

Preparing for the future

Seymour High School offering classes for Hispanic population

The Jobs for America's Graduates program is in its seventh year at Seymour High School.

In recent years, JAG specialist Celeste Bowman has had a few Hispanic students in the class.

If they were fluent in English, she said it was easy for her. Those who weren't fluent, however, made it challenging to interact.

Belitzabeth Vazquez was brought in as a specialist, and a couple of JAG classes were created just for Hispanics.

This year, there are 34 enrolled in the program.

With a growing population of Hispanic students, school leaders saw a need and filled it.

"It is a unique opportunity because we're able to provide them with assistance not just transitioning into life after high school but transitioning into a new culture," Bowman said. "To be able to offer that, we have a large enough Hispanic population here at the school, we can do that."

Of the nearly 120 JAG programs at Indiana schools, Bowman said Seymour is the only bilingual one.

Sharing her room with Vazquez, Bowman said she has even learned some Spanish.

"When I think of moving to a whole different country where I don't speak the language, I'm not familiar with the culture, it would be overwhelming," she said. "It presented me with a challenge in the past when I had a student who wasn't really fluent because I couldn't communicate easily. I know they need to learn English, but there's got to be some middle ground there."

Vazquez said she's from Puerto Rico and understands the students' background and heritage.

"This year, I had the opportunity to take and choose my students," she said. "I interviewed them, I went one-on-one with them knowing more about their interests and their needs because even though we focus on different skills here, our main goal is right there on the bulletin board: We need to graduate."

"We need to show that we can do it, we can go above and beyond," she said. "It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter where you come from."

JAG is a state-based national nonprofit organization that assists students with barriers to success by helping them overcome academic challenges in a path toward graduation, according to jag.org.

The class focuses on project- and service-based curriculum to help students develop leadership, organizational, conflict resolution, verbal and written communications, time management and other job-related and employable skills. Students receive career preparation and life skills training while in school and one year of adult mentoring after graduation to ensure their continued success.

JAG was established more than 30 years ago and now is in 33 states. Beginning in 2006 with just 12 schools, JAG Indiana has grown to the largest affiliate in the national network, according to its website.

At Seymour High School, JAG meets for an hour and a half every other day.

Vazquez teaches two classes at the high school and one at the Jackson County Learning Center in Seymour.

Students have to be recommended by a teacher, a counselor or one of the JAG students to be a part of the program.

There are no tests or homework like a traditional classroom. Instead, they participate in a variety of activities to enhance their soft skills, such as leadership, public speaking and transition to life after high school.

With leadership, Vazquez has officers in each class: President, vice president, treasurer, secretary and marketing. Students apply for those positions. She said they will start meeting twice a month as officers and once a month as the whole JAG student body to inform everyone on activities.

Community service projects are among the activities, as JAG students are required to complete at least 10 hours per year.

Their most recent community service project was collecting items for Puerto Rico residents affected by Hurricane Maria, and they will be bringing in a speaker on bullying and suicide prevention for school and community convocations in November.

“We work a lot on that because nowadays, we need to be more compassionate about others,” Vazquez said of community service.

JAG students also learn how to write résumés and cover letters, dress and act professionally, and prepare for an interview.

Some of Vazquez’s students have used those skills to land jobs while in high school.

Senior Michael Lara, a second-year JAG student, said he probably wouldn’t have his job at Burger King if it wasn’t for JAG.

“That really helped setting up my résumé and knowing what to say and how to act when being interviewed for a job,” he said. “It has really opened up my eyes. It throws you into a real-world situation.”

Lara said the work experience should help as he moves on to college to become a chef or a music teacher.

“You’ll be used to juggling two things at the same time once you get into college,” he said. “It helps you with time management skills because you have your homework done and still go to work. Sometimes, you have to make sacrifices.”

Senior Alin Torres said she has had a couple of jobs, and

she can rely on Vazquez for help when she needs it.

“I work a job, and since I’m 18, I get off really late, and then I have to do stuff at home,” Torres said. “(JAG class) is a time I can do my homework, and (Vazquez) can help me.”

JAG received a grant to give students employment opportunities and pay their wages this past summer.

Senior Brandon Colon worked alongside the school custodians. He said he had prior work experience.

“Whenever I did something wrong with the first job, it would teach me how to take criticism well, and coming around to the summer program, it was just a breeze,” he said. “I wanted to keep working with them during the school year, but I am too young to do that.”

Vazquez also is big on accountability, so she checks attendance daily and grades once a week. She said that’s important as students enter the workforce or go on to college.

Field trips are another part of the class. They recently went to Ball State University in Muncie and plan to visit local industries.

Through the class blog, Lara shares photos and information from the field trips

and activities they do in JAG and other classes.

Lara also is among the students who have competed in JAG Career Development Conferences, which give them an opportunity to demonstrate their employability and leadership skills and be recognized for their achievements.

The students agree it's good to have JAG classes specifically for Hispanics.

"I feel like they are giving us an opportunity to be more successful in striving for our dreams and having more options in what we can do in our lives," junior Alejandro Sachinas said. "It's not like a normal class. It's more of a professional place in which we can be creative and use our own stuff and work for and strive for our dreams."

Senior Desiree Hinojosa said Vazquez treats the students like family.

"Mrs. Vazquez has a lot of information, and she knows what she's talking about, and she's really good about helping us out," Hinojosa

said. "It's good because a lot of Latinos don't think they have opportunities for things, but in reality, there is something out there that can help them out. This class helps show that."

Joining the class this year, junior Edgardo Torres said he now has more motivation to pursue things while keeping a positive mind and being open-minded.

Classmate Daniela Vasquez said in JAG, it's important to maintain the right attitude and have a willingness to learn.

"JAG teaches us a lot," she said. "It teaches us to be prepared. It teaches us what we're going to face in the future. It teaches us how to act in the future toward important stuff, that everything counts."

The JAG classroom also is a place where they can comfortably speak Spanish. Vazquez said they speak Spanglish in the classroom because that's how many of the students are raised at home.

"We can all communicate with our own language that we can all understand, but at the same time, we try to speak English and try to improve ourselves," junior Dulce Gaytan said.

"It makes me feel at home," Lara said. "I feel like I can speak my native language more. I don't have to worry about being self-conscious about other people judging me for speaking Spanish."

Junior Fernando Ruiz said Vazquez makes it a welcoming environment.

"She always teaches us to love our own skin and be proud of who you are," he said. "That's what I really like."

Vazquez said she will maintain that atmosphere.

"In here, there's no time for bullying or making fun of others because another one maybe does have an accent or maybe another student would not have an English proficiency," she said. "There's no time for that in here. We are here to help each other."