

Umatilla's new bilingual program aims to elevate both language and lengua

By ANTONIO SIERRA
STAFF WRITER

At least three languages were being spoken at McNary Heights Elementary School on Thursday, and Umatilla School District officials were encouraging it.

A Japanese language program was visiting the school and the children seemed to be picking it up quickly. McNary Heights Principal Rick Cotterell said he had just greeted a student who proceeded to spout off several words in Japanese.

"I think it's legit," he said, laughing.

But school officials are more interested in better integrating a language far more prevalent in Umatilla: Spanish.

With the exception of a charter school in Ontario, Umatilla will become the first district in Eastern Oregon to offer dual language immersion courses in English and Spanish when it starts the program at the beginning of the next school year, according to Superintendent Heidi Sipe.

Sipe, who's worked for the district since 2000 and been its superintendent since 2007, said such a program has been a longtime goal for her and her staff, but the district has only recently been able to gather the resources and staffing capacity to get it started.

David Lougee, the bilingual program director for the district, said staff was inspired to pursue it further when they attended a 2015 conference that showed the benefits of a dual language program.

Sipe, Cotterell, and the Umatilla School Board all became ardent supporters, and with nine bilingual teachers on staff this year, the district felt ready to take the plunge.

"It takes a long time to build capacity," she said.

Teaching in two tongues

Teaching is the act of juggling a rotating assortment of competing interests, but McNary Heights kindergarten teacher Jessica Garcia Quezada throws in a few more balls by toggling between languages.

"On your bottom," she says to her students as she tries to settle them on a car-



Kindergarten teacher Jessica Garcia Quezada works with student Yadiel Coria on his spelling in Spanish on Thursday in a native language literacy class at McNary Heights Elementary School in Umatilla.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris



Kindergarten teacher Jessica Garcia Quezada goes over vowel sounds with her native language literacy class on Thursday at McNary Heights Elementary School in Umatilla.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

pet. "Abajo."

She leads them through a song where they chant all the months in English before asking them if they were ready for "Español."

"Enero, Febrero, Marzo, Abril, Mayo, Junio y Julio tambien," a cluster of 11 voices chime together.

"Agosto, Septiembre, Octubre, Noviembre, y Diciembre tambien."

This is one of the district's native language literacy classes, a class specifically designed for 48% of the school that's classified as an "ever English learner," a stat that includes English

learners and those that will be reclassified as fluent.

While most school districts in the area use an English language learner model where students learn in an English-only classroom while being pulled from the class throughout the day to work on literacy with a bilingual teacher or assistant, Umatilla's native language literacy program begins the year mostly focused on Spanish literacy while introducing more and more English as the year goes along.

Sipe said it often brings tears to her eyes whenever she sees Garcia Quezada teaching.

Garcia Quezada is a homegrown teacher, having returned as a teacher four years ago after going through the Umatilla school system as a student.

She was a native language literacy student herself, and Lougee taught her as a student when he still

worked in the classroom.

Although she had gone through the program herself, Garcia Quezada said she was initially worried in her first year of teaching that she would set her kids behind by focusing on Spanish.

But Garcia Quezada said she was reassured when she saw her students' growth, and Sipe and Lougee said the district's data backs it up: first-graders who were in the native language literacy program generally performed better in English literacy than their peers who were in English-only classes.

Garcia Quezada credited the program for sharpening her literacy in both languages enough that she could eventually use those skills as a teacher in her home community.

"I see these kids and I see myself," she said.

Garcia Quezada said she's excited to start teaching dual language immer-

sion classes, which will be under a different format than native language literacy courses.

Next year, Garcia Quezada will share her class with a co-teacher. She will lead a Spanish-only section of the class during one-half of the day while her co-teacher will handle English for the other half.

She said the dual language courses won't just be beneficial for students like her who came to school knowing little English, but also native English speakers with little exposure to Spanish.

District presses ahead

There's no shortage of bilingual education critics.

Some feel like such a program forces a foreign language on a family with no interest in learning it, while others think incorporating Spanish in English lessons inhibits students from learning the country's predominant language faster.

But Sipe said Umatilla's dual language program is an opt-in program and students will still have the option of attending an English only-class.

And Cotterell, the McNary Heights principal, said people only have to look at the data if they're worried that a dual language course is an impediment to English proficiency.

The district plans to restrict dual language classes to kindergarten in 2019-20 with plans to expand it to K-5 in the years to come. Eventually, Sipe said, staff would like to offer dual language courses to middle and high school students as an elective course.

Any early concerns about the program hasn't dampened early enthusiasm: Of the students that have registered for kindergarten so far, 40 have opted in, eight have opted out, and another 10 are undecided.

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