

# Bilingual Montessori creating a kid-size world

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It won't be fit for a king – but a princess will feel right at home.

Although the floor has yet to be placed, Bilingual Montessori School, LLC, has already begun to look like a child's paradise. Little giraffes and flowers lie about, waiting to decorate the walls. Six white cribs are ready to go in the infants' room. Tiny, blue toddler-cots recline against a wall, as does a large table with holes in it designed for high-chair-type seats – keeping children together and making mealtime less of a challenge for teachers.

And in the girls' bathroom, above a low sink is a pink-framed mirror with the word "Princess" inscribed above the glass. Within the next few weeks, Odalys González Fernández plans to completely remodel her space at 111 Longview Drive, beside Dance Arts Los Alamos' (DALA) White Rock studio.

"Everything's going to be built to kid-size," she said. "To their level."

The school will serve three age groups: infants (6 weeks old to 14 months), toddlers (14-36 months old) and children age 3-6. The school will stay open until 6 p.m., instead of 5:30 p.m. like many other schools, for 3- to 6-year-olds, so that parents can run errands on their way home from work, she said, before they have their children in tow.

Summer session will take children up to age 8.

She and Irina Yazikova, an administrator/teacher at the new school, will place wrestling mat-like coverings over the floor in the infants' room so new crawlers and walkers don't scratch or hurt themselves. Homemade sheets are in the works for the toddler-cots. In order to enter the school, parents will punch in key codes – different codes for each age-separated section.

Enrollees also have dance – through a partnership with DALA – and gymnastics to look forward to.

"We're doing this to serve the community," Fernández said, explaining that Los Alamos already has excellent schools for older children, but parents of younger children have long desired another option.

"The need has been here since '85," she said, "when I came to town. I tried to address it where I was teaching (at Ponderosa Montessori), but it was never enough ... Now, people learning about the school are saying to me, 'My God – thank you!'"

And although registration doesn't officially open until May 1, the infant section is already full, she said.

She decided to make the school bilingual mainly because, to her knowledge, there is no other bilingual Montessori in northern New Mexico. She said that although young children pick up a second language very quickly, many whose parents or grandparents speak Spanish either don't speak it at home, or do but then lose it after a few years of school. At Bilingual Montessori in White Rock, students will watch Spanish-language children's television programming, sing Spanish songs and learn practical Spanish-conversion skills. "They can order at Taco Bell in Spanish," Fernández said. "They can talk to their grandparents. And it gives them power to do something not everyone can do."

In the Montessori tradition, the school will teach a variety of practical skills, such as cutting bread, making their own sandwiches and peeling potatoes. Not only do these activities help children build independence, but they also promote finger/hand strength and coordination, which helps children with writing later on.

Also in line with other Montessori schools, students will learn in mixed-age classrooms, where older children teach the younger ones, and everyone can go at his or her own pace.

"The older kids love to be teachers," Fernández said, adding that the school highly encourages sharing of

toys as well as knowledge.

“We promote the concept of the family,” she said. “It’s not yours. It’s not mine. We’re a community.” Fernández plans to bring that idea out into the community as well, partnering with DALA and the White Rock Senior Center, where she hopes to connect children with senior volunteers – benefiting both the children and the seniors, many of whom are separated from their grandchildren.

One of her former students took the sharing lesson to heart – and came back to prove it years after he knew Fernández in school. Andy Spall, 23, now a resident of Chama, called his former teacher and volunteered to paint her school, which is several thousand square feet.

“He said, ‘Since you helped me so much, I want to help you,’” Fernández said. “He spent two weeks painting the whole school ... That was really touching.”

She added, “That’s why you teach. They grow up and remember you.”

Bilingual Montessori will hold an open house from 5-6 p.m. May 29. The first day of summer school will be June 2, and the fall semester begins Aug. 18. Check out [www.bilingualmontessorischool.com](http://www.bilingualmontessorischool.com) for more information, including registration forms, or call the school at 672-1800.