A: First, we researched program styles and spoke with several experts, such as Mimi Met. We wanted programs that were cost effective to implement and that produced a higher level of proficiency. From an economic standpoint, the way we build our dual immersion program in Utah, there are no extra costs for teacher hires. In a two-teacher model, a 50:50 program requires two teachers. One teacher becomes the English teacher and one teacher becomes the second language content teacher and you have two cohorts that switch back and forth 50% of the time. There’s absolutely no additional cost for a teacher — when an opening occurs you’re merely replacing a regular teacher with an immersion teacher, so the program is built up year-by-year K to 6 or 8. This is a much more cost-effective model, than with FLES, where “special” language teachers have to be hired to develop a program. As far as the proficiency outcome is concerned, research tells us that, because of the added time spent in the target language, children in immersion programs achieve higher levels of proficiency and literacy than their peers in FLES programs where less time is devoted to language learning.

Q: Can you describe the ways of teaching immersion programs? A: Well, let me just say that we’re in 57 schools now and not one teacher has lost his or her job. We may have had to reassign some teachers, but due to retirement, leave, or relocation, almost every school has been able to hire one new teacher per year and that one new teacher has been a language teacher, and so we have not displaced any teachers. We have received negative reactions from teachers’ unions, fearing job loss, but that is an unfounded fear, because no teacher has lost a job over dual immersion. That’s the beauty of the two-teacher model, and why I prefer it over the 90-10 model, because you’re able to use the existing teachers already at the school to thus become an immersion teacher in English.

Q: Can you describe the types of school districts choosing to implement immersion programs? A: We have 57 dual immersion schools in Utah. Of those, 31 are Spanish immersion programs—16 two-way and 15 one-way programs. We have 17 Mandarin Chinese programs and we have 9 French programs, with a state model for each. We are in 15 school districts across the state. Those range from the largest school district in the state with 70,000 students to one of our smallest school districts with 4,000. We have a rural school district, with 3,500 students looking to add immersion strands in each of their two elementary schools. Park City School district, with 8,000 students, plans to have dual immersion in all four of their elementary schools next year, two Spanish and two French.

Q: What role does literacy play in the immersion programs? A: Literacy is extremely important for us. We actually provide the content in grades 1-3, so we make sure all kids are grounded in English language arts and they know how to read and write in English first before they add a second language. We’re doing simultaneous literacy, so they are getting literacy in Chinese, Spanish, French, starting in first grade. They do some background work in English by an established English teacher already working at the school. That teacher is actually the rock of the program. Specific proficiency goals for every dual language immersion language are set and each grade level in all areas reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Q: What content is taught in the target language? A: In grades 1-3, the majority of the literacy block is taught in English, in addition, there is reinforcement in English for math, social studies and science. In the second language block in grades 1-3, math is taught in the target language, as well as what we call integrated curriculum, which is social studies, science, health and art. We also have a literacy class taught in the target language.

In grade 4 we have a major shift. The majority of math switches back to English and at this point the literacy is divided between the two languages. We move social studies in grades 4 and 5 to English and, in order to teach Utah state history and U.S. history in English, we either combine or split the second language. In the 6th grade, social studies (world history) returns to being taught in the second language and science switches to English. (See pie chart below)
Q: Is teacher supply a problem?
A: No. Our teachers come through local routes and as international guest teachers through state-sponsored Memorandae of Understandings with China, Spain, Mexico, France and Taiwan. Utah instituted a relatively new dual immersion endorsement and our universities are beginning to teach courses that lead to dual language certification. For example, if you’re a Spanish teacher you need the Spanish endorsement and a new dual immersion endorsement. We have a lot of elementary teachers in the pipeline who will eventually be certified for teaching in dual immersion programs.

And, we’ve raised the bar for our teachers. We require that all language teachers pass the Praxis exam and demonstrate Advanced mid proficiency. English teachers must have an elementary teaching license, whereas the second language teacher may have either an elementary license or secondary license, but must have both the language specific endorsement and the dual immersion endorsement.

Q: What professional development is provided?
A: Professional development is addressed in two ways. We have an Annual Utah Dual Language Institute (AUDI) in summer, a week-long institute required of all our immersion teachers and we also have on-going professional development throughout the year, where dual immersion teachers meet together four times and once within the district.

Q: How are students assessed and is data being collected?
A: Right now, students are being assessed by teacher observation checklists and formative assessments aligned to Can Do benchmarks. There will be common state-designed summative assessments at the end of 3rd grade. Of course, students take the usual state tests. We’re able to track their performance on the standardized state tests and compare their performance to monolingual peers, because of new state course codes designations, which allow us to gather data on dual immersion enrollment (i.e., 1st grade dual immersion, 2nd grade dual immersion, etc.) With all of this data coming in, there will be opportunities for research. The Utah Education Policy Center at the University of Utah will serve as a research clearing house to vet research projects from all of our universities.

Q: How have parents and the community reacted to the program?
A: Honestly, they are asking, why didn’t we do this 20 years ago! They’ve been very positive about the programs. In fact, we’ve had a number of angry parents who aren’t able to get their children into an immersion program.

Q: What about program sustainability?
A: I don’t anticipate funding being cut by the legislators any time in the future. The real beauty of immersion is that these programs, unlike FLES programs, don’t get cut because they become systemic. And, we have very strong support legislatively, economically and from parents who are tremendously supportive because of the results they’re seeing. The Governor, his office of economic development, the legislators, many of whom have children and grandchildren in the programs, are all behind it. And, we have a very aggressive expansion planned. One hundred programs by 2015 and we’re on track to add 15 to 20 programs each year. We want to add German, Japanese and Portuguese languages because business leaders tell us they need a workforce with these language skills, in addition to Chinese, French and Spanish.

Q: Any last thoughts, Gregg?
A: I just encourage people to look hard at the benefits of immersion. I think it should be mainstream across America. Our goal is to make immersion education available to any parent who wants it, so that it becomes the norm rather than the exception and that’s truly our goal in Utah.

For more information on the Utah Dual Language Immersion programs, go to: http://www.schools.utah.gov/ccur/dualimmersion/