

BILINGUAL, BILITERATE, BICULTURAL

Dual language program to expand next year

By Lauren Anderson

Freeman Staff

WAUKESHA — When Sophia Castillo and Danna Pena were in kindergarten together, they didn't understand each other. Coming from an English-speaking home, Castillo couldn't communicate with Pena, who spoke only Spanish, and vice versa.

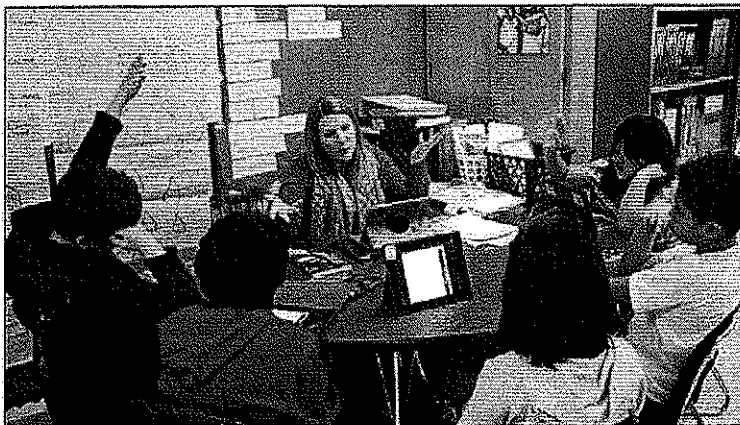
Now fifth-graders at Banting Elementary School, they are fluent in both languages and talk to each other with ease, both inside and outside of school.

Their friendship illustrates what the Waukesha School District's dual language program is designed to do: develop bilingual, biliterate and culturally-aware children.

Pena and Castillo are among the first cohort of students to participate in the district's K-5 two-way dual language program — an instructional model that integrates English and Spanish speakers in one classroom with the goal of developing both languages in all students.

It's a model of bilingual education the district is looking to expand next year, in hopes of offering more native English speakers an opportunity to participate. With parents and students spreading the word about the benefits of learning a foreign language, more and more students are

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Banting Elementary School fifth grade teacher Jessica Hegg works with students on Thursday in her dual language classroom.

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turning to the program, Director of Bilingual Education & World Languages Deirdre Garcia said.

"We have tremendous demand for the two-way program from the native English-speaking population," Garcia said. "The placement in that program is highly competitive. We are looking to enroll close to 200 students in kindergarten next year. That's a 100 percent increase from a few years ago."

The district's one-way program — which are dual language classrooms for only native Spanish speakers — will begin phasing out next year as the integrated approach of two-way expands to more sites.

Language immersion

Dual language begins with total immersion in the Spanish language. Beginning in kindergarten, 90 percent of a student's learning is in Spanish. As the student progresses through elementary school, the Spanish-English ratio changes, easing students into an even 50/50 split of each language by fifth grade.

The early emphasis on Spanish instruction is intentional, Garcia said, as native English speaking students need as much exposure to the language as possible. Students in the program follow all regular elementary curriculum, with the goal of being proficient enough to meet state standards in Spanish.

"We need to ensure that the kids who are learning Spanish as their second language develop linguistic ability to meet the standards of their grade level in Spanish," she said. "We can't do it if we just give them an hour a day of the language."

Students first learn how to read in Spanish, and later transfer those skills to English, as the literacy skills from the one apply to the other, Garcia said.

"In essence, students learn to read one time," she said. "They don't learn it two times. The result is very highly biliterate students by the end of first grade."

Lisa Bence's third grade class at Banting Elementary illustrated the approach during a math lesson Thursday, in which the students used their knowledge of the word "cuadrilatero" to then learn the new word "quadrilateral" in English. They examined the similarities of "cuad" and "quad," to discover it means four.

That type of instruction is common, Garcia said, as it builds bridges between the two languages.

"One myth is that kids just learn language naturally," she said. "But the reality is that the teacher is very, very purposeful in how she plans language acquisition."

Results

While the end result is students with high level cognitive skills in both languages, Garcia said, formal assessments don't necessarily reflect it in elementary school. Garcia noted that both national research and district-wide data indicate that it takes between five and seven years in dual language programs for students to show significant gains in achievement.

Because state assessments like the Wisconsin Knowledge & Concepts Examination and new Badger Exam do not offer those tests in Spanish, students who have been learning primarily in Spanish do not perform as well.

"That's a challenge for us because students who have been learning 90 percent in Spanish until second grade have about one year to be able to participate in a test like that," Garcia said. "The result is our students look like they are not performing on level, when in fact we're only measuring less than half of what they can do."

For students who stick with it, though, there is a pay off. Fifth graders William McCoy and Jeshua Mazaba — both

now proficient in English and Spanish — say they use their bilingual skills often. McCoy helps his Englishspeaking dad at the Mexican grocery store. Mazaba helps people who need Spanish-to-English translation.

Castillo said she learns “a lot more” through the program than she would in a monolingual setting.

“Your brain is working twice as hard,” she said.

Mazaba also noted a more philosophical benefit to speaking two languages.

“It’s like a second soul,” he said.

Email: landerson@conley.net

Horning middle schooler scores national recognition for essay

By Lauren Anderson

Freeman Staff

WAUKESHA — Horning Middle School seventh-grader Luis Angel Albiter is one of three students nationally to be recognized for his essay on the importance of being bilingual.

Albiter, who participates in the district's dual language program, was awarded by the National Association for Bilingual Education. One student from the elementary, middle and high school level received the honor.

"I feel lucky knowing that out of three people in the whole United States, I was one of those three people," he said.

Albiter's essay highlighted the interpersonal benefits of bilingualism. Knowing two languages, he said, allows him to help other people.

"I help people I don't even know because I've been there and I've done that and I know how they feel when they don't know something," he said. "So I try to help them as much as I can."

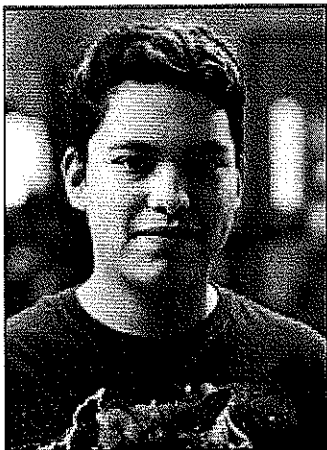
He also noted that being bilingual opens up more opportunities for himself and others.

"It leads you to think about how lucky you are," he said. "I know that if I keep doing bilingual, I will get to a career that I like and that I will excel in."

Albiter said he hopes his recent success will inspire other people to shoot for their dreams.

"If I can do it, I feel everyone should get the opportunities and take a chance," he said. "Even if you feel like it won't work or you won't get anything, there is always that 50 percent chance that you will."

Email: landerson@conleynet.com



Luis Angel Albiter, national winner of the National Association for Bilingual Education essay contest for middle school students.

Charles Auer/Freeman Staff