

## **Hed: CPS takes another go-round at expanding dual language programs**

**By: Kalyn Belsha**

It's a Tuesday afternoon in May at Calmecca Academy of Fine Arts and Dual Language and 32 kindergarteners are sponge-painting seahorses — though they also call them “caballitos de mar.”

The group is completing a thematic unit on the ocean this week, learning vocabulary and concepts in both Spanish and English as part of the school's newly implemented dual language program. The model divides instruction time between the two languages — starting with more Spanish in the early grades and working up to a 50-50 split by 5th grade. The goal is that that the students become bilingual and literate in both languages.

“I know five languages,” 6-year-old Moureen Mohammad says as she works. “Chinese, English, Spanish, Arabic...” She hesitates. “I need one more. I forgot. Spanish!”

Mohammad is learning English and Spanish in her dual language classroom, Arabic at home and Mandarin three times a week as part of Calmecca's world language program. She speaks so many languages, she herself miscounts them.

She's part of a cohort of young students Chicago Public Schools (CPS) hopes will gain a competitive edge by learning more than one language at school, often by mastering “heritage” languages they're exposed to at home, but not at an academic level. Studies show students who speak and write in more than one language show increased cognitive development, improved social relationships, better employment opportunities and higher wages.

Calmecca's dual language program is part of an ambitious initiative attempting to overhaul the district's approach to bilingual and world language education. At the forefront is a significant departure from what used to be the singular goal of public school language education: proficiency in English.

The seeds of the initiative were planted five years ago, when a commission of teachers, principals, bilingual education experts and two members of the Board of Education got together to evaluate language education at CPS. They recommended ways to close the achievement gap between English speakers and the district's now more than 64,000 English-language learners.

After reviewing district data and language education best practices, the commission issued a comprehensive [report](#) in November 2010 that said English-language learners needed “opportunities to formally develop their ability to read, write, speak and think critically at high levels in English and their home language,” adding many instructional methods work equally well on both English-language learners and English speakers.

The commission recommended allocating more funding to language education and supporting language education models with the goal of bilingualism, citing dual language as the proven “most effective... for developing bilingual-biliterate students.”

That recommendation is based on research that shows students who were in a dual language program score higher on English reading standardized tests than students who were in programs that transitioned earlier to all English.

“If students do not have these opportunities,” the report warned, “we risk dire consequences for them and wasted resources for the city.”

### **Renewed support**

Dual language education is not new to CPS. In the 1970s, Inter-American Magnet School, now in Lakeview, was one of the first schools in the country to embrace the teaching model.

But the new CPS initiative marks the first time in a decade the district is trying, in earnest, to grow and support schools with dual language programs.

In 2009, the district started a dual language pilot program at four predominantly Latino and low-income schools with large English-language learner populations — Whittier Elementary in Pilsen, Rachel Carson Elementary in Gage Park, Calmecca in Brighton Park and Volta Elementary in Albany Park — offering money and guidance to start new dual language programs or tweak existing ones.

When the pilot began, two then-members of the Board of Education — Clare Muñana and Alberto Carrero — were vocal proponents of the dual language model. And the district also had financial support: the Chicago Community Trust gave money to support the planning phase of the initiative and to fund trips to conferences and dual language classrooms in states such as California, New Mexico and Texas.

Federal stimulus dollars were used to help the pilot schools buy classroom materials, hire a coordinator to oversee the dual language program for two years, educate teachers about dual language and compensate them for new curriculum planning.

And, perhaps most important, for the first time in a decade, CPS’s Office of Language and Cultural Education hired a coordinator to oversee dual language education.

Their pick, Olivia Mulcahy, is well-suited for her job. Mulcahy practices what she preaches, as she herself is bilingual and multicultural, coming from Irish-Mexican-American roots. She’s outspoken and has the tenacity of a veteran dual language teacher, having spent a decade at Telpochcalli Elementary in Little Village. For her, dual language isn’t a pie-in-the-sky philosophy: Her own daughter is learning English and Spanish at Inter-American.

She says she’s going to do everything in her power to sustain CPS’s commitment to dual language for the long haul.

“It was never about just a boutique little pilot,” Mulcahy said at an interview in her office. She is wearing earrings that look like green steps — sacred “kiva” ruins in New Mexico — that show her appreciation for other cultures. “It was always about how do

we build models and have some effect on how language and literacy is looked at across the board.”

### **Learning from the past**

This initiative isn’t the first time CPS has attempted to start up new dual language programs.

In 1998, there was another dual language initiative based out of an office that oversaw early childhood education. CPS started programs at 29 schools, from pre-kindergarten to second grade. But it was hard to oversee a pilot at so many schools, each with different support systems and demographics.

“We had a lot of professional development, we received a lot of resources, and then after that year, that was kind of it,” said Laura Sierra, who was a dual language second-grade teacher at Carson during the pilot in the ‘90s and later became the dual language coordinator for the school during the pilot that started in 2009.

Despite the district’s hope these early dual language programs would continue on into older grades, Carson’s program — as well as programs at other schools — never moved beyond second grade. This kind of program is known as “early-exit” and contrasts with research that shows children in dual language programs need five to seven years to fully develop their language skills.

Sierra said she knew she should have been giving her students more Spanish-language instruction, but she felt pressured to prepare them for third grade, when they’d be transitioned into classes taught only in English.

“It was hard because we were on our own until this initiative came on,” Sierra said of the pilot that started in 2009. “It just opened up my eyes, knowing we really had not been doing it the way it should have been done.”

Those who worked with CPS on past dual language initiatives say this time around, the district’s approach differs in a few key ways. Fewer schools were selected based on their ability to actually implement and sustain dual language programs through higher grade levels and coordinators were put in place to oversee the implementation.

Mulcahy met with the four pilot schools’ dual language coordinators on a regular basis to provide professional development, explaining how they could create leadership teams that could absorb their duties once stimulus funding ran out.

Mulcahy also identified a network of about a dozen CPS schools — some with established programs, others with the vestiges of dual language programs from the ‘90s — and offered them funding for classroom materials, curriculum planning and out-of-state conference slots. That way, schools with dual language programs outside the pilot would know who to turn to for advice.

“What I didn’t want to do is say, ‘This is an exclusive club, if you don’t meet the criteria we’re not going to deal with you,’” Mulcahy said.

## Challenges persist

Bilingual education experts say it's difficult to judge CPS's long-term commitment to dual language just yet, given the relatively new administration and a \$712 million budget deficit that necessitated many cuts for this academic year.

This year the Office of Language and Cultural Education received \$5.3 million more than it spent last year, thanks in part to the district declaring world language programs a priority investment. But there was a \$1.9 million cut in professional development funding for the dual language pilot program, an almost two-thirds decrease.

Besides funding, there are other ways to gauge the district's support for dual language, according to Sonia Soltero, the director of bilingual-bicultural education at DePaul University.

The first, Soltero said, is whether the district continues to fund a dual language coordinator in central office. So far, despite administrative reshuffling, that position has remained in tact. And in a surprise move, funding from central office for two dual language coordinator positions — at Volta and Whittier — were extended one year beyond the pilot program.

Soltero, who served as an outside consultant to CPS during both the most recent and previous dual language initiatives, says commitment level also can be gleaned from the kinds of instructional materials the district supports and how much effort is put into teaching principals about education models that encourage bilingualism.

Apart from these outside factors, dual language is also challenged by something at the core of the program: There's no clear-cut definition at the district level of what a dual language program is.

It's something Mulcahy aims to fix by late spring of this year by issuing a rubric that will outline the "non-negotiables" of dual language and publishing a CPS handbook that offers tips on how to start new programs. There will be some sort of accountability structure in place, she said, to prevent schools from using the dual language label that don't meet the criteria.

Though she's still working on the definition, Mulcahy says dual language programs must last long enough for children to master both languages, English- and Spanish-speaking students must be integrated for a significant part of the school day and culture must be a significant part of the curriculum. It's possible in the future students and teachers will be "coded" as part of a dual language program, so it shows up on diplomas and is taken into consideration during hiring and layoffs.

"What I want to avoid is programs trying to fit the model to the detriment of the program fitting the kids," Mulcahy said. She says CPS's definition of dual language will include programs with a majority of English speakers, a majority of Spanish speakers and an equal mix of both.

“In schools where you have an ever-changing mix of (students who speak different languages), she said, “that’s where we really need to be flexible.”