Parents want elementary pupils to learn foreign languages -- but where?

By Michael Alison Chandler October 31, 2014 Email the author

London Carrasco, left, and Jonah Meyer, center, listen to teacher Renessa Copeland sing the Spanish words for different emotions at Semillitas Early Language Center in Northwest Washington. (Lexey Swall/For The Washington Post)

My 2-year-old son's first language is Spanglish. He likes ice in his agua, the color azul, and las vacas, or cows. "Baby vacas," especially. Lately, his favorite song is "Señora Vaca," a little ditty that gives thanks to the mother cow for all the tasty dairy products she provides.

"Sing it!" he demanded recently with a toddler's insistence.

"I can't. I don't know it," I told him. "It's in Spanish."

For the hours I invested in evening courses and holiday language schools in Central America trying to learn the language as an adult,

Advanced Spanglish might be the best I ever do. Like any parent, I hope for better for the next generation.

That's why I was excited to find him a Spanish immersion day-care program. Since he was 5 months old, he has spent his days with caregivers who call him muñeco, or doll, and who are teaching him that A is for avión, rather than airplane. He plays with coches y camiónes in the morning and cars and trucks at night.

Research shows that early language learning results in better pronunciation and higher levels of proficiency, as well as cognitive benefits associated with being bilingual. But, of course, any advantages accrue with prolonged exposure. I'm worried about the next step.

The majority of foreign language programs in the United States don't start until middle school or even high school. As my son approaches preschool and elementary school, I don't want him to lose his second language in that years-long vacuum. (For a list of Washington-area elementary schools that offer language instruction, click here.)

It's a growing concern for parents in the Washington area, many of whom are bilingual themselves or seek out similar types of language-focused day-care centers or nannies to give their children an early start with another language.

"What we are seeing is that parents are really demanding it from their schools," said Marty Abbott, executive director of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. "I am calling them language moms instead of soccer moms."

The council hopes it can tap the energy of these parents in a campaign that's getting underway to build up foreign language capacity in the nation's schools, starting from a student's early age.

“With the changing demographics in this country, it’s becoming harder and harder to ignore that we are living in communities that are multilingual already,” Abbott said. “Languages are an important asset.”

Just 15 percent of U.S. public elementary schools offer any foreign language instruction, according to the most recent survey funded by the Education Department, in 2008. That figure was down from 24 percent the decade earlier, a drop educators attribute to budget cuts and a heightened focus on math and reading inspired by the federal No Child Left Behind law.

Poor and rural districts are the least likely to offer foreign language. But even Loudoun County, one of the richest counties in the nation, cut an elementary foreign language program that was once among the most comprehensive in the state. All first- through sixth-graders used to get Spanish instruction. Now, foreign language again begins in the seventh grade.

Starting foreign language in middle school is late, compared with many developed countries that require instruction in one, or sometimes two, foreign languages in elementary school. And it skips over many of the years experts say children are especially wired to learn language in the most natural ways, through play and exploration.

Parents often turn to private schools, which are more than three times as likely to offer foreign language programs to elementary students, according to the national survey. Private tutoring centers or weekend language schools are also thriving, Abbott said.

But there are promising trends in public education.

In Washington, where I live, the public school system got funding this year to expand foreign language offerings in elementary schools. And some of the most sought-after charter schools, including Mundo Verde and Yu Ying, offer intensive foreign language instruction starting as early as preschool. Under pressure from parents, Arlington County expanded its foreign language instruction in elementary schools, furthering a plan to make it available countywide. And Prince George's County added foreign language classes in 10 additional elementary schools this year.

Nationally, full- or partial-immersion programs, where all or many of the academic courses are taught in a foreign language, have been growing since the 1970s.

Nancy Rhodes, former director of Foreign Language Education for the Center for Applied Linguistics, said immersion programs are "the shining star" of the foreign language movement because they get the best results in developing fluency.

Two-way or dual-immersion programs are also increasingly popular. With this model, students spend half the day in English and half in a target language, and the classroom is composed of students who speak English at home and those who speak the target language at home. That way, they can be language models for each other.

Cleveland Elementary is one of seven elementary schools in the District that offer a dual-language program.

In a pre-kindergarten class one September morning, students were discussing the question of the day, or the pregunta del día: Qué hace esta persona en la escuela? (What does this person do at the school?)

They spoke in Spanish about what the principal or gym teacher or other staff members do all day.

Upstairs, second-graders were writing essays in Spanish. By the higher grades, students write and speak easily in both languages, Principal Dawn Feltman said. On back-to-school night, she had a native-English speaker address parents in Spanish and a native-Spanish speaker talk to the parents in English.

Utah became the first state to legislate funding for large-scale implementation of dual-language and immersion programs in 2008. Delaware is rolling out a plan to bring the programs to more schools.

One reason the programs are on the rise, Rhodes said, is because the foreign language teachers also teach the core academic classes, and so they are built into the school district's standard funding formula. Programs that rely on itinerant teachers are more vulnerable to budget cuts.

Foreign Language in Elementary Schools, or FLES programs, are common in the Washington region, providing instruction from one to five days a week and aiming for a beginning level of proficiency.

Many school districts are working to integrate the grade-level curriculum into these foreign language classes. That helps to reinforce what students are learning and to build up their academic vocabularies in a second language so they are not just talking about colors and numbers and songs, typical beginning lessons for children.

Ideally, I'd like my son to spend more than an hour or two a week in another language.

In a few months, our family will enter a citywide lottery to enroll him in preschool. It's become a rite of passage for many D.C. families, one that we approach with some appreciation (publicly funded preschool is still relatively rare in this country) and some trepidation (there's no guarantee he'll be assigned to a school we favor).

Foreign language instruction is not our only priority, but it's near the top of my list. Competition is likely to be stiff, because I know I'm not the only one thinking that way.

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