico: As Close to Paradise as Man Will Ever See," a sign tells a visitor in one classroom.

Amidst odes to spring in English and Spanish, cries of "Look-it, lookit teacher" and songs of Spanish lace, some 200 Hartford youngsters, most of them Spanish-speaking, are getting their first taste of learning in two languages at Hartford's pilot bilingual school.

The school, called La Escuelita (The Little School) by the city's Spanish-speaking community, sits astride a busy highway and major downtown thoroughfare.

The building (the former Ann Street School) is old and the classrooms small, and many modern facilities are lacking.

But La Escuelita is in many ways a school run by the community for the community and it's for this that the city's Spanish-speaking community points

to it with pride. The school's community involvement and unique Spanish-English instruction methods have also brought visitors from all over the country.

La Escuelita is funded by a special grant from the federal Department of Health, Education and Welfare, the city Board of Education and the Model Cities program. A University of Hartford bilingual teacher corps program also has helped train teachers to work in the school.

One of the most important contributions to the school, though, has come from the parents of the city's Spanish-speaking community, parents have helped plan the school. There are also classes for them at night, and La Escuelita is often open for community meetings.

This has helped make the three-story brick building—in its first year as a bilingual school this year—the focus of much of

the interest and activity of the Spanish-speaking community.

The school itself houses about 200 youngsters of varying English and Spanish-speaking abilities. They're grouped by grades preschool through grade three, and language abilities.

After that, it's up to the teachers to help the children progress at their own pace. Because of the differences in learning and language abilities, most of the teachers and aides work with their students individually and in groups.

"I have 23 children, and they're all at a different level," says Mrs. Lynette Stelly, a second grade teacher. "Only four children could read at the beginning of the year. Now," she adds, "19 of them can read, 10 in both languages."

Both languages means Spanish and English, the two languages of instruction at the school. The theory is that a child learns best in his native

language.

"Once they have their basic skills in their mother tongue," explains city Bilingual Education Director Adolfo Jimenez, "they can transfer them to a second language."

For this reason, classes at the bilingual school are labeled "English dominant," "Spanish dominant," and "transitional." Depending on whether a child is more fluent in English or Spanish, he is placed in a class and first taught his basic skills, such as reading and arithmetic, in the language he is most comfortable in.

This is based on standardized examinations, which are given to every child at the school, says Head Teacher Edna Soler. It is hoped by the third grade that most of the instruction will be in English, however.

"The community knows the children have to learn English to integrate themselves into American society," Mrs. Soler says.

So there is at least some instruction in English in all classes, and the teachers try to teach American ways to the children as well, she says.

The parents and teachers have insisted, for example, that gym instructors teach the children games American children play—so they can better get along with their American playmates.

Lunch is always American-style too, because the children always have Puerto Rican food at home, Mrs. Soler says. The school has even recently started its own American-style safety patrol for the hallways.

At the same time, though, the school tries to give the children a good background in Puerto Rican history and culture, so they can be aware of their roots.

There are pictures of Puerto Rican heroes, along with John F. Kennedy at La Escuelita. And the words to La Borin-

quena, the Puerto Rican national anthem, stand beside the words to the Star Spangled Banner.

Maps of both Puerto Rico and the United States also grace the walls of many of the classrooms.

At this point, says Mrs. Soler, the school would like to enroll more English-speaking youngsters. This would help the socialization process even further, she maintains, helping both the English and Spanish-speaking youngsters.

While the community is glad to have a location for the school — after a long fight to have the school established — there are some difficulties with the Ann Street plant.

The school has no library, assembly hall, or suitable place for the children to play, Mrs. Soler says. There's also a need for some type of transportation so parents do not have to walk their children to school every

day over the busy highways.

Whether a new or renovated facility is found for the school — or the present building is remodeled — Mrs. Soler says the important thing is "a place that's good for the children."

That means a place with "good physical conditions that we hope will give security to the children too." It could be either "here or somewhere else," Mrs. Soler says.

Meanwhile, both Jimenez and Mrs. Soler are hoping that La Escuelita will serve as a model, as a pilot, for other bilingual classrooms in the city.

Mrs. Soler would like to see a bilingual component in every school, she says, "to better the cross-cultural relationship" between English and Spanish-speaking children.

La Escuelita could then serve as the central example of bilingual education, and each school could modify the basic program to its particular needs, she says.