

## Surmounting challenges of migrant education

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When Bertha Alicia Alvarez became a teacher, she did not envision being chased around her car by a quasi-domesticated hog.

But after an employee befriended the boar at a farm where Alvarez tutors young children, the animal had become fearless.

One morning last May, as Alvarez pulled up to the house where she would tutor two children of migrant farm workers, it was waiting for her. She stayed in her car until she thought it had wandered away.

It hadn't.

"I had brought Fruit Loops so we could make necklaces that day to identify colors," Alvarez said. "I had to keep throwing the cereal at him so it would leave me alone."

Awkward hog encounters, sand pits and pesticides are among the unusual occupational hazards faced by Alvarez and other educators who work with Manatee County's migrant students.

About 600 children from migrant, farm-working families attend Manatee County schools or educational programs.

While most of those children are in regular classes, nearly 50 are enrolled in one of the district's migrant pre-school programs.

Migrant families have access to all of the district's programs — including pre-school and Headstart programs — but long parent work hours, insufficient funds and the difficulty of arranging transportation to and from some of the county's most rural areas make accessing those resources difficult.

Those are just the issues associated with enrolling children in programs, said Kate Bloomquist, the district's migrant education coordinator. Once in school, students face several hurdles, aside from learning English, she said.

"They're moving very often — they're not always in the same school all year," Bloomquist said. "Their parents' work schedules are very demanding; it's difficult for them to take time to read to and teach their children. They don't live near libraries or anything like that, they have no Internet or computer access. And often times families are doubled up living in one trailer, so there isn't much privacy to study."

The at-home pre-school program gives parents the tools to prepare their children for kindergarten, regardless of seasonal location.

Kindergarten readiness is one of the pillars of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, which both Manatee and Sarasota counties have joined. The national



STAFF PHOTOS / THOMAS BENDER

Bertha Alicia Alvarez teaches Lesly Marquez, 5, in a rural area of Manatee county. The county goes out to migrant homes and camps to teach English to preschool-aged migrant children and their families.

organization says children born into poverty are especially at risk of falling behind.

For example, the campaign cites a study that found poor children hear as many as 30 million fewer words than their more affluent peers. By age 5, the campaign says, poor children recognize nine letters from the alphabet, while middle-class children can typically recognize 22.

The migrant-focused programs, funded by federal Title 1 and pre-school grants, help bridge some of those difficulties, Bloomquist said.

Manatee's migrant education program receives about \$700,000 a year in federal grants, about \$55,000 of which is funneled into pre-school programs.

The East Coast Migrant Headstart program opened in 2009 at Falkner Farms, which has 200 migrant children enrolled in district preK-12 education. In 2012, the county opened its first school-based migrant pre-school program at McNeal Elementary School.

Last year, the district pioneered migrant in-home pre-school tutoring, in which a tutor comes to homes once a week to teach children English, how to better express themselves and how to identify colors, letters and shapes.

Alvarez said she visits five children a week.

One of them is Lesly Marquez, who turned 5 Feb. 16.

Lesly, her older brother, her parents and her grandparents share a modest, wooden house owned by "el jefe" — the boss.

The home is about seven miles from where the family works at Falkner Farms.

The district provides transportation for Lesly's brother and her cousin to attend Witt Elementary School. It does not provide transportation to pre-school-aged students.

Because the Marquezes do not live on the farm, and Lesly's parents cannot leave their sometimes 14-hour shifts to pick her up from pre-school and drop her off back home, Alvarez comes to Lesly.

On a brisk but sunny February morning, Alvarez laid out a Play-Doh kit on an outdoor table.

She showed Lesly how to use a plastic roller to flatten the clay. They used cookie cutters to cut out and identify different shapes.

"What shape is this?" Alvarez asked as she helped up a five-pointed shape.

"A estar," Lesly said. Alvarez said it's common for native Spanish speakers to pronounce "e" before words that start with "s" when learning English.

"No, st-ah-r, look at my mouth," Alvarez said as she animated her face. "Staaaar."

After the lesson, Lesly's mother, Vaneza, spoke with Alvarez about what Lesly learned. Alvarez gave her a coloring book, showed her different shapes and body parts they were working to identify and handed Lesly a kite.

The rest of the week, Vaneza will reinforce Alvarez's lessons with Lesly, making sure she practices drawing letter shapes and stays engaged.

She said it's difficult to reinforce educational lessons when she's exhausted at the end of a work day. She checks her son's homework when she gets back from the fields — hours after he went to sleep.

She said she has seen Lesly improve before her eyes, thanks to Alicia's help.

“She has helped Lesly develop skills and become more social,” Vaneza said in Spanish. “It's wonderful to have (Alvarez) come by.”

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