



Elementary Principals' Platicas on Dual Language

December 2015

Overview

On December 9, 2015, Austin Independent School District (AISD) district staff met with elementary school principals to obtain their opinions and recommendations about the district's dual language (DL) program. The *platicas* (Spanish for talks or discussion) consisted of six small groups of principals led by a facilitator and/or a note taker who asked principals three questions about the district's DL program. Principals' responses were noted, and the most common response themes are summarized in this report. This information will be used by the district's newly formed bilingual innovation design team to make recommendations for improving the implementation of the DL program in the 2016–2017 school year.

Does dual language work for all students?

The first question elementary principals responded to was whether or not they believed the DL program worked for all students. Not all principals agreed that the program in its current form worked for all students, although most agreed that some program components were aligned with principles of good instruction for all students. The following conditions were mentioned by some principals as essential for the program's success: adequate staffing; adequate student enrollment [both English language learners (ELLs) and non-ELLs]; adequate supply of materials in both languages; support from district departments, school staff, and parents; highly qualified bilingual teachers; and students with grade-level abilities in their native language (L1).

Principals also mentioned the following as challenges or problems with DL on their campuses: state accountability and testing requirements (grades 3 through 5); high student mobility within the district; "mixed" classrooms, where students who are not in the same program are put in the same classroom in order to meet the district's staffing-to-student formula; lack of adequate funding for DL at campuses that do not receive federal Title I, Part A funds; lack of well-trained, highly experienced bilingual teachers; under-enrollment of students; recent immigrants enrolling at upper elementary grades who may have low L1 abilities; lack of enough time during the school day to implement all of the DL program components; lack of support from teachers, parents, or students; perceived inconsistency between DL and content-based instructional guidelines; lack of flexibility in implementing the DL model as prescribed by Gómez and Gómez (2015).¹

¹ Gómez, L., & Gómez, R. (2015). *The Gómez & Gómez dual language enrichment (DLE) model*. Retrieved from <http://dlti.us/3.html>

Required or Optional DL Components

The second question principals responded to was which DL model components should be required, and which should be optional. Some principals indicated that all components should be required but the schools should be given flexibility within those options with respect to how they are operationalized and used.

Required Components

When asked to suggest required DL components, principals suggested the following:

- Bilingual pairing or grouping of students
- Word walls
- Content bulletin boards
- Library books in L1 (native or first language) and L2 (second language)
- Writing, journaling
- Labeling of items in the classroom; color coding items by language
- Language of instruction, by subject area
- Language of the day
- Oral language development
- Bridging activities from L1 to L2
- Bilingual research centers
- Ongoing teacher training
- Highly qualified bilingual teachers
- Parent education on DL

However, when asked to suggest optional DL components, principals suggested some items that were similar to those suggested as required components, emphasizing flexibility through school-based or teacher choice about how to implement components:

- Student-generated alphabet
- Language of the day
- Language of instruction, by subject area
- Bilingual research centers or bilingual learning centers
- Specialized vocabulary enrichment
- Scheduling language arts blocks of time (L1 and L2)
- Labeling of items in the classroom; color coding items, by language
- Sequential versus simultaneous literature instruction
- DL curriculum and academic area curricula (need more alignment)
- Conceptual refinement as part of the lesson plan cycle

Suggestions for Improving DL Program Implementation

Finally, principals were asked to provide some feasible suggestions for improving DL program implementation. Many of the suggestions aligned with principals' responses to the two prior questions asked during platicas.

- Professional development opportunities: Most suggestions for improving professional development opportunities were aimed at teachers. Principals favored

AISD Dual Language Program

AISD's Dual Language (DL) program is a bilingual education program offered in the following format: one-way DL (serving only ELLs) and two-way DL (serving both ELLs and non-ELLs).

For more information on the DL program, see the following AISD web page:

<http://www.austinisd.org/academics/ell/duallanguage>

For more information on state education laws and guidance about bilingual education, see the following Texas Education Agency web page:

<http://tea.texas.gov/bilingual/esl/education/>



having training during the school day or in summer, before the school year starts, because teachers' schedules are filled during the school year. Principals suggested having ongoing teacher training opportunities throughout the school year. Principals suggested grouping trainings in vertical teams or in small groups of campuses located near each other geographically. Several principals suggested offering online or video-based training modules for teachers to access. One principal said that both principals and assistant principals should receive annual DL training, especially regarding state and district rules, due to the recent high turnover rates among assistant principals in AISD. Several principals suggested the following topics for training: biliteracy and Cheryl Urow's training.

- **Staffing:** Some principals reiterated the need for highly-qualified bilingual teachers. Some principals noted the misalignment between two-way DL program recommendations about balancing the number of ELLs and non-ELLs and the district's staffing policy to maximize the allowable teacher-student ratio per elementary classroom. Principals stated that as a result of the district's staffing policy as well as high student mobility, they had "mixed" classrooms that consisted of ELLs coded for the DL program and non-ELLs not coded for DL program participation. This has led to confusion and problems with delivering appropriate instruction to all students in the classroom based on students' needs. One principal said no mixed classrooms should be allowed.
- **Funding:** Some principals recommended adequate funding be provided for DL, based on campus needs and student population. One principal said that DL teachers should not be taken from the campus during the annual leveling process.
- **DL flexibility:** Due to student mobility and mid-year enrollment of recent immigrant ELLs, some principals requested flexibility in DL to better meet the needs of students who come to school with different language and academic ability levels. Some principals expressed the need for campus-based choices with respect to language of instruction in each subject area. However, other principals indicated a DL model structure of some kind is critical.
- **Curriculum material resources:** Some principals recommended that more Spanish resources be available at their campus. One principal mentioned that not all staff at the school had seen the newly adopted state curriculum materials. Several principals said the district departments needed to better align DL curriculum and instruction with core academic area curricula and instructional guidelines.
- **Testing:** Some principals said assessments for progress monitoring needed greater clarification and simplicity. They stated that assessments should be in the strongest (primary) language of the student. However, in DL it is important to assess progress in both L1 and L2, and principals were concerned that this could lead to a burden in the form of additional testing.
- **Program choice:** Some principals recommended that campuses be able to choose what DL programs they would offer, based on parent input, student enrollment, and staff support levels. Some principals went further in recommending that a campus be either all DL or not DL. Some principals were in favor of having some campuses be DL cluster sites, where parents could send their students to particular campuses that offered DL when their home campus might not have the capacity to offer DL.
- **Parent and community input and education:** Some principals recommended having more opportunities to provide parents and community members with information about DL and choices about what the school should offer. Some principals indicated that some parents misunderstood what DL really is. These opportunities also could be used for recruiting parents and students to DL.
- **Teacher input:** Principals asked that DL teachers' input be gathered on these same issues for DL implementation. One principal said that all staff must support DL if the school were going to implement the program. One principal asked for help from the district in facilitating discussions with teachers and staff when they disagreed or lacked support for DL.

Next Steps

Results from the elementary principals' pláticas in December 2015 will inform the work of the district's bilingual innovation design team, as they plan the structure of the DL program for 2016—2017. In addition, a DL teacher survey will be administered to gather teachers' feedback and recommendations for DL. A DL lead teacher group, led by staff from the AISD Department of ELLs, also will be included in a discussion about ways to improve DL for 2016—2017.

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