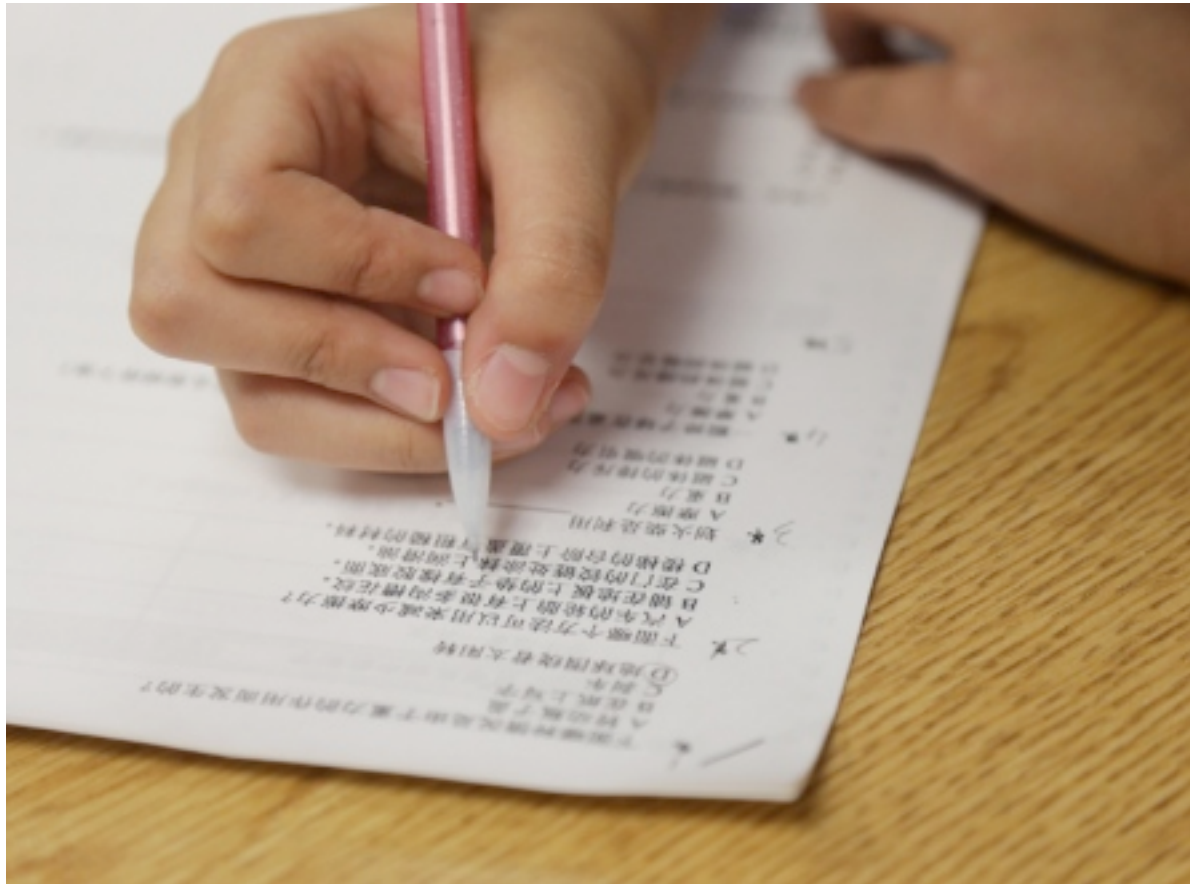


Duke University recognizes three local students



Vicky Wu works on schoolwork at her desk at the Renaissance School International last week.

Andrew P. Johnson / The News Herald

By [S. Brady Calhoun / The News Herald](#)

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PHOTO GALLERIES



- [Renaissance School](#)

PANAMA CITY — How do you say, 'Go Blue Devils,' in Mandarin?

That may not be common knowledge, but three seventh graders at a local private school can say it in Mandarin, English and Spanish.

Amelia Talkington, 12, Katherine Kozan, 12, and Vicky Wu, 13, students at Renaissance School International were recently named Duke University Talent Identification Program (TIP) award winners. The program selects high achieving middle school students and lets them take college entrance exams.

If they score well the students are granted access to distance learning programs and other resources from Duke.

"We're really excited to get our students involved with this," said Principal Laura Stahl. "It will open a lot of opportunities for them."

Talkington, Kozan and Wu did better on those exams than 82 percent of college-bound high school seniors. While most of their reactions were low key, Talkington said she "jumped up and down," when she saw her scores.

"It wasn't too hard," Kozan said of the SAT and ACT tests that often befuddle kids on their way out of high school.

Wu, Kozan and Talkington have been students at Renaissance School International in Panama City since it opened in 2005. They were the first three kids at the nonprofit private school created by Talkington's mom, Juliann Talkington. The curriculum, which now begins in pre-k, includes Spanish, Mandarin, English and math. The students go to immersion classes where only Mandarin or Spanish is spoken in the entire class.

During a school visit Thursday, pre-k students were throwing a stuffed toy at a board and trying to hit the right Mandarin word while their teacher encouraged them in the foreign language.

Young students absorb foreign languages much easier than their older counterparts, and within a short amount of time can speak in any language without having to translate it in their heads back to English, school officials said.

"It is like parachuting down to a foreign country where no one speaks any English," Stahl said.

Stahl added that Talkington chose the curriculum for the nonprofit school by finding the curriculum used by the best schools in the world and adapting it.

While the foreign language immersion is a big part of the school, the students also get plenty of English, math and science.

Amelia Talkington said she and her fellow students had already learned all the math on the SAT.

Currently the school has about 30 students from pre-k through seventh grade and officials plan to add a grade each year through high school. Also, in 2011 officials opened a campus in Costa Mesa, Calif.