



Principals' Pláticas on Elementary Dual Language Program

January, 2017

On December 14, 2016, Austin Independent School District (AISD) staff met with elementary school principals (who implemented the redesigned dual language [DL] program in Fall 2016) to discuss their experiences and recommendations for the program. The “pláticas” meeting consisted of nine small groups of principals, each led by a facilitator and including a note taker. The principals were asked three questions about the DL program. Their responses were recorded, and the most common themes are summarized in this report. This information is being used by the Department of English Language Learners (DELL) staff to plan improvements and implementation of the DL program in the 2017–2018 school year.

What was working well in the DL program implementation?

When asked what aspects of the program worked well, many principals indicated that the new program’s flexibility (e.g, the ability to choose from three DL program options) was beneficial. One principal explained that it gave campuses space for growth and adaptation, whereas another indicated that it allowed them to implement what worked best in their campuses. In addition, several principals indicated they had observed a more relaxed teacher environment and more positive communications with parents. Furthermore, principals listed the following as positive aspects of the redesigned DL program: support from bilingual specialists and from DELL staff; a larger number and higher quality of professional development opportunities; DL implementation in early elementary grades, and the flexibility to teach more in Spanish at those grades; more emphasis on academics and learning, and greater rigor in both languages; and switching between languages during units (weekly or biweekly).

How were campuses handling the three DL principles?

AISD’s DL program’s main principles:

- **Commitment to implementing DL from kindergarten through 5th grade**
- **A minimum of 50% instruction in Spanish or Vietnamese**
- **Strategic separation of languages**

Most principals stated that they were committed to following all three principles, but indicated that commitment to implementing the DL program from kindergarten (K) through 5th grade was stronger and easier in earlier grades. This was due to various reasons affecting later grades, including staffing difficulties (e.g., finding enough qualified bilingual teachers), staff-to-student ratio, the different backgrounds and grade levels of students who joined the program, and the occurrence of mixed classrooms (where English language learners [ELLs] and non-ELLs are in the same classrooms but not in the same instructional program). In fact, principals indicated

that mixed classrooms were a hindrance to all three DL principles. In addition to making it difficult to commit to implementing the DL program long term, mixed classes made student behavior and classroom management challenging. However, one principal suggested addressing the mixed classroom issue by transforming those classes into 2-way DL classrooms.

Various principals indicated that hiring highly trained staff would help address the separation of languages, but that it was difficult to find, hire, and retain qualified teachers. As a solution, one principal suggested using pairs of co-teachers to help maintain a 50/50 ratio of languages and the strategic separation of languages. However, some principals commented that hiring foreign teachers could be problematic because those teachers were used to a different educational system, were not familiar with the DL model of teaching, and sometimes lacked English language skills or spoke English with a strong (difficult to understand) accent. On a positive note about staffing, many principals indicated that having the support of bilingual specialists and having professional development sessions that addressed bridging concepts from one language to the other were very helpful.

Lastly, principals suggested that only allowing students to join the DL program in early elementary grades would make committing to the three principles easier because this would build a systematic foundation in prekindergarten (pre-K) or K, which could be expanded as students moved through the grade levels.

What requests did principals have about the DL program implementation options moving forward?

When asked for feedback on how to improve DL program implementation, principals made several suggestions that aligned with their responses to the two prior questions. The following were the most common suggestions:

- **Professional development:** Principals recommended more training or professional development opportunities for teachers, specifically professional development activities on bridging concepts across two languages, more training on how to help long-term and refugee ELLs, and more support on and direction about how to best serve special education ELLs in DL.
- **Program implementation support:** Several principals indicated they would like more support from DELL for ELLs speaking languages other than Spanish, and would like better bilingual resources (e.g., higher quality curriculum materials in Spanish and Vietnamese, and better translations of documents and assessments).
- **Bilingual specialists support:** Many principals acknowledged how helpful the bilingual specialists had been in the DL program implementation, and asked for more equitable support from the bilingual specialists across their assigned campuses.
- **More flexibility in implementing the program:** Even though many principals indicated they appreciated the increased flexibility allowed in implementing the program, a few indicated they should be trusted to do what works best for their campuses.
- **Eliminate mixed classrooms:** To address the issue of mixed classrooms, some principals suggested clustering schools for DL implementation by region, whereas others suggested improving AISD's staffing formula to better fit the needs and programs of each campus.
- **More time:** Some principals indicated they needed more time before the school year starts to develop the DL program with their staff, whereas others indicated teachers needed more time to plan DL lessons.

- Stakeholders: Principals suggested that DELL request feedback from teachers implementing DL to inform decisions about the future design and implementation of the program. In addition, principals indicated that DELL should provide parents with more information about the program and available program options.

Next Steps

DL teachers' feedback and recommendations for the program will be obtained through focus groups conducted by DELL staff and through a survey conducted by AISD's Department of Research and Evaluation. Teachers' input will be combined with results presented in this report to inform the work of the DELL team as they plan DL program implementation for 2017–2018.



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