

Advocacy Feature:

Schools cut back on foreign language classes— Emphasis shifts to ABC tests

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CLAYTON -- For just about everyone at East Clayton Elementary School, the latest snowfall was, well, snow. But students in Linda Griswold’s classroom were seeing something different. Nieve. Words new to the first-graders rolled off Griswold’s tongue as she described a familiar snowman in Spanish: El hombre de nieve.

The lesson may have been simple, but Griswold’s goal is more ambitious. She hopes that by fifth grade, her students will be well on their way to fluency in a second language.

Yet East Clayton is one of a shrinking number of elementary schools in North Carolina putting a priority on teaching a language other than English.

In a state that once pushed foreign language lessons as early as kindergarten, North Carolina elementary schools have been steadily curtailing instruction in second languages to devote more time and effort to basic reading and math instruction in English. Those two subjects are heavily tested under the state’s ABCs and federal No Child Left Behind accountability rules.

“I don’t think the ABCs were meant to narrow the curriculum, but unfortunately, that’s been one of the consequences in many districts,” said Maria Palmer, a bilingual member of the State Board of Education who first started learning English as a kindergartner in Peru.

“Things that are considered frills -- like the arts and languages -- are suffering,” she said. “We know that, done well, these things contribute to the education of children.”

Less than 20 percent of students in the state’s elementary schools are enrolled even in once-a-week language lessons, down from almost half in 1994. Schools have converted teaching positions earmarked for foreign languages to extra reading teachers, technology specialists and instructors for students learning English as a second language.

“Once those positions were taken away, they didn’t bring them back,” said Fran Hoch, foreign

language curriculum specialist with the state Department of Public Instruction.

In the mid-1990s, Wake County eliminated weekly language instruction in kindergarten through second grade at most schools. Foreign language survived as an elective in all grades only in magnet schools, some of which stress language instruction. A third of Wake’s nonmagnet elementary schools have eliminated foreign language instruction altogether.

“Principals have probably had some difficult decisions to make where they allocate resources,” said Tom Huffstetler, Wake’s senior administrator for second languages. “If there was an endless amount of money, I don’t think anyone would argue that foreign language instruction isn’t important.”

Other large districts, including Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Guilford, have all but dropped elementary school foreign language lessons except for a few magnet programs that now offer intensive instruction.

Foreign language instruction advocates say that in nonmagnet schools that continue to offer classes, the lessons often are too infrequent – perhaps just once a week – and lacking in clear objectives for students to develop fluency. Some schools offer “exploratory” programs, common in middle schools, that provide a sampling of several languages, but no concentrated focus.

Despite the trend in elementary school, more students are taking foreign language classes in high school. The state now requires two years of a second language for students to graduate from a college-preparatory course of study.

Still, some people say that’s not enough, especially if students have had little or no instruction before high school. “Students have to be able to communicate and compete in the world,” said Marty Babcock, program director of the Center for International Understanding in Raleigh, which provides global study opportunities for educators and policy makers. “More and more

employers want people who can speak a second language.”

National standards call for a minimum of 30 minutes of instruction a day, taught entirely in the foreign language and with a clear progression from elementary school into high school.

“A lot of people came out of an era when we thought two years of high school language was sufficient,” said Mary Lynn Redmond, director of foreign language education at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem and director of a project to foster language instruction in the state’s schools.

“If you start in elementary school with language, you’re reinforcing basic skills,” she said. “Some people may think it’s frivolous, but students who perform the best academically have had a longer sequence of foreign language study.”

That’s one reason the youngest students at East Clayton Elementary have the option to take a half-hour of Spanish five days a week.

“I see foreign language as a ticket to success for the whole child,” said Peggy Smith, principal at East Clayton, now in its second year of offering daily Spanish. “It makes for a better learner.”

RISING DEMAND

Demand for the program in kindergarten doubled this year over last, Smith said. Each day, groups of kindergartners and first-graders gather in Griswold’s classroom trailer. She speaks only in Spanish. The students tend to speak to her in English; she responds in Spanish.

One day this month, they made Valentines. Another day, she might teach them about insects. She tries to coordinate with their regular classroom teachers to reinforce – in Spanish – what they’re learning in English. Daily and consistent practice is key. Students who start early are more likely to develop fluency and better pronunciation.

No one needed to persuade Darlene Thomas, a Clayton parent who opted for the daily Spanish classes for her son, Chad, now a first-grader.

“When you’re young, your mind is like a sponge, and you can pick up things much easier,” Thomas said. Chad likes to sing songs he has learned in Spanish, she said, and often asks her to turn the car radio to a Spanish-language station.

“He wants to hear the music, and he wants to hear people talking,” she said. “If he starts early like this, he’ll really be able to learn the language.”

The Balanced Curriculum: A Guiding Document for Scheduling and Implementation of the NC Standard Course of Study at the Elementary Level

The Instructional Services Division at NCDPI, has developed a guiding document that focuses on the importance of delivering a well-rounded education which includes all areas of the Standard Course of Study. The document incorporates and addresses many current issues and concerns from the public schools as reported via surveys and feedback through teachers, principals and administrators to the elementary curriculum committee. There are many ways that this document can be used as a springboard for discussion groups, professional development, and leadership at various levels.

The PDF version is available on the web at: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/> (Click on the “Balanced Curriculum” link above the SCS chart). This PDF file contains the entire document, but is not hot-linked internally or externally. It will remain on the Web site until the new PDF (which will have the ability to follow links within and outside the document) is complete. Hard copies of the document that can be placed into notebooks or a CD version may be ordered through NCDPI publications.

Note: East Clayton Elementary School is a pilot site for VISION 2010: A Plan for Model Foreign Language Programs in the North Carolina Public Schools. For further information, please contact Dr. Mary Lynn Redmond at redmond@wfu.edu.

Call for Nominations

NNELL is now accepting nominations for the position of Second Vice-President for the 2004-2005 school year. (This is a 4-year commitment beginning in November 2004: Second Vice-President 2004-2005 moves into First Vice-President 2005-2006, President 2006-2007, and Past-President 2007-2008.) The duties of the Second Vice-President will include the following: to become familiar with and learn the NNELL Board and its workings, to assist the First Vice-President and the President, to carry out projects assigned by the First Vice-President and the President, and to serve as a voting member of the NNELL Executive Board.

Please send nominations via email attachment with each nominee’s curriculum vitae and a statement describing why the nominee would like to serve in the NNELL leadership to Martie Semmer at semmer@colorado.net by August 1, 2004. Thank you!