

New Multilingual Master Plan by San Francisco Public Schools  
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Imagine San Francisco with a public French immersion school. A public Russian immersion school. Spanish and Chinese immersion schools in each quadrant of the City, with enough seats for all comers.

Imagine every elementary school in the district offering at least 30 minutes per day of a second language to every student whose family chooses it.

Imagine strong middle and high school language programs feeding from those immersion elementary schools, so that San Francisco students will routinely pass AP literature and language tests in other languages with a minimum score of 4. Imagine kids coming out of general ed programs with a solid grounding in a second language, even if they weren't in immersion.

When today's 2- and 3-year-olds are ready to enter school, it may not be a dream but reality. Those goals, and more, are part of the San Francisco Unified School District's Multilingual Master Plan, a draft of which was presented to the Blue Ribbon Task Force last month.

It comes in part from the School Board's resolution that "preparing students for our world of multilingualism and multiculturalism has become an integral and indispensable part of the educational process," passed on Dec. 12, 2006.

In breathtaking boldness, the plan, already endorsed by school Superintendent Carlos Garcia, envisions a San Francisco school system that builds on the City's century-old history as a cosmopolitan, polyglot culture and international gateway.

"We're trying to prepare all San Francisco Unified School District students to become global citizens," says Laurie Olsen, a well-known educational consultant who is working closely with SFUSD staff to craft the Master Plan.

#### Already popular

The idea of focusing on language comes from two facts about the San Francisco Public Schools:

- Half of the district's students enter school already speaking another language, generally Spanish or Chinese.

- Immersion programs are hugely popular.

This gives San Francisco a head start in the language game, and a base of students who by middle school will move smoothly between two languages. Those existing language abilities, in 49% of students, will allow the District to merge heritage learners and those from the bilingual programs with students coming from immersion.

"The pathways are going to merge in middle school, because we believe they'll have the same levels of language proficiency. Out of a middle school program they'll be doing high-level academic work in that target language," said Margaret Peterson, the new program administrator for the District's World Language / Multilingual Education department.

And there's already a huge hunger for such programs. Parents crowd the district's eight public Spanish immersion elementary schools, two Cantonese immersion, two Mandarin immersion and one Korean immersion. All told, 13 of the City's 72 elementary schools offer language immersion, and still there are waiting lists.

"If everybody knew they could get a slot in immersion, that would be huge for enrollment and for people being excited about the district," says Tammy Radmer, founder of San Francisco Advocates for Multilingual Excellent, a group of parents with children in immersion programs in the public schools.

"I don't know how many parents I've talked to who are stressed out because they know they probably won't get into immersion. So people are pessimistic even enrolling," she says.

When parents can't get languages in the city's schools, they leave the system. San Francisco is home to numerous private language immersion schools, including two French, one Mandarin, at least one Russian as well as Chinese, Scandinavian, Italian and German immersion preschools.

When they can, they stay. A full quarter of parents in the city's two Mandarin immersion schools say they would have gone private or left the district entirely had they not had an immersion

alternative. With it, they stayed and are contributing to the growing vibrancy and excitement of one of the nation's most forward-thinking school districts.

But however popular languages are, currently 27 elementary schools have no language program outside of English. So the District plans to build on this vast base of parental interest to create a school system that prepares all students "to become global citizens in a multilingual world," in the words of the original Blue Ribbon Task Force report presented to the School Board in April of 2008.

This would put San Francisco schools on par with many in Europe, where competency and fluency in second and even third languages isn't considered surprising but merely expected in a world where speaking more than one language is presumed.

#### Not Just Immersion

The plan isn't all about immersion. While a choice of immersion programs would be available in every quadrant of the city, every school in the district would have at least one language program available in addition to standard academic English.

That would mean daily 30 minute classes in the target language, allowing all students in the system who follow the program through until 12th grade to attain a basic level of proficiency by graduation, something rarely attained in most schools nationwide.

"The programs won't be mandatory," says Peterson.

"It's about access, it's not about a mandate or a requirement."

"The district will work closely with administrators and teachers to make sure they can contribute their know-how and experience to building powerful programs," says Francisca Sanchez, the Associate Superintendent.

#### German, anyone? Arabic?

And the languages don't have to be Spanish, Mandarin or Cantonese, says Peterson. "The district is very open to additional languages. We're going to start where there's some demand, where parents are saying they want it, or teachers and principals are interested."

For parents whose kids aren't in those programs, especially parents whose children aren't yet in school, the possibilities are tantalizing. Already, the director of an Italian immersion preschool in San Francisco has contacted the district about beginning an Italian program. Given the numerous, well-organized language groups in the city, the possibilities seem endless for parents who begin organizing now.

It's been done before, recently. The District's two now over-subscribed Mandarin immersion schools, which currently have 140 students and will fill up at 360 students in 2011, were created by committed parents approaching the district just six years ago, in 2003.

Parents or groups that are interested in a specific language should contact Maria Martinez at [martinezm6@sfusd.edu](mailto:martinezm6@sfusd.edu).

#### But how?

In a time of budgetary constraints, implementing such an ambitious plan seems difficult in the extreme. Peterson says the idea is to begin implementing it in already existing language programs with the aid of the committed parent populations already in place, "building from the bottom up to strengthen existing programs."

That will include working on the Middle and High School portion of immersion programs, creating them in Mandarin and Cantonese as well as broadening the programs in place for Spanish.

It will also mean bringing together bilingual, heritage speakers and immersion program students at Middle School, when their language abilities should be nearly equal. This will create a broader pool of students (especially in Cantonese and Mandarin) at designated schools making class creation easier.

The plan is ambitious and the District realizes that it can't create such a broad plan out of thin air. One thing it has going for it is that it's teacher population is already linguistically rich, something not every school district can say. But even so, the District plans to begin working with university teaching programs across the state to begin a pipeline that will create the teachers it will need.

The students will feed back into those same universities. In middle school and high school they will take actual courses in the language they learned in elementary school, so social studies taught in Spanish or math taught in Chinese, plus an additional language arts class in that language.

That's crucial to raising students' abilities in the language through increasingly sophisticated course material. It pays off. In the University of Oregon and at UC Berkeley, Chinese programs have had to add two grade levels to their Chinese course work, because students coming out of immersion schools were so advanced they ran out of courses to take.

But how to pay for it? Clearly, there's going to be a lot less money going to California public schools in the coming years. The District hopes that community and civic partnerships can be formed around languages, schools and programs. That could mean money from the federal government, which pays to support languages it considers crucial (Chinese, Arabic, Russian, etc), money from China, which supports Mandarin studies worldwide, and money from community groups, parents and foundations.

To frustrated Spanish immersion parents whose children often find no suitable classes when they get to middle school, such ambitious planning might seem premature. But the District sees plans to focus first on those existing programs, to strengthen them and build them up as showcases that can be used to spin off new programs as the plan is implemented.

#### Next steps

Over the next two months the District plans to present its plan to interested parent groups, including Parents for Public Schools (PPS), San Francisco Advocates for Multilingual Excellent (SF AME), District English Learners Advisory Council (DELAC), Chinese for Affirmative Action, Bilingual Community Council (BCC), the Mandarin Immersion Parents Council and the San Francisco chapter of the California Association of Bilingual Educators (SF-ABE) to name a few.

The student assignment redesign team is working closely with Multilingual Education /World Language and English Learners Support Services to create a system that takes into account language pathways.

One goal is to ensure that once a student begins in a given language, they will have the opportunity to continue in it through high school. For example, "A kid who started in Japanese gets priority placement to a middle school with Japanese," said Olsen.

This is all meant to happen quickly. The District hopes to have gotten input from parent and other groups by April, so that during the 2009-2010 school year schools can plan and by 2010-2011 "we'll begin to see implementation," said Peterson.

The goal is that by 2023 "all schools will have this continuous pathway in place," she says. That would mean that two- and three-year olds in San Francisco today would graduate from a school system that presumes languages are crucial to a 21st century life.

But some things will happen more quickly. For example, Peterson wants to emphasize the importance of students who already speak two languages, and will present a plan to the Board of Education to award Seals of Biliteracy for students graduating with those skills as early as the end of this year.

There's certainly buy-in at the top. When the plan was presented to school superintendent Carlos Garcia, his reaction was "This is a dream come true," said Peterson.

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