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Will Dual Immersion Work for Your Child?

By Judy Molland

"Daddee!" yells 6-year-old Anka, her long black hair flying up behind her as she throws herself into the arms of her father, Eric Lee, who's come to pick her up from school. She continues in a happy chatter of English and Chinese, just like the students around her in the playground. Anka is a first-grader at the Chinese Immersion School at DeAvila in San Francisco, and her classes are conducted in 80 percent Cantonese and 20 percent English.

Growing in popularity, dual-language immersion programs are the new face of bilingual education, which was voted down by California voters in 1998. While bilingual education catered only to non-native English speakers, dual-language immersion programs are designed for students, native and non-native speakers of English, to learn two languages. One language does not replace the other.

"Bilingual education has basically become a dirty word, but dual-language programs seem to have this cachet that people are glomming onto," says Julie Sugarman of the Center for Applied Linguistics, a Washington, D.C.-based research organization.

Dual-immersion classes strive to include a 50-50 mix of native speakers in each of two languages – often English and Spanish, but programs are also offered in Mandarin, Cantonese, German, Korean, Japanese, Italian, French and Armenian, in various parts of California.

Most schools adopt a model in which 90 percent of the instruction is delivered in the non-English language in kindergarten. The percentage gradually shifts, until by fourth or fifth grade, students are learning in English for half the day and the other language for the other half.

The main goals of these programs are for students to achieve strong levels of academic proficiency in both languages and to value cultural diversity.

Dual-immersion instruction has existed in the United States for decades, starting with the 1963 opening of a school in Florida for Cuban refugees who had fled the Castro regime.

Today, there are at least 450 such programs around the country; of these, California has approximately 200 programs in 100 different school districts.

The San Francisco Bay Area offers more than 50

dual-language immersion programs; public schools in San Francisco alone have 19 different immersion programs in four different languages spread across 17 schools covering grades kindergarten through nine. Dual-language programs also are offered at schools throughout the Bay Area, including San Jose, Menlo Park, Half Moon Bay and Oakland.

Why Choose Dual-immersion?

There are plenty of good reasons why these programs are becoming so popular.

“Being bilingual is an undeniable advantage,” says Alison Mackey, co-author of *The Bilingual Edge* (Harper Perennial, 2007). A linguistics professor at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and the mother of two young children, Mackey knows that advanced knowledge of two languages gives kids enhanced creativity and improved literacy skills.

According to Escondido Elementary School in Palo Alto, which has a Spanish dual-immersion program: “On standardized academic tests, both groups outperform their counterparts who have been educated in monolingual classrooms. Spanish speakers also outperform their counterparts who have been educated in traditional bilingual classrooms.”

As Hilary Merrill, mother of second-grader Jake, puts it, “I’ve seen my son develop faster with two languages. It’s like he’s firing on all cylinders.” Like Anka Lee, her son attends the Chinese Immersion School at DeAvila, and she is thrilled with the school.

“If you are looking for a dual language and cultural experience for your child, nothing can beat full dual-immersion,” says Wendy Robushi, whose child was enrolled in a K-8 Mandarin immersion program in San Francisco. Her daughter Jiana agrees: “I loved it! And I’m now fluent in another language.”

Raquel Espinosa chose dual immersion for her two daughters because she wanted them to learn the language and culture of her native Mexico. She enrolled Paolina and Fernanda in Adelante Elementary School in Redwood City. “Spanish and English are valued equally,” says Espinosa. “There’s a great sense of community, where everyone is integrated, and a wonderful feeling of diversity, everyone being in this together.” Paolina adds, “I love running around outside and speaking both Spanish and English to my friends.”

How to Choose the Right Dual-Immersion School

What you can see speaks louder than words. Visit several schools and learn exactly what the program is about. Then, you can decide whether it’s a good fit for your child.

Wendy Cheong, principal of Starr King Elementary in San Francisco, which has a Mandarin dual-immersion program, offers these tips:

- Read about the design and intent of immersion.
- Tour the various immersion programs.
- Talk to parents/guardians whose children are in the immersion program.
- Consider the support needed to assist students to be successful in immersion.

WHERE TO LEARN MORE

- **Directory of Two-Way Immersion Programs in the United States** – www.cal.org/twi/directory
- **Two-Way Language Immersion Programs in California** – www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/ip/faq.asp
- **Let’s Raise Multilingual Kids! (Lists Bay Area Dual-Immersion Programs)** – sites.google.com/site/spanishimmersionadvocates/immersion-information/links-to-others

Also a native Spanish speaker, Margarita Navarro chose Fiesta Gardens Spanish Immersion in San Mateo, for similar reasons. And as an educator, she recognized the importance of early education.

“The school was phenomenal,” says Navarro. “In just two years, Paola learned to read and write in Spanish and to read in English and write phonetically in English.”

Not all parents who choose dual-immersion programs are native speakers, however. Like Merrill, Erik Olsen was anxious for his son to learn a second language early, and enrolled Zane in San Francisco’s Buena Vista Horace Mann, the district’s oldest Spanish immersion school, as a kindergartner. The boy is now in second grade, and Olsen has been thrilled that the language and culture are fully bilingual, even in classes like science. Zane loves the school. “It’s cool,” he says. “You can talk to the teachers in two languages.”

The Downsides

There are drawbacks. For one thing, trying to help a child with his or her homework when the language is unfamiliar to the parent may be an exercise in helplessness.

Another issue can be that students are not able to demonstrate their learning as well as students at other “regular” schools, because of the focus on two languages. But they do catch up by sixth or seventh

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"It is such a gift to families and children to be multilingual and to share cultures. You have such a connection to another culture when you speak another language."

— Rosina Tong, principal at the Chinese Immersion School at DeAvila in San Francisco

grade. Olsen agrees: "Kids learn to read and write English later than they would in a monolingual school, so you have to trust that they will catch up."

But it doesn't always happen this way. Merrill has found her son, Jake, to be reading above grade level, so clearly this varies, depending on the child and the school. Rosina Tong, the principal at DeAvila, points out that her school must cover the Common Core State Standards just like any other elementary school, and she is proud of the test scores.

Finding the Right School

As parents know, it's important to find a school that's the right fit for your child, and that's also true of dual-immersion schools.

Learning two languages is a challenge that not all kids are up to. And, of course, within the gamut of dual-immersion schools, there are many options. One reason Olsen chose Buena Vista for his son was its reputation as an artsy, progressive school. Robushi, advises: "Be clued into your children and their learning style. Are they flexible? Are they easily frustrated? Do they have any identified learning challenges?" If so, she encourages parents to ask about the school's approach to learning differences when they are checking out schools.

"It is such a gift to families and children to be multilingual and to share cultures," says Tong. "You have such a connection to another culture when you speak another language."

Navarro agrees, adding, "This is America. If the program is working as designed, dual-immersion is the great equalizer." ■

Redwood City's Judy Molland is a long-time teacher who writes frequently for *Bay Area Parent* about education.

Summer is the perfect time to start your child on language studies. We have a full line-up of Bay Area camps that focus on second languages and cultures. Find out more at bayarearent.com/article/camps-speak-an-international-language-peace-cooperation.html