

Multilingual and Multicultural Center

Frequently Asked Questions about Foreign Language Immersion Programs

How long have foreign language immersion programs been around?

The first immersion programs were developed in Canada in the 1960s using the medium of the French language. The early programs were driven by a group of parents' belief and vision that their children could learn French as a living language without harm to their competence in English. The success of these programs led to a rapid expansion in Canada and the export of this educational innovation to other countries.

What is a foreign language immersion program and how does it work?

In foreign language immersion programs, the regular school curriculum is taught in the immersion language for at least half of the school day. There are two common models of foreign language immersion programs:

- the 90/10 model (sometimes referred to as total immersion) in which 90% of the school day is taught in the target language and 10% is in English in the early grades. English language arts and reading is gradually introduced until students have moved toward a more even distribution of English and the immersion language by the end of their elementary school years. Some programs only move toward a 80/20 ratio as research indicates that increasing the percentage of English **doesn't** significantly impact their achievement in English but maintaining a high percentage of the target language **does** impact their proficiency in this second language.
- the 50/50 model (sometimes referred to as partial immersion) in which 50% of the school day is taught in the target language and 50% is taught in English.

What immersion model is implemented at Lyseth Elementary School?

Portland Public Schools has implemented a 90/10 Foreign Language Immersion model in grades K-2, with some formal English instruction beginning in grade 3. This is due to the significantly higher levels of proficiency reached in this model versus a more partial immersion model.

What are the future plans for the continuation of this program?

Portland Public Schools began the program at Lyseth in 2014 with one kindergarten cohort. A new class was added each year. There is now an immersion classroom at each grade level of the elementary school, K-5. Immersion programs have experienced explosive growth in the U.S. over the past two decades (with a 70% increase between 2006 and 2011). States with the highest number of immersion programs include Louisiana, Minnesota, Oregon, and Utah. Interest from other districts in Maine indicates that although Portland is the first public school district in the state to implement a full immersion program, it won't be alone for long. The Portland Public Schools are committed to not only sustaining this program at Lyseth but developing more immersion options in the district.

Are there plans to have immersion options at the middle and high school level for the students who participate in the elementary immersion program?

Many districts that implement elementary Immersion Programs go on to develop a variety of options for their immersion cohorts at the higher grade levels. Offerings vary from a number of blocks taught in the target immersion language (such as language arts, science, and social studies) to a continuation of the immersion model into the middle school and high school years. Portland Public

Schools will research and develop the best practice to meet the needs of the growing number of immersion students as the program progresses.

Are there options for entering the immersion program if the student enters the district after kindergarten?

Unless a student is transferring into the program from a similar one in another district or is entering with a similar level of language and literacy skills in Spanish, there will not be an option to enter the immersion program after kindergarten.

Why should I consider enrolling my child in an immersion program?

Immersion programs are the fastest growing and most effective type of foreign language program currently available in U.S. schools. An immersion program offers many benefits to students including:

- Higher levels of second language proficiency than students in other school-based language programs (Met, 1998).
- A greater ability to navigate in an increasing interconnected and global community.
- A positive effect on cognitive development including greater nonverbal problem-solving abilities and more flexible thinking (see reviews in Met, 1998).
- Greater academic achievement. There are over three decades of studies consistently showing that immersion students achieve as well as or better than non-immersion peers on standardized measures of verbal and mathematics skills administered in English (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Genesee, 1987).

How will my child's participation in an immersion program affect his/her English language and literacy development?

Many parents are concerned that participation in an immersion program may have a negative impact but many years of research show that the immersion experience actually enhances English language development (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). Full immersion students' English development may lag temporarily in reading, word knowledge, and spelling but research has consistently shown that this discrepancy usually disappears within one to two years as English Language Arts is introduced. It is important that parents are prepared for this sequence of language development and are aware that immersion students will be able to keep pace with and often surpass academically their peers in traditional classrooms.

It is important to note that, although Spanish will be the medium in their immersion classrooms, in most cases English is the home language for these students so they will have consistent exposure to and support for English at home and in the community. Parents can help to enhance English language and literacy development by reading to their children and engaging in English language games and activities at home.

Will my child become proficient in the second language? How long will that take?

Students in full immersion programs demonstrate fluency and confidence when using the immersion language after one to two years and their listening and reading skills are comparable to those of native speakers of the same age. However, achieving high levels of proficiency in speaking and writing in a second language is a long-term process. Although they may not reach native-like proficiency in all areas by the end of their elementary years, immersion students will have a strong second language base upon which to continue moving toward full proficiency and to develop proficiency in subsequent languages.

Is an immersion program a good choice for all children?

The vast majority of immersion programs are open to all students. There is no admission test or pre-screening process. Research findings on the effectiveness of immersion education hold true for a wide range of students, including those from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds (Genesee, 1992.)

Most children, even those with mild learning disabilities, achieve well in immersion programs and develop proficiency in a second language. In some cases, however, children with language processing challenges or whose first language acquisition is seriously delayed may be better suited to a traditional classroom. These decisions can be made on a case-by-case basis with communication between families, teachers, administrators, and other educational professionals.

I don't speak Spanish. How can I support my child's immersion experience?

Just like all parents, those with children in immersion programs should maintain an active role in their children's education by providing them with experiences that help develop their English language skills and enhance their cognitive and affective development. Parents and families can support their children by reading together and engaging in other activities that encourage their children to apply what they are learning in class. Communication with teachers is also important in order to understand and stay current on their children's academic, social, and language development.

In order for children in immersion programs to fully access the benefits of becoming bilingual and biliterate, it is important for parents to understand second language acquisition and immersion education, make a commitment to them, and find ways to support their children's use of the target language outside of school. This might include making books in the immersion language available at home, watching movies in the target language, or having the student share something they are doing in school in the target language at home.

Adapted from Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) Online Resources: Digests, August 2003^{SEP}; EDO-FL-03-04, *What Parents Want to Know About Foreign Language Immersion Programs*, Tara W. Fortune, Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, University of Minnesota^{SEP}; Diane J. Tedick, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Minnesota