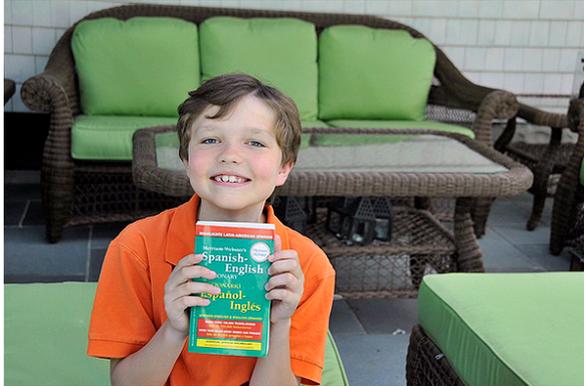


Southampton Elementary School Student Participates In Spanish Spelling Bee

Publication: The Southampton Press

By Hope Reese Jul 10, 2012 4:36 PM

UPDATED Jul 11, 2012 12:31 PM



Jack Zaloga will be heading to the Santillana National Spanish Spelling Bee held on July 20, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. REMY MCFADDEN

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Canada, Mexico, the Bahamas and Ghana, among other countries, convene at a convention center in Maryland for the bee, competing for a first-place prize of \$35,000 in cash, a trophy, reference collections, and even a Nook tablet computer.

Spanish spelling bees have become a new trend across the country, especially in places where non-English speakers are becoming a larger part of the community. Growing out of the Scripps tradition is the Santillana National Spanish Spelling Bee, which will be held for only the second time on Friday, July 20, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Last year, there were 11 participants from four states; a trophy and \$500 were awarded to the winner.

The studying paid off for Jack and Nick. As Jack ate Smarties on the day of the Southampton bee in April—he said they make him smarter—he and Nick tied for first place in their school’s bee. Now, Jack is one of two students—the other is from Newburgh—to enter the Santillana Bee from New York, which is joining the national competition for the first time this year. His buddy Nick also was eligible to go, but his family couldn’t make the trip west.

New York will be the seventh state, and the only state from the Northeast, to participate in the national bee—the others are California, Colorado, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas and Wisconsin.

On weekdays after school this spring, Jack Zaloga and Nick Castillo, fourth-graders at Southampton Elementary School and best friends since kindergarten, rushed home every day to launch a Skype video chat between them. More important than a simple friendly conversation was studying together for their school’s upcoming Spanish spelling bee.

Many people may be familiar with the Scripps National Spelling Bee, which is held—in English—every June. Formed in 1925, the bee has been the subject of television shows, books and documentaries. More than 200 of the best spellers from all 50 states,

Southampton Elementary School's annual Spanish spelling bee has been going on for about 15 years, predating the school's dual language program, which was established seven years ago in response to a growing need to educate a large group of students whose first language was not English.

It may have come just at the right time. According to Virginia Hyer, a media representative for the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of people in Southampton Town who speak Spanish at home more than doubled in 10 years, from 4,071 in 2000 to 8,671 in 2010.

At the time of the program's inception, there were more than 20 students who needed English as a Second Language services, and the school was legally required by New York State to adopt the dual language program, which puts native Spanish- and English-speaking students in kindergarten through the seventh grade together. The program creates a "cross-cultural bond that's so beautiful," said Ellen Martin, a fifth grade Spanish teacher in Southampton.

It offers students a unique opportunity to learn from each other, rather than being taught separately, as was the custom with traditional ESL programs. Half of the students are native English speakers, and half of the students are native Spanish speakers, and the classes are taught in both languages.

"The kids in my class learn about each other's cultures, and they're all right with it," said Ana Martinez, Jack and Nick's dual language teacher. "I wish I'd had that when I was little."

The class has been deemed a success. In the fourth grade alone last year, there are five classes, and two of them—a total of 39 students—were dual language classrooms. That's almost 40 percent of the entire fourth grade class. And even still, there is a long waiting list of qualified kids, whose parents share a growing desire for their children to become fluent in Spanish.

Jack and Nick met in kindergarten, in the second year of the program.

Nick, 9, grew up in Southampton, but his parents are from Colombia. He learned Spanish before English, he said. Nick said he believes the dual language program is "the best thing about school." He said learning another language feels "special, because a lot of people don't know Spanish," and thinks he's "lucky that [he's] one of the people who knows Spanish." Nick acts as a bit of a translator in class, helping others navigate a new language.

Sometimes Jack will go to Nick's house and "speak Spanglish" with the family. Nick's mom, Linda Zaloga, said that soon she won't be able to practice very well with her son, who is progressing "beyond her" in his proficiency with Spanish.

Jack's family has no Latino heritage: His mother, Lisa, calls herself a "mutt"—she's English, Irish, Scottish and German—and his father is Polish and Norwegian. Jack's parents grew up learning Spanish in school, but it was very different then. Her sons "conjugate, they know the tenses—and they use it," Ms. Zaloga said. "These kids walked into a classroom, and somebody started speaking Spanish to them. It's a totally different

way of dealing with it than when I walked into a high school Spanish class.”

The family travels to Mexico every year, which Jack said was fun because he could listen in on other people’s conversations and know what they were saying.

Jack and Nick’s teacher, Ms. Martinez, drives an hour to Southampton each day from Brentwood. She’s been teaching in the fourth grade dual immersion class for four years now, but this was her first year being involved with the spelling bee. Ms. Martinez is a Latina—her father emigrated from El Salvador, and her mother came from Guatemala. In Brentwood, where she grew up, there was a bilingual program, but Spanish-speaking students were kept separate from English-speaking kids.

To generate enthusiasm and help interested kids prepare for the bee, Ms. Martinez and Georgina Correa ran the “Spanish Spelling Bee Club,” which met three days a week for an hour each day after school.

Across the country, other schools like Southampton are following suit and hosting their own Spanish spelling bees. Although only some states—New Mexico, New York, Oregon, and a few others—have statewide Spanish spelling bees, local districts are coming up with their own versions of the Spanish spelling bee, many this year for the first time. A school in Glastonbury, Connecticut, has been holding a bee for 25 years. And Foxborough Regional Charter School will hold its third annual Spanish bee in June—it’s the only one held in Massachusetts.

New Mexico has been holding statewide Spanish spelling bees since 1994. And although there were only 11 middle-schoolers at last year’s premiere national bee—from Colorado, New Mexico, Oregon and Texas—the number of participants will double this July, as California, two new districts from Texas, Wisconsin, and New York will be sending their best spellers to Albuquerque to compete for the first time.

David Briseño, the state bilingual director of the New Mexico Public Education Department, was the creator and organizer of last year’s first national competition. “It came together through colleagues, friendships, and arm-twisting,” he said.

For Mr. Briseño, Ms. Martinez and other organizers working full-time, the bee has become a labor of love, they said, and they work on it in their off-hours. It’s something they do because they sensed something missing and saw a solution—and for them, it’s more than just a competition.

“It really helps us elevate the status of the language in this country,” Mr. Briseño said. “In so many places, Spanish is a second-class language. Unfortunately, in our country, when people think about it, they think of immigrants ... and there’s a bit of racism involved.”

His hope is that in “five, six, seven years,” the bee will “become a truly national event.”

The two best friends are eager for the big competition. “It’s kind of cool how I’m going to New Mexico. I’ve been to Mexico, but this is New Mexico.”

And while Jack’s best friend is disappointed that he won’t be going along, he is hoping

for the best for Jack. "I'm not going," Nick said, "so I want Jack to win."



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