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Reading is name of game at camp

By Nazish Dholakia - Express-News

"Bubbles!" rising first-grader Jose Zuñiga screamed as his teacher asked him to name a word that starts with the letter "B."

Zuñiga is among 16 students at La Escuela de Las Americas who are involved in the five-day Super WHY! Reading Camp.

The program, funded by the U.S. Education Department, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and PBS, focuses on bridging the literacy gap among children from lower-income families.

"I have seen a huge improvement in these children," said Claudia Garcia, a teacher leading the reading program. "I never thought it would be possible for them to pick up so much in a short time."

The program at La Escuela de Las Americas focuses on teaching predominantly Spanish-speaking children how to read.

"At the beginning, (students) were asking me to translate almost everything into Spanish," Garcia said. "Now they're so enthusiastic about learning the alphabet and the sounds in English."

The camp is based on Super WHY!, an award-winning PBS KIDS series that follows the adventures of four best friends who have the ability to transform into literacy superheroes.

Students "transform" into these characters and participate in activities that incorporate reading games, songs, and crafts.

Ana Marie Lira, the school's principal, believes that what the students have learned will stay with them.

"I know when they leave, when they hear the songs or play the hand games, they'll remember what they've learned," Lira said. "They're not going to forget it."

Garcia's class consists of kindergarten and first-grade students. It's one of two Super WHY! programs that will be held in the San Antonio area. This summer, 80 reading camps will take place nationwide.

The programs also are being supported locally by United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County.

"We're trying to bring more resources into the community to enrich what's already there," said Maricella Borroel, the Director of Early Childhood Services at KLRN, PBS's local affiliate, said. "They take the activities and what they've learned home with them, and it helps."

And research shows Super WHY! has helped.



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Sky Losoya, a youngster at La Escuela de Las Americas who's involved in the Super WHY! Reading Camp, participates in literacy adventures and games. Super WHY! is a program created to help children learn the fundamentals of reading through interactive storybook adventures.

A study conducted by the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania found that children who watched Super WHY! performed significantly better in most standardized measures of early reading achievement compared to children who watched an alternative science program.

Borroel said the program's key is its focus on individualization, by helping children in the areas they struggle with most. The students learn reading concepts by playing with letters, sounds, and words.

Garcia said this is a much-needed first step in teaching these children how to read and write fluently.

"These may seem like small gains to an outsider, but what they're learning is impacting them and generating an interest (in reading) within them," Borroel said.

This is the second consecutive summer that the program is being held in San Antonio, and Garcia hopes that many more camps like this one will be introduced in the future.