

Spanish-speaking students focus of Las Cruces school program

LAS CRUCES — The Las Cruces school district is taking steps to help students become college and career-ready with the implementation of a new dual-language program at multiple schools.

In 2010, LCPS formed the English Language Learner Task Force, comprised of 20 administrators and teachers, with the goal of developing recommendations for how to better meet the needs of English language learners, which data shows are a large group of students who struggle academically, said Roberto Lozano, the LCPS assistant director of instruction for English Language Acquisition, Bilingual, and Migrant Education Programs.

About 3,650, or 14 percent, of LCPS students are English language learners, he said, according to last year's numbers.

While LCPS has had dual-language programs in the past, the task force researched programs that would better address the students' needs, finding G-mez & G-mez Dual Language Enrichment Model, founded by Dr. Leo G-mez and Dr. Richard G-mez, to be the best fit.

Lozano said the new program caught the school district's attention because it's not a language program but an academic program, promoting a child's proficiency in their native language, since most acquire basic English outside of school. He said it also offers a new cultural outlook, and prepares students for college and careers.

According to LCPS, the model is based on the premise that the most effective way to teach English to a non-native speaker is through a strong education

in that student's native language, combined with instruction in English that progresses from simple to more complex.

"What I like the best (speaking from a principal's point of view) is the rich language, the cooperative learning strategies and the rich content that the program outlines," said Wendi Noble Hammond in response to a question about the program on the Sun-News Facebook page.

Under the model, English language learners continue instruction in their own language through at least fifth grade. The ultimate goal is to make all students proficient or advanced in both languages.

"My daughter will be in the tenth grade at Mayfield High School. She was in the dual language class at Doña Ana second through fifth (grade)," said Jeff Dennis on Facebook. "She didn't like it at first. She is an English first (speaker) and didn't know any Spanish. She liked it better after the third grade. I liked the small class size."

Not a requirement

The class is meant to target English language learners who will have first priority to enroll in the dual-language program, Lozano said. Non-Spanish speakers may also enroll in the class if it is not full. He recommends that non-Spanish speakers enroll in that class as early as kindergarten or first grade.

The program is not a requirement for any students, and English language learners may opt out if they choose.

In late May, LCPS had a public meeting to provide information about the new dual language enrichment model that 14 elementary schools will begin using next school year. Lozano and the G-mezes were key speakers.

According to the G-mez DLEM website, the program was first implemented in 1996 in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District in south Texas; an area Lozano, LCPS Superintendent Stan Rounds, and other LCPS officials visited in April.

"We're targeting making sure the kids get the skills they need," Lozano said. "We're really excited. It's moving in the right direction, and making the community aware of the dual-language education."

Opponents, fans

Dual-language programs used in the past have been the center of controversy, with some parents seeing it as a negative facet of the school curriculum.

"My son was in the dual language class; he learned absolutely nothing and he fell behind. He was the only English speaking child in the class, so for dual-language basically the Spanish-speaking learn to speak English; my child did not learn any Spanish," said Tammie Tomlin on Facebook.

However, Rissa Cristine, whose daughter participates in the program at

Loma Heights, described it as "wonderful."

Since its inception in Texas, the model has been implemented in more than 450 schools in three states, with Las Cruces being the only city in New Mexico to offer the program.

Lozano said the school district is waiting on results of the program before considering implementing it district-wide.

For now, Spanish is the only language option available, Lozano said. There is a possibility of adding more languages in the future, after Spanish becomes more solidified.

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Escuelas

Las Cruces schools that will implement the dual-language model this year: - Elementary: Alameda, Booker T. Washington, César E. Chávez, Central, Columbia, Conlee, Doña Ana, Highland, Mesilla Park, Sonoma, Sunrise, Tombaugh, University Hills and Valley View. - Middle (sixth grade only): Lynn, Sierra and Mesa -

Learn more

For more information about the Gómez & Gómez Dual-Language Enrichment Model, visit <http://dlti.us/3.html> High school: Centennial