

# John Stanford International School

## Guidelines for Language Immersion Programs

Language immersion programs present unique challenges to the school, teachers, families, and community. It is important that the entire school community have a common understanding of the goals of the program and how to achieve them. The purpose of this document is to provide some specific guidelines to help ensure the success of the language immersion program at the John Stanford International School.

These guidelines are adapted from the *Fairfax County Public Schools Guidelines for Immersion Schools* presented by Regla Armengol during a Language Immersion “Boot Camp” in August, 2000. The original Fairfax County Guidelines were developed jointly by the Coordinator of Foreign Languages in Fairfax County, special project teacher of foreign languages, foreign language area resource teachers, immersion teachers, immersion principals, and faculty from George Mason University.

There are three main goals of the language immersion program at the John Stanford International School. As a result of the language immersion program, students will

1. Acquire the immersion language.
2. Acquire English.
3. Achieve in the content areas.

In this document, we outline guidelines for each of these goals.

In addition, there are a number of administrative issues that arise in an immersion setting. We address Guidelines for Administrative Issues at the end of the document.

### **Goal 1: Acquire the Immersion Language**

To acquire a new language that is not the main language of the society in which they live (i.e. English), students need a high degree of motivation and perseverance. They will acquire the language naturally if the learning environment is set up in a way that maximizes the opportunities for the students to be exposed to high-quality language input. The following guidelines are designed to create such an environment in the school and immersion classes:

- 1. Designate specific classrooms as “immersion classrooms.”**  
Students will come to identify these rooms as places where the immersion language is spoken. Decorate the rooms to create a rich, cultural environment to promote the use of the immersion language.
- 2. Insist that immersion teachers speak only the immersion language.**  
The immersion teacher is the main model for the language (and sometimes the only model). Students will not make the effort to learn and speak the immersion language if they realize that they can slip into English with their teacher. This guideline has a number of implications, especially for transition at the beginning of the school year. For example:

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- The immersion teacher will need help communicating basic safety information, announcements, and emergency procedures in English to the students during the first day or week of school. (Have a bilingual speaker there to help the kids, but still communicate with the immersion teacher.)
- The staff needs to recognize that when performing school-wide functions (such as helping in the lunchroom), the immersion teacher will still speak only in the immersion language. (If this is a problem, then it might be wise to schedule the teacher to work with another staff member who speaks both languages or, perhaps, a community volunteer. Incidentally, this would provide a wonderful example for the children of the immersion language used in a real-world setting.)
- The immersion teacher should expect to conduct routine classroom functions (such as attendance and lunch count) in the immersion language.

### **3. In a partial immersion setting, be sure that 50% of the day is really devoted to academic work and meaningful activities in the immersion language.**

To succeed in acquiring the immersion language, students need as much quality language exposure as possible. It is easy for immersion time to slip away with other special classes (e.g., music and PE) or special activities (e.g., assemblies and drama). The immersion time must take priority.

Here are some other ideas for enhancing language exposure and learning:

- Alternate the classrooms each semester so that over the year, students experience having the immersion program in the morning and the afternoon.
- When there are staff turnovers, if possible, hire people who are proficient in the immersion language, as well as English. (This is true for any staff, not just classroom teachers, e.g., counselor, school secretary, cafeteria staff, janitor, PE, music, art, instructional aides, ESL, and reading.)
- Involve the whole school in the excitement of the immersion program. For example,
  - **Label everything** in the school in the immersion language (e.g., main office, bathrooms, library, nurse's office, gym, cafeteria, school menus, etc.). (*Note:* Since the John Stanford International School is host to a Bilingual Orientation Center (BOC), it is important to also label things in English and make a clear distinction between English and the immersion language(s), for example, through color coding.)
  - **Make announcements** from time to time in the immersion language. (*Note:* Be clear for the BOC kids about when English is being spoken versus the immersion language.)

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- **Highlight “words of the day”** in morning announcements to the school. (*Note:* Pick words from the languages of the BOC kids, as well as the immersion language(s).)
- **Decorate bulletin boards and showcases** to promote the immersion language and culture.
- **Celebrate special heritage weeks and holidays** of the immersion language and culture (as well as of other cultures).
- **Offer adult language classes** so that teachers, staff, and parents can learn the language, too.

#### **4. Help staff and parents understand the stages of language development.**

The children are likely to go through a long period, perhaps the entire first year, not choosing to speak in the immersion language until they feel ready. During this “silent period,” they will be listening to the immersion language, but mostly speaking in English. The immersion teacher will continue to respond to them in the immersion language. At some point, which may vary by individual, the immersion teacher will begin to insist that the children respond in the immersion language, too, at least when speaking about familiar topics.

Reading and writing will also be introduced in the immersion classroom early on through labels and illustrations around the classroom walls. Children are not limited to learning the spoken language, but are encouraged to read and write in the immersion language, just as they would in English.

#### **5. Make culture an integral part of the immersion classroom.**

In the immersion classroom, culture is not taught as a separate subject. It is integrated into the curriculum in a natural way as part of learning the language and subject matter.

## **Goal 2: Acquire English**

In an immersion program, becoming proficient in English is just as important as learning the immersion language. Both languages are considered equally important. The goal is for both native and non-native speakers of English in the program to develop bilingual/bicultural proficiency.

To support this goal, it is important for students to have maximum exposure to both English and the immersion language. For native speakers of the immersion language (for example, Spanish speakers in a Spanish language immersion program), the expectation is that they will be in class all day with their native English-speaking counterparts. Half the day they will have the advantage of working in their native language (e.g., Spanish), and half the day, they will need to stretch to use and learn English. The same is true for the native English-speaking children. In the best case, if

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non-native speakers of English need English as a Second Language (ESL) assistance, that assistance will be available to them in the regular classroom, rather than as a pullout.

Because the goal is bilingual proficiency, it is also crucial that the children continue to learn how to communicate in English about the subject matter that they are learning in the immersion classroom, e.g., Math and Science. For native English speakers, especially in the early years, this is not a major problem since it is likely that they will have the opportunity to talk at home (in English) about what they are learning in the immersion classroom. For example, a child might practice math concepts at home when the parent tells him to set the table, then asks, "How many forks did you need? Or "How many more napkins do you need?"

A child whose family does not speak English at home will need additional English practice at school, or in the community, in the subject areas taught in the immersion language at school. Often, the English classroom teacher counterpart to the immersion classroom teacher can create opportunities for students to learn the English subject-matter vocabulary in the English classroom. For example, the English teacher could assign geometric shape "names" (i.e. square, triangle, parallelogram, rhombus, etc.) to each of the student table clusters in her classroom. Then the teacher can ask the students questions, such as, "Which group has a shape with more than 3 sides?"

To accomplish both English and immersion language proficiency, both teachers need to be very aware of what the students are learning in each of their classrooms. By collaborating and monitoring student progress, they can make sure that students are successful at becoming academically proficient in both languages.

Here are some specific guidelines or tips:

1. **Share lesson plans with each other**, including lists of vocabulary and language structures needed to support communication on specific curriculum topics.
2. **Invite parents and families to be partners** in their children's learning. Make sure they know what concepts, vocabulary, and language structures the children need to know in English (as well as the immersion language). Encourage them to look for opportunities to practice these in English at home.
3. **Arrange for volunteer tutors** to come to the school to help children who are struggling with concepts or communicating in English about what they are learning in the immersion language.
4. **Be sure that children in the immersion program know and understand** all of the vocabulary and language structures used in standardized tests (such as ITBS) that they'll be taking in English. Don't let it be a surprise.
5. **Believe that they can do it.** It's a lot to ask kids to learn all the content in two languages, but they are up to the task! Learning languages is easy for kids and memorization is (still) fun when they're little. Take advantage of their natural capacity when it's at its best.

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### **Goal 3: Achieve in the Content Areas**

Children studying in the immersion program are learning in two languages. In addition, they are expected to learn to the same standards in the content areas as any other child at the same grade level in the Seattle School District.

At the John Stanford International School, the immersion program focuses on the content areas of Math and Science. We chose these subjects because of their natural use of manipulatives (objects you can hold and use to demonstrate concepts) and concrete, hands-on activities. To reach this decision, the planning committee researched other partial immersion programs across the U.S. and learned that most programs found Math and Science to be the most successful subject areas for learning the language (and content) in a partial immersion setting at an early age.

Although children in the immersion program will be taught Math and Science primarily in the immersion language, they are still expected to be able to communicate what they know about Math and Science in English. This is true for native English-speaking children, as well as the children who are learning English as a Second Language. We recognize that not all children will develop this ability at exactly the same time. However, the targets are clear, in terms of the Seattle School District Standards and Washington State Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) in Math and Science. Our commitment at the John Stanford International School is to work with children until they can demonstrate that they've achieved the standards in all their subject areas.

Over time, after several years of learning the immersion language, children will have enough mastery of the language to study other, more abstract content areas, such as Social Studies, in the immersion language.

Here are some specific guidelines for achieving in the content areas:

1. Introduce the immersion language in kindergarten and first grade in the content areas of Math and Science. Continue the immersion program into the next grade each year (i.e. 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, then 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and so on).
2. Emphasize concrete, hands-on activities in teaching Math and Science concepts. Use language that is simple and direct.
3. Ensure that all children in the immersion program have an opportunity to also practice Math and Science vocabulary and language structures in English – at home, through outside activities at school, or in the English language classroom.
4. If children seem to be struggling with Math and Science concepts, be sure to assess whether it is a language problem or a conceptual problem. You can have an English-speaking teacher, classroom aide, or volunteer assess them in English on those Math or Science concepts. If they are still struggling, then offer them additional help in the content area – in English and/or the immersion language. If they understand the concepts in English, but not in the immersion language, then offer them additional practice in the immersion language.

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### **Guidelines for Administrative Issues**

Special administrative issues or challenges faced by immersion programs include:

- Student enrollment
- Teacher planning time
- Welcoming visitors
- Working with volunteers
- Special assistance for parents
- Resources for immersion teachers and school staff

### ***Student enrollment***

Student enrollment presents a special challenge in an immersion program. The guidelines in this area are designed to be fair and equitable to children, families, and teachers, while maximizing the chances of success for the children and the program.

1. If vacancies occur during the first two years of the program (kindergarten and first grade), applicants on the waiting list may be considered for entrance into the program after consultation with the principal, the immersion language teacher and the English language teacher for that grade level. Every effort will be made to help these children come “up to speed” in the immersion language in the content areas being taught (i.e. Math and Science). Parents may want to consider sending their children to summer language camp (if it’s available) or doing some extra tutoring for a period of time.
2. Children who have come to the school via the Bilingual Orientation Center (BOC) are invited to join the regular program when recommended by the BOC. Their family may choose to have them join the immersion language program at this time. Or they may continue English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction in the content areas of Math and Science, separate from the immersion group.
3. If vacancies occur from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade, applicants on the waiting list may consider joining the immersion program if they are already speakers of the immersion language. Children who have not had any prior experience in the language (either at home, through travel, or outside study) will find it very difficult to succeed in the immersion program alongside children who have been acquiring the language for two years already.

### ***Teacher planning time***

Both the immersion and English-language teachers need to know how their children are achieving in the subject areas taught in both classes. Recommended guidelines:

1. Provide common planning time for the grade-level immersion and English-language teachers at least two times a week.

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2. Provide common planning time for the immersion teachers (across grades) to share and coordinate their efforts at least once a month.

### ***Welcoming visitors***

Many people are likely to want to visit the immersion program. The purpose of these guidelines is to ensure that we focus on meeting the students' needs, while creating an atmosphere in the school that encourages sharing and promotion of the immersion program.

Visitors, other than parents, who want to visit the immersion classrooms are encouraged to wait until the second semester of the school year. By this time, there will be more to see (more children will be speaking in the immersion language), and the classroom routines will be set.

To maximize success, the John Stanford International School has set the following guidelines for visits:

1. To arrange for a visit, contact the school office to set up an appointment.
2. Remember that English is not spoken in the immersion classroom by the teacher or the visitors. (If visitors need to talk with the immersion teacher in English, they need to step outside of the classroom with no children present.)
3. Attend the special events during the year that will be available for parents and families to learn more about the immersion program.

### ***Working with volunteers***

Many parents, family and community members are eager to volunteer in our school. In the immersion classrooms, volunteering is a little more complicated than usual. It is crucial that volunteers, like all visiting adults, maintain the "no English in the immersion classroom" rule. When a volunteer speaks in English (either to the teacher or to the kids), it disrupts the language environment and can undermine the children's confidence that they can learn to understand in the immersion language. For some kids, if they see that speaking English is an option in the immersion classroom, they'll simply stop making the effort to communicate in the immersion language.

Fortunately, there are still many ways to help! Here are some examples:

1. Volunteers who speak the immersion language may be invited by the teacher to help in the classroom.
2. For some activities (such as games and activities), a volunteer may be able to help in the classroom if they stick to non-verbal communication (i.e. no speaking English).
3. Volunteers can choose to do tasks (such as bulletin boards and materials preparation) that they can complete outside of the classroom.
4. Volunteers are welcome to speak English when they offer one-on-one tutoring (outside the classroom) for children struggling with Math or Science concepts.

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### ***Special assistance for parents***

Parents and families want to know as much as possible about what is happening in the immersion program. Here are some ways that the school can help meet their needs:

- **Kindergarten Orientation** (held before the school year starts) helps relieve children's anxieties about school opening. The immersion teacher conducts this session in the immersion language, with translation assistance to aid the parents and children.
- **Parent Newsletters** are sent out by the immersion teachers on a regular basis. Parents can volunteer to serve as newsletter editor. The newsletter can include tips for reinforcing Math and Science concepts at home in English, as well as informing parents of cultural events in the area related to the immersion culture and ways to volunteer to help at school.
- **Homework** is geared to reinforce concepts taught in the immersion class through problem-solving activities with parents in English.
- **Student Progress Report in the Immersion Language** is added to the regular report card to provide information for parents on how their children are doing in the immersion language.
- **Information about second language acquisition** is available from the school to help parents better understand the process of language acquisition and what to expect at each stage of development. This gives parents a better grasp of how their child is participating in class and what evidence of language acquisition they may see at home.
- **Adult education classes in the immersion language and ESL** are offered based on need and available resources.

### ***Resources for immersion teachers and school staff***

Here are some further ideas for gathering resources for the immersion program:

- Seek out volunteers in the community who are native speakers of the immersion language to help out in the immersion classes.
- Send teachers to professional conferences that provide teacher training and professional exhibits for immersion programs.
- Develop in the school library a professional reference section on immersion education for school staff and parents.
- Develop in the school library a substantial collection of books (and other media) for children in the immersion language.
- Identify a pool of substitute teachers for the immersion classes.
- Develop partnerships with schools overseas in countries where the immersion language is spoken.
- Work with the Alliance for Education to gain additional funding for the school and immersion program.