One D.C. school is turning to Spanish immersion to help its students learn English

By Perry Stein  March 7

Students east of the Anacostia River will be able to enroll in a dual-language school in their neighborhood for the first time, as Houston Elementary, a low-performing school in Ward 7, will become a Spanish-language-immersion school starting next school year.

Dual-language options are in high demand in the District, with the 13 traditional public and charter elementary schools offering such programs attracting long waiting lists each year. The addition of Houston to the roster of the city’s dual-language programs is a victory for education advocates, who have long argued that students across socio-economic levels do not have equal access to the programs’ benefits.

“We look at these programs as a way to close the achievement gap,” said Vanessa Bertelli, executive director of the D.C. Language Immersion Project, an advocacy group pushing to expand the city’s language programs.

During the 2016-2017 academic year, the 30 students in the pre-kindergarten class for 3-year-olds at Houston will spend half their academic time learning in Spanish, with the school incrementally expanding the program to a higher grade each year.

Houston will be one of the few dual-language programs in the city not located in neighborhoods with wealthy or Spanish-speaking populations.

About 75 percent of Houston’s predominantly African American students are considered “at risk” — children who are homeless, in foster care, or qualify for food stamps — and just 20 percent of them are considered proficient in reading.

School officials think the broad benefits that foreign-language programs can have on students’ cognitive abilities will make the program a perfect fit for Houston.

“There is something that happens in a brain of a child that’s learning in two languages. They develop a greater awareness of how language works. They develop flexibility,” said Katarina Brito, the bilingual program developer at D.C. Public Schools. “Rather than think of remediation — how do we get kids to catch up — we recognize that acceleration and creativity are better ways.”
Brito referenced a 2010 George Mason University study that found that math and reading test scores improved among students who participate in dual-language programs. Other studies indicate that the success of such programs hinges on how effective the bilingual teachers are in the classroom, and bilingual teachers can carry high salaries.

Rembert Seaward, Houston’s principal, said the school has a pre-kindergarten teacher for 3-year-olds who is bilingual and will teach the Spanish class next year.

Seaward said students will switch their language each day, taking classes in Spanish one day and classes in English the following day with a different teacher.

“Different languages are already a part of America,” Seaward said, adding that bilingualism will help students’ job prospects later in life. “I believe if we give our kids the opportunity to learn a second language, it’s not a very heavy lift. We just need to give them the opportunity.”

All students at Houston — which draws 68 percent of its students from the surrounding neighborhood in Northeast — will be required to participate in the dual-language program.

Tyler Elementary on Capitol Hill — currently the only dual-language school in the D.C. Public Schools system in a non-Spanish-speaking neighborhood — has both a dual-language Spanish track and a regular track, which integrates fine arts into the curriculum. There was a 233-person waiting list for Tyler’s Spanish program for the 2015-2016 school year, according to the system.

School officials say that Tyler’s academic performance has improved since the addition of the foreign-language immersion program more than 10 years ago. Forty-five percent of the school’s students are proficient in reading, and 3 percent are considered advanced, according to standardized test assessments.

Bertelli, of the D.C. Language Immersion Project, said the program has attracted higher-income families to Tyler, resulting in different racial and socioeconomic demographics between the two tracks at the school. The D.C. school system declined to provide data showing the difference in test scores for Tyler students enrolled in the dual-language program and those who are not.

“There is a perception that if a child doesn’t have issues with reading or with their family homes, then that child will benefit more from a dual language,” Bertelli said. “We know that is not the case.”

Seaward said he had to talk to parents and ensure they were on board with the changes ahead of bringing the Spanish program to Houston.
“Parents are excited, they’re really excited,” he said, adding that parents want their children to have every option available to them. “Every parent wants their child to have an education. It’s not either-or for parents, it’s both. ‘I want a standard education and foreign language.’”

Perry Stein covers D.C., Maryland and Virginia.