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Emerson kindergartners will start on path to being bilingual

An optional dual-language Spanish immersion program will be a first in the Everett School District.



Blythe Young, Emerson Elementary School's principal, is a fluent Spanish speaker. When classes start in September, many kindergartners there will be on the way to becoming bilingual, too.

Starting with kindergarten, Emerson will be the only Everett district school with a dual-language Spanish immersion program, Young said. The school hopes to offer the option in three kindergarten classes. Emerson now has five kindergarten classes. Teachers fluent in Spanish will be hired for the program, the principal said.

Plans call for Spanish immersion programs at Evergreen Middle School and Cascade High School. So kindergartners starting at Emerson this fall will have the option of learning in two languages through 12th grade — with the same curriculum as peers outside the program are offered.

It will start with what Young described as a “90-10 model.” For kindergartners, “instruction will be in Spanish all day,” she said. Instruction in English will gradually be added, year by year. By fifth grade, half of it will be in English. Her own three children — two now in college, one in Running Start — have gone through Spanish immersion programs. “They’re bilingual and biliterate,” she said. “They obtained the state Seal of Biliteracy upon graduation, it’s on their diploma.”

She expects about 50 percent of students in Emerson’s program will be native speakers of Spanish.

“We already have good numbers signed up,” Young said.

Applications for the program are now being accepted. Young said a tiered lottery will be used to fill available slots, first for Emerson students, then for those in the Everett district, and lastly for out-of-district kids.

Parents have been introduced to the program through online presentations in both languages. In announcing Emerson’s dual-language strand, the district listed several goals:

- Bilingualism and biliteracy, with students able to read and write at advanced levels in English and Spanish.
- Academic achievement, with students at or above grade level to be prepared for college and career.
- Socio-cultural competence, with students developing positive cross-cultural attitudes to become competent global citizens.

“A dual-language program is one of the best ways to close the learning gap,” said Young, who explained how it differs from the ways English learners are now taught. Currently, she said, those kids are helped by paraeducators, English language instructional coaches.

“It’s difficult to close the gap,” she said.

With a dual-language program, “they’re high academic achievers, truly bilingual,” she said. “All students perform as well or better than their peers on standardized tests. And there’s a sense of community.”

Washington schools have a number of language immersion programs. According to the state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, there are programs teaching in Spanish, Vietnamese, Japanese and Mandarin Chinese. With a state K-12 initiative, Superintendent Chris Reykdal has outlined a goal for all students to have the opportunity to become proficient in two languages through dual-language education by 2030.

“I’m excited to bring my experience here. It’s a passion of mine, for sure,” Young said.