

# Fulfilling the Promise of Dual Language Through Sustainability

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Promising practices...

Every year, the number of dual language programs across the country continues to grow. Motivation for bringing dual language education to a community may range from providing English learners with equitable access to the curriculum, raising overall academic achievement, or providing all students with a proven model of enriched education. Whatever the reason, one common theme across all programs is the inherent responsibility among decision makers to ensure that the program is founded in a solid understanding of what it takes to become a “well-implemented” dual language program. Knowing the research, adequately supporting the use of best practices, and having systems in place that foster sustainability are all essential to long-lasting success. By constantly revisiting and supporting the development of these areas, the desired results attained by other high quality programs can be realized, and the promise of bilingualism and biliteracy can be fulfilled.

Through our experience with districts across the country, it is evident that much up-front work is usually done by communities to justify why dual language education is appropriate for them. This work demonstrates that a key group of individuals driving the initiative has studied research, developed a plan to inform and earn the support of stakeholders, and determined how curriculum will be delivered. With these considerations accounted for, the program is launched—usually starting in one or two grade levels. And then what? The realities of implementation begin! The motivated teachers who initially worked with the administration to get things off the ground now become the trailblazers in the program’s first dual language classrooms. They are excited, effective, and deliberate in their actions, making sure that everything goes according to plan, while still having a role in the ongoing advocacy and promotion of the program. In order to maintain a high level of excitement for what they are doing, sustainable practices must be in place to honor and value the many hats that dual language leaders are wearing, while proactively planning for the unexpected challenges that will present themselves.

From the over 30 years of research by Drs. Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas, we know that data which quantifies the success of dual language instruction is based on the results of well-implemented programs (Thomas & Collier, 2017, p. 74). Knowing that, on

average, it takes 6 years for students to reach native-like proficiency and grade-level achievement, the importance of planning for the long term is amplified (Thomas & Collier, 2017). True bilingualism is an investment. By building the capacity of all stakeholder groups, program leadership can consciously expand program “ownership” from the small group steering the early initiative to the entire school community. This forward thinking of well-implemented programs leads to sustainability over time.

## Key Components of Long-term Program Sustainability

**Program Structures**—Who a school or district selects to guide a dual language initiative is critical. Leadership teams work best when they are a true representation of the community they serve and are able to bring the various stakeholder perspectives to the table when important decisions are made. With inevitable changes in key roles that will occur over the years, systems and structures must clearly articulate the program’s intended purpose and ideals to new stakeholders, some of whom may attempt to thwart or challenge its relevance. Steps such as an annual review of the mission statement, common commitments, and program model expectations help ensure the health and longevity of the program’s core beliefs. Conducting regularly scheduled self-evaluations using the rubrics of the *Guiding Principles for Dual Language Education* (Howard et al., 2017) will help stakeholders and practitioners reflect on the progress being made in various areas while setting goals that will elevate program quality and sustainable practices.

**Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**—At the core of any quality dual language program is a well-defined curriculum alignment (or articulation) plan (CAP) which clearly outlines what is being taught in each program language, for how long, and what it looks like at each grade level. In order to prepare all students for participation in high school honors or Advanced Placement courses in the target language, the alignment of language and content expectations between the primary and secondary levels must be present. Any district or school CAP should be revisited annually in order to adjust for new materials, course offerings, and available supports.

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Superintendents, along with directors of curriculum and instruction, assessment, and special education, must be reminded to constantly approach their work with a dual language lens. This will help in making large-scale decisions such as materials adoptions, selection of assessments, professional training, and master scheduling/staffing while accounting for nuances of dual language programs. Being proactive will diminish barriers and support the ability to create and maintain well-implemented programs.

### Staff Quality and Professional Development—

For programs to be effective, it follows that the people who will have the greatest impact on student performance be provided with the most effective and up-to-date tools and strategies. Being familiar with current research, dual language essentials, biliteracy development, cross-linguistic connections, and contextualized learning are all necessary in order to understand and support students. Since instructional materials can sometimes be incomplete or poorly translated into the target language, considerations for time to review, develop, and acquire appropriate resources must be made. Building support networks among the dual language teachers in your area and allowing them to collaborate regularly is powerful. Deliberately utilizing their skills to create alignment from elementary through high school is also essential.

Just like the leadership team, all teachers and support staff at a school site (including non-dual language staff members) must understand the purpose, systems, and structures of the program. While some teachers may never directly participate in the dual language program, there are many professional learning opportunities that all teachers can benefit from which will serve to reduce the “us vs. them” mentality that can often arise. Building the capacity of all staff and finding ways to support emerging leaders from within will provide a pool of knowledgeable and trusted individuals whose understanding supports all students and programs.

**Supports and Resources—**The combination of informing, engaging, and leveraging stakeholders from all levels is exhibited in how willing individual leaders are to “put their money where their mouths are.” Knowing why and how dual language programs work will never get a program to well-implemented status, much less sustainable, unless there are concrete, actionable plans in place to make it all happen. The ideals of dual language programming need to be reflected and directly aligned with board

initiatives, district and school goals, and common commitments among staff members. When incorporated in a meaningful way at the district level, the likelihood that adequate supports and resources will follow increases greatly.

**Family and Community—**Students, families, and community members are at the heart of every school’s dual language program. They are the beneficiaries of what is being offered and the reason for all the hard work. Ensuring that these stakeholder groups are actively engaged is of utmost importance. As part of their orientation, they need to be informed of dual language education’s purpose and promise—but it has to go beyond that. As with other groups, stakeholders have their own personal connections and purposes for participating. For them to move past simply being informed, they need purposeful opportunities to own the program and contribute to its success by sharing their perspectives and talents. Given a voice, students, families, and community members can become a program’s greatest allies and recruiters—or its biggest critics. Aligning closely with those being served adds another layer of accountability and another means of ensuring that the program stays true to its purpose.

For students to reap the benefits of a dual language program, leaders must work to foster a culture that values the perspectives of all stakeholders and encourages collaboration at all levels. It takes years of consistency—grounded in ongoing evaluation, reflection, and revision—to develop a larger community with the excitement and passion of the initial implementation team, but it is possible. Together they own the struggles and successes of the program and are able to fulfill the promise of bilingualism, biliteracy, academic proficiency, and sociocultural competence for many years to come.

### References

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- Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. P. (2017). *Why dual language schooling*. Albuquerque, NM: Dual Language Education of New Mexico/Fuente Press.

For more information regarding DLeNM’s program leadership and sustainability support offerings, please visit our website at [dlenm.org](http://dlenm.org), or contact Michael Rodríguez at [michael@dlenm.org](mailto:michael@dlenm.org).

