

U-TURN ON LINCOLN SPANISH-LANGUAGE PROGRAM



SARAH RICE / GAZETTE

Fourth-grader Shelby Rife works on her Spanish-language skills Wednesday at Lincoln International Studies School in Kalamazoo.

New idea: Immerse entire school

By Amber Tafoya

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A month ago, it looked as if a Spanish-language program at a Kalamazoo elementary school would become history.

Now, after a backlash from parents, it may become a more integral part of Lincoln International Studies School than ever.

Its principal is expected tonight to outline for KPS trustees a proposal to make a Spanish-language immersion program part of the main focus at the North Burdick Street school.

"We are presenting the recommendation that Lincoln implement a full-school-participation immersion program," Principal Kimberly



The shadow of teacher Heather Russell's hand appears in an image as she presents a math problem. Students in her class learn in both English and Spanish.

Parker-DeVauld said. "We will become one immersion and international magnet brand."

About 224 students — a little less than

half of Lincoln's population — currently participate in the immersion classes, designed to give native-Spanish speakers an easier transition into English and native-English speakers a much greater fluency in Spanish. While students have to apply for limited seating now, the proposed new model would make immersion available to everyone.

During recent school board meetings, students and parents protested a move to eliminate or phase out the program. Those concerns and resulting discussions factored into creation of the new proposal, Parker-DeVauld said.

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New idea: Immerse entire school

KPS officials looked into options from phasing the program out to moving it out of Lincoln to help sharpen the school's focus. Parker-DeVauld said having both international-education and immersion programs at Lincoln has split the school and resulted in a segregated student population. Few African-American students are in the immersion program because some parents don't understand the benefits, she said.

"We want to show parents that students do as well or better in an immersion environment," Parker-DeVauld said. "By the end of the program, we expect all students to become bilingual, biliterate — not just the select few the school produces now."

Another problem with the program's current design is finding enough students whose first language is Spanish to make up half the class, a requirement that was based on old immersion models.

Parker-DeVauld said that, after researching alternatives, she believes her new proposal fits with the community's makeup and allows more flexibility in the ratio of students speaking Spanish versus English, without diminishing learning opportunities.

Students who are in the program now learn math, science and other subjects in English and



SARAH RICE / GAZETTE

From left, Denise Garay, Alma Duran and Milton Romero-Diaz work to solve math problems. The fourth-graders at Lincoln International Studies School learn through both English and Spanish.

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Kimberly Parker-DeVauld

Lincoln principal

Spanish. Some say they hope their bilingual skills will help them excel in college and in the work force.

On Wednesday, teacher Heather Russell's fourth-grade class was learning to do fractions in Spanish. Milton Romero-Diaz, whose native language is Spanish, leaned over a classmate's worksheet, which directed students in Spanish to divide several circles based on a given fraction, and with a few

soft words and demonstration, helped her solve the problem.

"I like learning Spanish and English," Milton said later. "If someone has a problem learning in Spanish, I can help."

Student Shelby Rife, whose first language is English, agreed. "If I go somewhere where people are speaking Spanish, I know what to do," she said.

Knowing two languages helps the students analyze their lan-

guage and its origins, Russell said.

"Students have the option to bring home worksheets in Spanish or English," she said. "This encourages parent involvement on both sides."

The Spanish-language immersion program is a topic for tonight's Kalamazoo Public Schools Board of Education meeting at 7 p.m. at the district Administration Building, 1220 Howard St.

Board President Tim Bartik said Wednesday that he needed to hear the proposal before commenting on it. The school board will make a final decision on the program as part of its budgeting process in late June. Parker-DeVauld said proposed funding to expand Lincoln's immersion program would come from grants and KPS general funds.

'Do big things. Do big dreams'



LINSEY WUEPPER / GAZETTE

After coming home from work, Eloisa Morales de Rodriguez plays with her sons, Heriberto Jr., 3, and Jason, 8 months, in their Kalamazoo home.

Immigrant struggles to improve her family's lives

This is the first story in an occasional series about people who are overcoming barriers in pursuit of life's dreams.

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Eloisa Morales de Rodriguez crouched to squeeze the hand of her 8-month-old son as he bounced in a baby swing.

Then she stood up in the living room of her newly-rented Kalamazoo home. She turned and faced a wall dominated by a picture of her two daughters in long, white communion dresses.

She looked at the photo and then to her daughters, now a couple years older, who were talking at the kitchen table in the next room.

"This is what I wanted," Morales, 33, said in a clear voice, her pride evident. "I want my children to be happy. I wanted better."

In 13 years, things have gotten better. But not without struggles.

At 20, Morales left Mexico in a Ford Taurus and drove for three days with her father and Lucia, her 4-month-old daughter. She arrived in Kalamazoo, one among thousands of immigrants who have come to West Michigan in search of a better life.

Southwest Michigan has the second-largest concentration of Hispanics in the state after Detroit, and the population is growing, according to a 2004 study conducted by Western Michigan University. In Kalamazoo County, for instance, there are 6,200 Hispanics, according to the 2000 Census, with the largest cluster in Kalamazoo.

Nationally, Hispanics are immigrating in greater numbers to join their families and find better work, the study reported.

Please see **IMMIGRANT**, B3

Building on
DREAMS
Occasional series



Eloisa Morales de Rodriguez looks over a worksheet on homonyms during an English-language class.



LINSEY WUEPPER / GAZETTE

Eloisa Morales de Rodriguez makes belt sanders at Kalamazoo Industries Inc.

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Immigrant struggles to improve life

They want what everyone else wants, said Armando Romero, president of the Hispanic Leadership Coalition, which works with the Hispanic community in West Michigan.

"A home, security for their family and a place to build a future," he said. "It's that simple."

But for immigrants it can be a hard road, pocked with low-paying jobs, language barriers and cultural differences.

A new home

Morales, raised by her grandparents in a large family, had little money for school and few job options in Mexico.

"Buying a home was impossible there," she said. "I wanted more."

So 13 years ago, Morales left her small town in southern Mexico in search of a brighter future.

Her father traveled to Mexico and returned with her to Kalamazoo. He had been in the area for a few years, earning a minimum wage in farming fields, where she also found work.

The days were long and tiring. She often worked 12-hour shifts, starting at 5 a.m. Returning home after dark became routine. Speaking little English, Morales felt trapped, she said.

While at work, she depended on friends and family to help take care of her family, which now included a second daughter.

"Life was very lonely for us," she said. "I worried about my children, the way any mother would worry."

After five years of tending plants and earning just enough to get by, she realized she had to learn English if she was ever to make a better life for herself.

"You can't get anywhere in this country without knowing English," she said.

Even then, it was not until her eldest daughter, Lucia, then in the third grade, asked for help on her homework that Morales said she pushed herself to learn English.

"I did not know what to do with the papers my daughter gave me. I hated that I could not help her," she said.

In 1994, Morales began taking English classes through the Hispanic-American Council.

The first few classes were tough. Her friends and family told her she was too old to learn English.

She was wasting her time, they said.

Slowly, Morales said, she began to grasp the new language.

Learning English

Morales can walk from her home to English classes at St. Joseph's Church on Kalamazoo's east side. Morales' daughters often join her and play with other children who come to class with their parents.

"I'm glad I can take my children," she said. "That way I don't have an excuse not to go."

At a recent class, students were identifying verbs.

"Diana Ross was the most famous Supreme," English instructor Blanca Garcia said. "Eloisa?"

Morales paused for a moment, then gave the correct answer of "was."

After class, Garcia returned Morales' oral-test score: only two incorrect answers. Her daughters looked over their mother's shoulder at the test, smiling at the results.

For Morales and other students in the class, learning English has opened new doors, Garcia said.

"Many students come through here and move on to college, something they never thought they could do," Garcia said.

Working, living American

Morales quit her job at the greenhouse soon after starting English classes. By then she had purchased a mobile home, but she said the money she made did not make up for the time lost with her family.

And with her English improving, she had the confidence to look for a new job.

She called tool manufacturer Kalamazoo Industries Inc. after learning of a possible opening. A temporary two-week job turned into a permanent position on the plant's assembly line.

During a recent shift, rows of partly-assembled sanders lined work tables as Morales expertly pinched a wire on one of the machines.

She dipped her hand into the top drawer of her gray tool box. Pulling out a small wrench, she glanced at the inside of the box's lid where photos of her children were taped before going back to the assembly line.



Eloisa Morales de Rodriguez keeps photographs of her four children in her tool box at Kalamazoo Industries Inc.

"I have to assemble about 60 of these" every day, she said of the sanders, her hands black with oil and dirt.

But, she says, "I just work eight hours. No weekends. Now I work like an American."

Soon after starting her new job at the plant, Morales met Heriberto Rodriguez. He had grown up in Mexico, just a 45-minute drive from her childhood home. They were married in 2000, and Morales has since given birth to two sons.

"I think of my family as American now. They look American and talk American. This is their home," she said.

'She keeps us safe'

Today, Morales says she has time for her family and is more sure of herself.

Where once Morales felt inadequate, she is now confident. Simply talking to a stranger on the phone, something she could not do without knowing English, gives her children comfort, said her daughter Lucia, 13. Her children say they can depend on their mother for guidance and protection.

"She keeps us safe," Lucia said.

That confidence led Morales to volunteer at a local hospital, where she became interested in social work.

"You can't just learn English," she said. "You have to work hard, too. Now I have a better job and can speak English where there are mostly English-speakers. But I do want to do more."

In March, Morales will begin taking classes at Kalamazoo Valley Community College, where she plans to pursue a social-work degree.

"Do big things. Do big dreams," she said.