

City watch

# Youngsters study, live spirit of Japan

Burr Elementary pupils learn not only the language but also the culture of the country

By Jon Anderson  
Tribune staff reporter

"I like languages," said Sergio Hernandez, 9. "Someday I want to go to Japan and speak to somebody in Japanese."

To outsiders, that might seem like a far-out dream for a youngster sitting in a classroom in a Chicago public school in Bucktown.

To insiders, notably the pupils, teachers and parents at the Burr Elementary School, 1621 W. Wabansia Ave., it is not.

A visitor found that out Tuesday when he dropped in on 4th graders in a class run by teacher Laura McGlone.

"Let's sing our song. You remember it, right?" McGlone said, drawing a unanimous response that roughly translated as "yes."

With that, the youngsters sang a spirited rendition of "Ue O Muite Aruko," a ballad long popular in Japan. Then they adeptly moved onto flashcards with Japanese numbers and words, crossword puzzles built around Japanese characters and a quick-paced Japanese vocabulary drill.

The visitor recognized the

tune.

Against all odds, on June 15, 1963, under the title of "The Sukiyaki Song," it ousted Lesley Gore's "It's My Party" and became—for a moment—the No. 1 popular song in the United States. But unlike the whiz kids in front of him, he never had learned the words, especially not in Japanese.

That's not the way it goes at Burr.

Many of its 400 pupils have been studying Japanese—and exploring its culture—since they entered pre-kindergarten.

Burr is one of five elementary schools and five high schools in Chicago chosen by the Board of Education to offer Japanese studies as part of a world language program. But the school goes far beyond the minimums.

"We teach through games, activities, singing and dancing, and we provide authentic materials," said the Japanese program's other teacher, Kumiko Suzuki-Flasck.

That means everything from wearing kimonos to making field trips to points of local Japanese interest. Last year some 40 youngsters went by bus to a home for Japa-



Tribune photo by Chuck Berman

Burr Elementary 4th-grader Sergio Hernandez watches as classmate Nestor Solis plays a matching game in Japanese.

nese-American senior citizens and spoke in Japanese with residents.

At Burr there is also a Japanese drawing club, a drumming club, Japanese cooking and a Japanese choir that includes several parents.

"I knew our population was primarily Hispanic," said Principal Vinita Scott, who has worked at the school for 24 years.

But when the language program offer came up in 1999, she wanted a challenge.

This year the program received a \$5,000 grant from the Japanese Chamber of Commerce & Industry of Chicago Foundation, part of almost \$2

million in grants the foundation has made to arts and education projects in the Chicago area over the last 14 years.

"Our big dream is to add a third teacher," Scott said.

Another hope is to raise funds, maybe \$15,000, to send a group to Japan.

"We live in a global world. And these children are very appreciative of other cultures," Scott noted, standing under a world globe that hangs in the main hallway.

"The wonderful thing about children is that they don't know what they can or can't do," she said. "They feel 'this is something we can learn,' and they do it."