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Arcadia Elementary experiences Hispanic student boom

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U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, right, speaks with, from left, Mayra Velazquez and Ricardo Bocangero in their

third-grade class at Arcadia Elementary School. Inglis toured the school to learn about immigration in the area.

ARCADIA – Shy Esmeralda Ramirez, a 5-year-old from Hidalgo, Mexico, moved with her family to Spartanburg County this weekend. On Monday, they were enrolling her in elementary school.

"She speaks absolutely no English," Principal Chuck Bagwell said. "That's where we start."

It couldn't have been more perfectly timed for U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis' visit to Arcadia Elementary School, though it was just a coincidence. School officials say they enroll one or two non-English speaking students a week.

Inglis, R-S.C., on Monday continued his "immigration tour," as he calls it, with educators in Arcadia, with business people at lunch and with deputies around Spartanburg County.

He met bright-eyed, hard-working students, spoke to employers with different experiences hiring non-Americans and saw Hispanic gang markings not far from I-585.

The congressman called the Arcadia visit "inspiring."

Nearly half of the school's students are Hispanic. Many start school unable to speak or read English. Ideally, they start speaking the language within a year and reading follows, Bagwell said.

Arcadia met its Adequate Yearly Progress goals under No Child Left Behind this year, even though the cards were stacked against it, he said. Results should be released to the public soon.

About 90 percent of Arcadia students are on the free or reduced-price lunch program.

The county holds adult English classes there four nights a week.

And the school hosts popular after-school and summer programs for children, both through the Boys & Girls Club.

"I feel like there's a fight to stop immigration," said Gregory Tolbert, president of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Spartanburg. "The fact is, these families have a solid work ethic. They come here with their families intact.

"We need these families. We need them to be successful."

The overall attitude toward immigration in Arcadia is more open than some other places.

But Inglis, who sits on the House Judiciary's Immigration Subcommittee, says core beliefs are the same, and he's made those the focus of his information-gathering trek.

Those beliefs include protecting America's borders – with a stronger military presence, if necessary – maintaining English as the primary language here and requiring businesses to conduct up-front checks on Social Security numbers to make sure they're legit, Inglis says.

Educators were concerned that deporting a family member who's in America illegally punishes

children who have lived most or all of their lives here and are enrolled in school.

Inglis was worried that could translate into amnesty, rewarding illegal behavior. He also doesn't want Social Service workers "waiting at the doorstep" for immigrants.

"We were spending 'all that money' on whites and blacks before the Hispanics arrived," said Cindy Frady, a second-grade teacher. "The economic needs of this school haven't changed."

Frady has taught at Arcadia for 32 years. When she started, it primarily served students growing up in nearby mill villages.

Today, Arcadia Elementary School has four bi-lingual teachers.

Mexican family members have told Bagwell that when they left for America, they were told to get on Interstate 85 and look for the Fairforest exit.

The school makes teaching English its No. 1 priority, Bagwell said. Fifteen students, spread evenly among the third-, fourth- and fifth-grade classes, are designated "Arcadia Interpretation Masters" to help bridge the language barrier, and bilingual students in general help explain things to their non-English-proficient classmates.

Students at Arcadia genuinely love going to school, griping when it's time to go home, the teachers say.

Jessica Rivera just returned from a three-day weekend to find four "I missed you" letters on her desk from her first-grade class, for instance.

And, most parents at parent-teacher meetings are Hispanic, they say. The children translate if mom and dad don't know English.

"What we're seeing is a caring community that's been dealt a difficult hand," Inglis said. "And they're playing it pretty well."

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More information

ARCADIA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Hispanic student population

2005 -- 48.3 percent 2004 -- 41.6 percent 2003 -- 38.5 percent 2002 -- 34.9 percent

Source: Spartanburg County School District 6

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