

Bilingual schools offer new educational wrinkle

DIANNE SOLIS, The Dallas Morning News
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DALLAS (AP) — Inside the small classrooms of Lorenzo de Zavala Elementary School, first-grade students detail recipes, in Spanish, for "limonada," lemonade. "Agua, hielo, limon."

In another room, older students construct sentences, in English, with the word "malfunction" as they work through a Star Wars-inspired game. "My brain wasn't working," says one boy mischievously. "It had a malfunction."

Not missing a beat, teacher Charles Stewart tells a Star Wars comrade, "Cesar, turn his brain back on."

The giggles tumble out. But this is serious teaching and turning brains on is exactly the point. Teaching at this humble elementary school, just west of the Trinity River and a giant new bridge, is part of the most serious restructuring of bilingual education in decades.

Zavala is a dual-language school. It was one of more than a dozen schools in the Dallas, Irving and Grand Prairie school districts that opened their doors this month to teachers and principals attending the 41st convention of the National Association for Bilingual Education. Dual-language teaching was showcased as a way to accelerate learning and close achievement gaps.

Texas now leads the nation in the number of schools — about 700 — using dual-language programs at the elementary level, said conference speakers. About a sixth of the almost 5 million students in Texas public and charter schools are classified as "limited English learners," according to the Texas Education Agency. But any student can enroll in a dual-language program with the end goal of becoming bilingual and bi-literate in two languages.

"Our job is to show the benefit of bilingual education," Zavala principal Lisa Miramontes told her visitors, who included a fellow principal from Queens, administrators from Denver and teachers from Salinas, Calif. Miramontes recounted how her own mother, from the border town of Eagle Pass, had talked of being punished if she spoke Spanish.

Dual-language schools require some careful choreography, with boards full of words, poetry lessons on haiku and nursery rhymes, and science projects executed in two languages.

Dual-language schools can be one-way or two-way. Zavala started out as a two-way dual-language school, meaning students who spoke English only were paired with those who didn't. It is now a one-way dual-language school because of the school's demographics.

About 97 percent of Zavala's 453 students are Latino and come from one of Dallas' poorest neighborhoods. Its gymnasium is a nearby city recreation center, now closed for repairs. Streets are lined with simple, wood-framed homes, some painted butter yellow or lilac blue next door to some that haven't seen paint in years and have boarded-up windows. Senior citizens volunteer at the school in a program called "Off Your Rocker." Teachers have been known to wash school uniforms, if that sort of family support is needed.

Zavala sits in view of one of the most spectacular angles of the glitzy, glassy Dallas skyline of acquisition and aspiration.

And over the last eight years, Zavala has received the higher rating of recognized or exemplary five times, under testing procedures required by the Texas Education Agency. In 2011, it was rated acceptable.

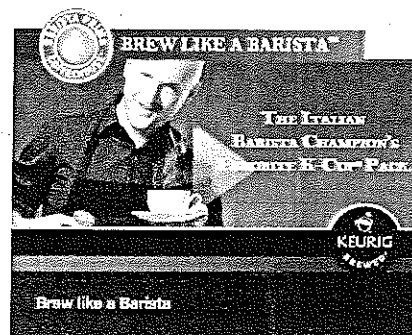
At the convention, the endorsements for dual-language education were frequent. Key proponents were treated like celebrities as teachers crowded around researchers with doctorates to snap photos. "Nationwide, we think every one of the nation's 16,000 school districts ought to be considering dual-language," said Wayne Thomas, a professor emeritus at George Mason University.

Some critics of traditional or transitional bilingual programs complain that teachers lack sufficient skills in both languages, and that teachers can spend too much time speaking in Spanish so that the transition doesn't take hold. Well-known academic researchers Thomas and Virginia Collier, who also spoke at the conference, said that after two decades of study of various forms of bilingual education, dual-language programs are superior. Achievement gaps can be closed using a solid six years of such education, they have said.

In one North Carolina study of six school districts, the researchers found that by middle school, students in two-way dual-language programs scored as high in reading and math as students in non-dual-language programs at least a grade ahead of them.

Ideally, students in dual-language programs moved into 50-50 instruction by second grade. Math is taught in English because of the universality of its language, numbers, its proponents say.

One criticism that has arisen is that parents have said they're frustrated at not being able to assist with homework. That includes not only English-speaking parents, but Latino parents who speak Spanish but don't write it.



At the **Federation for American Immigration Reform**, a Washington-based advocacy group that wants restrictions on immigration, spokesman **Ira Mehlman** said the group doesn't oppose such programs as long as they are voluntary and parents can opt out if they choose.

"From our viewpoint, assimilation is a desired mission," he said.

At the **Center for Applied Linguistics** in Washington, researcher **Julie Sugarman** said opting out of such programs should be an option.

"Parents should always have a choice — an informed choice. Any kind of child can do well in this kind of program, but it is really up to every individual family."

For those coming from Spanish-speaking families, Sugarman added, "When you add English and build the language you already have, (the students) do better than just taking away their Spanish."

Dual-language academic programs are now being tried in the **Dallas Independent School District**, **Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD**, **Irving ISD**, **Lewisville ISD** and **McKinney ISD**, and across much of Texas.

In **Dallas**, **Rosemont Elementary School** and **E.D. Walker Middle School** will offer the two-way dual-language program at the middle school level to the first class of sixth-graders next school year. **DISD** has 16 elementary schools offering such classes.

In the **Carrollton-Farmers Branch** district, parents recently asked trustees for a similar extension for students at **Janie Stark Elementary School**. The two-way program is now in two elementary schools. A third may be added in the new year, and one-way dual-language programs are now in almost all of the district's elementary schools.

"My opinion: It will only grow as people understand the value of it," says **Bobby Burns**, **Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD** superintendent. "By far, it is the right thing to do for students. For Texas, we need to be a bilingual state."

In the **Lewisville** school district, there will soon be 11 elementary schools using dual-language programs, up from three this school year.

In **Irving ISD**, there are students in the ninth year of a dual-language program. Next year, the program will continue at **MacArthur High School**, giving the district one of the oldest programs in North Texas. The district will have a total of seven schools using the program.

At the **NABE** convention, advocates noted that dual-language programs create pairs of students who reduce student-teacher load and create "mini-teachers" as Spanish-dominant students help English-dominant students and vice versa.

"The one who gets the most benefit is the one doing the helping," said **Richard Gómez**, who with his brother **Leo Gómez** has created a curriculum used in about three-fourths of Texas schools.

Dual-language academic programs haven't ignited the opposition like other bilingual education programs.

In 1998, California voters even approved a proposition that sought to eliminate many bilingual education programs. But such teaching still exists because families can ask for waivers, and dual-language academic programs have rooted there.

"Knowing two or more languages is a gift, if not a necessity, to compete with the world market," said **Rosanna Ramirez-Boyd**, president of **NABE** and a professor at the **University of North Texas** in **Denton**.

Staff writer **Wendy Hundley** contributed to this report.

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