

The Mercury News

Action Day opens first dedicated Spanish immersion campus in Willow Glen

San Jose preschool gives students ‘the gift of bilingualism’



Action Day School teacher Karla Rodriguez helps young students put puzzles together at the Willow Glen preschool on Sept. 29, when the Lincoln Avenue school opened as Action Day School's first dedicated Spanish immersion campus. The full-day Spanish immersion experience for preschool-age kids filled up so quickly that Action Day opened an additional Spanish immersion classroom at its Moorpark campus. (Courtesy photo)



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PUBLISHED: October 5, 2025 at 6:38 AM PDT

Willow Glen families, neighbors and business leaders joined District 6 City Councilmember Michael Mulcahy Sept. 29 for a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the opening of Action Day School's first dedicated Spanish immersion campus.

Located on Lincoln Avenue in San Jose's Willow Glen neighborhood, the preschool serves children ages 2 -5. While the students themselves may be small, the school's goals are lofty. As Mulcahy put it, "Action Day is giving families the gift of bilingualism, a skill that strengthens brain development, problem-solving, cultural awareness, and prepares children for a globally connected future."

The school is part of Action Day's Global Schools program, a full-day Spanish immersion experience for preschool-age kids. The Willow Glen program has been well-received, filling up so quickly that Action Day opened an additional Spanish immersion classroom at its Moorpark campus.

"Bilingual classrooms are fairly common, but full-immersion preschool programs are rare," said Cathy Jelic, president of Action Day. "We developed our program based on parent demand, and it's been extremely popular."

Indeed, research shows that early bilingual exposure increases the number of neural connections in the brain, improving cognitive and problem-solving abilities, and even providing some resilience to cognitive decline later in life.

"Besides the developmental advantages, children who speak other languages also have a better appreciation for other cultures and people who are different from themselves," said Action Day's program director Claudia Hernandez, who developed and leads the Spanish immersion program. "Students even have better attitudes about school. The question then for parents becomes, 'Why not?'"

Children attending the Global School are immersed in the Spanish language from the moment they walk through the door, when they're greeted by a teacher (or "maestra") with "Buenos dias! Como estas?" (Good morning! How are you?). "Tommy ya llego!" (Tommy is here!)

From then on, it's just like regular preschool - games, songs and play - but all done in Spanish.

Children learn Spanish the same way they learn English. Those who have never heard or spoken Spanish start out listening and getting comfortable with the Spanish immersion setting; those who are already bilingual begin to advance, accruing more vocabulary and improving their pronunciation and comprehension. Wherever they begin, "everybody gets something," says Hernandez.

Danielle Sarmiento and her husband jumped at the chance to enroll their preschool-age daughter Stella in Action Day's Spanish immersion program. "It was important to both of us that Stella grow up bilingual," Sarmiento says.

Sarmiento's mother immigrated from Bolivia when she was 12, but she encouraged her daughter to speak only English. "I was exposed to Spanish, but I didn't grow up speaking it myself," she recalls.

For many immigrant families at the time, there was almost a taboo against speaking one's native language. Sarmiento and her husband were determined that Stella's experience would be different. Today, Sarmiento's mother lives with them, helping care for her granddaughter and speaking only Spanish to her. Sarmiento's own Spanish isn't quite up to par. "I hear them speaking together, and I get so jealous!" she laughs. As she talks, Stella sits by her side, singing softly to herself—in Spanish, of course.

The demand that is driving the expansion of Action Day's Global Schools program seems to belie the national undercurrents. "In a moment when national conversations are seemingly working against bilingualism, San Jose is sending a very different message," Mulcahy said. "We are saying that every child benefits from learning more than one language, that diversity is not something to fear but something to nurture, and that being part of a global community begins here, in our classrooms."