**Hed: Starting dual language programs from scratch, a challenge in CPS**
**By: Kalyn Belsha**

At Calmeca Academy of Fine Arts and Dual Language it's hard to walk the hallways without noticing the walls. Student work written in Spanish and English is hung everywhere. Colorful posters with phrases like "Dos idiomas, una ventana abierta al mundo" are displayed to encourage students, who are mostly Latino and low-income, hailing from the Brighton Park neighborhood on Chicago's Southwest Side.

As a dual language school, instruction time here is divided between Spanish and English — with more Spanish in the earlier years, working up to an even split by 5th grade — with the goal that students become bilingual and biliterate.

The education model is new at Calmeca, which was among four elementary schools to participate in a Chicago Public Schools (CPS) pilot program that received federal stimulus money in 2009 to work on a dual language program.

The pilot is part of an ambitious CPS initiative to bridge the achievement gap between the district's almost 64,000 English-language learners — who represent 15.8 percent of all students — and English speakers. To do that, CPS is gradually moving away from programs that transition into English in the early grades and supporting programs like dual language that help students develop proficiency in more than one language.

CPS hopes to do this largely by helping students maintain "heritage" languages learned at home — which is Spanish for 87 percent of English-language learners in CPS — but aren't being mastered at an academic level. The push is based on studies that show students proficient in more than one language show increased cognitive development, improved social relationships, better employment opportunities and higher wages.

But in Chicago, how a school teaches its English-language learners isn't mandated from the top down. It's up to local schools to determine which model is right for them.

So even as the district expresses support for dual language, bilingual education experts caution that a school — and its principals, teachers and parents — must be ready for the model before rushing to implement a new program.

"You have to have the individuals who truly believe in it, wholeheartedly," said Frances Garcia, the principal at Calmeca. "You can't impose it on a school that doesn't have that belief system."

**Educating parents**

Of the four schools selected for participation in the CPS pilot program, two are starting dual language programs from scratch, beginning with younger grades, then rolling out more on a year-to-year basis.

The lessons CPS learns from the implementation of these programs will be used in a dual language handbook the district plans to issue in late spring of this year. The handbook will offer tips on how to start a new program and clear up confusion over

what defines a dual language program by offering guidelines of the model's "non-negotiables." For example, children who speak different languages must be integrated for a significant portion of the day and the program must span at least five years.

Lessons from the pilot schools will be used to advise new schools on what needs to happen to usher in dual language. First, you need the buy-in of administrators and teachers. Then, you have to educate parents about the model — a lengthy, difficult process.

Pilot school Volta Elementary in Albany Park saw that firsthand.

"The first year there was a lot of suspicion, a lot of concerns, especially from the Spanish-speaking parents (who were) not sure that they wanted their child in that kind of a program," said the school's principal, Ted Johnson. "Now this year, it's completely the opposite, parents are requesting to have their child there," he said of the 2010-2011 school year.

Guadalupe Sandoval, Volta's dual language coordinator, says she spent a lot of time educating parents in 2010. She held informational sessions at the pre-schools that feed into Volta. She passed out flyers in the neighborhood, which is known for being the most diverse in Chicago. It was a difficult sell. But "at the end of the year, no one was complaining," she said.

In Brighton Park, Calmeca teachers and administrators saw similar reactions. The first year they adjusted the kindergarten curriculum to provide more English because worried parents thought their children were learning too much in Spanish.

But after the program's first year, Calmeca educators had evidence to show parents new to the school. Parents with kids already in the program testified at meetings about the linguistic growth they'd seen at home. The school showed parents video tapes of lessons to demonstrate how teachers use visual cues to switch between languages. For example, a pre-K teacher talks to her kids in English with a frog puppet. When they answer her in Spanish, the frog gently reminds them it's time for English.

Convincing parents can also be difficult because research shows it takes until middle school for dual language students to perform better on English reading tests than those who transition earlier to all-English classes.

"It's a program that some people might not want to take a chance on," Garcia said, "because there's still that fear that 'What if the kids don't excel?'"

**A lesson in culture**

Overseeing a program with a long-term goal that can be at odds with yearly standardized testing isn't easy. But Garcia is a former English-language learner herself, who sees dual language as the chance to give her students the kind of support she didn't get when she was a young student in CPS.

“English-language learners come to the school with a gift, already having a knowledge base in one language,” she says. “And for us not to recognize it and use it to (our) advantage is a huge waste.”

Understanding and celebrating culture plays a big role in dual language programs, so much so that when CPS issues a handbook on the model, it plans to require a cultural component in the curriculum.

The thinking is, according to a 2010 CPS bilingual education report: “When schools value students’ home language and culture, it helps English-language learners develop self-confidence and positive attitudes towards school; as a result, they succeed more often in school.”

Garcia takes that to heart. As a dance teacher, she stays after school all year to help students choreograph a folkloric performance for their parents in May. On that day in 2011, rhythmic tunes from Mexico, Colombia and the Dominican Republic filled the gymnasium, as Calmeca students clapped and spun on stage, clad in flowing skirts and sombreros.

When the curtain opened for the cha cha cha number, Garcia emerged smiling in a form-fitting black dress, a tight bun holding her hair in place. Parents cheered loudly as she twirled — it’s not every day you see your principal doing a Latin dance in front of the whole school.

**Teacher training**

Parents are not the only ones who have to be educated about the dual language model. Teachers too, must be taught a new way of lesson planning. Dual language teachers use themes to demonstrate concepts, making connections between the two languages whenever possible. But many teachers aren’t taught the dual language model in college and have to develop those skills on the job.

“It’s a lot of work, we were afraid they wouldn’t be ready,” said Johnson of his dual language teachers at Volta. “The teachers (are) moving into the thematic unit-based curriculum as opposed to teaching from a textbook.”

As part of the pilot, CPS offered new dual language teachers paid curriculum planning time and trips to conferences and classrooms in other states to get ideas. For many, like dual language teacher Nancy Cordova at Calmeca, the process was nerve-wracking.

“I was really skeptical when I first started,” Cordova said. “I thought if I don’t get the support that I need to embark on taking this challenge... I was really afraid of failure.”

Cordova, who used to teach English-language learners as they transitioned to English, worried whether her own Spanish was at a high enough level to teach dual language. But she says watching the kids engage with her made her a believer in the model.

“When we are learning a theme and vocabulary I try to incorporate English read-alouds where they can bridge those vocabulary words onto English from the Spanish,” said Cordova. “I use movements to help them remember what the significance of the vocabulary words are or a specific concept.”

She moves her hands as if she were grinding corn to demonstrate. It’s what she did for her kids when they were learning the word “metate,” the Spanish word for an Aztec tool.

“I was able to see that the type of English instruction I was providing my students before was not ideal,” she said. “It was very disengaged and disconnected from what we were learning in the classroom.”

**Sustainability questions**

Pilot schools received money for two years to buy classroom materials, fund a dual language coordinator position and provide teachers with professional development.

But now that the stimulus money is gone, the pilot schools are left to roll out the program to older grades without federal assistance. As part of its attempt to close a $712 million budget deficit, CPS cut professional development for the pilot program in 2012 by nearly two-thirds, to $1 million. That cut will make it difficult for new teachers taking on dual language classrooms to get the same training their peers received.

Olivia Mulcahy, who is overseeing the CPS dual language initiative, says while the pilot schools received financial assistance, it’s not impossible for other schools in CPS to start up or change dual language programs on their own. Administrators should take a year to plan, she said, and discretionary funds need to be distributed in a different way.

“People have the impression that dual is a lot more money because in their heads you’re doing everything twice,” Mulcahy said. “You don’t teach everything twice and you don’t need the materials in both languages. Don’t get me wrong, school budgets are limited and people are making tough choices. But I don’t think it’s impossible.”