

# THE SOUTHWEST COMMUNITY CONNECTION

## Capstone program gives students early taste of study abroad

*Fifth-graders visit native countries of target languages, design original research*

BY CLAIRE OLIVER

*The Southwest Community Connection, Jun 1, 2011*

**SOUTHWEST — Getting their feet wet with international experience early, students from The International School in downtown Portland recently put the culmination of six years of language immersion to good use with a trip abroad and subsequent research exhibition.**

At the K-5 school, students take the majority of their classes — about five hours a day — in their chosen target language of Spanish, Chinese or Japanese. Subjects such as math, science and language arts are all taught by native speakers, and only music, art, physical education and English use English during instruction.

As part of the school's Capstone Program, fifth-graders spend two weeks visiting the native country of their target language.

Three students from Southwest Portland, for example, were part of a group that had the chance to test its Spanish language know-how in Madrid, Spain."

For the first week of the trip, students from The International School stayed with host families and attended La Salle Maravillas with their host siblings.

"It was like a five-day sleep-away camp," said Zoe Bennett-Hanes, a Bridlemile resident.

During their stay, students noted firsthand the differences between Spanish and American culture, including the fact that most students live in apartments, most go home for lunchtime and extracurricular activities such as dance, arts and crafts are offered during the four hours of recess held each day instead of after school.

The second week was spent touring other historic cities throughout Spain with teacher and parent chaperones, including Segovia, Salamanca, Alcala and Toledo.

Stops included cathedrals and the home of Miguel de Cervantes, author of "Don Quixote."

As part of The International School's International Baccalaureate curriculum, students also conducted their own research on the trip through collaborative partnerships, presenting their findings April 22 at an exhibition — the first of its kind at the school.

For their projects, students chose an aspect of local Spanish, Chinese or Japanese culture to examine; designed and administered a survey to students in their host classes; and then gave the same survey to students at home to compare results.

The fifth-graders then prepared a poster board presentation detailing the design of their research and created art and action elements to showcase.



SUBMITTED PHOTO / LINDA BONDER  
Brian Garten and his host brother, Diego, took turns practicing their Spanish and English skills, respectively.

Bennett-Hanes, for example, chose to focus on Spanish food, asking adults and children what they eat for each meal and examining the differences and similarities.

One of her major findings, she said, was that lunch is the biggest meal of the day in Spain, “like breakfast and dinner combined.”

Bennett-Hanes also noted that Spanish families eat a lot of ham, and pig legs hang in the windows of many restaurants.

For her art project, she decorated a cake and for her action, she served that cake to visitors at the exhibition.

Brian Garten, also a Bridlemile resident, chose to focus his study on Spanish transportation, asking survey takers what type of public transit they most often use.

Unlike students from Portland, who said they frequently use MAX, students in Madrid said they took the bus more often than the city’s “Metro” subway system.

They also use more cars, but they are smaller and more efficient, he said.

Garten made an outline of a car using photos of public transportation for his art project and set up car racing for children at the exhibition.

Guido Rahr, another student on the trip, designed a survey asking students about their preferred sports.

Rahr, a Hillsdale resident, said that, predictably, many Spanish students chose soccer, but that many also circled basketball as well.

He and his partner made a model of the Fifa soccer ball used in last year’s World Cup for their art project and organized a soccer game to play at the exhibition as their action.

Overall, the students said the process of researching and preparing for the exhibition was a positive one.

“It was a lot of work but really fun,” Bennett-Hanes said.

Chaperones on the trip said they saw students take ownership of their work.

“At first, the students were pretty overwhelmed, but they managed their own research and, in the end, really enjoyed it,” said Linda Bonder, the school’s marketing and communications director.

And, aside from their research, the experience of traveling abroad provided students with the chance to become even more assured of their Spanish language skills.

Rahr said he only encountered one other native English speaker on the trip, but nonetheless the students said they found they could comprehend Spanish easily and hold conversations with their host families and fellow students — only occasionally having to ask them to slow down.

Garten said he even took turns practicing his foreign language skills with his host brother, Diego, who is learning English.

And some of the teachers in Spain told chaperones the students from The International School understood Spanish grammar better than their native Spanish speakers.

“It’s a big deal to say I speak Spanish just as well as I speak English,” Bennett-Hanes said.

As for the experience of studying abroad at young age, “The remarkable thing is that they don’t think it’s remarkable,” Bonder said, noting that, when asked about their trip, most students answer with their take on recess and extracurricular activities.

“They’re able to do the work, which, for 11 year olds, is pretty big deal,” she said. “The culture and the language (of Spain) were comfortable.”

For more information about The International School and its Capstone Program, visit

