



Fontana Unified School District

Every Student Successful, Engaging Schools, Empowered Communities

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NEWS RELEASE

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Fontana Unified Pilots Summer Language Academy for English Learners

FONTANA – Incoming Fontana Unified high school students are strengthening their English language skills and building a peer support system through the Summer Language Academy pilot program, designed to prepare English learners to participate in school socially and academically.

Adapted from a culturally and linguistically responsive model developed by Anaheim Union High School District and in partnership with California State University, Fullerton, the four-week program is bringing together 85 ninth- through 12th-grade students, using their home languages and cultures as a foundation for learning English. Lessons center on building conversational skills needed for class, while counseling and community-building activities help develop their confidence and explore different pathways in high school and beyond.

“Being in this Summer Language Academy changed the way I think because I learned that growth comes from learning new things, even if they are difficult,” incoming senior Gurpooj Singh said. “It also changed the way I learn because now I ask more questions, practice English every day and am learning from others. When interacting with people here, I have become more patient, confident, and respectful of other backgrounds.”

Students meet four days a week at Fontana High School to practice speaking and writing English through hands-on exercises as well as small- and large-group discussions intended to help them become more comfortable participating in class. Lessons are structured around oral language, literacy foundations, academic vocabulary, and school readiness.

The academy currently supports students from nine different language backgrounds, including Spanish, Punjabi, Mandarin, and Arabic, creating opportunities for them to share their cultures with their classmates. These projects include creating personal storyboards sharing their individual journeys, discussing challenges they have faced and expressing their academic and career aspirations for the future.

“We are teaching English, but we are validating students’ home languages at the same time,” Senior Director of Multilingual Programs, Dr. Sergio Chavez said. “We want students to acculturate, not assimilate. Acculturation allows them to learn English while remaining grounded in their own language and culture, so they feel affirmed in who they are.”

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Fontana Unified expanded on the District's first Language Academy model by including counseling services. A dedicated counselor meets with students to explain A–G requirements and help them explore career technical education pathways while in school and after graduation.

According to Dr. Chavez, the sessions are particularly valuable for juniors and seniors who may be unfamiliar with the steps needed to pursue their goals in the United States. Students have shared aspirations in fields ranging from the skilled trades and performing arts to medicine and marine biology, allowing the counselor to connect those interests with potential educational and career pathways.

"This experience has been so rewarding because students are no longer afraid to speak their native language or demonstrate what they know," said Wendy Camacho, multilingual programs teacher on special assignment and instructional coach. "Everyone comes with so many beautiful stories. Giving them the time and space to express themselves without pressure has helped them recognize the strengths they already have and find a community where they feel seen."

Fontana Unified plans to track participating students over time to evaluate how they progress after completing the academy. District leaders are also aiming to expand the program to middle and elementary school students, creating a network of support for newcomer English learners across all grade levels.

"When a student first arrives, they may be scared and may not even want to be here because they were forced to leave what was familiar," Dr. Chavez said. "This is about family. We want them to find a second home and leave with people they can continue reaching out to for support. For Fontana Unified, it sends the message that 'all means all' and that we are here for every student."

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

FUSD_LANGUAGE_ACADEMY1: A Fontana Unified student works with a teacher to strengthen their English skills during the District's four-week Summer Language Academy.

FUSD_LANGUAGE_ACADEMY2: Fontana Unified newcomer high school students strengthen their English and connect with peers during the District's four-week Summer Language Academy, which uses their home languages and cultures as a foundation for learning.

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