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Dist. 131 program's goal: Make every student bilingual

By: Madhu Krishnamurthy



Stephanie Paul teaches a dual-language Spanish kindergarten class at Benavides STEAM Academy in Aurora. East Aurora District 131's dual-language program will be rolled up each subsequent year through 12th grade. *Courtesy of East Aurora District 131*



Terry Crossen teaches the English portion of a dual-language kindergarten class at Benavides STEAM Academy. East Aurora District 131 this year launched a districtwide dual language program for all kindergartners. *Courtesy of East Aurora District 131*



Jennifer Norrell, superintendent of East Aurora District 131



Lisa Dallacqua, senior executive director of teaching and learning at District 131



Rita Guzman, District 131 executive director of language acquisition and early learning

Alicia Smith wanted to help her biracial children connect with their cultural heritage.

Smith, of Aurora, is Black. The father of her two sons is Mexican.

It's why Smith enrolled the boys in a bilingual program at Johnson Elementary School in Aurora. Her 7-year-old, Alphonse Mendoza, started in the dual-language program in kindergarten and now is excelling academically in second grade, while her 6-year-old, Alano Mendoza, is doing well in first grade.

"I love the program. It is amazing," Smith said. "It gives kids, like, a hunger to want to come to school and know something different. They love their teachers."

This year, East Aurora District 131 launched a districtwide dual-language program that is unique statewide. It aims eventually to make all students in kindergarten through 12th grade bilingual and biliterate by the time they graduate.

This fall, 835 kindergartners across 12 school sites are receiving daily bilingual instruction. The goal is to roll up the program by one grade level each year until all students earn dual-language certification.

Only one kindergarten class out of 13 elementary schools opted out of the dual-language program. By next year, officials hope to have all kindergartners and first-graders enrolled in the program.

English and Spanish will serve as the foundational languages for all students to build upon in later grades, said Lisa Dallacqua, senior executive director of teaching and learning.

"When you talk about a multilingual ecology within a school district, it's always a good idea to start by building the base," Dallacqua said. "We also have students that come in with other languages from World Relief (a refugee resettlement group based in DuPage/Aurora). It's really interesting to watch those students because the interplay of three languages when they're so young ... the kids' minds are like little sponges."

Many suburban districts offer opt-in dual-language programs for students who aren't English language learners. Among them are **Elgin Area School District U-46**, Barrington Unit District 220, Cary District 26, Community Unit District 300, Crystal Lake District 47, Diamond Lake District 76, Elmhurst District 205, Glen Ellyn District 41, Hawthorn District 73, Huntley

Community School District 158, Naperville Unit District 203, Schaumburg District 54, West Chicago District 33, Wheeling District 21, and Woodland Unit District 200.

At District 131, 44% of its 13,561 students are native Spanish speakers compared to the state's average of 13%. Nearly 70% of District 131 students in kindergarten through second grade are English language learners, officials said.

Its population is nearly 88% Hispanic, 7% Black, about 3% white, and 1% of two or more races, with 37 languages represented districtwide.

Ramping up bilingual education was a key pillar of the district's strategic plan. It was something the school board committed to after conducting a districtwide needs assessment because an earlier bilingual program for Spanish speakers and all students was found to be "subpar at best," Superintendent Jennifer Norrell said.

"Our model was straight out of the '70s or '80s, where you would have children go into bilingual education to try to become more English proficient by second grade, and if they weren't, they simply got put out, whether you were proficient or not," Norrell said, "and then had very limited, if any, services (in) third grade through high school. For many children, that wasn't enough."

Children from families with high mobility rates that joined the district in third grade or later often fell through the cracks.

District 131 tested a pilot dual-language program at one school three years ago with students in kindergarten, first and second grades. There was a waiting list with a lottery deciding who could get in.

"We knew that we wanted to have some equity in the language development and have ample opportunities for all of our students, not just for our English learners," said Rita Guzman, executive director of language acquisition and early learning.

Officials had to quell some early opposition, then began educating all teachers, administrators and parents before the program could be rolled out districtwide.

Norrell said it required a paradigm shift to start viewing multilingualism as an added value and recognizing that earning a state Seal of Biliteracy upon graduating high school can be an asset for students no matter what career they pursue.

It's why district officials added Mandarin Chinese education starting in middle school and biliteracy pathways in French and German for high schoolers.

"We're having a cultural shift," Norrell said. "We struggled some brutal battles to adopt dual (language) for all. We're like the only district out of 852 probably that have sought out and won to be able to do this districtwide."