

Achtung, Baby: New Approach To Languages

College-Style Immersion Method Starts to Hit Grade Schools; English as a Second Language

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Jeff Zucker's son Maxwell attends kindergarten in French, while his toddler's preschool is in Chinese. Linda Choppin's first-grade daughter Michaela gets her schooling in German every other week.

None of these children has native-speaking parents in these languages. But, like a growing number of kids across the country, they are undergoing in-depth courses of study in a foreign language, often as early as kindergarten. In many cases, these pint-sized polyglots learn to read and write in their second language before they learn in English.

While some colleges and advanced high schools have long offered intensive, no-English-spoken courses, programs like these are becoming available to much smaller kids. A number of new language-immersion elementary schools have opened nationwide in recent years. Albert Einstein Academy, a public charter school in San Diego that teaches grades kindergarten through four in German part of the time, opened its doors in 2002 with 30 students, and since then its attendance has more than quadrupled.

In New Orleans, the International School of Louisiana spends 70% of the day teaching either in French or Spanish. Lakes International Language Academy plans to open next fall in Forest Lake, Minn., where children in kindergarten through second grade will learn strictly in Spanish. At the Archimedean Academy in Miami, a public school that opened its doors in 2002, students from kindergarten through third grade spend two hours a day in Greek. Teacher Demetrios Demopoulos says most students are now trilingual -- since many come from Spanish-speaking families. (Only about 10% have some connection to Greece, he adds.)

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WHEN MATH IS GREEK

Advantages

- Students get fluent faster.
- Studies suggest that immersion students eventually end up doing just as well, or better, in English.

Drawbacks

- There can be an initial lag in English skills.
- It's harder to jump into an immersion setting after kindergarten or first grade.

In all, the number of private and public schools in the U.S. that practice immersion has more than doubled to at least 300 in the past decade, most of them geared to the early to middle school years.

In immersion schools, students are taught some or all of their curriculum -- math, history, even art class, if there is one -- in the foreign language. The idea is that the sink-or-swim methodology leads to greater proficiency. "Immersion education is by far the best type of program in the U.S. for children to learn a foreign language," says Nancy Rhodes, director of foreign-language education at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C.

But the programs raise concerns with some parents, who question whether students can keep pace when studying science or history in a language they don't fully understand. The concerns are legitimate. Studies show that in the early grades, students in full immersion programs trail their peers in certain aspects of English language skills. "We do know that we lose students who struggle academically, and sometimes parents panic," says Tara Fortune, immersion-projects coordinator at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

Some kids respond well, while others might thrive in a different academic environment. When Elena and Stuart Jewell moved to Alexandria, Va., in 1994, they sent their two youngest children to Rose Hill Elementary School's immersion program. While it has worked well for daughter Jennifer, 13, who now speaks and writes Spanish fluently, the family pulled their son out after about a year. "It was hindering his English," says his mother, who recalls how he struggled with his English spelling and

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reading. Despite the impressive progress made by her seventh-grade daughter, "maybe it's for some kids and not for others," Ms. Jewell says.

How to Say 'Homework'

Advocates for immersion programs say some of this represents a natural tradeoff -- after all, the kids are using another language. But by the end of grade five, immersion students perform as well as or better than their English-educated peers in such areas as vocabulary and grammar, says Merrill Swain, a professor at the University of Toronto who has done numerous studies on immersion vs. mainstream students.

FINDING AN IMMERSION SCHOOL

Two resources for learning where schools are located and how they work.

Resource	Web site	Why it's useful
Center for Applied Linguistics "immersion directory"	www.cal.org/resources/immersion	Lets you punch in different criteria -- like what state you live in or what languages interest you -- to find immersion schools near you.
The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota	www.carla.umn.edu/immersion	Offers a wealth of information, including school profiles and research reports. (Click on the link for the American Council on Immersion Education).

Some parents also worry that they can't play as active a role with homework as they would like, although many schools provide help. The International School of Louisiana has an extra hourlong period at the end of the day where kids do their "homework" with their regular class and teacher. Students typically only bring home assignments done in English. And at L'Etoile du Nord, homework is sent home in English unless it involves work already started in class that just needs to be completed. The school is also looking to develop beginner French classes for parents to keep them engaged.

Immersion schools started in the 1970s with the advent of "magnet" schools, at a time when large school districts were looking for special themes to attract students to racially integrated schools. But in the past decade, the number of immersion programs has increased, in part becauseimmigrant parents are

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often eager to have their children learn the native tongue. U.S.-born parents, determined that their children have every advantage, have started enrolling their children in these schools and created more so their kids will be bilingual. Today, many of these types of immersion schools say that only a small percentage of students come from bilingual homes.

For kids who take the plunge, there can be a long-term payoff. Studies show that students who learn a foreign language before puberty are likelier to achieve native-like pronunciation than those who pick it up later in life. And educators say the more time students spend in the target language, the more proficient they become. There are different degrees of immersion, from partial (about half of classroom instruction time is spent in the language) to total (a larger portion of instruction is in the target language).

Start Early

One key to making immersion work is to begin children early, either with kindergarten or first grade. For one thing, many schools don't accept students who haven't previously been in immersion classrooms, or who can't demonstrate proficiency in the second language.

For some kids, it might take some getting used to. When Marc Rosenblum's daughter entered a Spanish immersion program in kindergarten last year, "she was not enthusiastic," he says, recalling how she refused to look at the Spanish books in the house. But this year, his daughter, Hazel, has had a real turnaround, and is now initiating Spanish conversations at home. "Her accent is already better than mine," says Mr. Rosenblum, a political-science professor specializing in U.S.-Latin American relations.

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