

Dual Language Immersion: Frequently Asked Questions for Parents

Get the facts on dual language immersion

As a parent, you play an important role in your child's education. If you are considering a language immersion program, you need to know how to help your child develop the best possible language and literacy skills, while also supporting their achievement in the basics. We have developed this list of frequently asked questions on dual language immersion to help you make informed decisions. If you have additional questions, please contact us.

-Kevin Smith, Director of Dual Language Programs

What is language immersion education?

The focus of dual language immersion programs is to help students become proficient in the target language while mastering subject content across all disciplines. In immersion programs, language is not taught as a subject, it is the medium in which core instruction is delivered. Research shows the most effective way for children to acquire a second language is to integrate instruction into the standard curriculum children are already learning. Furthermore, [students in immersion classrooms outperform students in traditional language classes](#), do as well as or better than non-immersion students on standardized tests and have a greater appreciation of cultural diversity.

What does it look like?

The two models you will currently find in Participate dual language programs are described by the North Carolina Department of Instruction (NCDPI) as follows:

- **Two-way immersion programs:** These programs group native speakers of English with native speakers of the target language. The mix is approximately 50 percent of each group and both become bilingual, biliterate and bicultural. Instruction is provided both in English and in the target language on alternate days, according to academic subjects, or according to a daily schedule (morning in one language and afternoon in the other). There



are a variety of models, and percentages like 90/10 and 50/50 are used to refer to how much of the instruction at different grade levels is conducted in the target language versus how much is given in English. For example, one school might have 90/10 in K-1 and then move to 50/50 for grades 2-5, while another school starts at 50/50 in kindergarten and continues with that through grade 5.

- **Full immersion programs:** These programs typically serve children coming from English-speaking homes in an environment where the target language is used exclusively. Content is delivered in the target language, and English Language Arts is introduced in grade 2 or later. The students become bilingual, biliterate and bicultural and are equally proficient in both languages, with near-native fluency in the target language.

It is important to note that schools may slide up and down the scale of immersion, meaning that students may move from 90/10 to 50/50 given specific school situations and student populations.

What happens in middle and high school after completing an elementary immersion program?

Many elementary immersion programs transition into middle school. Middle school students continuing with immersion studies will generally take one or two classes aiming to further develop more advanced language skills and in some cases may also include learning a content area such as social studies in that second language. The goal of a transitional middle school dual language immersion program is to prepare children to participate and succeed in more advanced language studies and even to access a third language in high school.

How does the admissions and application process work?

Immersion programs may be offered through a neighborhood school or part of a larger district choice or magnet plan. Once you have identified an immersion program you would like to participate in, contact the school or attend an information session, complete the registration form or intent to participate, and follow the process established to complete the registration process. Typically schools will collect all intent to participate or registration forms, process them and



inform you of assignment of a slot for your child. In some cases, there may be more families interested than slots available in a given year, so please ask your principal how they handle high demand for the program. Also, if you are outside of the school zone where the immersion program is hosted, inquire about your district's transfer policies as well as how they accommodate school age siblings.

My child will be in second grade next year. Can he/she join the immersion program?

Two-way immersion programs may admit new students through the upper grades based on target language proficiency and English literacy skills. In full immersion programs, new students are not admitted beyond the first week of first grade. Check with your school district to see what type of immersion program is available and how to get more information about the admissions process.

Is an immersion program only appropriate for high-performing students?

Research shows that immersion education can be effective for a wide variety of learners, including academically/intellectually gifted students, non-native English speakers, students with some exceptionalities and students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds.

What languages can my child learn?

Check with your school district to learn more about language immersion programs offered. The most wide-spread immersion programs in the U.S. are Spanish immersion programs, though there are also immersion programs in languages such as French, German, Mandarin, Japanese and Korean. Participate currently supports programs in Spanish and simplified Mandarin Chinese.

Isn't kindergarten too young? Transitioning my 5 year old to school is hard enough. Why would I make it harder?

You are right. Starting school is a transition, especially for those who have not had pre-school experiences already. Learning to go to school and understand school procedures and routines is a major change, but it can happen in any language. The sooner a child is exposed to other languages, the more comfortable they'll be and they'll attain higher levels of proficiency in the target language. The high use of



props, puppets and gestures at this early age benefits language learning. When you watch your child responding to his or her kindergarten teachers instructions and conversing with her classmates in another language, you will begin to understand the benefits.

What if my child doesn't respond well or doesn't like it?

Like any kindergarten child, your child will be tired at the end of the school day, and it is even more exhausting when processing a new language. If you are worried your child is not enjoying school or thriving in the immersion environment, talk to the teacher and principal. Most students respond well to an immersion program, as they are made to feel secure right from the start and, after the first few weeks, they do not focus on the fact that the teacher is not speaking English. Parents should give it at least nine weeks, if not a full semester, to see if the child responds better after getting through the transition of being in school.

Will my child be able to speak English in class until she learns enough vocabulary to communicate?

In kindergarten, you will often hear children speaking or responding to teachers in English. However, their teachers will be speaking only in the target language to them, using a lot of gestures and tools to convey messages. Good immersion teachers will encourage new language learners to respond in the target language by giving them the needed vocabulary to mimic. Teachers will not revert to English unless safety or emergency necessitates. Good immersion teachers, by the middle of first grade, will insist on no English in the immersion classroom. Students will quickly realize an easy way out if they are able to speak any English (except in emergencies) with their teacher.

Will my child take state-mandated assessments, like the EOGs, in the target language?

No. All state-mandated assessments, like the EOGs, will be taken in English.

My child is in a full immersion program, so how will he/she learn the English skills he needs to be successful on EOGs and other assessments in English?



In a full immersion program, your child will get dedicated English Language Arts instruction beginning in second grade. In grade 2, immersion students receive about an hour of English Language Arts daily. This time increases to 75-90 minutes in grades 3-5. Literacy skills and patterns learned in one language will help the development of skills in another language.

I don't speak another language so I won't be able to help my child at home.

The most important thing you can do at home is read to your child in English. Reading in any language supports the acquisition of reading skills such as fluency, vocabulary building and comprehension. Your child's homework should support what he has learned in class, so students should be able to tackle the assignment on their own. You will be able to identify what skill is being addressed and support learning in the skill, even if you can only help in English. Homework should not be a struggle. If it is, please talk with your child's teacher.

What else can I do to help?

There is a lot you can do! Be a strong parent advocate. Start an immersion parent group to support and educate one another, share successes, challenges and ideas to make the program outstanding at your school. Recruit for your school. Spread the word. Tell all your friends what you know about the program. Post it on your Facebook wall. It will be important for the health of the program at your child's school to maintain healthy numbers in the immersion classrooms. Your school should have a waitlist at all times so that any vacancies are immediately filled. Fundraise for a bilingual library. A school can never have enough Spanish or Mandarin books. Host a holiday book drive. Purchase books for the classroom or school library and encourage other parents to do the same.

Also, check in with your teacher regarding volunteer activities. It is important that volunteers maintain the no English in the immersion classroom rule to prevent inconsistent practices and to build the children's confidence that they can learn to understand in the immersion language. We don't want adult visitors or volunteers to send the message that speaking English is an option in the immersion classroom. Here are some ideas for volunteers who do not speak the target language:



- Select activities and games in which a volunteer may be able to help in the classroom using only non-verbal communication.
- Provide tasks that can be completed outside of the classroom, such as materials preparation, bulletin board preparation and newsletter formatting.
- After English instruction has been introduced, suggest after school one-on-one or small group tutoring for children struggling with English language arts concepts.

Preguntas frecuentes en español

¿Cuánto tiempo necesita mi hijo para llegar a ser bilingüe?

Las investigaciones indican que los estudiantes necesitan 5-7 años para aprender a hablar y escribir a niveles más altos en un idioma nuevo. Por eso es importante que las familias que escogen un programa de inmersión estén comprometidos a permanecer en el programa. Durante los primeros meses hasta el primer año es normal que el estudiante experimente un periodo silencioso en el cual el estudiante podrá entender mucho más de lo que puede hablar. Este periodo silencioso es natural y necesario. Cuando esté listo, su niño va a interactuar con sus compañeros y los maestros en los dos idiomas.

¿Qué pasa en la escuela secundaria o en el colegio después de completar un programa de inmersión en la escuela primaria?

Muchos colegios y escuelas secundarias tienen un programa de continuación para la inmersión lingüística. Estos programas mantienen las destrezas lingüísticas ya desarrolladas en un programa de inmersión total o parcial y continúan a desarrollar estas destrezas al más alto nivel posible. Los programas de Splash van a estar en 3 escuelas secundarias a partir de 2014.

¿Qué pasa si mi niño no se responde muy bien al programa o no le gusta?

Como cualquier niño de Kindergarten, su hijo va a estar cansado al final del día escolar. Es bastante difícil jugar, trabajar y adherir a todas las reglas de la escuela. Es aún más agotador cuando se hace en un idioma nuevo. Aunque tal vez Ud. hable



español en casa, su niño todavía puede encontrar palabras desconocidas. Así que, Ud. no debe preocuparse si su hijo está cansado o de mal humor después de un día largo de escuela. Si está preocupado que su niño no se está disfrutando la escuela o no se está desarrollando muy bien en el ambiente de la inmersión, favor de hablar con el maestro y el director. La mayoría de los niños se reaccionan muy bien al programa de inmersión--les hace sentir muy seguros desde el principio y, después de algunos días, no se van a enfocar en el idioma de instrucción. Los padres deben esperar por lo menos 9 semanas, si no un semestre entero, para ver si el niño se reacciona mejor después de la transición inicial de estar en la escuela.

Si mi hijo está en un programa de inmersión, ¿cómo va a aprender las destrezas necesarias de inglés para tener éxito en los EOGs y otros exámenes?

En un programa de inmersión parcial, los niños reciben 50% de su instrucción en inglés. En un programa de inmersión total, su niño va a recibir el alfabetismo en inglés a partir del principio del 2º grado. En 2º grado, los estudiantes de inmersión reciben aproximadamente una hora de instrucción en inglés cada día. También, sus clases especiales, como la música, el arte y la educación física están en inglés. En el 3º hasta el 5º, este tiempo subirá hasta entre 75-90 minutos en grados. Cuando se aprende el alfabetismo en el primer idioma, se desarrollan las destrezas en el segundo.

¿Cómo ayudo a mi hijo?

Dígale que su educación tiene gran valor. Puede ayudarlo en el idioma que Uds. hablan en casa y enseñarle los conceptos, las destrezas y la información que él o ella necesite. Un viaje al supermercado, una conversación sobre un libro favorito o la preparación de un plato especial, siguiendo una receta familiar--todas estas maneras de comunicarse con su hijo pueden ayudarlo en la escuela. La tarea de su hijo debe apoyar los conceptos que ha aprendido en clase. Los estudiantes deben tener la capacidad de hacerla solos. Los padres pueden identificar la destreza que se está utilizando y ayudarlo a aprenderla. La tarea no debe ser una lucha y, si se convierte en ella, favor de hablar con el maestro. Una de las cosas más importantes que puede hacer en casa es leer con su hijo en su idioma nativo y animar a su hijo a hacer preguntas sobre lo que ha leído. Leer en cualquier idioma apoya el desarrollo de las destrezas de fluidez, vocabulario, comprensión, etc.



¿Qué más puedo hacer?

Hay mucho que puede hacer. Sea un padre defensor fuerte. Empiece un grupo de padres de niños que están en el programa de inmersión para apoyarlos, educarlos, compartir los éxitos, dificultades e ideas y hacer que el programa sea espectacular en la escuela. Reclutar gente para su escuela. Corra la voz. Informe a sus amigos sobre el programa. Escriba algo en la pared de su Facebook. Será importante para la salud del programa en su escuela mantener los números de estudiantes en los salones de inmersión. Su escuela debe tener una lista de espera todo el tiempo para que las vacantes se llenen inmediatamente. Recaudar fondos para una biblioteca bilingüe. Una escuela nunca logra tener suficientes libros en español. Ser anfitrión de una campaña de libros. Si es posible, compre libros para la biblioteca del salón o de la escuela y animar a otros padres a hacer lo mismo. Ser voluntario en la clase: Sería genial tener hispanohablantes que participen en la clase y que modelen el idioma para los niños. Hable con el maestro para averiguar cuándo y cómo podría ayudar en el salón.

