

Frequently Asked Questions about the Consolidation of TWI Programs

by Amigos de Inmersión Dual de Berkeley (Friends of Berkeley TWI)

www.berkeleytwi.webs.com

Who is “Friends of Berkeley TWI”?

We are a group of Berkeley parents and teachers who have been advocating for the TWI program in Berkeley for several years. The District does not sponsor us and we do not speak for the District. We wrote this document to provide some answers to questions we have been hearing as the District considers consolidating TWI programs in one school. To join our email list and receive periodic updates regarding TWI issues in Berkeley, send an email to berkeleytwi@gmail.com. You can also visit our brand new website (which is still a work in progress) at www.berkeleytwi.webs.com.

Why do you support TWI?

Two-way immersion (TWI), also sometimes called “dual immersion,” is a program that was developed primarily to increase the academic achievement of English Learners. The basic idea is that teaching English Learners in their native language first promotes long-term academic achievement and confidence, as well as English proficiency. In Berkeley, it was implemented in the late 1990s as a way to support native Spanish speakers’ academic achievement, boost their test scores, increase their graduation rates, and teach them English. Because the program requires both native Spanish speakers and native English speakers in order to work, it also provides wonderful (and popular) second language enrichment for native English speakers.

When implemented with support and fidelity to the best practices models, TWI promotes bilingualism, bi-literacy, and bi-culturalism for native Spanish and English students alike. There is a wealth of national research establishing that TWI is the most effective way to increase the achievement of English Learners. In Berkeley, students who have gone through the TWI program (or the bilingual program at Thousand Oaks) are twice as likely to be re-classified as fluent in English by the time they enroll in Berkeley High than their counterparts who were in “English immersion” classrooms in elementary school. For more information and links to the research supporting TWI, visit <http://berkeleytwi.webs.com/apps/documents/>.

What are the challenges of supporting a well-run TWI program?

The research indicates that TWI programs are most effective when implemented according to what is called the “90-10” model. This means that students experience 90% of their day in kindergarten in the “target language” (here, Spanish) and 10% in English. Each year, the percentage of Spanish decreases by 10%, so that by fourth grade, the day is 50% Spanish and 50% English. In a school where enrichment opportunities (such as cooking, gardening, science, library, P.E., etc.) are conducted in English, it is virtually impossible to adhere to the 90-10 model and thus impossible to fully realize the gains that TWI can deliver. Moreover, TWI teachers need strong leadership, administrative support, and the ability to collaborate with each other, as well as access to Spanish-language curriculum materials. When TWI teachers are spread out over several schools, this requires centralized District support that may be prohibitively expensive to provide. Finally, the research is clear that the gains TWI delivers do not generally “show up” on state tests until middle school and beyond. After all, students are instructed in Spanish yet tested in English.

English Learners in well-run TWI programs far outperform their peers in terms of test scores, English proficiency, and high school graduation rates – but it can be frustrating and confusing for parents not to see those gains at the elementary school level. A great deal of outreach and education is necessary to inform parents about how TWI works and what they can expect from the program.

What are the benefits of consolidating TWI in one school?

The push to consolidate TWI in Berkeley has come from teachers and parents who are frustrated by the lack of centralized coordination and support for the TWI program. That lack of support has manifested itself in several ways, most disturbing of which is the decrease in enrollment among native Spanish speakers, which

has dropped the number of new TWI kindergarten classes in the District from five (5) in 2009-2010 to three (3) in 2010-2011. The existence of only one strand at each of the three TWI schools – Rosa Parks, LeConte, and Cragmont – threatens the long-term viability of the program and provides difficult short-term logistical and pedagogic concerns. Many of us believe that consolidation of the TWI programs is necessary to ensure that this program survives, and thrives. Because it is the educational model *most proven* to reduce the achievement gap for English Learners, saving (and in doing so, strengthening) the program is far preferable to letting it wither away. Indeed, the program should be expanded – so that it can benefit even more students – English Learners and native English speakers alike.

What would a consolidated TWI school look like?

Many of us believe that a consolidated TWI school would be able to provide the best that TWI has to offer to English Learners as well as native English speakers. Consolidation would, by definition, solve many of the most pressing problems with the current implementation of TWI. Teachers would not be spread out across the District, and would be able to collaborate in the creation of coherent curricular development and pedagogic strategies with other teachers at their grade level, which is not possible with only one strand at a particular school. A consolidated school would enjoy many advantages of economies of scale with respect to almost every aspect of the program that is currently lacking: coordinated parental education and outreach and acquisition of Spanish-language materials, just to name a few examples.

Significantly, the staff at a consolidated school would be bilingual, including the teachers who teach enrichment programs. In this way, a consolidated school could effectively realize the vision of the 90-10 TWI model that research demonstrates is proven to work best. It would also be significantly easier to consolidate resources to support native Spanish speakers who need support and extra tutoring. In addition, with multiple classes at each grade level, it is possible to provide 30 minutes per day of focused language development in each language. (When there is a single dual immersion class at grade level, this focused instruction becomes almost impossible for a single teacher.) Finally, we believe a consolidated TWI school would empower the Latino community in Berkeley, providing a multi-cultural, bilingual, and bi-literate hub for academic achievement in the District, where monolingual Spanish speaking parents experience true ownership and belonging at the school.

What are some of the concerns about consolidating TWI in one school?

The schools with bilingual and TWI programs are conducting various forums for parents and teachers to discuss their concerns and questions about a possible change in the way that TWI is structured in the District. We encourage parents to come to these events, participate, and make their voices heard. Some of the concerns we have heard from both TWI parents and non-TWI parents (as well as teachers) are that consolidation will disrupt school culture, upset family plans for younger siblings, and require some teachers to switch schools. We have confidence that the District's TWI working group will be carefully planning and studying the options so that any disruption is minimized. But, if consolidation happens, schools *will* change, and that is upsetting to many parents and teachers, ourselves included. Staff may move from one school to another and families may have children at different elementary schools. We believe any consolidation plan should carefully consider sibling preference issues. There are many possible policy options -- for example, perhaps families directly affected by consolidation should get to choose which school their younger children attend.

We don't have all the answers, but we are committed to working together to come up with the best solutions to these issues if consolidation becomes a reality. Many of us – teachers and parents alike – share the same concerns that we have heard expressed. It would be easiest just to leave things the way they are. But many of us feel that it is important to be proactive and try to be thoughtful about a transition rather than reactive to a less desirable transition caused by continuing neglect of the program. We believe too strongly that this program is critical to maintain, especially if we, as a community, are serious about closing the achievement gap in Berkeley.

(dated 11/14/11)