

Two-language program produces results

Dual Immersion students outperform English-only counterparts

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Hailey Elementary School second-grade teacher Juan Salamanca instructs a mixed class of Hispanic and white children in the Blaine County School District's Dual Immersion program. Photo by David N. Seelig

Test results show that students enrolled in the Blaine County School District's two-language program outperform their counterparts in English-only classes.

Recently released test results show that both Hispanic and non-Hispanic students in the district's Dual Immersion program continue to become more proficient at reading and math the longer they are enrolled in the program.

By the sixth grade, Hispanic students especially outperform other Hispanic students who do not have the benefit of a two-language program. In fact, 83.3 percent of the school district's Dual Immersion sixth-grade Hispanic students read at proficiency in the spring 2008 Idaho Standard Achievement Tests. That compared to a state average for sixth-grade Hispanic students of 39.4 percent.

Non-Hispanic sixth-grade Dual Immersion students also scored higher on the spring ISAT reading tests. A perfect 100 percent read at proficiency compared to a state average of 84 percent.

The higher test scores for the school district's Dual Immersion students were not a surprise to district administrators; in fact, they were expected.

"We're not surprised at all," said Matt Murray, director of curriculum and dual language learners. "The research clearly indicates that students would take several years but eventually would surpass their counterparts in English-only classes."

In fact, the primary goal of the district's Dual Immersion program has been to increase student proficiency, Murray said.

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"If we can give them the added gift of being fluent in another language, so much the better," he said.

The school district's Dual Immersion program is now in its eighth year and involves 520 students at Wood River Middle School and at Bellevue, Woodside, Hailey and Hemingway elementary schools.

Dual Immersion students are instructed half in English and half in Spanish. Classes typically include half Hispanic students and half non-Hispanic students.

The program is started in kindergarten. Students who have been in the program for the full eight years are now seventh graders at Wood River Middle School.

In their first few years of the program, students typically perform at lower proficiency levels than their counterparts who receive instruction only in English. However, by about the third grade, Dual Immersion students start to catch up with their English-only counterparts and in later grades they surpass them in academic achievement.

Murray, in his second year in the Blaine County School District, previously worked in Dual Immersion programs in Long Beach, Calif.

He said the reasons why Dual Immersion students perform higher scholastically are not fully understood, but that the phenomenon has been observed elsewhere.

"My thinking is that the rigor of learning two languages is stretching their minds to work harder," he said. "This requires them to use more of their brain power than they would normally."

Murray said that Dual Immersion students are not handpicked.

"Not at all," he said. "We have not put any requirements on students to start or continue with the program."