

New Dual Language Program Inspires Bilingual, Biliterate Learning

Kindergarteners begin path to fluency in both English and Spanish

Melrose Leadership Academy (MLA) has debuted two dynamic ventures this school year: It is becoming a K-8 (one of only a handful in Oakland) and a "dual immersion" English-Spanish campus where, ultimately, every student will move on to high school with a fluent grasp of both Spanish and English.

Both efforts are beginning in the same place: the school's two kindergarten classrooms. MLA is one of the few Oakland schools teaching English-Spanish immersion, and its approach starts with kids learning primarily in Spanish – even those whose first language is English – and mixing in English later until, by 4th grade, every student will learn in English and Spanish equally.

Despite the rigorous planning that went into launching this program, the first few weeks were uncharted territory for both students and staff. "It was hard for Elijah at first," recalls his mother Clancy Drake. "He knew it would be in Spanish, but it was another thing to experience it."

"It took a couple weeks to hit our stride," says kindergarten teacher Cynthia Gomez, "but once we did, they've really been thriving. Already some students are able to converse spontaneously in Spanish."

Once Elijah got his bearings, says his mother, "He started doing better and better, and he comes home wanting to read Spanish books. Now, he's on fire to learn Spanish!" she says. "We're very encouraged by the idea that by 8th grade he will be bilingual and biliterate. That's a huge gift to give him."

"My mom was right," Elijah concurs. "When I started, I didn't know any at all, but now I'm more cooperative and I'm doing much better, and I really want to learn Spanish."

"It's going well for Nubia," says her mother Marilyn. "It's a little hard for me because I don't know Spanish, but as I sit here and volunteer in the classroom, that helps me because I hear [Ms. Gomez] teaching, and then I can teach some at home."



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She says Nubia now tells her, "I can't wait till I get older so I can speak [fluently] in Spanish. Nubia told me she wants to be a bilingual librarian when she's older."

About her daughter Fernanda's experience, Ophelia Segovia says, "This kind of Spanish learning is the kind they won't learn at home. [The dual language program] is showing its benefits in terms of better and better opportunities [for our kids]."

"Parents are just fantastic here," says Gomez. "They are so eager to help," agrees her fellow kindergarten teacher Melinda Castrillon. "Our parents are part of the design team, so they're invested in this and really want it to work."

"When you look around the classroom," says Gomez, "90 percent of the stuff has been donated by parents."

What's more, the dual-language kindergarten has drawn a "really diverse classroom, more so than other schools," says Castrillon. "We have Latino, African-American, white, and biracial kids." The teachers and Principal Moyra Contreras also chose the make-up of each class to ensure a virtual 50-50 split between native English and native Spanish speakers.

The teachers believe running the dual-language program in such a diverse and balanced setting has led to an inspiring

amount of peer teaching. "We're having kids sitting down and learning from each other. Spontaneously, they started doing that," says Gomez.

This unique environment has also created a safe space for cultural sensitivity and curiosity. Case in point: Gomez says the kindergarteners recently had an impromptu "five-minute conversation about race. This is really exciting from the point of view of social justice," she says.

The camaraderie and community spirit in the kindergarten rooms has been infectious. Gomez and Castrillon say the middle-schoolers at MLA have taken kinders under their wings, acting as reading buddies and planting partners out in the school garden. In this way, the school has been able to bridge the gap between its "veteran" middle schoolers and the new class of kindergartners, easing MLA's transition as it becomes a K-8 building.

"The model of dual immersion should be looked at as something that's the wave of the future," believes Gomez. "It's great that kids can come out of this program completely bilingual," says Castrillon. "They'll be able to speak so fluently!"

For more, read the Oakland Tribune's story at <http://tinyurl.com/mla2imm>.

Farmer's Market Brings Affordable Organics to MLA Campus

Thanks to its thriving garden, cooking classes, and other health-conscious endeavors, Melrose Leadership Academy was already ahead of the curve in nutrition awareness.

But this October brought a new wrinkle: a weekly Farmers Market set up in partnership with the Oakland Farms-to-Schools Network, a project facilitated by the East Bay Asian Youth Center and the Oakland Unified School District. Every Wednesday afternoon, fresh organic fruit, vegetables, and eggs are delivered to campus, where Garden Coordinator Gehry Oatey sets up and runs the stand with the help of parent volunteers and students.

One of those students is 7th-grader Wafa, who was busy selling items to MLA parents, teachers, and neighbors from the area on the brisk November day we visited. "They get to visit our school and see everyone, and it's great," she says. "[The food] is healthier, it's all organic, and you can find things you can't get at other stores [in the neighborhood]. The Farmers Market introduces us to a lot of new foods, like persimmons."

Not only does the stand offer freshly picked organic produce, its prices are far



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lower than what you find at, say, Whole Foods or your standard Farmers Market.

Wafa rings up a customer whose canvas bag brims with organic herbs, avocados, lettuce, and cabbage. "I live on the next block over, this is so cool!" the woman says. "It's fantastic – now I don't need to drive to the market!"

"Great, thank you, keep coming!" Oatey tells her as she leaves.

"You keep coming!" she replies. "Don't thank me...I thank you!"

The MLA Market is open every Wednesday from 12:30 – 3:30, or until we run out of food, whichever comes first. Come visit!



Interested in joining the MLA family?

MLA now has 176 6-8-graders and 36 kindergarteners. By 2013, we will have a full cohort of two classrooms for each K-8 class. We will be accepting 40 kindergarteners for the 2010-11 school year. Find out how you can become a part of this unique, growing school.

SUPPORT MELROSE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY!

Due to state cuts, MLA's budget has taken another hit this year – and 2010-11 looks even leaner. We can stretch our government-allotted funds only so far, leaving "extra" resources such as field trips, garden supplies, and after-school programs in jeopardy. You can help us continue offering our kids the diverse activities they deserve! Donate online at:

www.smallschoolsfoundation.org
(designating "Melrose Leadership Academy")

or by mail: "OSSF/MLA,"
P.O. Box 20238, Oakland, CA 94620

Donations are Tax-deductible.
Thank you for your support!



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