

Johnston named Holmes Educator of the Year

Allison Sliva, BCISD Public Information

“Let me tell you a secret,” elementary teacher Candace Johnston whispered to her class as she hunched down in conspiratorial mode and gathered her students around her. “You’re going to need to know this in middle school, in junior high and in high school,” she added.

The students’ audible gasps and bodies at attention told it all: these first graders were ready and eager to learn.

“How many of you have older brothers and sisters at home?” Johnston asked.

Hands shot into the air.

“Well go home and ask them if they know what an *equal* sign (=) means!” Johnston prodded her students.

Excited voices mumbled and little bodies bounced in anticipation of going home to show off to their families the latest things learned at school. And more than likely, the home replay would be delivered in a combination of English and Spanish, as Johnston’s students are part of the bilingual education program at Tenie Holmes Elementary.

Johnston is Tenie Holmes Elementary’s Educator of the Year, and is as enthusiastic as her students when it comes to talking about the Holmes bilingual program. “Bilingual ed is a wonderful thing. And let me set the record straight that we are not a remedial program. Our bilingual program students are doing the same curriculum as the monolingual students. We are supporting our students in their home languages in all the content areas – math, science, reading – everything,” Johnston said.

Johnston explained that the bilingual program teachers instruct in both English and Spanish, and that the students write and read in English. “Research shows that we get better results when we teach our non-English speaking students in their home language. We do lots of instruction in English. But when I look into students’ eyes and see that they are not ‘getting it,’ I switch into their home language, which is generally Spanish. We’re about halfway through the school year now, and some of my first graders are already reading almost exclusively in English,” Johnston said.

She went on, “Some concepts we teach are so abstract. For example, when we’re reading a story, we often discuss ‘setting.’ That’s a difficult concept to explain to a first grader in any language. So if I explain ‘setting’ in Spanish first, then the students will understand the English word for ‘setting’ whenever we use it. We want our students to understand and learn concepts, not just memorize vocabulary words.”

According to Johnston, all of the bilingual students will exit from the program into monolingual classes. “But, we encourage our students and their parents to keep their bilingualism – what an asset to be able to communicate in more than one language!”

Johnson enthused, who also speaks French.

Holmes Elementary Principal Jessica Estlinbaum says that Johnston is someone that teaches with all her heart, goes the extra mile, and always has a smile on her face. “She’s someone we aspire to be like,” Estlinbaum explained. “Candace seeks out ways to assist the families of her students. One of her former students suffers from a physical birth defect and Candace has worked with the Spanish-speaking parents to sort through the mountain of paperwork from Texas Children’s Hospital for corrective surgery. This child is now in fourth grade on a different campus, yet Candace is still reaching out and

helping this family. Candace builds relationships with her students' parents. She understands that it takes both the school and the home to help children reach their potential," Estlinbaum said.

Ella Vargas, Holmes bilingual teacher, mentored Johnston when she first began teaching at Holmes. "I knew right away that Candy would be an asset to our Tenie Holmes staff. She was receptive to all the advice and suggestions I had to offer. She is very caring for the children in her class and gives 100 percent each day. I'm very proud of Candy and hope to teach with her for years to come."

Another co-worker, Leticia Lucio said, "Candace was my mentor when I started five years ago and still mentors me. She is one the most enthusiastic, cooperative and caring persons that I know. She is so optimistic and always encourages me when I am feeling overwhelmed. I consider myself blessed to work with the 'best' of the best."

New to bilingual teaching this school year is Cristina Gonzales, who says that Johnston is very passionate about the bilingual program. "This is my first year as a bilingual teacher and I must say that I have been learning so much from Mrs. Johnston. She is always a team player and willing to put others before herself."

Back in the classroom, Johnston's voice fills the room with her laughter. "Oh my, you just never heard anything as precious as one of these kiddos telling me in a cute Spanish accent that math problems are a 'piece of cake'. Just wait till we discuss the English idiom 'hit the ceiling' – these Spanish speakers are going to *love* explaining that one to their parents!"