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¿Qué pasa with bilingual education in Alachua County schools?

By Maria Coady

One short trip across Gainesville and it's easy to see transformation happening in our community, from the Innovation District, to cutting-edge medical care, to hip locally sourced restaurants with global flair. Yet one area left far behind this movement is language-rich education programs for all of our Alachua County students.

Alachua County has tremendous linguistic diversity both among its student population and in the greater community. From Spanish to Korean, Portuguese to Chinese, our community continues to attract families from around the world. However, the educational programs offered to both our multilingual and our native-English speaking families remain stubbornly outdated.

Currently, more than 800 students in Alachua County schools have been identified as “English language learners,” or ELLs, 57% of whom are Spanish-speakers. ELL students are primarily enrolled in English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) center schools and bused daily to J.J. Finley Elementary, Westwood Middle and Gainesville High schools.

Some ELLs elect to remain in neighborhood zoned schools. But neither of those program types (zoned or center) builds upon the linguistic resources of the students. Sadly for the language skills that multilingual students bring to the classroom, monolingual education ignores that talent. Making matters worse is that Alachua County also fails the other type of student: the native English-speaker, who is not offered language education programs that build bilingualism and biliteracy either.

One obvious and long-overdue solution to this problem is opening up the district to dual language education programs. Dual language programs educate students using two languages as mediums of instruction. For instance, students learn mathematics, science and social studies in two languages. Most programs aim to balance the ratio of language use to 50% in English and 50% in the target language, and they aim for a classroom balance of native speakers of each language.

Standardized test scores gathered from dual language learners consistently demonstrate high levels of bilingualism, biliteracy and academic achievement across content areas without loss to students' first language. Learning the same curriculum in two languages doesn't make students twice as smart, but in the aggregate, it certainly makes them outperform monolinguals.

Principals are sometimes reluctant to respond to parents' demands for dual language programs because they fear state assessment scores would go down for their children and their schools. Current bills allowing the use of students' first language, through Senate Bill 679 and House Bill 515, would address this concern. In addition to the right test, a long term (4-5 year) commitment to dual language is essential to demonstrate students' achievement in two languages.

It can't be overstated: Data show that students who participate in elementary dual language programs consistently outperform their peers in monolingual programs. This holds true for both native English speakers and for speakers of minoritized languages.

While the majority of dual language programs in the U.S. today are Spanish-English, programs can be found in French, Mandarin, Portuguese and Creole. Parents in Gainesville have taken notice of high-quality dual language programs that build bilingualism and biliteracy for their children and are asking, "¿Qué pasa? What's going on in Alachua County?"

The confusion is particularly rich given our state history. Florida is home to the first publicly funded dual language program in the United States: The Coral Way bilingual program in Miami, which opened in 1963. In other words, Floridians have a long history of dual language, with more than 125 dual language programs across our state today (bilingualeducationfl.org) and more than 3,000 across the United States.

Alachua County students and families deserve a 21st century education, and that includes high quality dual language education. What do we say to at least twice the languages spoken, written, and read? It's time to say it with our children: ¡Sí, por favor!

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Link to Op-Ed: <https://www.gainesville.com/opinion/20200220/maria-coady-qu-pasa-with-bilingual-education-in-alachua-county-schools>