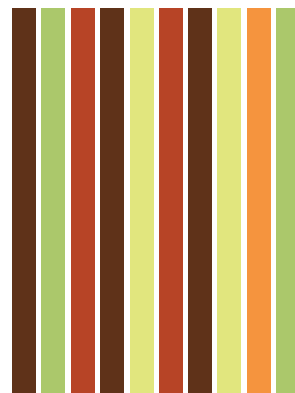


NEW JOURNALISM ON  
**LATINO**  
CHILDREN



**Buenos días! Good morning!**

## Implementing Dual-Language Programs in Illinois



**E**ach weekday morning, Ms. Griselda Martinez wears a bright red or blue scarf to the classroom, an accessory that she uses in teaching her kindergartners at Salt Creek Elementary in a Chicago suburb. If the scarf is red, her young students know to greet her with

their most enthusiastic “Buenos días!” If the scarf is blue, the students start the day with an equally eager “Good morning!” Ms. Martinez’s kindergarten class is part of a growing trend in education: a dual-language (DL) program.

New Journalism on Latino Children offers fresh viewpoints and evidence on Latino child development and schooling. The project is based at the Institute of Human Development at UC Berkeley, in collaboration with the Education Writers Association and the Latino Policy Forum, and funded by the McCormick Foundation. For additional stories and new research, go to: [www.ewa.org](http://www.ewa.org).

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## The Dual Roots of Dual-Language Programs

Bilingual education has taken center stage in Illinois with a new education mandate; many public preschools will be required to offer bilingual education to all three- and four-year-olds who do not speak English. Dual-language classrooms like Ms. Martinez's represent one very promising model in bilingual education that is being used to develop these new preschool programs.

The interest in bilingual education arises from two, disparate sources. On one hand, more than 1 in 5 schoolchildren in Illinois is Latino, and many are English-language learners. Recent research indicates that a DL approach to bilingual education may be the most effective way to teach these non-native speakers English, as well as nurture their academic skills generally (Collier & Thomas, 2004). Dual-language programs offer children the chance to maintain—and gain literacy in—their home language while they become fluent in English and prepared to succeed in traditional classrooms.

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On the other hand, many native English-speakers have realized the benefits of fluency in more than one language in our increasingly multicultural and global society. And, as evidenced in Europe and most other countries with multilingual societies, they have noted that starting children on a second language at an early age facilitates fluency (Lindholm-Leary & Howard, 2008). In fact, many exclusive private schools are attracting new students with their strong second-language programs, starting in preschool.

In Illinois, these two groups are coming together in DL preschools and kindergartens. Dual-language programming is characterized by developing high levels of proficiency in students' home and second languages, through the division of classroom instruction in both. While different schools take various approaches, most of these classrooms also encourage cross-cultural understanding by splitting student enrollment between native-English-speaking and non-native English-speaking students, and encouraging family involvement.



## Inside the Classroom

Ms. Martinez's class of 24 students will stay together as a cohort through the fifth grade. Currently, it is the only DL kindergarten classroom in the district, and is not just unique, but popular: it has a waiting list (five native English-speakers and 10 Spanish). If room opens up, program administrators will accept new native Spanish-speakers, but have found that native English-speakers are too far behind in Spanish for late-entry after kindergarten. In fact, the typical native Spanish-speaker arrives in class the first day with some knowledge of English, as most were born in the United States and exposed to at least some English. In contrast, the average native English-speaker arrives with very limited Spanish, perhaps from being a fan of "Dora the Explorer."

Young students embrace their new language skills and fervently call out "scarf violations." Starting on the first day, Ms. Martinez teaches 80% of the curriculum in Spanish and the other 20% in English. Surprisingly, despite their linguistic backgrounds, the children do not seem to miss a beat. A blonde-haired, blue-eyed student helps her teacher complete a Spanish-language sentence on the board; a native Spanish-speaking boy leads his classmates in counting down the remaining days of the month in English.

While children are encouraged to speak in the (scarf-) designated language, they are initially allowed to respond in their language of choice. As fluency increases, however, so does the demand for sticking with the appropriate language. While differentiations are aptly made during lessons about which language should be spoken, parents note that their children make few distinctions among their classmates by native tongue.

At Gary Elementary, in West Chicago, the DL program began in 2000, and goes through the sixth grade, with two DL classrooms in most grades. The students in Ms. Gianna Gatto's kindergarten class are also divided between native English- and Spanish-speakers, yet many of the native-English-speakers are second and third generation Latinos. Here, too, there are waiting lists for families eager to enroll their children.

Ms. Gatto engages her young students with an animated game about the days of the week—currently in Spanish. A math lesson later in the day will be in English. She orients the language of lessons by subject area, according to her preferences. While the students break into groups by home language for their literacy lessons, about 80 percent of the kindergarten day occurs in Spanish. This allotment of lessons in Spanish gradually decreases until the curriculum is split evenly between Spanish and English in the fifth grade. Administrators note that they provide a lot of support to their DL teachers because the language balance is challenging in a demanding curriculum.

And teachers aren't the only ones experiencing the challenge. Fourth graders recall their first days in kindergarten when they were monolingual. "It was hard for me to begin Spanish, because I didn't come from Mexico," recounted one. Another concurred, "It was hard for me to learn English because my family doesn't speak it." Yet, in fourth grade they shift easily between the two languages, and tout the benefits of their knowing both: "I can talk to whomever I want—in English or Spanish!"

**"I can talk to whomever I want—in English or Spanish!"**

*-A dual-language program 4th grader*



**Currently, there are 48 dual-language (DL) programs in Illinois, including programs with Spanish and Japanese curricula. The recent expansion of DL programs, most notably in Chicago's middle-class suburbs, promises to create a new generation of fully-bilingual students—many of whom will be the first in their White, monolingual English-speaking families to master another language. However, somewhat paradoxically, it is important to note that many of Illinois' 190,000 English-language-learners still have limited access to quality bilingual education. (Illinois Resource Center, 2009).**

## Developing the DL Programs: Responses and Results

Native Spanish-speaking parents express their enthusiasm about the dual-language program, both for its immediate benefits, and those in the future. For some families, these programs facilitate connections among the generations. One dual-language program parent explained that now her children, "...are able to communicate with the entire family. When we go back to Mexico, they can speak with their grandparents, and their aunts and uncles, who don't speak any English." In some cases, parents report that their children are actually learning more Spanish in school than they would have at home, as another parent explained: "[My daughter has] learned a more academic level of Spanish than what she would have learned in the street." Parents also see their children's participation in the dual-language programs as a promising investment: "In the future, they will be able to find a good job, because there is high demand for bilingual people."

Native English-speaking parents talk of their excitement about broadening their children's perspectives starting at a young age. As one explained, "This is when their minds are open and can soak in a language—not only learning details of it, but the sound of it, and really make it part of them." While some of their friends and neighbors apparently voiced concerns about the DL students falling behind their peers in traditional classrooms, participating parents spoke of the strong curriculum, and the research showing that these bilingual children do better in school.

Schools with DL programs, and those hoping to develop them, are seeking out recent research on best practices, and learning from each other. As the new DL program was being developed at Salt Creek, parents teamed with school administrators to talk with those in other districts to find out about more about established programs. At both schools, program administrators reiterate that an essential part of creating a high-quality program is getting highly trained, dynamic teachers. Adaptations have been made to fit these recommendations to the schools' student bodies and their resources—and the communities have responded.

At times, the reaction at both schools has not been all positive; there have been instances in which the DL programs seem to have activated anti-immigrant sentiments. The schools have responded by inviting skeptics to visit, meet the participating families, and experience the classrooms. By and large, those involved in the DL programs have found their experience to be one of bringing together different communities and forging mutual respect among them through their children.

Administrators are proud to note that their DL students' initial test scores show promise: English-language learners are outperforming those in more traditional, transitional bilingual programs, and native-English speakers are testing higher than their peers in traditional classrooms. And best of all, as one parent pointed out, "The school can actually teach your kid a second language by the 6th grade. How cool is this?"

**"It's important to me that my children speak both languages for many reasons. They are able to communicate with the entire family. When we go back to Mexico, they can speak with their grandparents, and their aunts and uncles, who don't speak any English. Also, in the future, they will be able to find a good job, because there is high demand for bilingual people.**

*-A dual-language program parent*



## Moving Forward with Dual-Language Programs

While Illinois's forward-looking stance on bilingual education is built on research showing that dual-language programs allow children to excel in all academic areas – including their home language and English—it also raises some questions. Namely, how can districts afford it? Expansion of dual-language programs to more, and younger, children requires resources, the largest of which is a highly-qualified workforce. Currently, most districts are cutting their budgets. Yet, common sense – not to mention research – indicates that putting students on the right track at the beginning of their academic careers costs much less than helping them play catch-up later. How can Illinois afford not to invest in its youngest learners?

Collier, V. P., & Thomas, W. P. (2004). The Astounding Effectiveness of Dual Language Education for All. *NABE Journal of Research and Practice*, 2(1), 1-20.

Lindholm-Leary, K. J., & Howard, E. R. (2008). Language development and academic achievement in two-way immersion programs. In T. W. Fortune & D. J. Tedick (Eds.), *Pathways to Multilingualism: Evolving Perspectives on Immersion Education* (pp. 177-200). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

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For additional information, go to: [www.ewa.org](http://www.ewa.org)  
**This project is supported by the McCormick Foundation.**  
Design by Leticia Tejada  
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