

# Questions About Immersion Programs

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## **What is Immersion education?**

Immersion instruction has been used in Canada for over 35 years. Immersion schools in the United States are gaining popularity as an effective method of language learning. The immersion concept has been around for thousands of years; it is the way all of us learned our native language. In immersion, language learning is done in such a natural way that students are comfortable with instruction. Children are excellent mimics. They are eager, curious, and less self-conscious than adults in experimenting with and acquiring new languages.

In foreign language immersion programs the regular

approved school curriculum is taught in a foreign language. In other words, the foreign language is not taught as a subject itself but is used as the language of instruction for all subject matter. Students learn science, social studies, math, reading, and other content area material in the second language. In North America, Spanish and French immersion programs are the most common, but there are also immersion programs where the language of instruction is German, Japanese, Chinese, or other less commonly taught languages including native language immersion programs in Hawaii, Alaska, and Canada.

## **Do children entering into an Immersion program need to have a background in the language being taught?**

No, children do not need to have prior exposure to the particular focus language. Immersion programs are designed for children whose families do NOT speak the focus language. Since most immersion programs in the United States begin at the elementary level, children

who start school in an immersion classroom generally pick up the second language quickly and naturally. They may understand better than they can speak by the end of the kindergarten year, but many programs expect children to add speaking skills by the end of the 1st grade year.

## **When should children learn a second language?**

Highly publicized brain research reported in Time and Newsweek in the late '90s states that it's never too early. A 2001 Congressional Report concurs: "Recent research shows that the optimum human learning time for all languages is between birth and age 10. The Committee

is especially concerned that the nation's educational system is not meeting a critical need for speakers of foreign languages to fill sensitive Federal agency jobs, and is not preparing enough students to face an internationally competitive business environment."

## **Do immersion students usually follow the same curriculum as the students in regular English programs?**

This differs from program to program and depends on the availability of curriculum in the focus language. In the St. Cloud Area School District's Immersion program,

students mainly follow the curriculum of all other St. Cloud Area Schools. Curriculum is sometimes adapted to meet the needs/limitations of the program.

## **Won't learning in another language impair a child's ability to speak, read, and write in his/her own language (English)?**

No, in fact research over the past 30 years has consistently shown that children who are in foreign language immersion programs are not handicapped in any way when it comes to performing adequately in their native language (English). Moreover, because children in immersion classrooms have such an enriched language experience, they often perform above average

on the standardized tests, which school districts typically give to assess student achievement in English. However, it should be noted that the test scores of children in the lower grades (K-3) may, sometimes, lag behind the scores of non-immersion students. However, test scores for upper elementary score often surpass those of non-immersion students.

## **What level of skill in a second language will students have by 6th grade?**

The goal is for students to speak a second language fluently. They will also have strong enough reading,

writing, and listening skills to master the core academic subjects in the second language.

## **Is Immersion the right choice?**

In answering this question, it is important to weigh the opportunities that you are offering your child through exposure to the second language and its culture. Taking

part in the immersion program is a unique learning experience.

## How can I help my child if I don't speak the second language?

A family commitment is essential for children to experience the great benefits of an immersion education.

Parents can support their child in these ways:

- Make a long-term commitment to immersion.
- Develop an understanding of immersion education.
- Encourage the use of the second language outside of school.
- Provide experiences outside of school to develop English language skills.

## Did you know . . .

Research shows second language immersion gives children the opportunity to:

- Acquire the second language.
- Have a greater capacity for listening.
- Learn higher level thinking skills.
- Demonstrate a better understanding of English.
- Develop better communication skills.
- Think more analytically and creatively.
- Express enthusiasm and have an aptitude for problem solving.
- Have a greater awareness of them self and others.
- Gain insights into other cultures.
- Have the ability to adjust more easily to the new and unexpected.