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## The bilingual classroom

Edmonton offers dynamic language education program

Students taught in Mandarin, Arabic, German, Hebrew

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EDMONTON—The eyes of seven-year-old Marvin Do are glued to the hand of his teacher as it slides up and down an imaginary scale to mark the tone of each Chinese character flashed on a card.

Marvin and his Grade 1 classmates mimic the teacher's hand action as they navigate the intricacies of Mandarin, a language with four dominant tones, each of which can bestow different meanings.

Marvin, the son of Vietnamese immigrants, will spend the morning using Mandarin to study society, health, art and physical education. In the afternoon, with a different teacher, he will study science, math and language arts in English along with his classmates who hail from China, Singapore, Brunei and Hong Kong. Some in the class are better at English than Mandarin; others are more proficient in Mandarin; others still, such as Marvin, speak Cantonese as a first language.

"It's fun," says Marvin. "I like to learn all of the different words."

Marvin's teacher, Sin Ching Pong, an immigrant from Hong Kong, says the biggest challenge she faces is finding the classroom time to cover all of the necessary ground: "On top of all the regular curriculum, you're adding the Chinese language."

Welcome to Caernarvon School, one part of a remarkable bilingual language program offered by Edmonton Public Schools. The most extensive of its kind anywhere in Canada, Edmonton's bilingual program is the country's most dynamic experiment in second-language learning.

The board currently offers full bilingual programs in seven languages: American Sign Language (ASL), Arabic, Mandarin, German, Hebrew, Spanish and Ukrainian. A total of 27 schools offer half of each day's programming in the target language and the other half in English.

In four of the languages — ASL, Mandarin, German and Ukrainian — students are able to attend a bilingual school from kindergarten through Grade 12. More than 6,000 of the board's 82,000 students are enrolled. (Another 2,000 take part in French immersion.)

The school board began its foray into bilingual education in 1978 with a Ukrainian-English program; it has expanded steadily ever since and is now preparing a Punjabi curriculum.



**JOHN ULAN FOR THE TORONTO STAR**

Marvin Do, 7, studies at Edmonton's Caernarvon School, part of the city's extensive bilingual education program. The board offers full bilingual programs in seven languages, including Mandarin.

The model is a dramatic departure from the one found in most other large Canadian cities where languages other than French and English can be studied in individual credit courses, or else after school or on weekends in heritage language sessions. Edmonton, although not nearly as ethnically diverse as Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal, has emerged as the leader in second-language learning.

Stuart Wachowicz, Edmonton's director of curriculum, says the city's approach is based on extensive research that shows students literate in their first language are more adept at acquiring English, which in turn improves their overall school performance. "In general, our marks on provincial achievement tests — English, mathematics, social studies and science — are significantly higher for students in bilingual programs compared to students who are not," he says. "The results speak for themselves."

Indeed, bilingual education is now being trumpeted by some of Canada's leading educators as the best way for children — and especially immigrant children — to develop their overall academic skills. The debate is critical in Canada where students who speak a language other than English at home now make up 20 to 50 per cent of the general school population in Canada's biggest cities.

A leading proponent of bilingual education is the University of Toronto's Jim Cummins. Widely considered the national dean of second-language learning, Cummins argues that Canada is failing to take advantage of a major economic resource: its linguistic diversity. Research pointing to the value of bilingual education is considerable. Cummins has examined more than 150 studies conducted during the past 35 years; they suggest, he says, that bilingual children develop more flexibility in their thinking by processing information through two different languages.

According to Cummins, bilingual students gain a deeper understanding of language and how to use it effectively. The languages, he contends, nurture each other and allow students to transfer skills — grammar, syntax, listening and memory development — from one language to another.

The theory is that, as a result, children who study at least part-time in their first language will be better able to develop skills in a second language. In other words, spending classroom time on Mandarin may in fact help students, particularly immigrant students, develop their English skills. At the very least, it won't hurt that development.

"You can have your cake and eat it, too," says Cummins. "You can get better second-language acquisition results at no cost to the student's English."

After more than a quarter-century of experience with bilingual education, educators in Edmonton have found that students in bilingual and French immersion programs perform better on district-wide English language exams than those in regular classrooms. The difference is marginal in Grade 3, but is significant by Grade 9.

A breakdown of 2003 Alberta Learning Achievement Test results generally confirms the board's analysis. The breakdown shows that students in the German, Hebrew, Mandarin and Ukrainian bilingual programs all did substantially better than other Alberta students by Grade 6. They extended that lead through Grade 9.

There was one important exception, however. Students from the Arabic bilingual program — many of them from the ranks of recently arrived immigrants and some with significant deficits in schooling — trailed their Alberta counterparts in Grade 9 social studies, mathematics and language arts. Less than two-thirds of the Arabic program members achieved the acceptable standard in the three Grade 9 disciplines.

Those results would seem to suggest bilingual programs cannot overcome all educational deficits. (Wachowicz says figures are based on a small number of students and need further analysis since there's no control group with which to compare the Arabic bilingual students, who may in fact be doing better than their Arabic counterparts enrolled in regular programs.)

Bilingual education has been studied extensively in the U.S. where similar anomalies have been discovered.

In a study of New York City's large bilingual program reported in *The New York Times*, researchers found higher test scores among Korean, Chinese and Russian immigrants, who were most often enrolled in English immersion classes, than among students who spoke either Spanish or Creole. The latter students were most likely to be enrolled in bilingual education classes and come from poorer and less educated families.

One of the most important endorsements of bilingual education came in an August, 2002 study published by George Mason University's Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas. The researchers had followed more than 210,000 minority language students from 1985 to 2001 to determine what programs were most effective in assisting their academic development. About three-quarters of the students were native Spanish-speakers.

Among the authors' conclusions:

★ Bilingual programs and extended English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs (with at least four years of enriched language support) gave students the best chance of reaching high levels of academic achievement; the fewest dropouts came from these programs.

★ Students with no proficiency in English needed at least four years of enriched support to perform at a language level appropriate for their grade level.

★ The strongest predictor of ESL students' academic achievement was the amount of formal schooling they had received in their first language; the more primary language grade-level schooling, the higher their achievement in the second language.

Collier and Thomas argue that bilingual programs offer the best kind of classrooms for poor and disadvantaged immigrants, many of whom are not able to meet the dual challenge of learning new subject matter in a new language. They contend that bilingual programs allow these students to do grade-level work while learning English. Otherwise, the researchers say, these students have to put their educations on hold for several years while learning enough English to understand the curriculum. As a result, many immigrant students never overcome the learning gap that opens up between them and their English-speaking peers.

It is a critical issue in the U.S., where it's projected that by 2030 students whose first language is not English will make up 40 per cent of the school-aged population. The vast majority of them will be Hispanics, who are already being poorly served by the education system, according to the Civil Rights Project at Harvard and the Urban Institute, which earlier this year published figures showing that less than half of Hispanic students

### **BY THE NUMBERS**

- 7: The number of languages in which the Edmonton school board offers full bilingual programs, including Arabic, Mandarin, Hebrew and Ukrainian.
- 1978: The year in which first Edmonton bilingual education program was started — in Ukrainian
- 81% of Alberta students passed the Language Arts portion of the province's standardized Grade 6 test
- 91% of students in the bilingual Ukrainian program passed Alberta's Grade 6 Language Arts test
- \$126,000 Extra money an Edmonton bilingual school with 460 students would receive to cover special materials and equipment

graduated from high school in New York state (32 per cent), Massachusetts (36 per cent), Michigan (36 per cent) and Nevada (38 per cent).

But the issue of how best to improve the academic achievement of Hispanics and other immigrant students is highly politicized in the U.S. And bilingual education has become the focus of that debate.

Already, four states have voted through ballot initiatives on the fate of bilingual education and intensive ESL programs. In three of the states — California (1998), Arizona (2000) and Massachusetts (2002) — voters have eliminated the use of languages other than English for classroom instruction. The ballot initiatives replaced bilingual education programs with English immersion programs that last a year or less. Parents are allowed to request special waivers to keep their children in bilingual classrooms, but the school boards are under no obligation to grant the requests. Colorado became the first and only state to defeat an "English first" movement in November, 2002.

While the debate over how best to teach immigrants has often been incendiary in the U.S., where 850,000 students were enrolled in bilingual education in 2000, the same cannot be said for Canada.

The debate has simply not taken place in this country, even though about 10 per cent of the country's population use a language other than English or French at home. Big-city school boards outside of Alberta and Manitoba have never made a serious attempt at bilingual education. The question is: Why?

School board officials contend that their French immersion and extended French programs (a reduced form of immersion with some subjects in English) essentially serve as the Canadian version of bilingual education. Moreover, in cities such as Toronto and Vancouver, where more than 80 languages are spoken, bilingual education would be a logistical nightmare, they say, that could result in the creation of "cultural silos."

Critics of bilingual education, which have included Ontario's 1995 Royal Commission on Learning, argue that both Canadian society and the students themselves would be poorly served by grouping Arabic students in one school, Punjabi students in another and Chinese students in still another. (Ontario's Education Act continues to prohibit any language other than English or French to be used as the language of instruction.)

U of T's Cummins, however, says Canada's big-city school boards, particularly those in Ontario, have used the fear of ghettoization as a "cop-out to stop any kind of imaginative thinking" on the issue.

"What we haven't done in Canada is step back and say, 'What kind of outcomes are possible given the mosaic we have? We haven't looked creatively at any of the possibilities.'" He believes Toronto and other big-city boards should, for instance, develop academies where students can study any one of three or four international languages in a bilingual setting. Such schools could offer French-English, Mandarin-English and Spanish-English programs that would overcome concerns about ghettoization and afford students the chance to develop their home languages.

Edmonton's Wachowiz says the bilingual program, once in place, is not expensive to operate. Curriculum materials need to be developed and school space assigned to accommodate the programs.

"But once that infrastructure is there, the cost of delivery is virtually the same," he says "We believe one style of education, one particular mode of education, is not suitable to meet the needs of all children or all parents."

That belief is reflected in the fact that Edmonton offers 30 alternative school programs, including schools with special focus on Aboriginal history, visual arts, dance, science, sports, even soccer. There's an all-girls program, an International Baccalaureate program, a Canadian studies program. Edmonton Public Schools also encompass religion. The board offers Christian alternative programming at more than 10 schools. And at its bilingual Hebrew-English school, Talmud Torah, a former private school, Jewish religious studies are taught as an extension of the school day.

"That's what we're about: Choice," says Wachowicz. "And because we're meeting the needs of parents within the public-school system, there are very, very few private schools in Edmonton.

"Every time a public system loses a student to a private school, there's a dollar amount we lose, which means we can do less for our students. It means if we want to provide the best possible education that money can provide, then we have to be inclusive."

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