

Record-Journal (Meriden, CT)

Getting the language, not the material While bilingual, state's newest English speakers lag academically

by Andrew Perlot
Record-Journal staff

Published: January 9, 2009

Last year, 9-year-old Ricardo Munoz arrived at **Hanover School** in Meriden speaking virtually no English. But outside his classroom Thursday, a bit shy, his hands pulled into his sleeves and his eyes locked on the ground, he spoke his new language clearly.

He's learned a lot since leaving Puerto Rico, he said in unaccented English, and though changing languages was "pretty hard," he likes his classes.

Like Munoz, non-English speaking students in Connecticut tend to learn English quickly.

The state leads the nation in advancing English fluency. Only 1.4 percent of its 28,841 non-English-speaking students failed to show progress toward fluency in the 2006-07 **school** year, according to a recent study, compared to 38.4 percent for the rest of the country. The annual study, Quality Counts 2008, was conducted by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, a Bethesda, Md., nonprofit that studies trends in education.

But while Connecticut students are learning the language rapidly, they're still far behind their English-speaking peers in academics.

The state is ranked 50th in the nation in the performance of its non-English-speaking students, with just 29.7 percent proficient in math and English, compared to 75.7 percent of the entire student body, including English language learners. Nationally, the average is 41 percent for non-English speakers and 68.9 percent schoolwide.

Hanover Principal Miguel Cardona said students in the **school's** bilingual education program show rapid progress.

"Three years ago, these kids were in all different countries," he said, pointing out a class. "They're assimilating really well. They're amazing." Spanish-speaking students are put in classes with bilingual teachers, who work on their English as well as the general academic subjects. As students become proficient in English, the amount of Spanish used is reduced.

Students speaking other languages are taken out of their classes to work one on one with instructors to learn English.

One of the reasons for the general testing disparity is that Connecticut's academic tests are among the most challenging in the nation, Cardona said.

Christopher Swanson, director of the Quality Counts study, agreed with Cardona that hard tests are a factor, as is the fact that the state's students as a whole score well, which increases the gap between the two groups.

"Connecticut is a state that's done very well in terms of overall performance," he said. "They're average level is pretty high compared to national norms, but there are these big gaps between the disadvantaged and the advantaged."

But there's little allowance made for high populations of lower-scoring minority groups under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Districts that don't show continuous improvement in standardized test scores - for all student groups - face punitive action from the state Board of Education.

Only three **schools** - Franklin, John Barry and Thomas Hooker - of the district's 12 have managed to meet this year's academic proficiency requirements and are at no risk of state intervention within the next several years.

In Meriden, 992 students are enrolled in the 30-month bilingual education program, representing roughly 10 percent of the student body.

On the fourth grade 2008 Master Test, 33.3 percent of these students tested proficient in math, while 17.5 percent were proficient in reading and writing.

The city is struggling to close the achievement gap between minority students, many of whom do not speak English, and the rest of the student body, said Associate **School** Superintendent Robert Angeli. The city's large population of non-English speaking students is a major reason for the district's low performance scores on standardized tests, he said.

In Wallingford, there are 245 non-English-speaking students, representing about 3.6 percent of the student body, said Janis Lautier, the district's pupil personnel director. "We as a district really work with every student in terms of no child left behind," she said. "They really learn and progress very well."

On the Connecticut Mastery Tests, 58.3 percent of non-English speaking students tested as proficient in English while 83.6 percent did so in math, she said. The state Board of Education recognizes the need for improvement in the academic performance of its non-English speaking students, said spokesman Tom Murphy.

"It's clear that we don't do enough for English language learners in Connecticut," he said, "but the fact is that this is a national issue that no state does well in. It's really vital that we close the gap, that we change instruction in our **schools** (and) equip more students to be able to teach students with limited English skills."

But with the board fighting to even maintain current funding levels, finding additional money to put toward the program is not likely, he said.

"The (state education) commissioner is aware of it and wants to do something about it," Murphy said. "We may not have the money to do much, but money isn't everything. Sharing promising practices can be pretty effective."

aperlot@record-journal.com (203) 317-2234

Dave Zajac /Record-Journal

Ricardo Munoz, 9, a fourth-grader at **Hanover School** in South Meriden, works in the **school's** computer lab Thursday. Ricardo came to Meriden from Puerto Rico a year ago and has quickly become fluent in English.

Copyright 2009, Record-Journal, All Rights Reserved.