

German immersion due in fall

New school plans to open with kindergarten, first grade

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Joining the crowd of popular Spanish and French immersion programs in Twin Cities schools this fall is one that should feel familiar to many Minnesotans: German.

The Twin Cities German Immersion School agreed last month to lease a former union hall in St. Paul's St. Anthony Park neighborhood, and organizers have filled a little more than half of their spots in kindergarten and first grade.

The charter school, which intends to grow to include grades K-8, will be the first German-immersion program in a state where more than a third of residents claim German ancestry.

"It's sort of interesting that Minnesota took so long," said Nancy Rhodes, director of foreign language education at the Center for Applied Linguistics, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group that studies language in education.

In Milwaukee, for example — where U.S. Census figures show about 21 percent of residents have German roots, slightly lower than St. Paul's 25 percent — the public school system has run a German-immersion elementary program for nearly 30 years.

Of the 13 language-immersion programs at the elementary level in Minnesota, 10 are Spanish-immersion or dual Spanish-English immersion, said Tara Fortune, immersion projects coordinator at the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota. The other three are French.

Spanish dominates nationwide as well, Fortune said. "(It) is sort of the unspoken second language of the United States."

But in the Twin Cities, when organizers started researching the feasibility of a German school two years ago, they realized within a few months that there was pent-up demand, said Mary-Fred Bausman-Watkins, the school's operations director.

A survey sent to families in the German community to gauge interest in a school yielded more than 200 responses, Bausman-Watkins said, convincing her and her colleagues there was a way "to make room for a language that will always have a smaller draw than Spanish."

In June 2003, about 35 families came to a meeting to learn about the school, and they helped organizers plan over the next year. The school was approved last September by the state Education Department.

The school is sponsored by the St. Paul-based Germanic-American Institute, which has offered language classes in its Summit Avenue headquarters for more than 10 years and which secured the grant to fund the feasibility study for the school.

The school was set up as a charter to allow more control over the program than might be possible as part of a public school district, said Marcy Zachmeier-Ruh, curriculum director.

Charter schools receive state funds but operate independently of the school districts in which they are located. They are free and open to all students.

That independence is attractive to St. Paul resident Melissa Persson, who has enrolled her daughter Olivia in this fall's first-grade class. It means the school can offer a rigorous curriculum based on German schools that she and her husband, Per, who is from Sweden, value highly. "The concept I love," she said.

But the risk inherent in a new charter school makes her nervous. "I'm scared to death about it," she said. She has enrolled Olivia in other schools for the fall as a precaution.

Two charter schools in the Twin Cities have closed this school year. In January, eight of 105 charter schools made the state's watch list, compiled to keep an eye on schools' financial conditions. The list also included 18 of the state's 378 public school districts.

Bausman-Watkins and Zachmeier-Ruh — both of whom are longtime language teachers and administrators — are confident their school will be a success, and both have signed up their own children.

Beyond the interest in German in particular, they say, parents are attracted to the value of immersion education generally.

Every immersion program Bausman-Watkins has talked to in Minnesota has a wait list, she said, and she and other advocates cite test data indicating kids educated in immersion programs score at or above the level of their peers in their home districts and statewide.

Language immersion challenges children in a way that is developmentally appropriate, said Zachmeier-Ruh. The idea is that when kids have to figure out what the teacher is saying in a new language, their problem-solving abilities and other cognitive skills are boosted.

The school will use a total-immersion curriculum, meaning all teaching is done in German from the first day of kindergarten on. Instruction in English language arts is introduced in third grade, and starting in sixth grade, the teaching is half in English, half in German.

"We're really excited" to be able to offer language immersion to kids in grade school, said Bausman-Watkins, "an age when the brain is a bit more plastic.

"(It's) a dream come true," she said.

BY THE NUMBERS

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In addition to the Twin Cities German Immersion School, two others are being added this fall: a Spanish-immersion program in Eden Prairie and a charter school in Worthington that will combine Spanish, English and a third language.

Outside of immersion programs, many schools offer instruction in various languages at the elementary level. In St. Paul, for instance, French, Spanish, German, Hmong, Ojibwe and Dakota are offered for elementary students in the public school system. Those languages, plus American Sign Language, Chinese, Japanese, Latin and Russian, are available in the higher grades.

Sources: Tara Fortune, immersion projects coordinator at the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota; Lana Mahoney, social studies and world languages coach, St. Paul Public Schools.

FYI

For more information about Twin Cities German Immersion School, call 651-492-7106 or visit www.germanschool-mn.org.