

IMMIGRATION: Dual-language students can help Georgia's schools advance

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Body

Much has been written and spoken recently about the problems of large numbers of non-English-speaking students flooding into our classrooms. However, very few people have made real attempts to define a possible solution that would benefit both immigrants and local students.

Let me start with a basic assumption that it is fundamentally a good thing for all people to develop genuine fluency in more than one language as part of a strong educational program. Many surveys have indicated that students with genuine dual-language competence outscore their monolingual counterparts in regular school assessment tests.

Currently non-English-speaking immigrant children are seen as disadvantaged because of their lack of English. However, these children already have fluency in another language. So all we have to do is add fluency in English to convert them into a potentially advantaged situation. For English-only speakers, developing fluency in a second language in the current educational system is very hard, given the lack of second-language learning opportunities, especially in elementary schools.

In dual-language (sometimes known as two-way immersion) elementary schools, students from all language backgrounds spend half of their time in English and half in another language. There are many examples of programs of this kind in public and private schools throughout the country, including Atlanta International School.

Dual-language programs are superior to bilingual programs --- where immigrant children are taught through the medium of their own language until their English is good enough for them to be mainstreamed into English-language classrooms. The fundamental flaw in bilingual programs is that these children speak their own language at home, in the playground and in the classroom, meaning that, for many of them, their English never becomes good enough.

In a dual-language program the children are immersed in both languages, with progress being made not only in language development, but also in other subject matter.

If this process commences at an early age, all children can develop proficiency in their chosen second language.

Beyond pure language development, there are other benefits of a dual-language education. Proficiency in a second language always brings with it knowledge of another literature and culture, which in turn promotes global understanding and communication, necessary attributes for success in an increasingly inter-dependent world.

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The United States has to compete in the global labor and commercial markets, and the existence of a multilingual work and sales force will **help** our economy greatly.

Georgia currently languishes near the bottom of the educational rankings for U.S. states. A thrust toward the development of genuine **dual-language** and international educational options throughout the state has the potential to raise the state much higher.

Alex Horsley is executive director of the Center for the Advancement and Study of International Education in Atlanta.

Graphic

Alex Horsley

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