

Homework for Parents

Phoenix-Talent School District offers English classes to open communication

By Paris Achen
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Giggling and holding scribbled scripts in front of them, Jose Hernandez and Olivia Salazar introduce themselves to each other.

"Hi, I am Brian's daddy," says Hernandez, the father of a Talent Elementary School student. He shifts in his stance as if to ease into character in front of about a dozen adult students in an English as a Second Language, or ESL class at Talent Middle School. The Phoenix-Talent School District began offering the free classes to students' parents this fall.

"I am his teacher," Salazar replies, simulating a parent-teacher conference. In real life, she's the mother of a Talent Middle School student. "Brian is playing around in class all the time."

The students, actors and audience alike, laugh at the dialogue, occasionally lapsing into Spanish to make a comment.

"What can you do?" Hernandez asks.

"I (will) make sure he is not sitting next to his friend," she says decidedly.

"Perfect," Hernandez says with a smile, as the class breaks into applause and more laughter.

Although the skit Hernandez and Salazar wrote and performed was intended to give them practice in speaking English in front of others, it encapsulates one of the main reasons the school district decided to provide the classes free of charge to parents.

District officials say parent involvement in their children's education improves students' chances at success. One of the main barriers to parent involvement among non-English-speaking parents is the inability to communicate with teachers and administrators. Most school districts in Jackson County provide translators at campus events for Spanish speakers, but there often aren't enough to go around.

And, adds Genoveva Rojas, a Talent Middle School parent, parents don't want to have to depend on a third party to tell them what's happening at their children's school.

"Almost all the time we don't like to depend on another person," Rojas says. "We want to do it."

The Central Point School District also has been offering free English as a Second Language classes and computer classes to its parents, and English classes for parents are provided by LISTO Family Literacy Program at Medford's Howard Elementary School and soon in White City.

The six-week course at Talent Middle School and Phoenix High School is led by Rogue Community College instructors at three different skills levels from 6 to 8 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays.

"It's a life skills curriculum," says Kiersta Fricke-Gostnell, RCC's ESL coordinator. "It helps people function better in society, with their kids, when they go to a doctor's office. It helps them perform all the things any civilian would. We try to make it fun, but it's something they can use right away."

Students take an assessment to determine at which level they will be placed.

In the Level 1 class, students on a Wednesday night learn the difference between "on" and "in." After demonstrating pronunciation of the words the students are about to use, teacher Genealle Visagorskis divides the class into pairs for an interactive activity that gives them practice in making decisions about word use and in pronunciation.

Student Claudia Leal places a pencil on a sheet of paper on a table and asks, "Where is the pencil?"

"On the paper," responds Maria Paso. Then, "On the notebook."

About 60 people are enrolled in the classes. Together, they have about 150 children enrolled in the Phoenix-Talent district, Del Rio says.

"It's a perfect time to learn English, especially when you have kids; you can help them," says parent Elia Tzintzun. "I hope every parent comes here because you can learn."

Javier Del Rio, the district's English Language Learner coordinator, says he plans to track the academic performance of the child students to find out whether their parents' attainment of English skills will have any impact on the students' achievement.

The classes aren't the first time the district has offered English as a Second Language to parents. The classes were offered three years ago, but the district ran out of funds to pay for it.

The classes were revived this year after a Latino leadership group at Talent Middle School identified the language training as a primary means for improving parental involvement in their children's education.

The classes are offered free thanks to a \$7,500 grant from the Medford-based **Gordon Elwood Foundation**, Del Rio says. School district tax revenue currently isn't used for the program. The funds go toward paying for RCC instructors and for childcare during the classes, Del Rio says.

In order for the classes to continue through the end of the school year and resume next year, the district will need to obtain more funds either through another grant or donations, Del Rio says.

"I really don't want to have to charge parents," Del Rio says. "They really want to learn English. It's just that it costs money, and they have so many things going on in their lives. They understand that to be successful in this country they need to learn English."

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How to help

The Phoenix-Talent School District is seeking donations to help continue its no-cost English as a Second Language classes for parents through the end of this school year as well as next year. To donate, call 535-1552 ext. 357.