Schools May Merge Spanish Language Programs

Board to Consider Plan For 2nd Bilingual Center

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The Arlington County School Board is looking at consolidating two popular Spanish immersion programs at Oakridge and Abingdon elementary schools into one larger school, creating a second countywide bilingual center.

The plan would increase the number of slots available to students, but it also would change the location of the school, which School Board members said could end up in a different building or at one of the current sites.

If the South Arlington schools were to merge programs, the new school would join Key Elementary as the only two in the 19,000-student system to have an entire building devoted to students spending half the day in Spanish instruction and half in English. Additionally, half of each class are native English-speakers, while the other half are native Spanish-speakers.

"It's a proposal that we are interested in and intrigued by," said School Board member Elaine S. Furlow. "One of the benefits of combining the programs is that there would be room to grow. But the thing parents have to do is think if they are willing to have their 5-year-olds go to some undecided place to attend. We want to have more community feedback."

Two community forums will be held at Gunston Middle School on the issue: one from 10 to 11:30 a.m. Saturday and another from 7 to 8:30 p.m. next Thursday. The School Board will vote on the issue in February, Furlow said.

Key Elementary, which serves about 440 students in its immersion program, has a short waiting list. The other programs do not have waiting lists. In all three programs, neighborhood residents get first priority, and then parents from across the county can opt to get their children into one of the slots.

Abingdon, which has a total of 523 students, has 82 students in its immersion program. Oakridge, which has 471 students, has 130 students in its immersion classes.

Research on learning and brain development demonstrates that the best time for introducing a second language is before age 10. When a second language stimulates the brain during that period, neural pathways are established that improve one's ability to add other languages and increase an individual's

Arlington Plan Would Expand Spanish Program

opportunity for multilingualism.

The Arlington programs use English to teach children in language arts, social studies and the "specials" (art, music, etc.). Spanish is used for math, science and Spanish language arts.

Educators said that it is easier to administer the program when everyone in the school is using the same curriculum. For instance, there is no tension over resources being split between traditional programs and the immersion program in the same school.

Mildred Cruz-Fridman, principal of Oakridge, said she is interested in hearing what parents think of the idea.

"On the positive side, it would be easier," Cruz-Fridman said. "On the negative, you could lose your neighborhood school."

Iris Ioffreda, a parent who has a fifth-grader at Key Elementary and an eighth-grader at Gunston Middle, said she has seen it done both ways and prefers merging the programs. Key was not a full immersion program until five years ago.

"I just think having a full immersion school is better for the principals and teachers so everyone is on the same page," Ioffreda said. "All the books in the library are for immersion instruction and the classes can all be the same size."

Still, Ioffreda said, there will be debate about where the program should be housed.

"That will be the question," Ioffreda said. "That's what we will want to hear from the community about."