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R.I. public schools turn to charter for help teach 2 languages at once

The benefits, says the head of school for International Charter, are unequivocal: students become bilingual and bi-literate, and schools see improvements in academic achievement and cross-cultural awareness.

SOUTH KINGSTOWN, R.I. — Step inside the kindergarten classroom at West Kingston Elementary School and you see 20 5-year-olds counting in Spanish.

Their teacher, Sol Hernandez, speaks to the children in Spanish, using her hands to underscore her instructions. When a student struggles to find the right Spanish word, Hernandez or her teaching assistant whispers the answer or asks another child to help.

A small group of kindergartners plays hopscotch, throwing a bean bag on a number and then counting in Spanish. At another table, children sort and count small groups of tiny plastic bears.

In the hallways, the bathroom signs are in Spanish. So is the school's mission statement.

Turning to charters

At a time when the debate over the role of charter schools in Rhode Island has become polarized, a few schools districts are willing to ask charter schools to share their expertise.

Two traditional school districts, suburban South Kingstown and urban Pawtucket, have asked the International Charter School to teach them how to offer dual language immersion. This summer, educators from the Pawtucket charter school trained kindergarten teachers from the two districts on how to instruct students in two languages.

Students spend half of the day learning in Spanish and the other half in English.

Julie Nora, head of school for the International Charter, which has offered dual language immersion for 14 years, said the benefits of dual language instruction are unequivocal: students become bilingual and bi-literate, and schools see improvements in academic achievement and cross-cultural awareness.

"We see increased problem-solving skills, increased social skills and increased empathy," Nora said. "English language learners are often seen from a deficit perspective because they speak another language. All of sudden, they are seen as an asset."

Nora hopes to deepen the partnership by asking her teachers to observe their colleagues in Pawtucket and South Kingstown, then switch places.

"One of our goals is to develop a professional learning community so we can call on each other as things come up," she said. "I've met with the superintendents of Providence and Central Falls. We'd love to work with them as well."

The Rhode Island Foundation awarded \$39,324 to the South Kingstown school district and \$83,358 to the Pawtucket school district, which included the International Charter.

Charter schools were originally designed to serve as models of innovation, whose fresh ideas would be shared with traditional public schools. To date, however, those collaborations have been limited, with Central Falls standing out as one of the few traditional districts that have reached out to charters.

This three-way partnership is part of changing that dynamic.

Multicultural approach

In South Kingstown, the program began this fall with a total of 40 kindergarten students at West Kingston and Peace Dale elementary schools. The district will add a grade every year going forward.

"Our overall goal is that our dual language students will come out of the program bilingual, bi-cultural and bi-literate," said Lindy Fregeolle, South Kingstown's dual language coordinator. "This program offers our students a rich cultural experience. We're preparing students to be successful in a global economy."

Dual language immersion is part of the Rhode Island Department of Education's five-year strategic plan. Former state education Commissioner Deborah A. Gist promoted the idea during her last "state of public education" speech before the General Assembly.

Ray Lyons, whose 5-year-old son, Colton, attends West Kingston Elementary, called the program "a dream come true."

"Every day my son comes home and tells me a new word in Spanish," Lyons said. "The path they will be on, staying with it from kindergarten through grade 12, is amazing. They will be bilingual in two or three years. In 10 years, this will be the norm. I'm so glad South Kingstown took the lead."

Each district, Nora said, will take away something different from the experience. In South Kingstown, children will become multicultural at a time when the



West Kingston Elementary School teacher Sol Fernandez leads her kindergarten class in a lesson taught in Spanish on Thursday. At the board with her is student James Morse. The Providence Journal/Sandor Bodo

global workforce calls for not only fluency in more than one language but fluency in more than one culture.

"This is not just about learning another language," said West Kingston Principal Kim Mather. "It's about multiculturalism. When our kids enter the world, whether it's high school or their careers, we want them to understand that the world is a tapestry. This program will give them a great step up in understanding how they fit into a global world."

Value of fluency

In Pawtucket, a district of 9,100 students where 1,000 speak only Spanish at home, dual language immersion offers a fresh way of looking at English language learners. Rather than viewing Spanish fluency as an impediment to learning, this model sees it as a positive contribution to the classroom, especially for students whose primary language is English.

"We're spending exorbitant amounts of money on English as a Second Language," said Pawtucket Supt. Patti DiCenso. "Why aren't we embracing the fact that these students speak Spanish?"

In Pawtucket, dual language has been introduced to kindergartners at Nathanael Greene Elementary School this fall.

When DiCenso heard that International Charter was partnering with South Kingstown, she jumped on the opportunity to participate as well.

Pawtucket isn't stopping with Spanish immersion, however. The district has launched a Chinese language immersion program in grades 8 and 9. The district is adding a Portuguese immersion program next year along with expanding its Chinese program.

"I didn't want this just to be in the suburbs," DiCenso said. "My colleagues in South Kingstown were a year ahead of me. I stuck my foot in the door. If it's good enough for [suburban] kids, it's good enough for urban kids."

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