

Dual-language immersion seen as ‘win-win-win’ for Catholic education

SEATTLE – Teaching half the school day in English and half in Spanish could be a boon for Catholic education in the United States, according to a Hispanic educator.

Luis Ricardo Fraga, a professor of political science at the University of Washington and director of its Diversity Research Institute, said such a program, called “two-way immersion,” could provide a superior education, increase educational opportunities for Hispanic Catholics, increase enrollment and prevent school closures.

Starting two-way immersion programs in Catholic schools would be a “win-win-win,” Fraga said.

“The hope is that Latino families will be attracted to this, that English-dominant families who want their children to learn two languages and cultures and Catholic values will be attracted to this, that this can lead to greater enrollments in schools with low enrollments, and that it provides a superior educational opportunity for these children, all at the same time.”

The first goal of implementing a two-way immersion program would be “to provide a proven, superior educational opportunity for families who are committed to give their children a Catholic education where two languages and two cultures are united by a common commitment to the Gospel and to our faith,” said Fraga. “The model builds upon two-way immersion programs that have been used in the United States and in a few Catholic schools across the country for over 20 years.”

In a school with a two-way immersion program, children learn subjects in both English and Spanish from bilingual teachers, beginning in kindergarten. Half the students are drawn from households where Spanish is the primary language, and half from English-dominant homes. In such a program, Fraga said, students are fully bilingual and biliterate by fourth grade.

And there’s no trade-off in terms of academic achievement, he said.

“There is increasing research that shows that children who learn and master two languages at an early age are better at math, are better at music, are better at learning and critical thinking because their brains are more active and their brains are more able to synthesize information,” Fraga told The Catholic Northwest Progress, Seattle archdiocesan newspaper.

A two-way immersion program is not right for every Catholic school, Fraga said, but it could be a good fit at parishes where large Hispanic and non-Hispanic populations exist side by side, “but without an opportunity to work closely with one another, or learn from one another.”

“And the school then might be the place where all of this can happen,” he said.

The second purpose of implementing two-way immersion in Catholic schools, Fraga said, is “to expand educational opportunities for Hispanic/Latino Catholics, who are the major source of growth in the Catholic faithful in the United States today.”

While Latinos make up 35 percent of the Catholic population in the U.S. – and account for 67 percent of practicing Catholics between the ages of 18 and 34 – only 3 percent of school-age Latinos attend Catholic schools.

Nationwide, the high school completion rate for Latinos is just 50 percent; in Catholic schools, it is estimated at upward of 90 percent, Fraga said.

“In the United States, the history of Catholic education is providing educational opportunities to low-income, recent immigrant Catholic faithful,” he said. Over the years, that’s included Germans, Irish, Italians, Czechs, Poles, Lithuanians and other ethnicities.

“We want to make sure that Latino Catholic immigrants are not the first immigrant group in the history of the United States not to be well served by our Catholic schools.”

Fraga, a member of St. Benedict Parish in Seattle and chairman of the pastoral council, serves on the board of directors and diversity committee of the Fulcrum Foundation, which provides financial assistance to promote and support Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Seattle. In May, he was appointed to the President’s

Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, and last fall he was named one of the 100 most influential Hispanics in the nation by Hispanic Business Magazine.

He previously taught at Stanford, Notre Dame and the University of Oklahoma. His research focuses on Latino politics, the politics of race and ethnicity, immigration politics, education politics, and voting rights policy.

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