

Volunteers teach kids how to speak Spanish

by **PAUL MORTON**

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¿Hablas español? (Do you speak Spanish?)

Students at Eastwood and Prospect elementary schools are learning to speak Spanish through a volunteer program initiated by Oberlin College Spanish and linguistics instructor Kim Faber. The Spanish in the Elementary Schools (SITES) program uses Oberlin College student volunteers to teach Spanish to kindergartners at Eastwood and third-graders at Prospect for 30 minutes once a week.

While foreign languages are typically taught in high school in public school districts, Faber said there are huge advantages to beginning the training earlier.

"There's been a lot of important research that shows things like students who grow up with contact with a second language do better on standardized test scores and reading comprehension," Faber said. "And those are two of the biggest areas that the elementary schools are trying to work on. So the goal is to get some amount of fluency in the elementary schools."

The SITES program started in October 2005 with 16 student volunteers, who received training in foreign language instruction from Faber. The students were divided into eight groups of two tutors each, with four groups going to each school.

The tutors meet once a week with all the kindergartners and third-graders, with an average of 20 students per team. The sessions last 30 minutes, but Faber said more exposure would be better.

"One classroom, in which the teacher is my husband, meets two days a week for 20 minutes each," she said. "And the difference between two days a week and one day a week is pretty significant. Right now what it's doing is giving the kids the idea that there's other languages out there."

Faber said she would like to expand the program in the future

to include an additional grade each year until all elementary grades receive foreign language instruction. But she said that would be more than she could expect student volunteers to undertake.

"I would really like this to be more of a spark that would ignite something that would be taken over by the schools and not so much something we're trying to impose on the schools," she said.

The elementary students are actually getting more exposure in January through Saturday classes held at the Oberlin Public Library. Student tutor Carmen Welton said she started the Saturday classes as a Winter Term project after a conversation with the parent of one of her kindergarten students.

"She said her son was really enjoying learning Spanish, but she felt he didn't actually know what he was saying a lot of the times," Welton said. "She thought if we met at least twice a week it would be better. So I organized and designed classes at the public library."

The Saturday classes are open to all interested students, from kindergarten through fifth grade, whether they are in the weekday classes or not.

They are divided into two groups, with kindergarten through second grade meeting from 10 to 11 a.m., and grades three through five meeting from 11 a.m. to noon.

"It's a lot more informal than the classroom setting, and a lot more kids show up," Welton said. "We had 65 kids show up the first weekend."

The classes at the library have also attracted a couple of high school Spanish students - a freshman and a senior - who are interested in using what they have learned outside of the classroom. She said allowing the high school students to help teach on Saturdays reinforces what they have learned.

"That's something we want to explore even more, because the way to (reinforce what they have learned) is to allow the high school kids to interact with the younger kids," Faber said. "Especially the ones that have finished and gone as far as they can go there. Then they can use what they have learned, and it empowers them to share that with smaller kids."

Faber said the students have embraced the Spanish instruction. And the community has started to embrace it as well.

"Yesterday, one of the teachers at the Oberlin Early Childhood Center is a Spanish speaker, and she asked if she could come and teach a class on Saturday," Faber said. "She's Puerto Rican, and she speaks in Spanish to the kids in the day-care. So I said, sure. And I like that idea. High school kids are asking to come and help, and offer up their time on a Saturday just blows my mind."