

THE REGION

SECTION | D

BUFFALONEWS.COM

THE BUFFALO NEWS

SUNDAY, MAY 4, 2014

BUFFALO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Heritage effort aims to boost Hispanic achievement

By TIFFANY LANKES

NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Exposure to their cultural heritage isn't always part of the regular school day for Hispanic students in the Buffalo Public Schools.

Their language, history and customs aren't typically reflected in classroom materials, an omission educators argue can affect their academic performance.

But that is changing at Bilingual Center School 33, where this week students celebrated El Día del Niño – the Day of the Child – through a partnership with the Hispanic Heritage Council of Western New York.

The traditional Latin American event honors the importance of children in society, raising awareness of issues affecting their health, safety and education. The council brought the celebration to the Buffalo schools three years ago as a way to help students connect with their culture, and maybe in turn get them more interested in learning.

"If you look at a lot of the (English Language Learner) schools, they're low-performing," said Casimiro Rodriguez, president of the council. "This day we look to sort of create a new identity for them. We want to keep those traditions."

Volunteers spent one morning at the school reading stories to the students to promote literacy. Students then participated in an assembly during which a storyteller acted out El Coqui, a traditional tale in Latino culture.

Similar events were held at the Niagara branch of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, and the Hispanic Heritage Council hopes to sponsor similar efforts in the future.

"We want to make sure our students in our schools know where they come from," said Tamara Alsace, the school district's director of multilingual education who is also part of the council.

About 16 percent of students in the Buffalo schools identify themselves as Hispanic. That proportion is far greater at School 33 on Elk Street, where Hispanic students make up 65 percent of the enrollment.



Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News

Buffalo comptroller Mark Schroeder reads to a first-grade class at Buffalo Public School 33 during the school's celebration of "El Día del Niño" – the Day of the Child.

And while this group makes up a substantial part of the enrollment, schools have historically struggled to meet the unique needs of Hispanic students, creating a wide achievement gap between them and their white classmates.

In Buffalo, Hispanic students performed on par with their black classmates on last year's state reading and math exams, with both groups trailing white students.

About 8 percent of Hispanic students met the state reading standards, compared to 7 percent of black students and 25 percent of white students. That gap also was reflected on the math exams, on which 6 percent of Hispanic students met state standards, compared to 5 percent of black students and 22 percent of white students.

Performance was even lower for students who do not speak English as their native language. In the

state's large urban school districts, just about 1 percent of students learning English mastered the state standards. In last year's Buffalo graduating class, Hispanic students graduated in fewer numbers.

The reasons for the divide, educators say, are multifaceted, including language barriers, cultural road blocks and a lack of connection to the material being taught in the classroom. Even students born in this country may struggle with the English language because Spanish is the only language spoken at home.

In an effort to better reach its large Hispanic population, School 33 is launching a language immersion program where students take their classes in both Spanish and English. The program is starting with pre-kindergarten, a grade level where enrollment is split evenly between students who speak Spanish as their native lan-

guage and those who speak English.

"We don't want them to forget their native language," said Principal Miguel Medina.

School 33 is trying to incorporate elements of the students' heritage into lessons and projects. The school is also using an inquiry-based approach to teaching, where student questions and curiosity – not lesson plans – shape instruction.

Working with community group including the Hispanic Heritage Council, is key to bringing these components into the classroom. The council is working to bring similar cultural components into other Buffalo schools. It is currently putting together an exhibit of Hispanic history in Buffalo.

"It's important for the children to have an idea of their history," Rodriguez said.

email: tlankes@buffnews.com