

# Making sure the learning starts early

By KATHERINE LEAL UNMUTH  
Staff Writer  
kunmuth@dallasnews.com

Catalina Vazquez had to become a student herself to learn how to be her child's first teacher.

With help from the Dallas nonprofit program Avance, she and other Hispanic mothers are taking a more active role preparing their children for school.

"At school, he likes to read and participate in class," Vazquez said of her 4-year-old son, Angel. "The teacher asked, 'Who taught him this?'"

But many Latina immigrant mothers aren't receiving such help because programs like Avance often suffer from limited funding and lengthy waiting lists.

A new study further highlights the problem: While Hispanic children are born healthy, they begin lagging in language and mental development by age 2 — before they even begin preschool. The lag was tied to mothers' low education levels, the interactions they had with their children and large family sizes.

"We need to help these families earlier," said Bruce Fuller, a researcher at the University of California, Berkeley, who led the study. "If we don't, the slowdown in cognitive growth is going to handicap a lot of children, and then it starts to snowball."

Fuller also said he wants to promote President Barack Obama's push for expanded funding for early childhood programs, including those that send educators into homes to train new mothers on child development.

The study tracked 8,114 infants born in 2001. Researchers wanted to examine why healthy Hispanic babies make progress developmentally from 9 to 15 months but then begin falling behind.

The study found that Hispanic toddlers had lower levels of word comprehension, speaking and understanding simple tasks and gestures. By age 2, the children were about six months behind white children.

Researchers also noted that the education level of Hispanic immigrant mothers is lower than other groups, with few completing any college coursework and the majority living in high-poverty conditions. Because of their larger families, they had less time to commit to children one on one.

Some programs targeting education for mothers are trying to fill in the gaps.

## Lessons for parents

Avance, which serves mothers with newborns to 3-year-olds, contracts with the Dallas school district and also receives funding from the United Way and other private donors. It served about 985 children last year and has about 10 families on waiting lists at each of its 23 school sites.

Through the program, parent educators offer weekly four-hour classes on learning activities to use with the children.

"Our parents start out at the beginning of the year with basically silent relationships with their children," said director Lisa Oglesby Rocha. "We ask parents, 'When does your child start to learn?' In the beginning of the year they say, 'When they go to school.'"

Mothers also can take Eng-

lish and GED classes through Avance. Many of the mothers did not complete — or even begin — high school in Mexico.

## Teaching moments

On a recent morning at Dallas' Stevens Park Elementary, mothers sat with their 3-year-olds on their laps, observing an instructor showing them how to energetically read a story and repeating the lyrics of a song.

During the sessions they also receive handouts. One portion, "*nombrando las cosas*," or naming things, instructs mothers on specific descriptive words, adjectives and verbs they should use when speaking with their children.

Ana Ramirez has four children and worries that she isn't giving enough time to each of them, so she brought her 3-year-old son, Ivan. She admits she didn't read to her children before.

"I thought this would help, and I would learn how to play with him," she said.

Another nonprofit, the HIP-PY program, or Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, has a similar aim. Parent educators make home visits to the mothers of about 700 children 3 to 5 years old in the Dallas school district, teaching them a curriculum to use with their children.

The Irving school district also uses the program, which was developed by the National Council of Jewish Women.

"We tell them, 'Even if you're just driving to a store, identify shapes of signs, colors or letters,'" said Adriana Treviño, program manager for Dallas ISD HIP-PY. "If they do 15 minutes a day of little lessons, that makes a big difference, as opposed to having the child watch TV all day or just entertaining themselves."

# Opinion

## EDUCATION

# Delaying a child's mastery of English is a ticket to nowhere

**Bilingual education in elementary schools does few favors for Hispanics who want to find a surer path to success through higher education.**

By JAMES H. REZA  
Special to the Star-Telegram

When I was co-director of the choir at All Saints Catholic Church (a predominantly Hispanic parish) in the 1970s and '80s, I had several confrontations with our then-pastor, Father Albert Lopez.

He wanted our choir to sing in Spanish at the 9 a.m. children's English Mass. I'd tell Lopez there were already more

Spanish Masses at All Saints than English and I wasn't going to comply with his request. That infuriated him.

"James, I've heard your choir sing beautiful Spanish love songs at wedding Masses, so why can't you sing hymns in Spanish?" he asked.

"Father, those folks who hire me to sing at their weddings pay me good bucks to sing in Spanish," I would respond. "You, sir, have never given or offered the choir one red cent. Which is fine with me, but I don't feel obligated to follow your wishes."

After several intimidating confrontations, I decided to take my choir grievances to

the bishop's chancellor office. At a meeting with several diocesan leaders, I was told that I was right to decline Lopez's demands and that they would contact him to stop his not-so-priestly behavior.

Needless to say, that made Father Lopez mad as a hornet.

After the bishop's chancellor meeting, the principal at a prestigious private school in Fort Worth approached me.

"James, I read your column in the *Star-Telegram* titled, 'On the mastery of English,' and I wholeheartedly support your opposition to bilingual education," the principal said. "I have a circle of — sad to say — bigoted white friends who

are educators, and their take on bilingual education is to give Hispanics all the bilingual education they want."

He went on to say that his friends believed that our nation would need subservient and less-educated workers in the years to come, and what better way to mold those workers than through bilingual education?

I grew up in north Fort Worth and attended San Jose Catholic School in the 1400 block of North Commerce Street in the 1940s. The student body was 100 percent Hispanic.

From Day One, the nuns immersed us in English. From

that humble Catholic school came individuals who went to Texas A&M, Texas Christian University, Texas Tech and the University of Texas at Austin and became architects, engineers, business leaders and nurses.

No thanks to bilingual education, Hispanics have the highest dropout rate in the nation. Hispanics have a dismal attendance history in institutions of higher learning. And, after election officials caved to the demands of Hispanic political activist groups to provide bilingual ballots, Hispanics have a poor voting record.

While employed at General Dynamics (now Lockheed

Martin Aeronautics) as an engineer illustrator, I ate at the company cafeteria with the engineer staff.

As I looked around, I couldn't help but notice several tables full of Asian engineers. I asked myself, "When will I see a table full of Hispanic engineers?"

Sadly, the answer was obvious: never.

When I would ask Asian engineers how they managed to get a good education, they would answer, "Our parents told us to learn English well!"

JAMES H. REZA OF LAKE WORTH IS RETIRED FROM GENERAL DYNAMICS AND TARRANT COUNTY.