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Bilingual storytellers teach value of cultural communications

“Mama” Edie Armstrong, dressed in African garb told a cute story about a family of mice who encountered a big, scary green-eyed cat while on a family picnic.

Armstrong relayed the tale in Spanish while her storytelling partner, Sue O’Holloran translated it into English on June 27, 2011 to the classes of children attending Title 1 and Title III elementary summer school classes at River View Elementary School. Title 1 serves low income students, and Title III serves bilingual students.

The mother mouse, and eventually the whole family began barking like dogs, and the cat ran away, leaving the mice to enjoy the rest of their picnic.

The punch line was just as funny – and the point just as clear – in both languages: “It is very important to speak a second language!” the women said.

O’Holloran and Armstrong presented assemblies for the students to teach them the importance of cultural awareness and appreciation. They sang songs, played special instruments from Africa, Mexico and Ireland, and shared personal stories to show how cultural information can enhance communications.

O’Holloran also worked with teachers to teach how personal cultural stories can be integrated into the classroom.

“The objective was to show teachers that they don’t have to be ‘the expert’ of every culture, but that they can include the children’s voices in the classroom via the students’ own stories,” said Dr. Carmen Ayala, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

O’Holloran will work with students to develop their own stories on July 20-21, 2011, before students present their own stories at another assembly.

“District 202 continues to grow and change,” Ayala said. Student enrollment was about 96 percent white in 1990. Last school year it was about 59 percent white, 23 percent Latino, and 9 percent African

American. Nearly 80 different languages were represented in District 202 last year.

“This program was a great opportunity for us to serve the special needs of our English Language Learner students, engage in some unique teacher professional development, and continue to show our commitment to every student in our community,” Ayala said.