

Abstract: This story is a recent feature on a “dual immersion” school in Washington, DC that gives a good sense of what the schools are like, along with comments from parents, proponents and critics.

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Dual-Language Immersion Improves Skills for Students of Different Cultures

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BODY:

The students in John Mahler and Shakira Holmes's first-grade class at Kemp Mill Elementary inhabit two worlds at the Montgomery County school.

In the world that is Room 103, the doormat reads "Welcome to our classroom" and a basket is filled with such books as "Clifford the Big Red Dog."

But when students cross the threshold into Room 104, the doormat reads "Bienvenidos a nuestro salon de clase" and the book becomes "Clifford: El Perro Bombero" (Clifford the Firehouse Dog).

The youngsters are part of a dual-language immersion program whose aim is to have non-English-speaking students and their English-speaking counterparts help each other become bilingual.

During the school day, Mahler teaches children only in Spanish; Holmes speaks to them only in English. In fact, Mahler said, because the kids have never heard him speak English, some are not aware that their ponytailed instructor knows how to speak it.

"It's a unique approach to helping kids learn a second language -- one that's not sink or swim," Mahler said.

Some educators and parents see such programs as a way to address demographic changes in the nation and teach children to value other cultures. In 2000, 17 percent of students enrolled in public schools were Hispanic, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Because dual-language immersion requires a mix of English-speaking and non-English-speaking students, supporters say the program has an added benefit at such schools as Kemp Mill, where 35.9 percent of students do not speak English fluently. With both languages receiving equal billing, educators say the program can boost the self-esteem of non-native English speakers.

"The kids that have been looked at as 'Oh, those poor kids' -- well, now they're the models when it comes to speaking Spanish," said Mahler, Kemp Mill's first-grade Spanish teacher.

In most Washington area schools, non-English speakers are placed in classrooms where the majority of the instruction is done in English. They may receive some support from an aide who speaks their language or from a specially trained teacher who knows of strategies to use with non-English speakers. Some may receive instruction in reading or other topics in smaller groups with other students who don't speak English. And although a such students might maintain some of their native language, the goal is toward classes conducted in English as soon as possible.

The number of dual-language programs has grown steadily since established in the 1960s. Today, there are 329 such programs across the country, more than double the number 10 years ago. Two of the most well-known programs are in the D.C. region: Oyster Bilingual Elementary School in the District and Key Elementary School in Arlington.

Dual-language and bilingual education programs have their critics, however.

"We think that bilingual education is the mistake that keeps on giving," said Jim Boulet Jr., executive director of English First, a Springfield-based group committed to establishing English as the official language of the United States and eliminating mandatory bilingual-education programs.

English First is especially critical of dual-language programs for non-English speaking students, he said, because they are taught in their native language.

At least four states -- California, Massachusetts, Arizona and Colorado -- have had ballot initiatives to limit or do away with such programs. Colorado's initiative on bilingual education was the only one to fail.

Dual-language immersion received support in 2000, when then-Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley praised it for encouraging bilingualism.

Researchers who looked at dual-language immersion programs said that by the fifth grade, children achieve at roughly the same level or better than those who participate in standard bilingual programs.

Non-English speakers master English while still maintaining their native language. And English speakers maintain their English while gaining some knowledge of a second language.

On a recent afternoon, the students at Kemp Mill finished worksheets before starting their math lesson. Around the tables, children chattered in a mix of English and Spanish.

At one point, an English speaker asked his Spanish-speaking classmate a question. The boy replied in English, only to have his classmate scold him.

"You're supposed to talk in Spanish so we can learn," he chided, wagging an index finger at the boy.

Holmes said they encourage the children to lean on each other to help translate. But every once in a while, the translation goes a bit astray.

When the students at one table started to get a bit unruly, Mahler leaned over and whispered to one of the boys in Spanish. The boy looked up, uncertain, and then turned to his classmate, who translated.

"He called you 'Dummy,' " the boy's classmate told him, a knowing look on his face.

"No way," he replied, his eyes wide.

"He did," the first boy said, his face quite serious.

But another classmate jumped in to make a slight correction.

"He did not," she said, giving the first boy a look. "He said to 'Be quiet.' "

Karen Sporgitas's two children, Elizabeth, 7, and Alexander, 5, are in Kemp Mill's dual-language program. Initially, she worried that Elizabeth's English might suffer because she was spending less time studying it. Instead, she has found that her daughter's English is just fine and that her Spanish is better than that of her older brother, who began studying it last year as a seventh-grader.

"It's amazing how fast kids learn another language," she said.

The benefits of dual-language immersion, Sporgitas said, are obvious.

"To learn Spanish at such a young age," she said, "will benefit [them] in the future no matter what [they] do."

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