Report

10

Rock Creek Forest Elementary Spanish Immersion Program

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Introduction

Rock Creek Forest Elementary School is located in Montgomery County, Maryland, which is a suburb close to Washington, D.C. In 1977-78, a small group of parents from an adjoining neighborhood approached the principal about the possibility of starting a Spanish Immersion program like the French Immersion program that had started several years earlier at another Montgomery County school.

A group of first, second and third graders formed the first class of Spanish Immersion. A bilingual teacher was hired.

Organization

Eighteen years later the school has nine separate classes of Spanish Immersion from kindergarten through fifth grade. The program grew from the one multi-age class to two multi-age classes, one primary and one intermediate. Next, there were two grade combination classes. Now there are two kindergarten classes, two first grades, two second grades, two third grades, one fourth grade and one fifth grade. In two years we hope to reach the goal of two classes at each grade level.

This program operates as a "school within a school." Therefore, the school staff works on ways to bring students from both programs together for academic interaction.

Student Selection

The original students were selected with the requirement that they have good English reading skills. Now, students are admitted to the program in kindergarten by lottery with no academic requirements. They must be English speaking. The school administration conducts 8-10 open houses from November-April for parents of prospective students. Parents must complete a transfer application by April 1 of the current year. A lottery is conducted by late April to select the fifty students for the two half-day kindergarten classes. If there are more than fifty applicants, then a wait list is established. Applications are also accepted on a space available basis for grade one and a wait list is also established.

For admission after grade one, students must meet informally with a grade level teacher to show some knowledge of spoken and written Spanish. Experience has shown that students who enter with no Spanish after grade three have difficulty acquiring the academic concepts due to the limited vocabulary.

In 1985 the Spanish Immersion program became part of the desegregation magnet programs that were designed to keep the balance between the racial populations. This magnet status allowed Montgomery County Schools to provide one additional staff position and a small amount of money for materials yearly.

In 1988 when the principal who started the program retired, and a new principal was appointed, school climate surveys were administered to teachers and the community to identify areas of success and areas for improvement.

The successes included the opportunity for the students to learn Spanish and Spanish culture. Anecdotal information from graduates and parents told of career choices chosen by former Immersion students based on fluency with the language. Middle and high school teachers stated that the former immersion students had excellent accents and a large vocabulary in Spanish.

The areas of improvement included a need to bring equity to the two programs in the school, a need to promote collegiality between the teachers on the staff, a need to change the neighborhood perception of which program is "better," and a need to help Immersion students learn correct Spanish grammar and syntax.

During these last nine years, the staff of both programs worked together in grade level teams to plan units of instruction. Teachers from the traditional program and Spanish immersion work together to solve pertinent grade level issues. The grade level classrooms are located in close proximity so that grade level teachers and students can communicate regularly.

Staffing

Staffing is probably the number one concern for the administrator. A successful teacher in this program should be a native speaker and have certification in elementary and or early childhood education. Teachers need to have some fluency in English, as well, so that they can communicate with parents and also take advantage of local county inservice or college courses.

Montgomery County Public Schools' Department of Personnel works hard to recruit Spanish-speaking teachers. They place advertisements in nationwide newspapers, send recruiting teams to conferences such as, National Association of Bilingual Education (NABE). In addition, they recruit on college campuses. Applicants must interview with the Department of Personnel, as well as, with the local school principal. The applicant must also take a local general knowledge test, a Spanish oral and written test and pass the National Teachers Examination.

In addition to the Spanish teachers for immersion, one staff position is allocated for students to receive English reading/language arts starting in grade 2. The students in grades 2-5 receive English instruction for 45 minutes daily. In grade five, all fifth graders from both programs are regrouped by reading skill and have reading language arts instruction together.

Teacher Training

The school system offers workshops for new teachers. The immersion teachers need to participate in all new teacher training as well as training in effective strategies for immersion teaching.

Strategy-based instruction is useful for immersion teaching since students must learn the language through the content. Each lesson much reach back to what concepts and vocabulary the students already know. Then through visuals and hands-on experiences, students are introduced to new material. The teacher creates the context for the new information. Students manipulate the information to construct meaning for themselves.

The teachers use the school system curriculum. They must translate units and assessments or create them originally in Spanish. Over the years, teachers have written science, social studies, math and reading units at each grade level. These units are shared with teachers.

Materials

The school staff, in connection with two other schools that have Spanish programs, evaluate new texts and reading books and review them for accuracy and appropriateness for the curriculum. Book evaluation must be done by this group of teachers, because there is no one else to evaluate the Spanish books. If the teachers want newer materials, they must evaluate them first.

Money for the textbooks and materials comes from several sources. The per pupil allocation from the school system is distributed by grade level. The teachers keep an on-going wish list. The magnet money is used for computer software, as well as print materials for the classrooms and the library. The local school PTA is generous and provides funds for computer hardware and materials for the school library. A federal grant was acquired by the school system and divided between the schools that offer foreign language. Computer hardware and software were purchased with that grant.

Homework

While educators believe that homework is a review for the child, parents always want to help their children do their best. The teachers try to go over the routine assignments so that students know what to do. We tell parents that they can talk about the subjects in English. The child will do the work in Spanish. Long-term projects are outlined so that parents can help their children meet the deadlines and acquire the materials. Parents can always write notes to the teacher when the homework was particularly hard for the students. Then the teacher can review and follow-up with additional instruction when necessary.

Grading

The issue of grades is multi-faceted. The teachers must assess student skills and knowledge of the concepts as well as of the Spanish. For example, in math, the teacher must determine if the child understands the mathematical concept and if the child knows the mathematical vocabulary in Spanish. The teacher must be able to differentiate the skill acquisition in the math grade and the language component in reading or language skills. That sometimes brings up questions that are best answered during parent conferences.

The school system report card lists the following under reading: decoding and comprehension, language skills such as mechanics and grammar, writing skills, oral expression and listening comprehension. There is no place on the computerized form that says that the student is learning in Spanish. Therefore, the report card must be accompanied by a comment sheet that address that

information. The teacher of reading/language arts in English gives one grade that includes each of the reading, writing, speaking, listening areas. When a student transfers to another school, it is important for the accepting school to know that the grades reflect skill acquisition in Spanish.

Assessment

Until 1990 student achievement was measured by the California Achievement Tests which were administered in English to all students in grades three and five. In 1986, parents and staff noticed that reading comprehension and reading vocabulary scores were more depressed then the other scores in math. It was determined to use the magnet position to provide direct English instruction in reading and writing skills to students in grade two through six every day for forty five minutes.

Since 1992, the State of Maryland has been using performance assessments to evaluate student achievement. Teachers have changed how they have been teaching. More emphasis is placed on strategies such as giving evidence from reading to support an answer, organizing information on various types of charts to use for analysis, and incorporating writing into all aspects of the curriculum. Reading skills of global understanding, developing interpretation, and critical analysis are stressed. Students in Spanish immersion must be able to apply the strategies and critical thinking skills necessary for success to work in English even though a majority of instructional time has been in Spanish. It requires more effort to acquire these skills and more time to apply what they have been taught. The length of the school day is the same for them as for the students in the traditional program. Students and parents report that they spend more time on homework each year starting in third grade. Students must put in time to read for information and pleasure in both Spanish and English.

Middle School

The local middle school, grades 6-8, offers two class periods for Spanish immersion students. One class is world studies taught in Spanish and the other is a Spanish language class. The students go to sixth grade feeling confident in their Spanish abilities. They may not always realize that their grammar or syntax isn't perfect. The middle school teachers report the challenge they have trying to correct incorrect language patterns. The elementary teachers are focusing on using context and modeling to correct grammatical errors. Mini-lessons are also used for frequently made mistakes. The elementary teachers are also discussing what the students will need to learn in the future so that students can be more realistic about their middle school language experience. The goal is for students to take Spanish 4 in ninth grade. There are some eighth graders who currently go to the high school for Spanish 3 during their first period class.

Retention in the Program

Currently, we accept 25 students into the kindergarten classes and increase to 26 in the first grade classes. After grade two, replacements for students who leave the program are not made unless the student can speak and read Spanish. Therefore, the number of students in each grade decreases as the students move from grade 2-5.

Some of the reasons students leave include parents moving too far away within the county or moving out of the county, acceptance into a highly gifted program at grade 4, and difficulties in learning. By grade 3 students realize that they must work hard to be successful because they have homework in both the Spanish immersion class and the English reading language arts class. Some students evaluate if they have the time, persistence and desire to continue in Spanish Immersion. Usually they decide that they have put this time in, thus far, and want to be able to converse in two

languages. Some students who have had difficulty learning to read, decide to take off the stress and go to the traditional program delivered in English. Some students have difficulty learning and after formal evaluation are determined to have a learning disability. The school provides resource support in English for any learning disabled child. The parent and child have to decide if the child is to remain in Spanish immersion. Most of the students who have learning disabilities stay in Spanish Immersion and receive their resource support in English.

Summary

As with anything that is worthwhile, learning a second language in an immersion model does take effort. The kindergarten child learns the accent and vocabulary very easily. The kindergartner has the opportunity to hear language, repeat language and concepts and acquire vocabulary at a rapid rate. Any person learning a language goes through stages of language acquisition. Even though a baby hears grammatically correct language from birth it takes about 5 years for the child to speak in grammatically correct sentences. The same is true in immersion classes. By fifth grade, students are fluent. The degree of fluency depends on the time and effort put in to the experience. Those students who were encouraged to always use Spanish and who willingly tried to always use Spanish showed the most language fluency.

Every year it is amazing to watch the kindergarten class go from no Spanish to following directions and singing songs by November. If you ask a fifth grader how hard it was to learn Spanish, they look at you and say it wasn't hard at all!!