

impact

ROSE
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Spring 08

Gigi Johnson (left) and a classmate work on math, a subject they are learning in English and Spanish.



Photo by Chris Takagi

Foster Elementary School Local School Changes with the Times

Gerardo Perez has one grievance to air about his education. "The teachers are fun," says the 4th-grader, "but sometimes," he adds, "they make us do tests." Willing to overlook this flaw, however, he still says he "loves" his school, "loves" to learn and looks forward to coming every day.

While student achievement is the primary tool by which schools should be evaluated, having satisfied students doesn't hurt either. By this measure, and several others, Gerardo's school – Foster Elementary School in Arvada – is doing well.

Located on 53rd Place just off Wadsworth Boulevard, Foster is in a neighborhood that was once comprised of a fairly homogenous, mostly

white population. Like much of the metro area, the population has grown more diverse. And so have the educational needs of the children.

"I started here in Fall 2003," says Foster Principal Leigh Hiester. "During the five years prior to that, there had been an increase in second-language learners of 300 percent. Those students comprised 90 out of 270 when I became principal."

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In addition, the school's enrollment numbers were dropping and its mobility rate, which measures how many students transfer in and out of a school in a year, was high at 65 percent. With the backing of Jeffco Public Schools, Hiester drew on past experience as a dual language teacher to add a dual language program to Foster's offerings.

The concept of dual language differs from other methods that teach English language through immersion or special instruction aimed only at students that speak another language. (See below.) For students enrolled in Foster's dual language program, native English speakers and native Spanish speakers are part of the same classroom. Instruction in regular subjects like math or science is given for alternating periods of time in different languages – six weeks in English, then six weeks in Spanish. This gives students the opportunity to learn more than just the words of another language, they also learn concepts and to “think” in another language.

While dual language instruction may not be feasible at schools that have multiple foreign languages spoken, it has been a success at Foster, which now has a waiting list of students wanting to get into the program. “We have 140 second-language learners out of a total population of 358. That's nearly 40 percent of our students,” says Hiester. The school plans to expand the program but still offers traditional English-only or Spanish-only instruction to neighborhood families that may prefer those teaching styles.

Making the transition to a dual language program required some creativity. While a few teachers had the necessary credentials, most

did not. Hiester worked out a plan to bring in professors from the University of Colorado – Boulder, and later from the University of Colorado – Denver, to teach the teachers on site during the school day. “Today, almost all of our teachers are ESL certified and quite a few have a master's degree in bilingual education,” says Hiester. Rose Community Foundation has granted \$55,000 to support the professional development efforts.

Hiester praises her staff for their commitment. “One of the things that people don't get is that it's so important for our Spanish-speaking kids to keep speaking Spanish,” she says. “It's the language of their moms and dads. If they stop speaking it, they stop speaking to their parents. And that's not a good thing.”

In addition, dual language programs offer native English speakers the chance to broaden their horizons. Gigi Johnson, Gerardo's classmate, started learning Spanish in first grade. “I can really speak Spanish,” she says, adding “I think it'll be easier for me to get into college and to get a job.”

“We are a stronger school now,” says Hiester. “Our mobility rate has gone down and last year, our CSAP scores went up in 11 of 13 categories.” (CSAP, the Colorado Student Assessment Program, is the state's standardized test to measure how well students are learning.) “Our children deserve the very best and that is what we are striving to give them every day.”

Learn more about Foster Elementary at <http://jeffcoweb.jeffco.k12.co.us/elem/foster/>.



Photo by Chris Takagi

Students at Foster Elementary School

More about Dual Language

Researchers Wayne P. Thomas and Virginia P. Collier of George Mason University were so impressed with the results of dual language programs that they titled a 2004 study, *The Astounding Effectiveness of Dual Language Education for All*. They write: “...we have been truly amazed at the elevated student outcomes resulting from participation in dual language programs.” To read the report, go to: <http://njrp.tamu.edu/2004/PDFs/Collier.pdf>.