

New signs bridge language gap at Clinton

By Philip Sean Curran
Staff Writer

Kevin Fallas came to Clinton Elementary School as a first-grader, unable to speak English and adjusting to life in a new country.

In the past eight years, Clinton has become the Ellis Island for foreign-born children. As home to the district's English as a Second Language Program, it has drawn a multi-ethnic population.

Parents here are trying to bridge the language barrier that might separate foreign-born pupils like Kevin and their parents from the rest of the school community.

This year, they designed and paid for multi-lingual signs that were hung throughout the building. They are in 15 different languages, like Chinese and Polish, and are outside rest rooms, exits, the theater and elsewhere.

In addition, the Clinton PTA produced versions of its newsletter in Spanish and Haitian Creole, said Cecelia Cancellor, vice president of the PTA.

The school sees itself as a melting pot, home to families representing 17 nations. Parents said they embrace the cultural diversity at the school, and that these steps help to promote it.

"My kids understand what a culturally diverse environment is

because they live it," Cancellor said.

"This is the UN," said Principal Patty O'Neill on Friday.

They see benefits for all students. The signs not only help foreign children assimilate into their new environment, but they also open new languages to English-speaking children.

Clinton has 466 pupils this year, with 45 of them in the ESL program. They come from all across the district, even if they are not zoned to attend Clinton.

That's because eight years ago, the district decided to put the ESL program under one roof. Before, it was split between Clinton and Seth Boyden Demonstration School.

In some cases, those children might have been adopted by American families. In other cases, parents might have moved into Maplewood or South Orange from some foreign country.

But not all of them who enter the school at the same time start at the same time. Some come in the middle of the academic year, unable to speak any English. Those children, sometimes natives of eastern Europe, Haiti, and Asia, take regular classes with

their English-speaking peers.

Kevin, now a fifth-grader, recalled his first day at school. The native of Costa Rica was afraid they might be making fun of him.

"It was hard especially because you don't know what other people are saying," he said Friday, in English.

He is a close friend of a classmate just like him. Without being told, he helped translate into Spanish for the boy.

Arlene Aguirre, an ESL teacher, said the school pairs up ESL students with other students who speaks the same language.

As for the newsletter, draw in parents who might not get involved in the school due to a language barrier.

Parents of foreign students have it rough too. A mother and a father might have to work multiple jobs.

The PTA had help from a Spanish teacher at the school, Martiza Leyva, and a teacher's aid, Francel Michel, who translated the newsletters into Spanish and Haitian Creole.

Philip Sean Curran can be reached at 973-763-0700, ext. 110, or at news-record@thelocalsource.com.



Photo by Barbara Koldkalis

Kevin Fallas, a fifth grader at the Clinton Elementary School, follows the signs for the Boys bathroom. The Clinton PTA funded multi-lingual signs to ease the transition to English.