



That is the question on many area parents' minds

BY JENNIFER MARINO WALTERS

Three years ago, my husband and I agonized over a decision—whether or not to enroll our twin boys, then in kindergarten, in a Spanish immersion program the following year. Their school is one of 17 Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) that offer language immersion starting in kindergarten or first grade.

And FCPS is not alone. Several school districts throughout the D.C. area offer their own language immersion programs (see sidebar). The enrollment lotteries for a lot of these programs are now open, which means many local parents are currently facing the same dilemma we did.

ALL ABOUT IMMERSION

Area schools offer two types of immersion programs: one-way and two-way programs. One-way immersion programs include mostly native English speakers who are learning the target language. Two-way programs combine native speakers and learners of the target language.

In both types of programs, students spend at least half their day learning in the target language. In partial immersion programs, students learn math, science

and health in the target language and the rest of the subjects in English. In full immersion (less common), all instruction is in the target language.

The benefits of language immersion are plenty. According to the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C., learning a language at an early age enhances children's brain development, expands their cultural awareness, helps them think more flexibly and increases job opportunities later in life. Bilingual children outperform monolingual kids in problem solving, pattern recognition and divergent thinking.

Studies by the RAND Corporation and researchers at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, have also found that immersion students score better on standardized reading and math tests than their non-immersion peers by late elementary school.

Elisabeth Harrington, supervisor of the World Languages Office at Arlington Public Schools (APS), says that APS students enrolled in language immersion programs also eventually outperform their non-immersion peers in standardized

tests. But she says that's not usually the case in the earlier years.

"The benefits of immersion are long-term," Harrington says. "Test scores might be lower at first, so parents just have to trust the process."

VARIED EXPERIENCES

When my husband and I were making our decision, our biggest concern was what actual immersion families thought of the program. And we found that while some families loved immersion, others felt it wasn't right for their children.

Melissa Chabot's son is in the kindergarten Spanish immersion program at Bailey's Elementary School for the Arts and Sciences in Falls Church, Virginia. "We are having a wonderful experience," she says. "My son is getting to know kids with diverse backgrounds and experiences and learning about other cultures. He loves it."

Sarah Clark's sixth-grade daughter and second-grade son love being in German immersion at Orange Hunt Elementary School in Burke, Virginia. Clark's daughter is in advanced math and can hold conversations with her German relatives.

"The kids have a great sense that different people have different perspectives," says Clark. "They know that there is more than one way of looking at something."

But Mary Oborski pulled her son out of German immersion at Orange Hunt in second grade because she felt his teachers weren't a good fit for him. Since there's usually only one set of immersion teachers at a school, switching an immersion child to a different class typically means pulling him or her out of the program.

"My child was much calmer and happier after I switched him," Oborski says. "He is currently in fourth grade and is doing great."

Another mother, who asked to remain anonymous, also pulled her second-grade daughter out of Spanish immersion at Ravensworth Elementary in Springfield, Virginia, in the early '90s because the child was getting stressed about not understanding her homework and projects.

"Many of my friends also took their children out of immersion because they were developing upset stomachs and had lots of tears and frustration," she recalls.

Though Harrington acknowledges that not every parent and child will like immersion, she says parents shouldn't automatically count children out based on their personality or learning disabilities. "I believe every child is capable of succeeding in language immersion," says Harrington.

Ultimately, we decided to enroll our boys in Spanish immersion, and we are thrilled

with our decision. They are thriving in third grade, and they get through their math homework just fine (with a little help from Google Translate). And this year, we have already entered our kindergarten-age daughter into the lottery.

"Our world is getting smaller because of connectivity," says Harrington. "So if you want your children to be global thinkers who are more accepting and understanding of other cultures, then language immersion is a gift you can give them." ■

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Considering Immersion?

Here are some tips from parents who have been there, done that.

1 Figure out transportation. Some school districts (like APS) offer bus service for immersion kids, but many don't. So if your kids will be going to a school that's not their zone school, figure out how you'll get them there. "It takes us an hour round-trip each day for drop-off and pickup, plus extra for any evening activities," says Clark.

2 Consider friendships. Clark says most of her kids' classmates live near the school, so she has to drive their children to friend's houses. Therefore, they don't know kids in their own neighborhood very well.

3 Meet the teachers. Oborski recommends meeting the immersion teachers at your child's potential school ahead of time to determine whether they might be a good fit for your child.

4 Talk to parents. Reach out to parents of immersion students at the potential school to hear about their experiences.

5 Give it a shot. Still not sure about immersion? Just give it a try. You can always take your child out of the program. "If it doesn't work for your child, don't think twice—pull him or her out," says Oborski. ■

LOCAL IMMERSION PROGRAMS

Below are four area school districts that offer language immersion programs. These programs are typically filled via lottery systems, and some of those lotteries are open now. If you don't see your child's school district on the list below, just ask the administrators if an immersion program exists.

Arlington Public Schools

apsva.us/world-languages/immersion-program/

Grade at time of entry: K and middle school

Language: Spanish

Lottery deadline: Feb. 3–April 15 for K; middle school has a separate enrollment process

District of Columbia Public Schools

dcpss.dc.gov/DL

Grade at time of entry: K or 1 (except at Columbia Heights Education Campus, which has a structured late-entry program)

Language: Spanish

Lottery deadline: The deadline was Feb. 3 for high school and March 2 for grades K-8, but visit myschoolsdc.org to learn more.

Fairfax County Public Schools

fcps.edu/academics/world-languages-immersion-programs

Grade at time of entry: K or 1, depending on the school

Languages: Spanish, French, German, Japanese, Korean

Lottery deadline: March 20 for grade K; late registration opens April 2. Registration for grade 1 closed Feb. 20; late registration opened March 5. Late applications will be added to the end of the waiting list in the order of date received.

Montgomery County Public Schools

montgomeryschoolsmd.org/curriculum/specialprograms/admissions/immersion.aspx

Grade at time of entry: K-5, middle school

Languages: Spanish, French, Chinese

Lottery deadline: April 24; middle school has a separate enrollment process ■