



## Educación Bilingüe a Nivel de Escuela Secundaria Dual-Language Education at the High School Level

DANIA VAZQUEZ

*A dual-language program at one high school aims to send the message:  
“We value all of who you are – both languages are equally important.”*

**T**he guest editor of this issue of *VUE*, Rosann Tung, interviewed Dania Vazquez, founding principal of the Margarita Muñiz Academy, a Boston public high school offering dual-language education in Spanish and English. The first dual-language high school in Massachusetts, this Innovation School opened in the fall of 2012 with 80 ninth-graders and plans to eventually serve 320 students in grades 9 through 12. The purpose of the interview is to share the school’s unique model and early successes with *VUE* readership.

### AN ASSET-BASED APPROACH FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

**Q** What are the advantages to offering a dual-language program to high school students in Boston?

**A** A dual-language school is an asset-based approach to educating students. It’s ensuring that we bring forward, from multiple perspectives, all the assets that kids come with into the system. So I have to answer this question from the different perspectives of who I have in my school, and it’s very nuanced, as I’ve learned this first year. We have the whole spectrum: native English speakers who attended dual-language elementary and middle schools, English language learners (ELLs), and heritage language speakers.<sup>1</sup>

*Dania Vazquez is founding principal of the Margarita Muñiz Academy in Boston, Massachusetts.*

The kids who have been in a dual-language program in grades K–8 need the opportunity and a pathway if they want to continue in that model. We are finding that the dual-language elementary and middle schools have to build the value for continuing in a dual-language school so that kids feel that bilingualism is an asset that they want to continue to hone. Since it is so new to have a dual-language high school, the elementary and middle schools are now also thinking about what a high school pathway means for their students.

This approach is probably most meaningful to the kids who are limited English proficient (LEP), because they’re coming into the school and realizing, “Oh, both languages are important; and if I go to a school with a Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) program,<sup>2</sup> my English is the most important thing and my Spanish is being sort of let go.” The dilemma there, which is quite interesting, is that kids want to speak English, because when they leave our building, they’re surrounded with the idea that to belong in this society is to speak English. It’s an interesting sort of back and forth for that group of kids, to see that Spanish is an asset, too. The messages they’re getting from everywhere else is that what’s important is English.

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<sup>1</sup> *Heritage speakers* refers to bilingual students whose first language is the one spoken in their home, but who usually change their language dominance to English when they start going to school. Their vocabulary in their native language and their knowledge of their heritage culture may be limited.

<sup>2</sup> SEI is the predominant approach to ELL education in Boston. This model relies on the use of simple English to impart academic content, using the native language only to assist students in completing tasks or to answer questions.

<sup>3</sup> “FLEP” students are those who were once ELLs in the system but have reached a level of English proficiency deemed adequate to learn academic content in English.

Then we have kids in the middle, who already speak English. Some are “formerly limited English proficient” (FLEP),<sup>3</sup> or they have never been labeled “LEP” in this school system, or they’re no longer qualified for an SEI program, but they speak Spanish from the heritage language perspective. So they’ve let go of the academic learning in Spanish. They’re in our school as heritage language speakers, and it becomes an identity question.

One young man said in the beginning,

I was really resistant [to learning Spanish], and I didn’t understand why Spanish was so important to learn. But now I’m really into it. I really understand who I am, and now I’m beginning to think in Spanish, too. In the beginning, it was really hard, because I didn’t think learning Spanish was so important, but now I get why it’s important.

It’s very nuanced. A key part of developing language is the connection to cultural identity – who you are, who you represent. Culture is conveyed through language. We want to honor all of who you are and we can do that through language. You may know the language, and you may know how to read and write in that language, but do you understand that it’s valued? Kids are not coming in necessarily understanding that speaking another language is an asset. The societal messages that are coming in at ninth grade are very profound: “Your Spanish language isn’t all that important. You must give up that part of your self and your identity. Your English is key to being a valued member of the society. That’s what counts.”

Our model at Muñiz Academy intentionally will change that message. The message here is “we value all of who you are – both languages are equally important.”

**Q How do the staff and the programming at your school get the students to see that being bilingual is an asset?**

**A** Getting them to see that being bilingual is an asset is a very intentional and active daily process. For example, three days a week our community language is Spanish. Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, whether in the hallways or outside of class, everyone speaks in Spanish, staff and students. Sometimes, it's hard to honor that because we all go back and forth, and we all remind ourselves "today is Monday, and community language is Spanish." We do everything in writing in two languages, and what comes up when you see our materials, like our website, is Spanish first. If you have a title of something, the top line has to be Spanish, the bottom line is English.

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It's also important to have intentional conversations with kids. I don't think there is a week that goes by that I don't say to some kid, “You need to hold on to your Spanish. It's important. It's who you are, and it's *all* of you that we want, and your being bilingual is going to get you a better job and better opportunities.”

So it's a constant presence, a constant conversation, a constant “we value both languages, and you have to be proficient in both languages.”

## FEATURES OF THE SCHOOL

**Q What are some of the design elements of your school, and why have you chosen them? How does it all fit together?**

**A** Our elevator speech is that we're a dual-language college prep high school, and the three important anchors that help us get kids to college are Expeditionary Learning,<sup>4</sup> the arts, and technology. All of those connect and support the learning in both languages.

Expeditionary Learning is how we're trying to do the work with the kids. The idea is that you're learning through authentic opportunities. Our schoolwide theme is revolution. An essential question students are thinking about is, “What do you stand for?” For example, the Spanish teachers are starting an expedition taking it from the angle of the Cuban revolution. Students are researching the history of Cuba during that time period. The teacher is going to invite people who were actually immigrants from Cuba during Castro's revolution, so that the kids can interview them.

The arts are an integral part of our program. The arts are another form of language that can really help kids learn from a multi-disciplinary perspective while enlarging their view of the world. We offer a choir and have started elements of an orchestra. We also offer visual arts. In our first year, we've had

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<sup>4</sup> Expeditionary Learning is a whole-school reform model that organizes learning around an experiential, project-based approach in which students do original research and create high-quality products for audiences beyond the classroom (see <http://elschools.org>).

two concerts and exhibited student artwork. In addition, the music teacher has decided to do a mini-project on a play that the whole school is going to see, *In the Heights*. The play is about Latino kids in Washington Heights, with very similar life stories and aspirations as our students. Our music teacher and students are exploring the music and the lyrics. What happens in the arts can translate over to the academics. We want to have kids who are well-rounded leaders and citizens, an important part of our mission.

Our third anchor is technology: helping kids learn how to use a computer to learn and to enhance their learning. A lot of kids don't have computers at home or don't know how to use a computer well. So it's getting everybody to be on a level playing field around technology.

Those are the three design anchors, but there are a few other design elements. We're having kids travel by cohorts rather than hand-scheduling kids. So they travel with the same group of kids for their academic classes. Then when they travel for arts block, they travel in a different cohort of kids, because they're either traveling as students of instrumentals or students doing chorus. And then they are also grouped for crew, which is our Advisory.

The other design element for dual language is that you have humanities English and humanities Spanish. We're also figuring out math, science, and the other subject areas – how do you balance both languages, because there's not a math Spanish teacher and a math English teacher? So one teacher has to do both. I've allowed teachers to experiment this year with what works.

**Q** You use standards-based grading. Can you say a little bit more about that?

**A** We're not using letter grades and numbers like 100 percent. It is standards-based grading. We have academic learning targets. So every course, every quarter has a set of learning targets that kids have to meet, and those learning targets are assessed by certain products that teachers develop. So if you have to demonstrate the learning targets in writing, for example, then the product would be an essay or a poem.

## THE NEED FOR RESOURCES

**Q** How can the district support your school or better support your school?

**A** It's a start-up school. It's a really tiny school right now, really complicated. As a district, we need to think about what it means to implement a dual-language high school model, considering funding for staffing as well as curriculum and resources. It would be terrific to see more language learning opportunities in middle school so that more students would feel they can consider a dual-language school. Finally, the district needs to think about professional development supports as we continue to grow our school as well as others. It's multi-layered. Boston Public Schools (BPS) is talking about opening more dual-language schools. We need to strengthen the current dual-language schools and create a strong network.

Apart from the questions about our specific model, we also need to think about how to best support start-up schools. We have a huge vision with a limited budget, so you have to make hard choices while implementing that vision.

**Q** Would you say that the greatest barrier right now to your school's success is lack of adequate resources?

**A** When you have such a wide range of kids, you need a lot of extra people to do the work. You need a lot of support systems and safety nets for kids. I'm learning that from my high school principal colleagues at other schools. I don't think this situation is unusual or related to our model. Our students are not as well prepared as they should be for high school.

### WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

**Q** Could you tell us about some of the successes you've had this year with your ELLs? How are the students with different levels of Spanish and English mixing?

**A** We intentionally group native speakers of English with the kids who are learning English heterogeneously in the same room. But we're also working with kids who are at the very beginning levels of learning English because they haven't been to school, or they have had limited schooling, or they are not up to grade level academically in their own language. We pull out beginning ELL students to do English as a Second Language (ESL) during the humanities time, so that they can get up to speed on the English and feel more confident. At the high school level, there is the social and emotional aspect; students don't want to speak in front of kids, because they feel more inhibited, shy, much more self-conscious. So it's been more successful to give them that intensive ESL support, while for all other subjects and experiences they are fully integrated.

**Q** How will you know your school has been successful going forward?

**A** We'll know we're successful when we've established a culture where kids understand that both languages are valued and they are valued as real people. We will be successful when students know that we value *all* of you – culturally, academically, artistically – and that you have to meet those learning expectations as well.

We'll know we're successful when kids are fully bilingual, no matter what point of entry they came in. And when we have figured out our model for dual language: How do you use both languages in subject areas in a way that makes sense for both teachers and kids? When we can see language and content learning in the context of authentic expeditions happening, we'll see the vision coming alive. We are at the beginning steps. We have a long way to go.

*For more information on the Margarita Muñiz Academy, see <http://munizacademy.org>.*