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Dual-Language Programs Are on the Rise, Even for Native English Speakers

By **ELIZABETH A. HARRIS** OCT. 8, 2015

On one of the first days of class at Dos Puentes Elementary School in Upper Manhattan last month, a new student named Michelle peered up through pale blue glasses and took a deep breath.

“Can I drink water?” Michelle, 6, said.

“Diga en Español,” her first-grade teacher, Rebeca Madrigal, answered.

Michelle paused.

“Can I drink agua?” she replied.

It was a start.

Dos Puentes, a three-year-old school in the Washington Heights neighborhood, is a dual-language program, which means that subjects, like reading and math, are taught in two languages with the goal of making students bilingual. Once seen as a novelty, dual-language programs are now coming into favor as a boon to both native and nonnative English speakers, and in areas around the country their numbers have been exploding.

In New York City, there were 39 new or expanded dual-language public-school programs this fall, in addition to an increase of about 25 programs two years ago. The city has about 180 such programs, according to the Department of Education. Languages offered now include Arabic, Chinese, French, Haitian-Creole, Hebrew, Korean, Polish and Russian, as well as Spanish.

In Utah, 9 percent of the state's public elementary students are enrolled in dual-language programs. In Portland, Ore., 10 percent of all students, and nearly one in five kindergartners, participate. Statewide efforts to increase the number of programs, and expand access to them, are underway in states including Delaware and North Carolina.

Libia Gil, assistant deputy secretary and director of the office of English language acquisition at the federal Education Department, said that while there was no definitive count of dual-language programs nationwide, "there are clear indications of a movement."

In some localities, like New York City, the primary goal of expanding dual-language programs is to increase access to them for English-language learners, officials at the city's Education Department said.

Traditionally, these children were taught almost exclusively in English. But new research suggests that while these students can take more time to get on grade level in a dual-language program, by late elementary or middle school they tend to perform as well as or better academically than their peers and may be more likely to be reclassified as proficient in English.

"If someone is teaching you 'A, A, Apple,' and you're thinking 'A, A, Manzana,' you're not building on the knowledge you already bring to the table," said Victoria Hunt, the principal at Dos Puentes.

But these programs also offer a partial solution to the intractable problem of de facto school segregation. John B. King Jr., a senior adviser at the federal Education Department who will soon become President Obama's acting education secretary, said dual-language programs "can be a vehicle to increase socioeconomic and racial diversity in schools" by drawing more affluent parents.

At the School for International Studies, a sixth-through-12th-grade school in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, the enrollment recently shot up to 100 sixth-grade students this year from 30 last year. The principal, Jillian Juman, estimated that half of that interest came from the school's recently added International Baccalaureate program, and the other half from families looking for a dual-language program, which is offered there in French.

"It does allow for much more diversity," Ms. Juman said. "In terms of

language, culture and socioeconomically, too.”

More and more, native English-speaking parents see biliteracy in their own children as important in a global economy. In Delaware and Utah, statewide initiatives to increase dual-language education were largely conceived as a way to increase bilingualism among English speakers.

“I want two things,” said Gov. Jack Markell of Delaware, a Democrat. “I want students from Delaware to be able to go anywhere and do any kind of work they want to do, and I also want to attract businesses from around the world, to say, ‘You want to be in Delaware because, amongst other things, we’ve got a bilingual work force.’ ”

For native English speakers, there is relatively little research on how dual-language programs affect their performance on standard metrics like state tests.

But Jennifer Steele, an associate professor at American University’s School of Education who is finishing research on Portland’s dual-language programs, said her work had found performance increases for both native English speakers and English-language learners in some grades and certain subjects once they reached late elementary school.

The climb to that advantage, however, can be daunting. Depending on the model, classes are generally taught from 50 percent to 90 percent of the time in the target language, with the rest taught in English. Some programs switch halfway through the day, while others switch every other day or by subject. Especially early on, many words spoken in class are ones a child has never heard.

Liz Menendez, a kindergarten teacher at Dos Puentes, said she had regular conversations with her students to reassure them that this challenge was one they could master.

“If you set the tone from the beginning, then they kind of know, ‘Hey, I’m going to get it in just a second, let me see what she’s doing,’ ” Ms. Menendez said. “They are sponges. They start attuning.”

To help them along, language at Dos Puentes is color-coded, especially in the lower grades. In one classroom, a label near a jar of pencils read “sharpener” in royal blue and “sacapunta” in fire engine red. On a poster, the words “read quietly”

had a blue border and “leo en voz baja” a red one. As a kindergarten teacher sang in Spanish with her students, she made sure to use a red marker as she wrote on a dry erase board.

Shane LeClair, whose son, Tuck, 7, has been at Dos Puentes since kindergarten and is now in second grade, said that the boy spoke no Spanish when he started, but managed.

“It was strangely always O.K.,” Mr. LeClair said. “It was his first real school experience, and having nothing to compare it to, he jumped right in.”

Arilda Crisostomo, who was born in the United States to Dominican parents, said she chose the program to enable her daughter, Brooke Lynn Jackson, 7, to speak to older members of the family in Spanish, but also to give her a professional advantage in the future.

“We are conscious of the edge she will have when she’s out in the world because she will be biliterate,” Ms. Crisostomo said. “That’s different from being able just to speak in Spanish.”

Educators caution that not all dual-language programs are equally good. If a program is not run properly, they say, the pace might be catered to native English speakers, so content in English becomes more difficult and content in the other language is too easy. And even at well-run programs, hiring qualified teachers can be a challenge.

Sean Reardon, a professor at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education who has researched dual-language programs, said there might also be a difference depending on what two languages are being taught. While Spanish and English are phonologically similar, sharing an alphabet and many sounds, character-based languages like Chinese are quite different, he said, and that might make it more difficult for students to follow along.

“I don’t think there’s one answer in the research, is dual-language immersion good or bad,” Professor Reardon said. “I think it might well depend on what the other language is relative to your home language.”

That said, he added, there is only so much that can be measured.

“There is great value in having a kid grow up to be bilingual, and even if your

kid didn't do quite as well on the standardized math test, maybe that's worth it," he said. "In the end, they come out with this whole extra skill they wouldn't otherwise have had."

Correction: October 8, 2015

An earlier version of this article described incorrectly the written Korean language. It is alphabet-based, not a character-based.

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