

Learning Spanish in Upper Moreland

By Gary Weckselblatt Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, January 15, 2015 2:00 pm

As they entered the classroom to their teacher's greeting in Spanish, the Upper Moreland fourth graders sat down ready to get to work — and they were excited about it.

For 40 minutes they listened to Ashley Kontostergios, their instructor, communicate in Spanish and they responded in kind as they frequently raised their hands to be called on to answer questions in a language previously foreign to them.

Kontostergios typically followed the children's response with "Muy bien, perfecto."

Upper Moreland is doing something quite rare in these days of tight school budgets, adding a world language program at the elementary school level.

Joe Waters, the intermediate school's principal, called the program "a dream come true. We have long recognized the need for children at this level to be exposed to other languages."

Assistant Superintendent Jenny Lehman, who has pushed the district's continuous improvement framework for more than a decade, said Upper Moreland looks at instruction and development in a systematic way. She said adding an elementary component of world languages happened only after middle and high school level classes were in place.

With the elementary classes followed up by middle school selections of French, German or Spanish, Lehman said the district has developed "a nice sequence" all the way to Advanced Placement courses, which can be used for college credits if students achieve a score of 3 or higher.

Kontostergios, who also teaches Spanish in high school, said younger students benefit from the early exposure. "They definitely pick it up more quickly," she said. "The kids have been awesome. We started out with a few pictures and putting together phrases. Now we're at sentences."

Upper Moreland is using the Symtalk language system to instruct the youngsters. In Kontostergios' class, students move blocks on a smartboard to create sentences. There's lot of participation in the



Spanish teacher Ashley Kontostergios assists Andrew Lee, a fourth-grade student at the Upper Moreland Intermediate School with his Spanish work during class Wednesday. The Upper Moreland School District has implementing a new World Language program at the elementary level. Starting this year, grades three, four and five will begin learning basic conversational Spanish.

24-student classroom.

According to Lehman, research said the Symtalk method really fits what they're trying to do: "Get children to speak as quickly as possible."

The students are pumped.

Hannah Springart, 10, said learning Spanish helps her "communicate with my best friend. She teaches me a lot of Spanish words, now I can teach her."

Mika Levine, 10, said "If I ever meet new people or have people in my family that speak Spanish, I'll be able to talk to them."

Austin Konczyk, 9, said "I'm able to tell my family members how I can talk about things. I show them how I can say Spanish names and how I can write, too."

The progress of the students is "amazing" when you consider they take two hours of Spanish once in a six-day cycle, Lehman said. "There's such an enthusiasm."

The learning is not limited to students. Waters and Michael Bair, the assistant principal, travel twice a week to the Spanish Language School in Philadelphia for classes.

"We want to be able to communicate with students and parents in a respectful way," said Waters, adding that Upper Moreland has about 100 students whose second language is English. "They entrust their children to a system they know so little about. We're very thrilled with our district moving in this direction."

Last year, the district began a Spanish club. Waters said one of the byproducts of such an endeavor has been that students with difficulty in English have become the "go-to" students in the club.

"It's given them some prominence and changed the perception of them in a very positive way," he said.

The process, Waters continued, will help district students "do what languages should do — build bridges. Common barriers begin to break down, which is what education is all about."