

CASE STUDY

Woodburn School District. Woodburn, Oregon:
Creating Schools That Build Connections Across Communities



In Oregon’s agricultural Willamette Valley, the community of Woodburn is a blend of White, Latino and Russian cultures.

Russian immigrants have come to Woodburn for over a hundred years, seeking religious freedom in a region where their centuries-old cultural and farming traditions could continue – and where their way of life (clothing, industry, religion) is still largely maintained. Woodburn’s White population are descendants of people who trekked across the Oregon Trail as pioneers and settled in the rich farmland of central Oregon. There also is a growing and prosperous retirement community of mostly White residents along the highway corridor near a large, new outlet mall.



Many of the Latinos in this area followed the crops and came to Woodburn for harvest, but then stayed to make the town home. Others are migrant Latinos who continue to flow through the area as work is available in the nurseries and food processing plants. The growth of Latino entrepreneurship has played a role in revitalizing the downtown area, which was largely abandoned as large chain stores opened along the highway corridor, but is now thriving with Mexican restaurants, groceries, and shops.

The city is now 52% Latino, 11% Russian, and 37% non-Russian White. In other communities, this kind of mix can often end up generating tension, inequities, and hostility. In Woodburn, these groups, in general, practice a careful and polite separation from each other. But in the schools, another story is taking place – a story of determination and passionate commitment to valuing the multiple cultures and languages of the region, closing gaps, preparing all students to be bilingual, and building relationships across cultural and language differences.



The district, with 4,700 students, has put itself on the map nationally with a robust trilingual K-12 program (Russian, English, and Spanish) and an unusual and visionary commitment that every child will graduate literate in English and at least one other language.

The cornerstone of this effort is the Woodburn School District Strategic Plan. Its mission is “engaging and inspiring all students to achieve challenging goals and aspirations and contribute to a diverse world.” The motto of the district is: “Diverse in Cultures, Unified in Mission.” The core values include the following:

- All people have equal inherent value
- Diversity is a strength
- A community thrives when its members recognize and value their interdependence
- And, family is the strongest influence on the growth and development of an individual.

The evidence that these values are not just empty rhetoric is strikingly visible at the entrance to school buildings where signs read (in three languages): “BELIEVE, CREO, ВЕРИТЬ.” Signs on school walls are in three languages, books in all three languages fill the school library shelves, and the voices of students and teachers alike fill the classrooms and halls in multiple languages.

This linguistic diversity has not been easy to achieve. The story of how Woodburn has built this shared vision and commitment to bilingualism is a story of hard work, vision and conviction, activism, determination to do whatever it takes to make it work, and courage.

It all began with concerns about low achievement and high drop out rates among Latino students. The school system recognized that something had to be done to strengthen the program and schooling for English learners. Where other communities often just accept these patterns as “the way things are,” Woodburn had parents, educators and district leadership who were willing to work to build something better.

Says Sherrilynn Rawson, one of the educators who has played a key role in developing the biliteracy programs:

“It was just the right people at the right time. A group of teachers who were very concerned about raising academic achievement of our English Learners, and leadership that was willing to take the risk to go and look for what works. Staff willing to put in time to figure it out and make it happen. Parents spoke out. And, together we looked for and found powerful research to indicate what would be most effective.”

Planning teams were charged by the Superintendent to read research on language learning and to visit successful schools around the country. Their goal was to find out what practices were most effective for English learners, and what works to help all students attain high achievement in academics. Rawson explains, “*It was clear, the more we read, the more we saw, that the way to get to these goals was by building high levels of home language literacy.*”

The district began to build programs for their English learners around that research. But the focus on research didn’t stop there. The district contracted with nationally-known evaluators to evaluate how the program was working once they set it in motion. They found the bilingual program had a powerful impact on their own students and in their own community. The district commitment to biliteracy for all students grew from there. It moved from using home language literacy as a pathway for English learners to English literacy, to adopting home language literacy as another goal in addition to English literacy. And then, district leaders and parents reasoned, if the children in the bilingual program were coming out biliterate, why shouldn’t *all* students in the district get the opportunity to become biliterate?

The community spoke out loud and clear – Latino parents, White parents, and Russian parents. Walt Blomberg, Superintendent of Woodburn Schools, recalls

looking at the results of a survey they had sent to all parents in the district about whether they would want their children to develop biliteracy.

“The survey came back with overwhelmingly positive results! And that encouraged us, that’s what it took for me to basically say that we are going to be a bilingual district. People wanted it! They were hungry for it! So it was my job to make it happen.”

Woodburn adopted several models, all aimed towards biliteracy. They established two-way (dual) immersion programs which mix English Learners and English fluent students together in the same classes, so that both groups develop biliteracy together. They also created maintenance bilingual programs for English learners, heritage language programs, and an English Plus program. Through enrollment in one or another of these models, all students in the district are involved in learning two or more languages.

Making a trilingual school work required a large investment in professional development, in purchasing or creating materials in the languages of instruction, and in widespread recruitment to find teachers with high-level biliteracy. The district has a Binational Teachers Exchange, bringing teachers from Mexico to work in its summer programs. They also are “growing our own” teachers, encouraging young bilingual people in their own community to become teachers. It has taken years to build the bilingual teacher force in the district – but it has been done!

It became a community commitment to find books in all three languages. The district looked internationally and found and purchased Spanish language texts. But Russian language books that matched the Oregon standards could not be found. So, Russian-speaking parents and teachers worked to translate materials and texts from English books into Russian, and typed, cut and pasted the Russian text into what had been English only books.

All this took parent volunteers, extra work for the teachers, and leadership willing to find the resources needed to build the program in order to find teachers, train teachers, and to purchase materials. It has taken concerted effort to “sell the program” to the wider community, for the schools still face some community attitudes that students should just speak English. The superintendent takes seriously his role in educating the White community and the business community about the importance of biliteracy and why the district is so committed to the program. He explains:

“It’s about the survival of our programs. You have to have advocates. The business community interacts with the public everyday. And they often don’t have kids in school. You don’t want your business folks to lose confidence in the schools, you want them to understand what you’re doing and why. Most people who grew up in Oregon haven’t spent a lot of time with diversity, they haven’t mixed with people who are different, they haven’t spent time thinking about language programs. So it’s our job to be sure we include them. We educate them about bilingualism. We try to engage them in what we’re doing and why.”

Says one principal, *“those that might be skeptical look at our test scores and see that the program is successful.”* Latino students’ test scores in academic subjects as well as in English have risen dramatically. As the research had promised, bilingualism pays off in higher academic achievement and in stronger English.

Don Judson, a banker and leader in the Woodburn Chamber of Commerce, doesn’t have children in the schools, but recognizes the importance of what the Woodburn School District is doing.

“Woodburn is what the U.S. will look like in 20 years. Our schools do an incredible job, and when our kids graduate, they are biliterate. I would have killed for an opportunity like that when I was in school. It gives them a tremendous advantage in the world. Woodburn kids are far and away ahead of districts where students learn just one language.”

Latino parents also need information and help in understanding the dual language program and how it benefits their children. The district has created Parent/Community Liaison positions with the express charge of providing that outreach and parent education. Antonio Ramos, a trilingual immigrant from Mexico, is one of these liaisons/coordinators who has seen with his own eyes the impact of dual language programs on his sons.

“My oldest son is in the university now. He didn’t get the bilingual program, and it was hard at home. I didn’t speak English, and it was hard to work with him because everything he brought home [then] was in English – and everything at home was in Spanish. He became quieter. But my middle son was in the Transitional bilingual program. He would come home really happy with his paperwork in Spanish, and the change is really big. He is now in tenth grade and is completely bilingual in both English and Spanish languages, and is taking Russian as a Second [third] language. And he doesn’t have the conflict of “what language should I use.” He speaks to someone who speaks Spanish the way I speak Spanish, and if someone speaks English, he speaks to them the way they speak English. I can see how different it is for him than for my older son.”

Antonio also witnesses, however, how difficult it can be for a parent who doesn’t have information to make the decision to place their child in a dual or bilingual language program. And so, through community radio, through workshops and meetings in the community, direct personal contact, the district reaches out to Latino parents. Antonio explains:

“One of the difficulties is that the message that the Hispanic community receives from the radio, television, newspapers, uncles, other generations that were only able to overcome the barriers they faced with only English, the message is to not put children in bilingual programs and put them into English ONLY. I tell them, you have the final word, it is your decision, your child, but I will tell you as a professional and as a parent what the result will be - what I

have seen in my own children – and THEN you make the decision. And when they hear about my children becoming fully bilingual, they keep their children in the program.”

Indeed, parents of children in the schools are deeply supportive – because they see the improvement in academic success. María Cervantes, a mother of two boys, speaks about her efforts to keep her children connected to their family language:

“It’s important to encourage the bilingualism. A lot of parents say: No, we’re in America now, we need to speak English: but I think they really haven’t considered themselves the opportunities that would be available to their kids if they maintain their language, too. As a parent, I think it’s the greatest thing you can ever give your child. It makes them smarter, and it makes them more available to the world. It’s a value, you need to value your language, because that’s who you are. Once you lose the language, you lose your culture and you lose yourself. And knowing your language and two or three other languages, it’s a gift.”

It’s not just immigrant parents who see the value in their children becoming bilingual. Many second and third generation Latino families in Woodburn have lost their Spanish. They want their children to be able to reconnect to family and culture, and to reclaim their Latino heritage.

Parents and educators in Woodburn look at language learning also in terms of economic reality, with biliteracy giving their children a leg up in the labor market. They know if their children speak and read two languages, their job options will be better. In Woodburn, more and more businesses and services are recognizing the need for bilingual workers. But students are being prepared to participate in a global world as well.

Being able to speak two languages is not just about getting a better job or doing better in school, Woodburn is discovering the enormous pay-off in stronger and more respectful relationships across cultural and language groups in the schools and community. Sherrilynn Rawson, Principal of the first elementary school in the district to pilot the dual language immersion model, explains:

“It started as a commitment to English learner achievement. It became a commitment to biliteracy. But now it has become something even bigger. It’s a whole different way to understand things. Knowing another language leads to viewing things differently. It gives us ways to understand each other. That’s important. The world is getting to be a smaller place, and it is so important we have ways to understand each other.”

Theresa Ellis, a parent of a child whose home language is English, describes the broader community impact:

“I wanted my daughter to have the opportunity to not just live side by side with

people who look different and speak different from her, but actually to really be able to interact, to not feel stopped by language and cultural barriers, to not feel intimidated about speaking to someone who is different. I just wanted her to be able to fully live in our community, comfortably... And it helps the parents, too. School is a place where communities can come together – or not. You know, you can have real divisions in your community, but when kids are put together in a kindergarten class, and I'm looking at your child and you're looking at mine, that tends to break down a lot of divisions. I knew that I wanted to know people a little bit better in our community. We might not speak the same language, but our children are in the same class. We start seeing each other as equals.”

Anthony Veliz, one of the Parent and Community Liaisons, looks back on the past decade since the district began to build its emphasis on bilingualism, and what has happened with relationships between parents of different cultures:

“My daughter’s classroom has Asians, Anglos, and Latinos – all growing and learning at the same [time]. And it’s not just literature or academics, there is also the social part. They can connect. Be in communication. Here we have Russian non-believers and religious Russians, we have first-generation Latinos and third generation, we have Anglos who live on the golf course and also Anglos who live in cars – all in one classroom. They respect each other. They understand. And I can tell you that in Woodburn, in this period of 12 years, we can see that cultures and communities seem to be coming together. It is achieving that coalition – at least in terms of learning about each other and mutual respect.”

Though it felt like a leap of faith in the beginning to go down the path of bilingual programs, and though it has taken years of work to build the programs, the children and community of Woodburn are reaping great benefits.

The Woodburn School District Approach

- Biliteracy as a goal for all students
- Student-centered curriculum
- Focus on high level academic language and higher level thinking skills
- High expectations
- Parent participation and choice
- Interactive and cooperative learning
- Culturally appropriate curriculum and school environment
- Multicultural staff that reflects the student population
- High quality and well supported staff
(i.e., common planning time for teachers, recruitment and hiring of qualified and competent bilingual staff, and emphasis on professional development)

ACTION TOOL

Making a Case for Dual Language Education

Read and discuss the Woodburn School District case study.

What interests you about it? What inspires you? Did the Woodburn model give you ideas for what you might like to see happen in your community?

Following the discussion, consider the following action steps.

Investigate Dual-language programs

Dual-language programs are spreading across the nation. There are now hundreds of programs in over a dozen languages, including Spanish, Korean, Navajo, Japanese, Chinese, and Russian. Research on program effectiveness has consistently found that students in well-implemented Dual-language programs perform equal to or better than students educated only in English, they also drop out less, and do better in school. To get more information about the model, or research on effectiveness, or to find out where there may be programs near you, visit the following organizations' websites:

Center for Applied Linguistics

www.cal.org/twi/directory

202-362-0700

Two Way Bilingual Immersion Association

www.bilingualeducation.org

626-814-4441

National Association of Bilingual Education

www.nabe.org

202-898-1829



Investigate what is going on in the schools of your community

Are they ensuring children will learn English to high proficiency? Are your schools educating children to become biliterate? Or are they contributing to students feeling ashamed of their home language or being unable to develop bilingualism? This toolkit will help you find out!!

These are things a school should have in order to help children become bilingual in Spanish and English. Does your child’s school have these?

	School HAS this	School does NOT have this
When you walk into the school, you see signs in Spanish and in English		
The school has a program so that students are learning to read and write in both Spanish and in English		
Teachers in the school are bilingual – so children see adults using both languages		
Being bilingual is seen as a positive – and children are encouraged to use both languages		
Students do academic work (homework, papers, etc.) in both languages		
Students are assessed in both English and in Spanish, and parents get regular reports on how children are progressing in BOTH languages		
There are meetings and workshops for parents on how to support children in developing literacy in two languages		
ESL classes and Spanish literacy classes for parents are offered at the school site		
Students have opportunities to use computer technology to communicate with students throughout the world in Spanish		

After finding the answers to fill in the chart above, sum up all the positive things your school is doing. Let your school know that you appreciate the things they *are* doing to support the development of bilingualism. If there are things they could be doing, but aren’t, let them know that you would like the school to begin doing them. Let them know that bilingualism is important to you and your child’s future.

Are negative things going on that need to be stopped?

Schools can be a negative force as well as a positive one. Here are some of the things that happen in schools that can discourage your child from becoming bilingual, and can contribute toward them rejecting Spanish and not learning English as well as they could. Be sure these are *not* happening in your child’s school.

	School HAS this	School does NOT have this
Students are told (by teachers or by other students) that “we only speak English here,” or they are told not to speak Spanish		
Students are teased or put-down or excluded because they speak Spanish, or because they don’t speak perfectly fluent English		
There are no books in the school in Spanish		
There is a policy in the school or district that instruction should only be in English		
A bilingual program isn’t provided in the school – there are no classes or lessons that help students develop literacy in both languages		
Students are placed into separate classes or programs for English Learners, but these classes don’t have adequate books, teachers don’t have adequate training, and even after four or five years, students don’t seem to develop the English skills they need to be able to do well in classes with English fluent children		
Students are just placed into regular classes with English fluent students, and aren’t given help to understand what the teacher is teaching and how they can participate.		

Make a list of all the negative things happening at your school. Take this information to the school administration and parent groups, and ask that policies be changed. Be sure to speak up and let the school know that you want the school to support bilingualism.

Make a case for dual language education in your school district

To make this case to the school or the school district leadership, put together these materials:

- The results of the survey above, “What is going on at your school?”
- A copy of the Woodburn, Oregon, case study,
- Copies of some of the school policies in the Policy section of this Toolkit

It may also be helpful to look through the Myths and Facts section to prepare to speak to any misconceptions that parents, teachers, administrators, and local politicians may have about language learning and bilingualism. You may also want to consider doing the Assessing Our Community Climate... survey, which will demonstrate whether students are getting negative messages at school.