

# Learning Languages: Any Place, Any Time

By Allyson Day

When I walk into a school building with my large brown and pink polka-dot suitcase rolling behind, many think I am going on a trip. Not the case. My suitcase is my rolling office, my rolling bag of tricks, my rolling lesson plan in a bag. Like many elementary Spanish teachers, I travel from building to building with all my wares that help teach students the love of a second language!

One of my teaching assignments is different than those taught by my public and private school colleagues. Each Tuesday morning, I roll my suitcase into a former elementary school building and set up for the day's exciting K-12 Spanish classes for children who are homeschooled.

The West Des Moines Community School District serves those children through the Home School Assistance Program (HSAP). HSAP has existed for many years, although not at the level it functions now. In the beginning, a coordinator visited homes to collaborate with families on the educational progress of their children. In 2007, the Chief Financial Officer of the West Des Moines Community School District, a parent of homeschooled children, suggested expanding the program to include enrichment classes. Parents were polled and initially requested subjects that proved difficult to teach and/or assess at home. Art, lab-based science, physical education and writing were offered in the first year with approximately 80 students participating at varying levels.

After the success of the first classes, Spanish and drama were added the next year. said Dan Miller, a homeschooling father who has two children in the program says, "We confidently instruct the children through most of their subjects, but some, such as foreign languages and music, present a great difficulty. The children use a computer-based program to assist them in languages, but it is no

substitute for a real teacher."

Now, six years later, there are 130 students involved in the program.

## STAFFING

The job description for a homeschool Spanish teacher has many of the requirements one would expect. The candidate must be fluent in Spanish, love working with children, be willing to work with all kinds of learners, communicate well with parents and students, and have great enthusiasm for teaching. The HSAP classes in the West Des Moines Community School District are very elementary heavy, so hiring a Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) teacher met the developmental needs of the majority of the students. There are, however, junior high and high school students that want to learn Spanish too. Since the program is classified as "enrichment," there is flexibility in the level taught according to certification requirements and subsequent hiring of teachers. (Check your individual state Department of Education for specific requirements.)

A homeschool teacher must possess very specific qualities to ensure a successful program. First and foremost, the teacher must be open-minded to different educational approaches, such as homeschooling. The educational culture of homeschool families can be very different than that of the traditional school community. Teachers must also be open-minded to and respectful of differing belief systems. Many families that homeschool have strong beliefs in some aspect of life, which can be apparent through the words and actions of their children. The homeschool teacher must be able to accept all students as they come and must also be able to work with all grade levels, some of them being grouped together.

## CLASS SCHEDULE

The fall and spring sessions are 13 weeks long. The fall semes-

ter goes from Labor Day to the first week in December, the spring from the end of January to the beginning of May. This schedule was created to meet the needs of homeschooling families who often take extended trips around the holidays.

The elementary students attend enrichment classes one morning a week. They learn Spanish for 50 minutes and then rotate to another subject area for two other class periods. The groups are multi-age and consist of classes of K-1, 2-3

and 4-5, with approximately 15-20 students in each class. The reason the elementary Spanish classes are so well attended is because homeschool parents pay close attention to educational research, and they are aware of the window of opportunity that exists for learning language at an early age. This results in the K-1 grade class being the largest group.

#### **ELEMENTARY CLASSES**

In the elementary classes, students experience immersion in the language. They participate in a wide variety of games, songs, and stories. Special attention is given to the developmental level of the students, with emphasis on high energy, highly motivating activities lasting only five-10 minutes each. My repertoire of strategies includes informational gap activities, Total Physical Response, Total Physical Response Storytelling, the natural approach, units with Integrated Performance Assessments, along with other strategies based on the National Standards for Foreign Language.

Holidays and cultural topics are also discussed. In the spring, each subject area in the HSAP program has a culminating activity. The writing class has a poetry reading, the drama class has a production, and the elementary Spanish classes have a piñata party. Prior to that date, students learn about the cultural traditions surrounding piñatas and then create their own class piñata. Students learn that the American birthday party tradition has Hispanic, Aztec, and Mayan roots.

The K-1 curriculum consists of conversation questions, colors, numbers, days of the week, clothing, and shapes. It should be noted that there is a significant high turn-over of students in our HSAP program. Because homeschool families are not bound to a school-year schedule and have many curriculum options available to them, their year-to-year routines vary greatly. It is not uncommon for a family to enroll in the HSAP classes during the fall semester, but

# HOMESCHOOL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM OFFERS SPANISH CLASSES TO ALL LEVELS

not the spring semester. Or they may take classes for one year, and then decide to “take a year off” because they have a new baby. Additionally, many families “try” homeschooling for a year or two and then re-enroll in public or private school. Based on this unique dynamic, I teach the same curriculum in the K-1 class for both years even though there are first graders who attended as kindergarteners too. This meets the needs of the students very well, and their retention rate is

good, even though they are only with me for 26 class periods of 50 minutes each in one year. The fast-paced environment in my classroom keeps students interested, even though some of the same activities may be repeated.

In the 2-3 and 4-5 classes, the “enrichment” nature of the classes gives me complete freedom to choose curriculum. I alternate between the content-related curriculum that I teach in the public schools and student-driven curriculum. One year students asked to do a unit on animals. Last year, they wanted to study sports. Luckily, I have written FLES curriculum for our public school district for 19 years, so I can efficiently develop curriculum for these classes using my knowledge of best practices.

My homeschool classes are generally smaller in size than my public school classes and serve as a great place to try out new strategies. Last year, when I took a class on using iPads in the FLES classroom, I piloted the lessons with the homeschool classes first. While writing integrated performance assessments for my public school curriculum, I tried out various components of the assessments on my homeschool classes to see how they worked and decide what to tweak.

#### **SECONDARY CLASSES**

Developing class offerings for the older students was challenging at first. When I was hired, the program offered two classes: a junior high class (grades 6-8) and a high school class (grades 9-12). This was successful the first year I taught, but it would not have worked the next year because of the high turnover rate in HSAP students. New students are allowed to enroll at any time. This provides great flexibility for the families, but made it difficult to progress with the students who remained in the program for any length of time. Changes in the courses were necessary.

Now parents can enroll their children in Spanish A, Spanish

B or Spanish C. Any student, sixth grade or older, is eligible to take Spanish A. The classes are now year-long courses. Students must complete a full year of Spanish A to be eligible for Spanish B, and they must complete Spanish B to take Spanish C. It was important that the classes *not* be called Spanish 1 or Spanish 2. I did not want to mislead parents to believe that if their child took Spanish 1 in HSAP, they could take Spanish 2 in a traditional high school the next year. Regular high school classes have 180 days of instruction per year versus the 26 days in the HSAP program.

For curriculum, I use the same textbook that my district's high school uses. This allows for a smooth transition for students who choose to enroll in the public high school after homeschooling. Because the classes are enrichment in nature, letter grades are not assigned. At the end of each class, I hand the students a review sheet, covering the important points of the lesson. Most homeschooled students are skilled at studying independently or with a parent, so this is a successful way to re-enforce the topics of my direct instruction. The next lesson begins with a mini-quiz over the previous lesson. Mini-quizzes are not meant to be difficult or stressful; they are to remind the students that they should periodically study their Spanish to ensure retention. Students can also access a wiki website I developed for them. Each class in elementary and secondary has its own page with the current lesson topics available for study. There are also links to on-line games and songs for additional practice.

Secondary classes also have a culminating activity at the end of the school year in the spring. This endorses their hard work and gives them a cultural experience they might not otherwise have. Students brainstorm ideas, and have chosen such activities as an Hispanic food fair where students prepare and bring a food from a Spanish-speaking country, a field trip to a local Ecuadorian restaurant, and a piñata party.

### **FUNDING**

In Iowa, public school districts receive 30 percent student funding for each homeschooled child that is enrolled in their district. Any money received for homeschooling students must be spent on homeschooled students, so that money goes directly to the HSAP program. As word spread about the vast offering of enrichment classes taught by experienced certified teachers, families in surrounding communities open enrolled their students into the

district. The same 30 percent funding is then provided for those students. Teachers are paid hourly rather than on contract, since the schedule does not follow the district calendar.

### **CHALLENGES**

When I started with the program four years ago, I knew little about the homeschooling culture and how it might relate to Spanish instruction. I have learned a lot during my experience.

As mentioned earlier, homeschool families are used to keeping their own schedule. Because these are enrichment classes, there are no attendance requirements. This frustrated me in the beginning because I was accustomed to teaching in a public school, and I wanted my students present and ready to go. Most of them are, but each year there are a few that are much more laid back.

During my second year, I learned to look at the HSAP the same way I viewed ballet lessons or an extra-curricular art class for my own child. I became more relaxed and understanding of the culture of homeschooling, and it stopped bothering me. I realized that many families choose homeschooling because they want more flexibility. I knew that the students that were attending regularly were learning and growing in their language acquisition, but also appreciated the students who came infrequently because I knew they were at least walking away with a positive attitude about Spanish.

Another issue is the short amount of teacher-student contact time. One 50 minute class period once a week for 26 weeks is hardly enough time to get through what I could cover in the public schools. After getting a few years of experience, I became more accustomed to the amount of time I have with the students and what I could realistically cover. I struck a balance between maintaining the highest of teaching standards and remaining realistic about the amount of time I have with students.

### **WHY IT WORKS**

This program is successful and has almost doubled in size over a few short years for many reasons. First and foremost, these free classes are provided by certified veteran teachers, who specialize in unique subject areas. Although the district offers an elementary school Spanish program in the public schools, the idea of elementary Spanish classes is still relatively new and interesting to many homeschool families. Therefore, they want their students to participate. Secondly, the children are excited to be there. Meeting only once-a-week keeps the ex-

perience new and interesting. Dan Miller's daughter, Mattea, a seventh grader who has been in the program for six years, says, "It is the most fun class. I like singing the songs. I like doing the quizzes."

A certain level of teacher gratification is achieved by teaching students for several consecutive years. As a FLES teacher, I have the opportunity to instruct students in consecutive years and build relationships. Being able to teach children in the HSAP program from elementary into junior high and then into high school gives me the experience of a familial, one-room schoolhouse.

The shorter school year—26 weeks instead of the traditional 36 weeks—cuts back on teacher and student fatigue. The long break in the winter months makes everyone eager to return in late January. Small class sizes enable greater participation for students, more accountability, and the opportunity for more in-depth learning.

### **CONCLUSION**

Teaching Spanish to homeschooled students is different than being a FLES teacher in a public school. I have less time with the students, and the commitment level for some families is different due to the enrichment nature of the course. However, the enthusiasm, overall behavior, and willingness to learn are big perks to teaching in the home school program. Having autonomy over my very own articulated K-12 program keeps things stimulating and novel for me as well.

Working with parents who take great investment in their children's educational experience is an energizing benefit for this veteran teacher. In fact this year, so many parents enrolled their children in my K-1 class, we had to divide them into their own grade levels and hire another Spanish teacher. In a time when budget cuts are looming, it is invigorating to know that early language learning is greatly appreciated and valued.

**Allyson Day** resides in West Des Moines, Iowa, and has been teaching in the West Des Moines Community School District for 21 years, with 16 of those being in an elementary Spanish program, along with four years in the Homeschool Enrichment Program highlighted in this article. She teaches part-time and spends the rest of her time caring for her family of seven.

