

New School Will Teach All in 2 Languages

Education: English and Spanish will be used for the entire curriculum at a charter campus to open in Canoga Park.

By IRENE GARCIA, Times Staff Writer

A former math teacher will open the first charter school in the San Fernando Valley to teach its entire curriculum in English and Spanish this fall, with the goal that every student become bilingual by the fourth grade.

The Los Angeles Board of Education recently approved the proposal for the Multicultural Learning Center, which would become only the second charter school in the region, after Edison Elementary in Santa Monica, to offer a "dual immersion" curriculum. The new school will open on leased property on the grounds of Faith Lutheran Church in Canoga Park.

"It's enriched education, where you don't have to give up a language to learn another," said school founder Toby Bornstein, 60, who has taught elementary and middle school for 35 years.

There are 260 such dual immersion schools in the nation, nearly half of them in California. Bornstein received a \$35,000 grant from the California Department of Education to develop the innovative elementary school proposal, and the state has provided another \$1 million to get it off the ground.

Parents of future students said they are thrilled that their children will have the opportunity to become fluent in another language.

"I can't wait," said Wendy Shugar, a single mother from Woodland Hills who has two children in public schools. "I fully think it will be one of the better schools in the Valley."

The campus will accommodate a maximum of 200 children in kindergarten through fourth grade and will employ 10 full-time teachers. Grades five through eight will be added later, said Bornstein, who is recruiting students through community meetings and at overcrowded local public schools.

Frances Rodriguez, a bilingual education teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District for 22 years, will teach at the Multicultural Learning Center.

"For English-speaking kids there's the obvious benefit of knowing two languages," she said. "For the Spanish-speaking kids, who are often made to feel like the bottom feeders of our society, there will be pride that others want to use their language."

The California Charter School Act of 1992 established charters as an option for parents, students, teachers and community members to design self-governing schools. California has 250 charter schools serving about 110,000 students.

They operate free of the State Education Code, which means they can make independent decisions on staffing, curriculum design and budgetary matters while remaining public schools. They must be nonsectarian and they are barred from charging tuition. They also cannot discriminate by race, religion, economic means, test scores or athletic ability.

They range in size from 38 to 1,400 students and are found on existing school campuses, on leased church property, in storefronts and in office buildings.

Educational approaches vary from back-to-basics and home study to multi-age grouping and expanded use of technology.

Two of the Valley's most successful charters--Vaughn Next Century Learning Center in

Pacoima and Fenton Avenue in Lake View Terrace--have received favorable evaluations through the years, and in 1998 the Board of Education unanimously awarded them new five-year mandates.

For more information on the Multicultural Learning Center, parents may call (818) 888-9089 or they may attend separate community meetings in English and Spanish at Faith Lutheran Church, 7500 De Soto Ave. The meeting in English will be held from 10 a.m. to noon June 9 and in Spanish from 1 to 3 p.m. June 23.