

## St. Paul German school links past, future

By JAMES WALSH, Star Tribune

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"Guten morgen," said Mary-Fred Bausman-Watkins to one rosy-cheeked child after another as they walked in with their parents.

"Guten morgen," came the reply -- usually, depending on how sleepy or grumpy or German-immersed each child felt on a recent frosty morning.

That front door greeting serves as the portal, of sorts, into a world where English stops being spoken in most classes and German, only German, is used each and every day. Welcome to the Twin Cities German Immersion School, Minnesota's only public school that submerges children in German. Minnesota has 14 public immersion schools; most teach Spanish and some teach French.

This einsamer wolf of Twin Cities German education is thriving. The school is moving to bigger digs on University Avenue in St. Paul this summer. The school hopes to eventually grow to K-8; it serves kids in K-3 now.

Bausman-Watkins has led the school since its inception. Parents and members of the German-American Institute approached the former teacher at Minneapolis Southwest High School to explore starting a German language school.

While several of the school's families have a German connection -- a parent or parents are German-speaking or come from German-speaking families -- a growing number of families have no German language background at all, Bausman-Watkins said.

"There was a core group that said, 'German is important to us,'" she said. "But many other families have come."

More growth to come

The school opened its doors in 2005 at a small, two-story building near Hwy. 280 and Como Avenue in St. Paul. It has 125 students in a kindergarten room, two first-grade classrooms, a second-grade room and a third-grade room. There is no room to put new students. So, next fall, the school will reopen in space it will share with Avalon Charter School at 1745 University Av. There is more than enough room for both programs, Bausman-Watkins said.

Michael Dorneich is the chairman of the school board. His daughter, Marlene Dorneich-Hayes, attends the school. His desire for a German immersion school springs from wanting his family to better connect with their heritage and their extended family, he said.

"My parents are German, so I know some German," he said.



Second-graders; Jim Gehrz, Star Tribune

"And we have relatives in Germany. I wanted her to be able to communicate with them."

It seems to be working. Not only is Marlene's experience helping improve her dad's German skills, but on a recent trip to Germany, she was easily playing and chatting with her



Jim Gehrz, Star Tribune

First-graders in Verena Rittstieg's class participated in a visualization exercise as they prepared to perform in a play at the Twin Cities German Immersion School in St. Paul. The school is the only one of its kind in Minnesota and among just a handful nationwide.

German cousins, her dad said.

"It's amazing, but the fact is that these kids just soak this stuff up," he said. He now regularly hears Marlene singing German songs to herself.

"And it's nice to see her speaking with her grandfather, my father," he said.

Some of the program's growth will be assisted by a three-year, \$450,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Foreign Language Assistance Program. The school is adding two teachers next year.

"I don't think we want to be a huge school," Bausman-Watkins said. "But this will help us grow."

There are public German schools in San Diego, Glendale, Cal., and Anchorage, Alaska. It is believed that the first German immersion public school in the U.S. was the Milwaukee German Immersion School in 1977. Now with 600 students in pre-K through fifth grade, the school is one of three language immersion schools in that city, said Principal Albert Brugger. Many of the children from the three schools -- German, French and Spanish -- move on to the Milwaukee School of Languages for grades 6 through 12, he said.

Why German?

Brugger said that while German immersion is not as common across the country as French or Spanish, it's an important option for many families seeking the broader horizons of language immersion.

"You want a myriad of languages," he said. "And German is a good one. It's the second-most-used language on the Internet. A fifth of all books published in the world are in German. And Germany is one of the largest economies in the world."

He added: "There are immense opportunities for people with these dual-language skills."

Bausman-Watkins, who was born in Germany and spent part of her childhood in Russia, said that, in the U.S. anyway, it falls to the schools to provide the avenue to bilingualism.

"Unlike in Europe, we don't need to learn another language to speak with most of our neighbors," she said. "But learning another language is so critical to reaching out to the world."