

## **EXPANDING ACCESS TO DUAL LANGUAGE/ BILINGUAL PROGRAMS FOR ALL STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT 14, BROOKLYN**

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**Our presentation,** "Expanding Access to Dual Language/Bilingual Programs for All," reflects the journey of Superintendent Alicja Winnicki and her team in advancing equity through languages and addresses the next steps in increasing access to rigorous, culturally diverse programs to diverse students. Community School District 14, located in the Greenpoint, Williamsburg, Bushwick, and Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhoods of Brooklyn, comprises 26 schools, including Early Childhood, elementary, middle, K–8, and 6–12 grade spans. Currently, there are nine Spanish/English dual language programs, and one in each of the following languages: French, Polish, Japanese, Chinese, and Italian. There are also language enrichment and immersion programs in Italian and German, transitional bilingual programs in Spanish, and a unique transitional bilingual Yiddish program for students with Down syndrome. The vision of the district has always included developing and nurturing existing dual language and bilingual programs, with the intentionality of aligning them with the diverse make-up of the student population. As with many community school districts within New York City, a high percentage of students in District 14 come from low-income homes (75%). The majority of students are Hispanic (58%); the next highest group is Black students (21%), followed by White (14%), Asian (5%), and Other (2%), as indicated by the most recent New York State Education Department demographics data (New York State Education Department, n.d.).

Early on in her tenure as superintendent, Winnicki worked with stakeholders to develop an agenda that highlights and leverages the assets of multilingual learners by increasing the number of programs available in the district. Equally important was her drive to create a district vision for embracing multilingual learners and to develop the expertise of staff in addressing the challenges faced by multilingual learners, deepening their understanding of how these learners contribute to the holistic and inclusive education programs. Multilingual learners and communities influence and co-construct academic programs in schools. Key to the success of new programs was the development of educators' pedagogical expertise regarding how to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of all students, including multilingual learners. The district also had to closely analyze instructional practices, curricular choices, and programmatic options to ensure that the district moved toward closing the then-existing achievement gap between multilingual learners and native English speakers. The most critical step in the action plan set forth to achieve this goal was for MLLs to have access to rigorous and culturally responsive programs. It

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was also important to enlist the support of parents by validating community demand for programs that promote and preserve heritage languages. All these factors had to be considered as schools prepared to launch new programs.

## **Background**

As the title “Expanding Access to Dual Language/Bilingual Programs for All” implies, there are multiple opportunities for families to enroll their children in dual language and bilingual programs within District 14. Dual language/bilingual programs are strong entry points in developing students that are bilingual, bi-literate, and have a profound understanding of the richness of multiculturalism. The overarching goal of dual language/bilingual programs is to facilitate the construction of meaning across content areas in more than one language, thus affirming opportunities to problem solve, negotiate meaning, grow intellectually and beyond a monolingual society. There are many indicators that speak to the impact dual language and bilingual programs have. However, the primary beneficiaries are the students enrolled in the program; they are the future global citizens who understand and appreciate the intellectual and academic potential of bilingual and plurilingual brains. As we collectively deepen our understanding of multilingualism, we recognize that we must expand equitable access to these programs by providing all students with the opportunity to learn in two or more languages.

Alicja Winnicki began her tenure as District 14 Superintendent in 2012. At that time, there were two dual language programs and four transitional bilingual programs. Currently, there are 14 dual language and five transitional bilingual programs, including two bilingual programs in Special Education classrooms. As a longtime resident and educator in District 14, and an immigrant who arrived in the United States at the age of 25 from Poland, Winnicki has valued her students and their families, who have always been a source of inspiration; honoring their heritage and voices has been her driving force. Experience as a teacher, staff developer, principal, and now the superintendent also played a role in developing core values that embrace language learning and put multilingual learners at the forefront of the district agenda. In the different roles as a student and a teacher of English as a Second Language, as well as in various leadership roles, it was always the students that ignited Winnicki’s passion and motivated her actions. Close interaction with her community and intimate exposure to many world languages helped to deepen her understanding of diverse cultures and traditions.

## **Process**

The district priorities specified the importance of honoring students’ home languages and emphasized that multiculturalism be at the forefront of all efforts, thus promoting an agenda of “Embracing Multilingual Learners,” providing educational equity through giving all students access to level-appropriate, challenging, and engaging curricula. The district prioritized:

- Creating opportunities for equitable schools where Culturally Responsive and Sustainable Education inspires and motivates student intellectual engagement and discourse with a focus on social justice.
- Identifying and intentionally addressing unfinished learning (post-pandemic) in support of all students.
- Providing access to high-quality academic, bilingual, STEM, and enrichment programs for all diverse learners, including multilingual learners and students with disabilities, by increasing instructional capacity of teachers and leaders in blended and remote learning environment and new instructional models.
- Strengthening an inclusive community where all students, staff, and families feel welcome and appreciated, valued, and recognized by all members of the district community, with emphasis on trauma-informed instruction and healing schools.

These priorities support the district's mission to ensure that our pedagogical practices and curricular choices are aligned to the tenets of Culturally Responsive Education, consequently increasing access and equity to language learning programs in the district.

The development of dual language and bilingual programs was indispensable to the district's equity and access agenda to service multilingual learners and native English speakers in multiple languages across schools. This would allow schools to leverage the cultural and linguistic diversity of the district to enhance learning, while providing families with opportunities to enroll students in cognitively demanding programs that would facilitate bilingualism and produce biliterate students who would be better prepared for the 21st century and a global economy.

## Results

Over the eight years under the leadership of Superintendent Winnicki, there has been a significant expansion in the number of dual language programs in the district, with notable results. As mentioned, families can enroll students in dual language programs in Spanish, French, Polish, Japanese, Chinese, and Italian. Language enrichment programs in German and Italian are also available in the district, as per school policy. The benefits for students enrolled in rigorous instructional programs that provide opportunities to learn in multiple languages are many, including increased performance on standardized ELA and math exams for MLLs. A cursory glance of aggregate assessment data reported on the website seems to indicate that, in 2018 and 2019, students in District 14 who at some point were classified as English language learners outperformed students that were never English language learners in both ELA and math (New York State Education Department, n.d.). Similarly, broadly speaking, there seems to be a steady increase in the percentage of students, both English language learners and former English language learners, scoring at proficiency levels or above over the past five years in both ELA and math across the district.

Another positive outcome of participation in programs that honor the heritage language of students and promote plurilingualism is that students have the liberty to express thoughts, ideas, or problem solving in the language that best suits them, their learning, and the occasion. Plurilingualism speaks to the assets of speakers of many languages and the benefits of having access to languages and cultures. The debate team at MS 50, a middle school in the district, exemplifies what students can achieve when allowed and encouraged to use languages as a vehicle for self-expression. This school has a Spanish/English dual language program and transitional bilingual program. The principal started a debate team to provide a forum where students can engage in research, discussion, and debates centered on social issues relevant to the times and their personal lives. Students debate various topics in both English and Spanish. This program has provided the opportunity for increased student voice, advocacy, and leadership. As a result, the school's debate team has won the NYC Student Debate Championship three years in a row, has competed in national championships, and has been the first team ever to debate at a national championship in Spanish. Furthermore, the students and the coaches "broke the glass ceiling" of the national competition rules that called for debating in English only. Now, more students from across the USA will have opportunities to show their debate skills in their home languages.

## Implications

Building on the equity agenda and the vision for District 14 for dual language and bilingual programs for multilingual learners, we recognize that we must expand access to rigorous instructional programs aimed at developing bilingualism and biliteracy and providing a multicultural perspective to all students within each school community. As we strive to expand access, we will seek to meaningfully involve the voices of all families, providing increased professional learning anchored in research-based pedagogy for multilingual learners to all staff members. Hence, we will augment community support for dual language

and bilingual programs through increased community outreach, thereby further empowering multilingual families. Expanding access for student engagement is promoted through our shared understanding of ensuring the continuum of dual language programs in middle school, providing opportunities for diverse students not enrolled in dual language programs to learn in multiple languages, and establishing debate teams in multiple languages across the district. The goal of achieving this agenda calls for creating strategic opportunities for teachers and school leaders to engage in professional learning centered on multilingual learners. Parents of students enrolled in dual language/bilingual programs have always been our partners; however, as we move forward, we must also solicit involvement of parents whose children are not currently in dual language or bilingual programs. Therefore, we are establishing school- and district-level planning committees to explore sustainable options for transforming dual language and bilingual programs into school-wide and district-wide language learning communities, where the theory of action for the culture of sharing and appreciation for languages amplifies what we call the “embracing of multilingual learners.”

### References

New York State Education Department. (n.d.). <https://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2019&instid=800000045345>

### Notes

This conference keynote presentation includes experiences of the Brooklyn District 14 superintendent Alicja Winnicki and her team, in which Elsa Nunez is a field support liaison. All information in this presentation is based on direct knowledge of Brooklyn District 14 and its successes.

