



Boards Making a Difference

Dual Language Programs Emerging in Iowa

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Dual language programs, where students learn core subjects in two languages, are a growing trend across the nation. According to a 2016 article from [Education Writers Association](#), there were 260 dual language programs in the U.S. in 2000. Today, there are an estimated 2,000 dual language programs in nearly 40 states and Washington, D.C.

This trend is also gaining popularity in Iowa. While we were not able to confirm this number because it is not officially tracked by the Iowa Department of Education, nearly a dozen school districts offer dual language programs today. We are profiling two of those districts—one that has offered the program since 1997, and another that just launched the program in 2018.

Both districts, West Liberty and Denison, offer two-way 50/50 dual language programs. In a 50/50 dual language program, half of the students speak English natively, and half speak Spanish natively. There are several schedules that could be followed—students spend half of the day immersed in English, and the other half in Spanish. Or, they spend an entire day in one language and the next day in another. They could also alternate from one language to another in each period.

West Liberty Serves More Than Half Student Population in Dual Language Program

The West Liberty school district offers a robust dual language program that scales from kindergarten through 12th grade. A federal grant back in 1997 sparked interest from the district to study various program models. The program started out small and was only offered to pre-k and kindergarten students in its first year, 1998. From 1999-2002, additional grade levels were added and over the next few years, continued to 12th grade.

“You talk about West Liberty, and you hear about the dual language program. More than half our students are participating in this program. Our board is very supportive and engaged with children in the program, and sincerely interested in second language development for the benefit of students as well as the



community,” said Superintendent Joe Potts. The West Liberty student population is 54 percent Hispanic, which also reflects the population of the community.

“Dual language is an effective strategy in providing supportive instruction for EL learners. The board believed that 20 years ago when they started the program, and today, our board is still very cognizant of that. It helps us support our significant majority minority population in the district and community,” said Board Member Lynne Sasmazer. West Liberty’s program strives for a 50/50 balance in Spanish and English speakers, but does not always hit the mark if there isn’t enough interest in the program. The lowest ratio is 60/40.

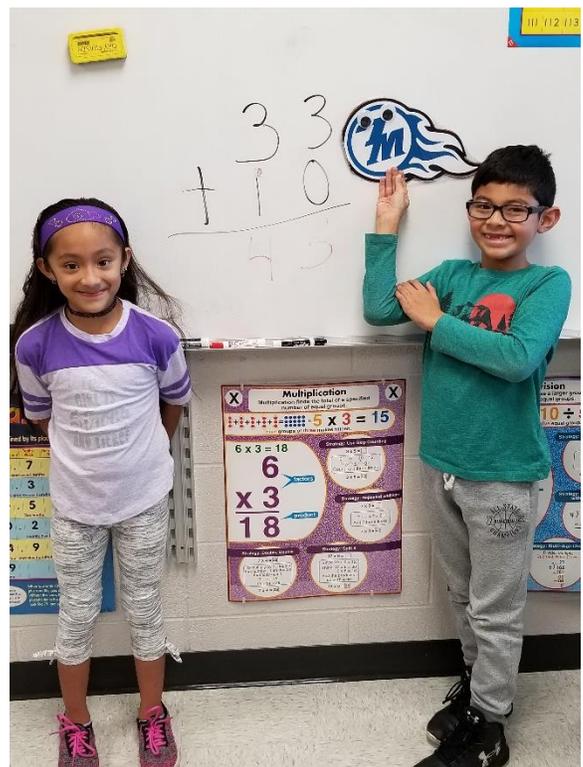
DUAL LANGUAGE PROGRAM A SELLING POINT FOR PROSPECTIVE FAMILIES

There are many parents who are interested in educating their child in two languages—so many, in fact, that the district has a wait list for the English-speaking portion of the program.

“This program really makes our district unique, and we have a lot of families who move into the district specifically because they want their children involved in the program,” said Sasmazer, “We are one of those families. We appreciate the opportunity to have that much foreign language instruction in a public school—not a lot of families have that opportunity.”

PARTNERSHIP WITH SPAIN BENEFITS STUDENTS

All dual language programs need bilingual speakers, but the demand outweighs the supply. Many districts struggle to find just one teacher—West Liberty must have three teachers for each grade level. While there are some local teachers, the district has partnered with Spain since 2007 to recruit teachers to come to Iowa for 1-2 years and teach. This recruitment is not easy or cheap—but benefits students significantly.



“This is really beneficial for the elementary level of the program—the most immersive portion. Bringing in speakers who are European Spanish speakers, in a community that is primarily Central American Spanish speaking, adds another dimension to the program,” said Sasmazer.

GRADUATES RETURN TO DISTRICT AND TEACH, SHARE BENEFITS OF THE PROGRAM

In addition to recruiting teachers from Spain, West Liberty recruits local graduates to teach in the district. Students who have continued the dual language program all the way through graduation are obvious candidates to recruit—for teacher positions, and to promote the program to potential students.

“Our students who graduate from the program do remarkably well. They are bright shining stars in the district. They come back and share stories of some aspect of the program and how it’s benefitted them,” said Potts.

So far, the district has successfully recruited several graduates of the program to return to the district as teachers. They expect this number to rise, as more graduates are coming out of college and preparing to search for jobs.

“We hope to build a cadre of educators with strong backgrounds in language instruction and built-in familiarity and affinity for our community,” said Sasmazer.

EVALUATION SHOWS PROGRAM IS WORKING

The district has many years of evaluation under its belt, so they feel confident in saying that the program is making a difference for all students involved.

“We believe the program has considerable benefits, not only in acquiring a second language, but helping second language learners develop important academic skills. Research suggests that as an intervention, dual language programs are optimal,” said Potts.

The district has a goal of keeping as many students in the program as possible all the way through 12th grade. As students progress through grades, they do see a number of students drop out for logical reasons such as sports, orchestra, drama, etc.

“We are working to keep more students in until they graduate. Around 15-20 percent stay all the way through senior year. It’s still remarkable that we have a large percentage continue through middle school,” said Potts.

In an effort to encourage most students to continue through graduation, they’ve reconfigured Advanced Placement (AP) classes to offer students the first level of AP language in Spanish, integrating standards and making curriculum more engaging and aligned to high expectations. Additionally, as mentioned previously, they also invite graduates back to the district to help promote the program.

“We feel the program gives students skills that will serve them well in the future. Our teachers impart that to students—learning a language and learning about another culture and having sustained

interactions with friends and neighbors from different backgrounds will serve you your whole life,” said Sasmazer.

Meet the West Liberty School Board

Denison Launches Dual Language Program with Strong Support

The Denison school district serves a diverse population of students—60.6 percent Latino, 30.8 percent Caucasian, 5.2 percent African American, 2.8 percent Asian and 1.01 Other. There are 23 languages spoken in the district. Several years ago, the Denison school board set a goal to increase opportunities for young students to have access to more than one language.

“The dual language program is important for our school and community. It is critical we provide both English speakers and Spanish speakers with a strong beginning in their native language, while at the same time introducing and developing a second language,” said Board President Kris Rowedder.

A task force was created to lead the charge and began researching options. Initially they looked at offering exploratory Spanish classes in elementary or middle school. But, they heard feedback from parents that they wanted their children to be bilingual or biliterate.

“Research shows that Spanish as an exploratory exposes kids to Spanish, but they don’t get the biliteracy and bilingualism we were looking for,” said Dual Language Coordinator Heather Langenfeld.

You may be wondering, what’s the difference between biliteracy and bilingual? A student who is bilingual can fluently speak two languages, while a student who is biliterate can fluently read, write and speak two languages.



RESEARCH AND PROGRAM VISITS LEADS TO SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH

So, the focus turned to researching and visiting dual language programs across Iowa and the nation. Iowa visits included Sioux City, Marshalltown and West Liberty. The task force eventually recommended a two-way 50/50 dual language program and the board voted in support of that direction.

"In the past, I have had many parents ask that we look into beginning such a program. Many of these were parents of English as a first language students that were eager for their children to begin to learn Spanish at an elementary age and reap the benefits such a program could provide their children," said Rowedder.

In the fall of 2018, the program was rolled out to 48 kindergarten students and 48 first grade students. Next year, students in second grade will have access to it and the program will continue evolving all the way through high school. The end goal is for all K-12 students in Denison to have an opportunity to learn in both Spanish and English.

The district chose the 50/50 program model because they did not want to exclude English speaking students from the opportunity—they wanted all students to be able to participate in the program, both English and Spanish speaking students.

"Students who have a skill set in multiple languages are in high demand in the workforce. This unique skill set gives them advantages in seeking employment and/or job advancement," said Superintendent Mike Pardun.

BOARD AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT CRUCIAL PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

Board members are especially supportive of the program, because they know the importance of ensuring students are prepared for their future, in an increasingly diverse world.

"The board prioritizes finding and offering the best opportunities possible for all students—dual language programming, STEM initiatives, etc. They set the tone and direction for school administration to pave the way, so teachers and support staff feel empowered to be creative, collaborative and show initiative to dream, design and implement the best programs and experiences for all students," said Pardun.



Parents, students and community members are excited about this program and the direction the district is moving. With a large ELL and Hispanic population, it's important to all stakeholders that the community embraces these cultures.

"It's truly eye-opening for kids to see what a big world we have, and the opportunities they have to learn about other people and other cultures. It really helps to build an appreciation for each other," said Langenfeld.

FOCUS TURNS TO MOVING THE PROGRAM FORWARD

The district is turning the focus from the initial program launch phase of programming, scheduling and curriculum to the next phase, instructional strategies and best practices. Soon, they will begin the evaluation process to ensure students are fully benefitting from the program.

Denison has similar challenges to West Liberty—finding bilingual teachers in Iowa. Like West Liberty, they've had luck recruiting Denison graduates to return and teach. They have also completed all the necessary paperwork to partner with Spain, if the need arises.

"We are a nation that is everchanging and our young learners are the stepping stone to building progressive and compassionate students—our future citizens," said Rowedder.

Meet the Denison School Board