

Raising a Polyglot

Helping Your Child Become Bilingual and Bicultural

By Emily Puro

For some, it's a matter of heritage, a way to continue familial traditions and make sure their children can communicate with relatives near and far. For others, it's an opportunity to give their children "a leg up" in an increasingly global economy. For many, it's the most logical path toward nurturing culturally competent citizens of the world.

Whatever the reasons, more and more parents are choosing to educate their children bilingually, and both public and private schools are adding language immersion programs to meet that demand. Parents in the Portland metropolitan area can now choose between Spanish, French, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Russian and German language immersion programs beginning in kindergarten or earlier, in both public and private schools.

The options include one-way immersion, where students mainly from English speaking backgrounds are immersed in a new language, or two-way, where about half the students speak English as their first language and the other half speak the target language. Some programs are full immersion, with all or almost all instruction delivered in the target language, while others are partial immersion, with instruction split between English and the target language.

Benefits of Language Immersion

There are countless benefits to speaking a second language, from expanded career opportunities in an increasingly international workplace to the ability to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds to the pleasures of experiencing world literature, theater and cinema in their original forms. But research-based and anecdotal evidence suggests that the benefits of language immersion programs go beyond bilingualism to include cognitive and academic advantages, increased cultural competency, and larger benefits for society as a whole.

According to research cited by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), students who receive second language instruction appear to be more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not; bilinguals outperform similar monolinguals on both verbal and nonverbal intelligence tests; and students who learn foreign languages score statistically higher on standardized college entrance exams than those who do not.

"The data shows that the average kid in the immersion program,



The curriculum at local immersion schools covers both language and culture, as can be seen in the photo of a fourth grader in the International School's Chinese program.

"This class is teaching the kids how to be more open minded and how to accept different cultures into their lives. It's teaching them not to be judgmental toward other cultures and to accept everybody for who they are."

- Julia Zakharchenko, teacher, Kelly Elementary School's Russian immersion program

regardless of where they come from, scores at the 73rd percentile by sixth, seventh or eighth grade," says Rob Stewart, immersion coordinator at southeast Portland's Atkinson Elementary School. "The average kid in another program scores at the 50th, so intellectually there are huge advantages."

Immersion programs, especially two-way programs that serve both native English speakers and native speakers of the target language in each classroom, offer students a unique opportunity to experience a second culture from an early age. "This class is teaching the kids how to be more open minded and how to accept different cultures into their lives," says Julia Zakharchenko, a kindergarten teacher in southeast Portland's Kelly Elementary School's Russian immersion program, a two-way approach. "It's teaching them not to be judgmental toward other cultures and to accept everybody for who they are."

"Being able to read and write in two languages is great," says Stewart, "but being able to understand that the way we do things in our country is no more than that - the way we do things, not the right way - that awareness makes them citizens of the world rather than just citizens of our country."

"Two-way immersion programs are really powerful programs for kids in both language groups and for the families," says Lucy Estrada-Guzman, principal at Vancouver's Sarah J. Anderson Elementary, which offers a Spanish immersion program. "It creates cross cultural understanding not only with the kids but also with families and staff members."

One-way immersion programs introduce children to world cultures
Raising a Polyglot continues on page 28

as well. At southwest Portland's International School, where classes are conducted in Spanish, Mandarin Chinese and Japanese, students, "are being immersed in a microcosm of our world, one where the neighbors next door speak a different language and invite them in to celebrate different holidays," says Linda Bonder, the school's marketing director. "When growing up in this type of immersion, diversity and multiculturalism is as natural as waking up in the morning."

In addition to building community, many experts believe the economic and political future of our nation hinges on our children's ability to communicate effectively in world languages in order to compete and collaborate in today's global market. To do that, a greater investment in bilingual education is needed. "The research is pretty clear that if you wait until college to start, it's too late," says Michael Bacon, immersion education coordinator for PPS. "We need to create K-16 pipelines for kids to become multilingual (and) multicultural."

Toward that end, about three years ago, PPS and the University of Oregon became among the first collaborative projects in the nation to receive a federal grant to develop a kindergarten through university language program to produce "superior level speakers, readers and writers" of what the government deems "a critical language," in this case Mandarin Chinese. The goal is to support students who will become professionally proficient in any number of disciplines while at the same time performing at a "superior level of proficiency" in Mandarin Chinese.

Elementary Years and Beyond

Although second languages have traditionally been introduced in middle or high school in this country, it makes sense to start earlier for a number of reasons. A big incentive is to capitalize on young children's natural capacity for language acquisition.

"I like to compare it to teaching math," says Nancy Rhodes, CAL's director of foreign language education. "We could wait until middle school to start teaching math but we want to start in kindergarten so they can work with manipulatives and blocks and start counting with hands-on materials that fit cognitively with their developmental level." Similarly, she notes, teaching colors and numbers and shapes in a foreign language makes more sense when children are reviewing these concepts anyway. Also, studies have shown that the younger an individual learns a second language, the more native-sounding his pronunciation will become.

After elementary school, students have a variety of options to continue their bilingual education, depending on their school district. PPS considers each language track a K-12 program, with some second language instruction in content areas continuing through high school.

But funding can be a problem. For example, the Beaverton School District's first elementary Spanish immersion program began 13 years ago, and two more have been added since, but there are currently no immersion offerings in the district's middle or high schools. "It's number one on our issues list," says Eve



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

Part of the language immersion experience is visiting foreign countries, practicing the language and meeting the people.

Berry, a two-way immersion coach at Barnes Elementary School.

Some students in the area's private elementary immersion schools transfer to public immersion programs in middle school, while others continue their educations at Portland French School's middle school or northwest Portland's Gilkey International School. Beginning

in fall 2008,

the Portland French School, French American International School, the German American School and the International School are joining forces to open The International High School which will have options for students coming from immersion schools as well as those with little or no experience in a foreign language.

Interest Continues to Increase

According to CAL, which maintains a directory of language immersion programs throughout the country, there are now 263 schools offering one-way immersion programs in the United States, up from a single program founded in 1971. "Until 1999," the CAL report notes, "schools offering foreign language immersion programs outnumbered those offering two-way immersion programs, but that balance has shifted over the past 7 years. As of 2006, there are 338 schools in the United States that offer two-way immersion as compared to 263 schools that offer foreign language immersion." The majority of two-way programs were established in the last two decades, and most are in public schools. (While the CAL directory doesn't include every U.S. program, it's the most comprehensive list available.)

"Two-way immersion programs are really powerful programs for kids in both language groups and for the families."

- Lucy Estrada-Guzman, principal at Vancouver's Sarah J. Anderson Elementary



PHOTO COURTESY OF FRENCH AMERICAN SCHOOLS

Language Schools and other Resources in the Metropolitan Area

Public Schools: Enrollment in many public school immersion programs is conducted through a lottery process. Applicants for most districts are accepted beginning in February with school visits scheduled throughout the spring. Contact your district for information about visiting schools and applying for admission.

Private Schools: For private language immersion schools, call or check the web sites for application information.

Chiquitos School (Spanish; through third grade) – 11675 SW Butner Rd.; 503-641-7717; www.chiquitos.org

French American School (also Gilkey International Middle School) – 8500 NW Johnson St.; 503-292-7776; www.faispdx.org

German American School (through fifth grade) – 3900 SW Murray Blvd., Beaverton; 503-626-9089; www.gspdx.com

The International School (Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese; through fifth grade) – 025 SW Sherman St.; 503-226-2496; www.intlschool.org

La Escuela (Spanish; through third grade) – 7703 NE 72nd Ave., Vancouver; 360-883-5658; www.languageacademyinc.com

Portland French School (through middle school) – 6318 SW Corbett Ave.; 503-452-4160; www.portlandfrenchschool.org

Preschool Programs:

Amiguitos (Spanish) – 5105 SE Aldercrest Rd., Milwaukie; 503-653-4081; www.amiguitos.org

Bodhi Tree Center (Mandarin Chinese) – 5403 SE Center St.; 503-788-0336; www.bodhitreelanguagecenter.org

Portland Kinderschule (German cooperative preschool) – 68 SW Miles St.; 503-246-2447; www.portlandkinderschule.com

Other Local Resources:

Hola Hola and Moshi Moshi (televised language instruction produced by Portland Public Schools): For broadcast schedules and online activities, visit www.pps.k12.or.us/depts-c/moshihola/

Bilingual Story Times: Check with your local library.

Portland Early Learning Project: Fee-based bilingual playgroups and school programs. 503-284-0610; www.portlandearlylearning.com

Free Japanese 'Sing and Play' Class Offered: The International School is offering a free "Sing and Play" class for kids ages 4 and under beginning Jan. 11. The class will be taught in Japanese by International School teachers and will meet on four Fridays beginning Jan. 11 from 10:45 to 11:15 am at the International School, 2305 SW Water St. Reservations required; call 503-226-2496, ext. 305 or e-mail Japanese@intlschool.org.

Other Resources:

The Bilingual Edge: Why, When, and How to Teach Your Child a Second Language by Kendall King and Alison Mackey (Collins, 2007)

The Bilingual Family: A Handbook for Parents by Edith Harding-Esch and Philip Riley (Cambridge University Press, 2003)

The Center for Applied Linguistics: Research and other information about second language learning and immersion programs, including directories of one-way and two-way immersion programs. www.cal.org

Canoe Island French Camp: PO Box 370, Orcas, WA 98280; 360-468-2329; www.canoeisland.org. Kids can speak French while enjoying the fun of summer camp at this ACA accredited camp. Located on a private island in Washington's San Juan Islands; all levels of French are taught.

Raising a Polyglot continued from page 28

With waiting lists for public immersion programs and increased community demand, both Vancouver and North Clackamas Schools – each currently offering one Spanish bilingual program – are considering expanding their programs. "We have found that this is the kind of education our community is very interested in," says Howard Yank, curriculum specialist for Vancouver Public Schools.

"These kids graduate from high school and have the ability to go to college in another country," says Eryn Barker, a teacher in West Sylvan Middle School's Spanish immersion program. "They have the ability to work in another country or work in a bilingual setting, whereas most second language programs in this country do not serve our children to be able to do that. You leave being able to conjugate a verb, but you cannot have a conversation. You can't analyze. You can't have opinions in a second language."

Other than living in a foreign country, says Barker – and most researchers, educators and parents seem to agree – immersion programs offer our students the most effective path toward becoming bilingual, bicultural citizens of the world.

Emily Puro is a Portland freelance writer and mother.

Raising a Polyglot continues on page 32