

All About Language Immersion

How bilingual programs nurture brain development, foster cultural awareness and create true citizens of the world

By Anne Laufe



Kindergarten students at the Portland French School easily adapt to being instructed in French, even if it's not their native tongue.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PORTLAND FRENCH SCHOOL

Every year, when the fifth grade students from Portland's French American International School (FAIS) travel to France, the accompanying parents come back amazed by how well their children speak the language. Even more impressive, according to FAIS Admissions Director Arezu Movahed, is when French shopkeepers ask, "Where did your children learn to speak such good English?"

FAIS is one of several local schools offering language immersion programs beginning as early as preschool. With nearly all their instruction presented in French, says Movahed, FAIS students "are sounding native by the end of fifth grade."

If the idea of language immersion is all Greek to you, read on to learn what the benefits are, how these programs operate, and how young children adjust to being taught in a foreign tongue.

Benefits of Early Bilingual Education

Locally, there are a handful of outstanding private schools – and several public schools – offering language immersion programs. (See "Selected Portland Area Immersion Programs" on page 14.) Private schools begin enrolling students in language immersion programs as early as preschool. Public school immersion programs begin in kindergarten.

All of these programs are based on research from the past 40 years showing that children's brains are wired to learn languages best during the first 10 years of life. According to Jim Cummins, a professor in the Modern Language Centre at the University of Alberta in Canada, studies also suggest children who learn two languages at an early age have greater sensitivity to linguistic meanings and may be more flexible in their thinking than those who learn only one language.

Most parents enroll their children in immersion programs for these types of cognitive benefits, says Sabine Moyer, admissions director for the German American School of Portland. "About 75 percent of our students are from non-German speaking families," Moyer says. "We have over 20 countries represented. It's not about one specific language. It's really about the language acquisition.

Early language acquisition is good for brain development in lots of different areas."

Linda Bonder, director of marketing and communications for The International School in southwest Portland, agrees. "Many families are after the brain benefits of learning a second language," she says. "When we're babies and toddlers, our brains are ripe to learn other languages, but by the time kids hit middle school, that part of your brain is already off doing other things."

In addition to the intellectual perks, experts cite myriad other benefits to early second language immersion. Kids who learn a second language become adults with broader social and economic opportunities. As our world becomes more and more interdependent, their prospects for finding a job and building a career are enhanced by being fluent in more than one language. Their understanding of other cultures also provides an advantage in an increasingly global society.

When graduates of The International School travel to other countries, says Bonder, "they understand at some really deep level what it is to be a world citizen. They go to other places and experience being part of communities there in a way you can't really if you only can say 'gracias' and 'de nada.'"

How Does Immersion Work?

In language immersion programs, students are taught most or all of their subjects in the second language, usually by native speakers. At the Portland French School, which serves kids from preschool through eighth grade, teachers speak only French to the preschoolers. While some parents worry that this could be frustrating or confusing for young children, those who have first-hand knowledge reassure them it's not.

Dominique Bradley, director of admissions and marketing for the Portland French School, says, "Two-and-a-half- and 3-year-olds may think it's weird (at first), but very soon it seems normal. They don't question it. Their brains are so ready to process the information that is given to them in another language that it's not hard for them."

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At the International School, where children in preschool through fifth grade study either Spanish, Chinese or Japanese, students in both preschool and kindergarten classes are taught solely in the second language. Bonder says kids at this age tend to understand more than they can say in the second language, so they often talk to each other and to the teacher in English. But by the end of first grade, she adds, students are expected – and able – to use the second language exclusively while in class.

Another common fear for parents is that children in immersion programs may lag behind in English. According to Bradley, students in immersion programs may master English tasks a bit later than their non-immersion peers, but they tend to have stronger verbal and written skills and slightly higher scores on standardized tests when they're older.

In most Portland-area immersion programs, an hour a day of English language study is introduced in the first grade. At FAIS, which includes the French American School for preschool through fifth grade and Gilkey International Middle School (Gilkey) for sixth through eighth grades, the number of hours of English instruction increases by grade level. In the upper grades, for example, history is taught in English, as is English literature.

At Gilkey, students continuing from the French American School begin studying a third language. By the end of eighth grade, says Movahed, they're fluent in French and proficient in either German, Spanish or Mandarin Chinese.

Non-native speakers must enroll at the Portland French School, the German American School, The International School and the French American School beginning in preschool or kindergarten. Students occasionally are accepted as late as first grade, but only if the family is highly motivated to help the child catch up. "We would have to interview the student to make sure they would be successful," says Bradley. "By first grade, our students are really proficient in French and they're also using that language for math and geography and history."

While many of the students at Gilkey are graduates of the French American School, located on the same campus, the middle school also accepts students from other area immersion programs, including those at public schools, as well as students who have never studied a second language. (Students with previous immersion experience in French, German, Spanish or Mandarin study these languages at an advanced level and study social studies in their immersion language. Students without previous language immersion experience study core subjects in English and begin to learn a second language.)

Learn More

For a round-up of pertinent studies on language immersion and brain development, visit bi-lingual.com/School/WhatsImmersion.htm.

The International School has compiled a collection of interesting articles about language immersion at intlschool.org/news-clips/articles.



Preschool students at The International School enjoy Mandarin Chinese picture books in the school library.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FRENCH AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

Kindergarten students at the French American International School don costumes for the school's annual Mardi Gras parade.

Developing Cultural Awareness

Language immersion programs help children become bicultural as well as bilingual, Movahed adds. Teachers in these programs come from all over the world and they introduce students to their native cultures.

At the French American School, for example, teachers from the Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) engage students in art projects centered on African art, including masks and textiles. At The International School, preschool children learn nursery rhymes, songs and dances from their teachers' native countries. Second graders study a unit on world religions, while fourth grade students study immigration, which includes interviewing someone who has immigrated to America to understand why they chose to move here.

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The Bottom Line

If you think you might be interested in a language immersion program for your child, don't hesitate to visit a few schools – and ask a lot of questions.

"The most important thing to remember is that you can't start it later," says Bonder. "You can always stop it if it's not working, but you can't start immersion in the fourth grade. At least go look and see if it might be right for your child."

Adds Bradley, "It's the best gift we can give to our children."

Anne Laufe is an award-winning writer and frequent contributor to Metro Parent.

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