



# Dual language program fosters bilingual, biliterate culture among all students

by Jennifer LeClaire



Superintendent  
Daniel King

Spanish and English are in a virtual dead heat to be the most-spoken language in the world. In the United States, the number of Spanish-speaking people is growing by leaps and bounds.

These are primary reasons why Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) ISD launched a program in 1994 to foster a "dual language culture" among its students. After 15 years of faithfulness to that mission, educators in this Rio Grande Valley district this past May proudly watched the first cohort of 45 students from PSJA High School and PSJA North High School graduate from the district's dual language program.

Program participants since kindergarten, these graduates read, write and speak fluently in both academic English and Spanish. All of them have gone on to attend college; some of them on scholarships.

Meanwhile, the dual language program in PSJA ISD continues to flourish.

"Last year, we implemented the dual language program district-wide for all Limited English Proficient (LEP) students and for English-dominant students who want to participate from kindergarten," says Superintendent Daniel "Danny" King.

The number of campuses offering the program has grown from nine to 30 since it began. Today, almost 6,000 of the district's 30,000 students are in the dual language program; approximately 1,200 of those participants are native English speakers. The district makes the biggest push at the kindergarten level to enroll English-speaking students in the dual language program. According to King, the younger the students are, the easier it is for them to become proficient in two languages. However, there are exceptions to the rule, and ultimately, it comes down to

parental support. If a family wants to enroll an older child, PSJA ISD reviews that case on an individual basis.

When the class of 2009-2010 completes high school, 55 dual language program students will be among them. Ysleta ISD in El Paso is also graduating bilingual and biliterate students; however, PSJA ISD is the only school district in the entire country that has more than 1,000 students enrolled in dual language classes at the secondary level.

As part of its expansion efforts, PSJA ISD is adding a grade level to the dual language program every year, replacing the transitional bilingual program with a one-way dual language model, which most of the students participating are native Spanish speakers. The district expects to reach full implementation of the program in the elementary schools by 2014. Most campuses will be one-way dual language campuses, with the exception of a few implementing a two-way model in which the language groups are more balanced.

Currently, at the elementary level, the dual language model provides 50 percent content in Spanish and 50 percent content in English. Pre-kinder, kinder and first grade students learn literacy in their dominant languages; math in English; and social studies and science in Spanish. All social activities provide opportunities to use both languages, as they follow the "language of the day."

Second through fifth grade students follow the same routine, except their language arts classes are in both languages. Also, additional electives are offered in those grades to introduce vocabulary terms in the other language.

At the secondary level, the current model is 80 percent content in English and 20 percent content in Spanish, but the Dual Language Department is

See PHARR-SAN JUAN-ALAMO page 66

## Quick reference

**Biliterate** (adjective): able to read and write in two languages.

**Bilingual** (adjective): able to speak two languages with the facility of a native speaker.

**Bicultural** (adjective): of, pertaining to, or combining two cultures.

PHARR-SAN JUAN-ALAMO continued from page 64

working to add more courses in Spanish to realize a truer 50-50 model.

"People have a bad taste in their mouths when it comes to bilingual education, because everybody implements it their own way," Silva says. "Schools have failed miserably with the Limited English Proficient students. Our program gives LEP students a little bit of Spanish and immerses them in English. We are validating their native language while helping them acquire a second language. That's the bottom line."

### The advantages of biliteracy

Beyond research that proves the simultaneous study of two languages offers cognitive and cultural benefits, district officials say that bilingual, biliterate students have a keen advantage when applying to colleges. Showing proficiency in two languages at a high academic level is an attractive characteristic to college administrators, King says. Furthermore, students entering the workforce who are bilingual automatically increase their marketability.

To be sure, college preparation begins early for students in the dual language program. Students who participate in the program take a course called Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish for high school and college credit as early as seventh grade. In 2008, 111 eighth grade students took the AP Spanish language exam. Eighty-two of them earned college credit. This year, about 75 percent of PSJA ISD's middle school dual language students entered high school with college credits already in their pockets.

### Validating the native tongue

King says the dual language program gives native Spanish speakers greater confidence. The district's LEP population makes up a little more

than 41 percent of the student body. Recent immigrants make up less than 5 percent.

"Being on the [U.S.-Mexico] border, many of our students come from Spanish-dominant homes," King says. "Instead of treating their home language as a deficit, we've found that treating it as an advantage gives them a lot of confidence and makes students comfortable in both English and Spanish settings."

Students who are strong in Spanish can be the stars of the classroom in Spanish language classes; they can serve as tutors for English-speaking students who need help with their vocabulary and reading. Consequently, when those same Spanish-speaking students attend their English classes later in the day, King notes, they are more comfortable asking their English-speaking peers for help.

"Achievement gaps start to get a little wider in fourth and fifth grades; we know that the gap is there with students who never really acquired academic instruction in their native language," Silva says. "If students don't get cognitive academic language proficiency in their native language, they don't do well when they get older. Our students will be bilingual and biliterate with no achievement gap."

### Growing language proficiency

PSJA ISD is now making requirements a little more challenging for students. Instead of requiring six dual language credits to graduate from the program, students need eight credits. This encourages students to take both content and non-content coursework in dual languages throughout high school. PSJA ISD has added more co-dual courses, including biology, algebra I, algebra II, physics and chemistry.

PSJA ISD also wants to implement a third language at the high school level, so students can become reasonably fluent in a third language before they graduate. Administrators have discussed several language options, including French.

"We see, more than ever, kids have such high self-esteems because they are proficient in two languages," Silva says. "And think – this can all be done in a public school setting. We can implement a consistent model from kindergarten all the way through 12th grade so everybody is on the same page. This is our dream come true."

JENNIFER LECLAIRE also has written for *The New York Times* and *The Christian Science Monitor*.



North High School  
May 2009 graduate  
Rigoberto Martinez was  
among the first cohort  
of students to complete  
Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD's  
dual language program.