Introduction to Immersion Education

What’s the difference between an immersion program and a foreign language program?
Immersion education is not the same as a foreign language program. Immersion is defined as a method of instruction in which the regular school curriculum is taught through the medium of a foreign language. The immersion language is simply the vehicle for content instruction; it is not the subject of instruction as it is in a traditional foreign language program.

Are all immersion programs designed the same way?
Elementary immersion programs in the United States can take a number of forms:

- Full immersion – Students spend the entire school day using the immersion language to learn academic content.
- Double immersion – English-proficient students learn academic content using two different immersion languages (i.e., English-speaking students learn French and Spanish).
- Two-way partial immersion - Students (some of whom are proficient in English and some of whom are proficient in the immersion language) learn academic content using English and the immersion language.
- One-way partial immersion – English-proficient students spend at least half of the school day using the immersion language to learn academic content.

CFSD’s immersion programs follow the one-way partial immersion model. Students in our elementary immersion program spend half of the day learning some core subjects with an English speaking teacher and they spend the other half of the day learning different core subjects with an immersion language speaking teacher.

What are the benefits of immersion education?
Most immersion students can be expected to reach higher levels of second language proficiency than students in traditional school-based foreign language programs. Becoming bilingual opens the door to communication with more people in more places. In addition to developing a lifelong ability to communicate with more people, children may derive other benefits from early language instruction, including improved overall school performance, superior problem-solving skills, and more flexible thinking. For more information on the benefits of bilingualism, see the following:

- “Brain Research: Implications for Second Language Learning”
Additionally, over three decades of research consistently show that immersion students achieve as well as or better than their peers in traditional classrooms on standardized measures of verbal and mathematics skills administered in English (even when content area instruction takes place in the immersion language).

**Are there any other advantages to immersion education?**
Knowing a second language provides a competitive advantage by opening up additional job opportunities for students as they enter the workforce. Potential employers in today’s world cite the ability to speak and write clearly and effectively as the most important qualification they look for in a job candidate. At the same time, however, they often complain how difficult it is to find candidates with adequate communication skills in both monolingual and multilingual settings.

Technology and economic interdependence have made the world a smaller place. Never before have so many people from different countries been able to come together to collaborate, share knowledge, or do business. And never before has there been such a need for talented and well-trained young people in all fields who are culturally literate and who can communicate effectively in English and another language. Students who acquire a world language through an articulated K-12 sequence of instruction can expect to increase their earning potential by 10-15% as compared to their monolingual peers.

**How will my child understand the teacher if the teacher never speaks English?**
In the early grades, immersion teachers recognize that their students will not understand everything they say. In order to make academic lessons comprehensible to learners and to support their learning of academic content and the immersion language, immersion teachers—who are proficient in English and the immersion language—use a vast repertoire of instructional strategies as they address the school district’s curriculum. They use body language, visuals, manipulatives, exaggerated facial expressions, and expressive intonation to communicate their meaning. In kindergarten it is common for students to speak English with their peers and when responding to their teacher. As the years progress, students naturally use more of the immersion language. To draw students into using the language, teachers often use songs, useful phrases, chants, and rhymes and carefully structure the day with familiar routines.

**How will learning content in a second language affect my child’s English language and literacy development?**
Many parents are initially fearful that immersion may have a negative impact on their child’s English language development. But research consistently finds that the immersion experience actually enhances English language development. *Full* immersion students’ English development may lag temporarily in reading, word knowledge, and spelling while instruction is
occurring exclusively in the immersion language. However, after a year or two of instruction in English language arts, this discrepancy disappears. It is important for parents to understand that, to date, there is no evidence of a similar lag in English language development in partial immersion programs.

Parents of students in immersion classrooms can support their children at home with English language and literacy development in the same ways that parents of students in traditional (non-immersion) classrooms do. For example, they can read to their children every day in English and involve them in games and activities that may complement their classroom learning. Research shows that the stronger the development of the native language, the greater the proficiency in the immersion language, so children who enter an immersion program with a strong base in English will succeed more easily than those whose English skills are not as strong.

**How can I support my child’s immersion experience if I don’t speak the immersion language?**

Like all parents, parents of children in immersion programs are encouraged to maintain an active role in their children’s education by providing experiences that help develop their English language skills and enhance their cognitive and affective development. It is very beneficial for parents to read to their children (in English) daily and to engage them in activities where they can apply what they are learning in class. For example, third-grade students studying measurement can do activities at home that involve measuring, such as hanging a picture or baking cookies. Parents can also communicate with teachers on a regular basis about their children’s academic, social, and language development. Parents support the goals of the program by becoming well informed about immersion education and by continuing their commitment to keep their child in the immersion program. Parents may also seek out opportunities for their children to use the immersion language outside the school context, for example, by taking advantage of community events that highlight the immersion language or culture or by providing reading materials in the immersion language at home.

As long as families commit to reading to their children in English and exposing them to the immersion language in a variety of settings when possible, they can trust the immersion model to ensure their children will progress in literacy development in both English and the immersion language.

**If my child has special needs, how will the immersion program meet these needs?**

We believe that all children can learn. In the partial immersion classroom students are provided with learning in a contextualized environment where teachers use extra-linguistic strategies (e.g. varied intonation, visuals, body language, facial expressions) to support content. Students with a variety of needs and skill levels work and learn together. Students who have special needs such as learning disabilities, behavioral issues, and other possible problems have been shown to do as well academically as they could be expected to do in the traditional classroom, provided that they receive the same assistance as they would if enrolled in the traditional classroom. Studies also indicate that immersion is not likely to be the cause of learning difficulties; the same difficulties would arise in any educational setting. Any child who can learn to communicate in his first language can acquire a second language through the immersion process.
Will my child feel insecure or frustrated in the immersion environment?
Be prepared for the fact that your child may initially be confused and perhaps even frustrated as she expends the effort and energy it takes to learn in the immersion classroom. Your child will likely be very tired at the end of the day, as language learning is cognitively demanding. This reaction is very normal for first-time immersion learners and can last from two weeks to two months depending on the child’s age and basic language ability. However, children are generally very resilient and will soon feel comfortable with the second language.

Information adapted from the following sources:


