



Cliff Grassmick / Staff Photographer

Zoe Patricia Labansat Naver, left, and Ziranda Dominguez race to the screen during a teaching exercise. Peak to Peak Charter School has unveiled a new “Spanish for Heritage-Speakers” course this year that is providing 23 Spanish heritage speakers in grades six through 12 the ability to achieve full academic biliteracy.

Harnessing strengths

Peak to Peak charter starts heritage Spanish class for native speakers

By Amy Bounds
Staff Writer

Lafayette’s Peak to Peak Charter started a Spanish class for heritage speakers this fall, creating a community for the school’s small but growing Latino population.

Heritage speakers generally are those who have been exposed to Spanish regularly in their homes.

Already bilingual, though sometimes missing formal Spanish instruction, typical Spanish language classes aren’t a good fit.

“It’s not engaging for a second-language learner,” said Elizabeth Leach, who co-teaches the class with Evelyn Firman. “We want to harness student strengths in English and Spanish. We’re letting them use what

they already know so being bilingual feels like an asset rather than a challenge.”

That means allowing students to use either language instead of requiring Spanish only and taking a wider language arts approach — how to organize an essay or how to debate — instead of focusing more narrowly on grammar and vocabulary.

“It’s really nice to be in a Spanish class where we don’t have to learn past tense and conjunctions,” said Peak to Peak senior Ziranda Dominguez. “We’re learning real-world speaking and current events and history. We can code switch — switch back and forth between English and Spanish.”

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Plus, Leach said, the class is an opportunity to teach students in a culturally responsive way and give them literacy skills they can use in their other classes.

“When you teach in a culturally responsive way and help them feel seen, they rise to those high expectations,” she said.

While most of the students in the class are Latino, a few are Anglo students who came to Peak to Peak after attending Pioneer Elementary, a dual-immersion bilingual school in Lafayette.

Some have had formal Spanish instruction, others learned only by hearing it spoken at home. The 23 students in the combined sixth-grade through 12-grade class are grouped into three levels based on their Spanish fluency — honors, high school and middle school.

A recent lesson, for example, focused on accents and why and when they’re used — something students who grew up speaking Spanish with their parents typically don’t learn.

Firman said the positive feedback she’s hearing from students includes that they love starting their day “in a very welcoming community” in the class.

“You can just be yourself,” said ninth-grader Zoe Patricia Labansat Nova. “Everybody knows everybody.”

In designing the class, Firman and Leach looked at similar classes at other Den-



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Ziranda Dominguez becomes expressive earlier this month when debating in the class “Spanish for Heritage-Speakers,” new this year at Peak to Peak Charter School.

ver-metro area schools.

Firman also drew on her own background as a heritage Spanish speaker, while Leach is getting her doctorate in leadership for educational equity focused on Latino learners.

Plus, they took into account feedback from a Peak to Peak Latino parent group on how the school could better support students. Suggestions included bringing in Latino role models for the students since most teachers are white, so the class includes field trips and guest speakers.

One field trip was to the Denver Art Museum, to see an exhibit of all Mexican-American artists. The school also displayed an exhibit on the untold history of the area created by the Boulder County Latino History group.

“It was awesome,” said sophomore Brandon Castro, noting that he hadn’t known that Colorado was once a part of Mexico.

Next month, the students in the class plan to host a film screening to welcome the neighborhood’s Latino community to campus dur-

ing open enrollment, hanging fliers in both English and Spanish in the community.

There’s also a plan for the students to publish bilingual children’s stories that they’ll read to elementary Spanish students at Peak to Peak.

“We’re not just focused in the classroom,” Ziranda said. “We can take what we learn in here and take it out to the community.”

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