A young woman stands in the center of a school hallway. She is wearing a black t-shirt with the text "ONCE A DRAGON ALWAYS A DRAGON" and black pants. Her hands are on her head, and a large, white, scribbled-out shape covers her face and hair. The hallway is filled with blurred figures of other students walking in both directions. A digital clock on the wall shows "12:45 19".

“IKIWA UNAKWENDA KWA MADARASA MENGINE, KUNA WATU AMBAO WALIZALIWA HAPA. KIINGEREZA YAO NI BORA KULIKO YAN-GU NA WANAELE-WA ZAIDI KULIKO MIMI.”

-Alice Munzero

“IF YOU GO TO OTHER CLASSES, THERE ARE PEOPLE THAT WERE BORN HERE.THEIR ENGLISH IS BETTER THAN MINE AND THEY UNDERSTAND MORE THAN ME.”

BREAKING BARRIERS

Students become bilingual through the English Language Learners program (ELL)

words | Obsee Abbajabal & Sabrina Romero layout | Andrew Maresca

With just one more year left in school, Giovanni Rivera-Moran '19 was on track to graduate in El Salvador before moving to Johnston. His credits did not transfer properly, making his years of education on paper become nonexistent. Now, he is forced to take Math I, material he had previously learned.

Rivera-Moran is one of the many students apart of the English Language Learners (ELL) program taught by Emily Kenny. The program is designed to help students, whose primary language is not English, expand their level of understanding. According to the Iowa Department of Education, ELL students made up about 5.9% of the students enrolled in the Johnston Community School District during the 2016-2017 school year.

Overall, there are about 75 students that are observed by the program. However, not all students take the actual class. Kenny directly teaches 39 students every day.

"They never stay for a full day in my class," Kenny said. "It's like throwing them right into the water as soon as they get here, which is good and bad. It's my only option for the most part just because where we are at with our program and staffing."

Through the years Kenny has tried many different approaches to making sure the ELL students feel comfortable at school.

"I feel like as the program has grown, it's a lot harder for me to get to know the students because I have very limited one on one interactions," Kenny said. "Sometimes I try to find a buddy student, but I have to be careful about that because I don't want the other student to just become the translator the whole time."

One of the main goals of the class is to familiarize students with the English language. Every year, students take the English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) to make sure they meet the requirements for being in ELL. In order to be tested out of the program, students must score proficient on both the ELPA and Iowa Assessments.

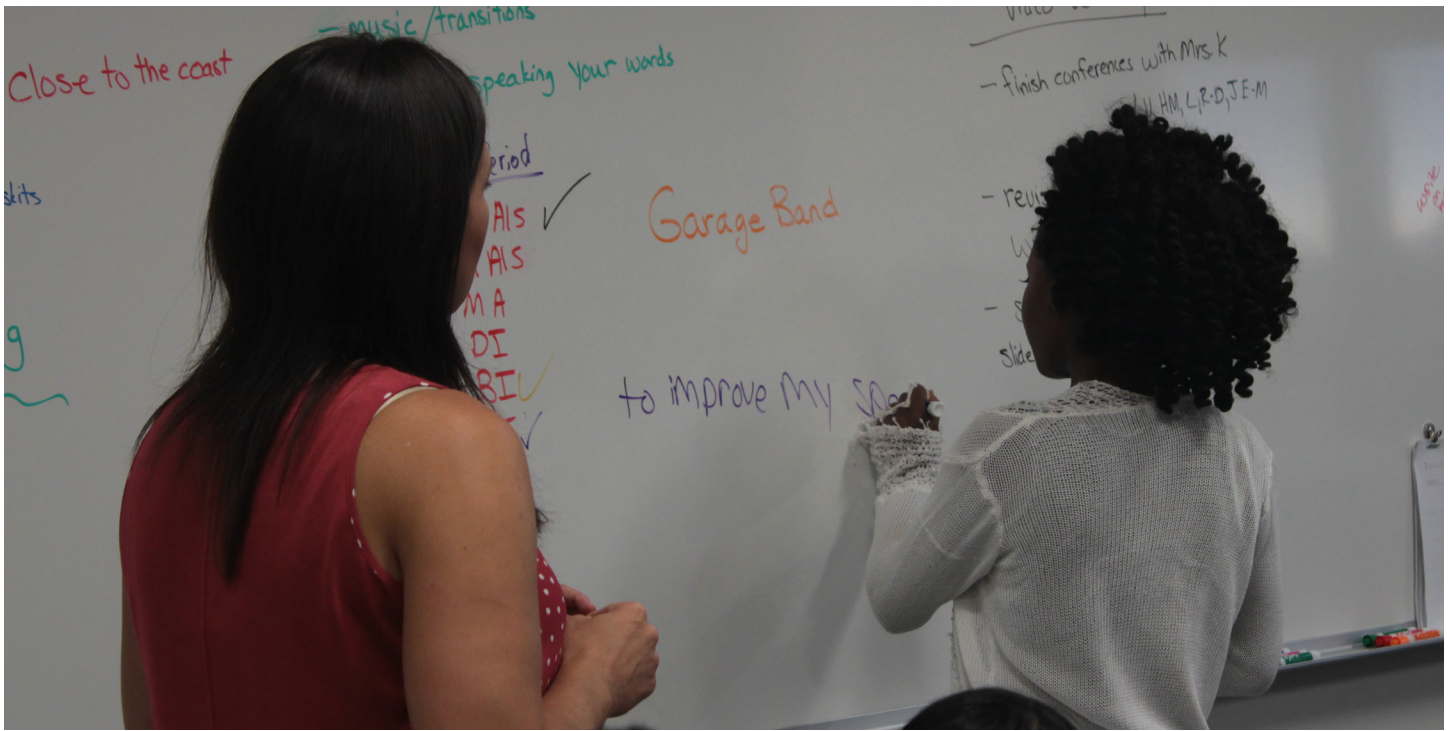
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"I already went through the same math content that I'm learning now. The only thing that is different is the process, and that's the confusing part."

-Lisania Ramirez-Duran



Emily Kenny, ELL teacher, speaks to students about the purpose of a social contract. Kenny interacted with students hands-on in order to set expectations for the year. Photo by Andrew Maresca.



Kenny guides Ledeisha Vah '19 in writing one of the social contract goals for the school year. Vah was chosen as an example to demonstrate the activity for the rest of the class. Photo by Andrew Maresca

Alice Munezero '18 primarily speaks Swahili, and is another student involved in the ELL program. After moving from Kenya, she started her freshman year at Johnston. Munezero, along with many other students, feel more at ease in Kenny's class.

"When you're in the ELL classroom, our teacher explains more," Munezero said. "She makes us understand, and gives us examples."

Munezero finds that the classes she takes outside the ELL classroom are more challenging.

"If you go to other classes, there are people that were born here," Munezero said. "Their English is better than mine and they understand more than me, so it is hard for me to understand in the [fast-paced environment]." Frequently, Munezero ends up having to set up a time with the teacher outside of class, so she can fully understand the material taught in class. "All teachers were patient with me and they tried their best," she said.

Although most are easy to talk to, some ELL students may be hesitant in approaching some teachers.

"I see students having problems fitting in out of my classroom," Kenny said. "They feel like they can't say, 'Can you slow down' or ask somebody a question." This is not the case for all students, but

those that are new to the district tend to feel this burden.

For many students, the struggle doesn't stop once they leave the classroom. Noor Noor '20 speaks Somali, and is new to the district this year. He transferred here from Hoover High School, after living in Kenya. Noor plays the trumpet and participates in the Varsity Marching Band. However, his participation comes with some obstacles as his main mode of transportation is the bus.

"It's hard for them to join activities and things sometimes when they have to take the bus home," Kenny said. "Johnston is not a walkable town."

Sophia Van Zee '19 and Joseph Haggerty '18 both stepped up to the plate, taking turns picking up Noor before practice. Initially, it was a challenge for him to ask for a ride to the required

morning practices held at the school.

"I think it's been difficult for him to communicate with people, but he understands very well," Van Zee said. "He just isn't able to speak perfectly, but his English is very good."

Noor has received much support from the other members of the marching band. "The trumpet section is a tight knit community of best friends," Haggerty said. "Anyone who decides to march while

“Math doesn't require English, because if you see a math problem, you can do it according to how much you know”

-Alice Munezero

playing the trumpet automatically becomes a part of the family.”

To help students succeed academically, the program has recently set up “sheltered classes” in hopes of preparing students for science and history classes that they may take later on. These two sheltered classes, World Studies and Investigations in Science, are only offered to ELL students.

The foundational science class helps students interact and participate in labs which some students haven’t experienced before.

“You have to think about things that they need to know about before they can jump right into Biology,” Kenny said.

In the World Studies, students learn to utilize their linguistic skills so they are able to analyze events like historians. With Social Studies, students have either learned the history of another country or have not learned much history due to some cases of interrupted learning or different curriculum in their old school.

Math is an easier class to take than others for most ELL students.

“I have two classes that are easy for me, math and social studies,” Munezero said. “Math doesn’t require English, because if you see a math problem, you can do it according to how much you know.”

Lisania Ramirez-Duran ‘18 also moved here from El Salvador. Although she has learned and understands foundational principles of math, and beyond, she still has trouble with concepts taught.

“For me it’s the process,” she said. “We had a different process to solve (similar) problems.”

Rivera-Moran has completed many years of math courses at his old school, but like Ramirez-Duran, he still gets puzzled.

“I already went through the same math content

that I’m learning now,” he said. “The only thing that is different is the process, and that’s the confusing part.”

Not all students are as lucky to have an educational background like Munezero and Rivera-Moran. Although math is easy for most students because there is less language involved, it all depends on how much education a student has had.

“Some students have been to school in three different countries because of war or moving,” Kenny said. “If they have had interrupted education, there’s no foundation to build on. It’s a very different story than a student who comes from a normal high school in Mexico and is just transferring their knowledge from Spanish to English.”

Through thick and thin, Kenny has always been beside her students, encouraging and guiding them along their way.

“I just want to thank my teacher,” Munezero said, remembering all the times Kenny had helped her. Many students part of the program, like Munezero, sing her praises for her dedication and the effort she puts into teaching.

“It’s like throwing them right into the water as soon as they get here, which is good and bad. It’s my only option for the most part just because where we are at with our program and staffing.”

-Emily Kenny



ELL teacher Emily Kenny informs students of their latest project. Students were assigned to create a skit regarding a characteristic they included on their social contract.

ELL STUDENTS ARE 4.6 PERCENT OF THE STUDENT BODY

