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Young children learn Spanish at Norton Space and Aeronautics Academy

[Stephen Wall, Staff Writer](#)

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SAN BERNARDINO - He's not Latino, but 8-year-old Jahzeel Smith is learning to speak Spanish like someone born in Mexico.

"I like it because you could talk to different people with it, you can translate it, and you can learn different words that you never heard," he said.

Jahzeel is one of 340 students attending the Norton Space and Aeronautics Academy, a public charter school with lofty language aims.

The school, which opened on the edge of the former Norton Air Force Base in August 2008, serves an ethnically diverse mix of students in kindergarten through third grades. Each year, a new grade is added until there is a full kindergarten through 12th grade campus. Student enrollment is about 50 percent Latino, 28 percent black, 15 percent white and 8 percent Asian.



Renee Rosas teaches in Spanish during a kindergarten class on Thursday at the Norton Space and Aeronautics Academy in San Bernardino. The charter school teaches students with a 90/10 ratio of Spanish to English in kindergarten. The amount of Spanish decreases annually until both English and Spanish are used equally. (Gabriel Luis Acosta / Staff Photographer)

The goal is for all students to speak, read and write in English and Spanish in all academic areas after continued attendance in the program for at least five years. A third language, Chinese, will be introduced to students in fifth grade.

"We want them to acquire the language skills and social and cultural skills to be full participants in a global economy," said Principal Jan Gustafson-Corea.

The instructional method is known as dual immersion, which pairs English learners and English speakers in the same classroom to develop fully bilingual and academically successful students.

"The earlier you learn a second language, the more ingrained it is in your mind," said Joanna Nord, whose 5-year-old son, Ryan, is in kindergarten.

Nord said her son comes home singing songs in Spanish that his 2-year-old sister repeats.

"In this day and age, especially in California, it's good to know a second language," Nord said. "I think it will be a benefit."

Other school districts in San Bernardino County offer dual immersion programs, but they are different from Norton because they are in selected classes and not school wide.



Students Stephanie Monroe, left, Andy Essa and Nayeli Vera receive instructions from teacher Erika Cortes in the dual immersion third-grade class on Thursday at the Norton Space and Aeronautics Academy in San Bernardino. (Gabriel Luis Acosta / Staff Photographer)

The San Bernardino City Unified School District has offered dual immersion for nine years. The program is taught to hundreds of English speakers and English learners at eight elementary schools and one middle school.

"As our world gets smaller and smaller and we get closer and closer to each other, the opportunities to benefit are many," said Daniel Arellano, the district's director of English Learner programs.

The Colton Joint Unified School District has a two-language program at Ruth Grimes Elementary School. There are two bilingual classes in kindergarten, two in first grade and two in second grade.

"By the time they leave sixth grade, they are all bilingual and biliterate," said Bertha Arreguin, the district's director of language support services.

The Norton Academy is part of the Lewis Center for Educational Research, a nonprofit organization named in honor of Rep. Jerry Lewis, R-Redlands. One of the center's programs is the Academy for Academic Excellence, a kindergarten through 12th grade charter school in Apple Valley formed in 1997.

The Norton Space and Aeronautics Academy's charter petition was approved by the San Bernardino County Board of Education in 2007.

"This charter is one of a kind in San Bernardino County because of the high quality curriculum and the high quality bilingual credentialed teachers," said Gil Navarro, a county board member. "I would support more of them."

Kindergarten students at the school receive 90 percent of the instructional time in Spanish and 10 percent in English. The amount of Spanish decreases annually until both English and Spanish are used equally.

Gustafson-Corea said that English speakers at the school aren't at risk of losing English because it is spoken at home, in the community and the media.

A child who learns reading and writing and math and science skills in one language can easily transfer those abilities to another language, she said.

"As we learn more than one language, our capacity for academic success increases as well," she said.

Makeda Parker, whose 8-year-old son is in second grade, said she initially was concerned he wasn't getting enough English



Principal Jan Gustafson-Corea is a firm believer in the dual immersion education of English-Spanish offered at the Norton Space and Aeronautics Academy in San Bernardino. (Gabriel Luis Acosta / Staff Photographer)
instruction.

"Because I work with him at home, as well as the way they have the curriculum set up, I am confident he will get everything he needs," Parker said.

Parker said she is excited about the addition of Chinese and possibly other languages in the future.

"Learning that second language at this age opens up other pathways to acquire other languages as they get older," Parker said.

Research of dual immersion programs shows that English speakers who learn two languages perform as well as or better on tests of English than their peers who have been taught only in English, Gustafson-Corea said.

Vanessa Ochoa said she enrolled her 7-year-old son at Norton because it offers a more structured curriculum and more personalized instruction than traditional public schools. The school expects students to behave properly and teaches there are consequences for misbehavior, she said.

Ochoa said she wants her son to build a strong academic foundation in Spanish so that he doesn't forget his roots.

"I have a nephew who is 18 who thinks he is white," said Ochoa, whose first language is Spanish. "My son knows he's Mexican. He can talk both languages and he's very proud of that."

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