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MEMO: Chart attached to the end of this article

'MULTILINGUALISM' PROMOTED RAVENSWOOD WANTS TO TAP STUDENTS' VARIED CULTURES

Trustees of the Ravenswood City Elementary District have a vision that someday students in the eight-school district will walk down the halls speaking not only English, but perhaps Tongan and Spanish as well.

District officials are capitalizing on the community's rich ethnic mix by embracing "multilingualism" as their new approach toward educating children.

"We want their lives and reality reflected in what they study," said Magdalena Fittoria, director of the district's bilingual/migrant education program. "We shouldn't have to wait for Cinco de Mayo or Black History month to study those cultures."

Superintendent Charlie Mae Knight said the move toward "multilingualism" would send an important message to families in the district that officials accept all languages and cultures.

Among other things, multilingualism would encourage teachers to incorporate elements of different cultures into the lessons they teach. But children wouldn't be the only ones learning about other races. District personnel also would be encouraged to learn Spanish or Tongan, so they can work more effectively with parents and students.

Such an undertaking seems a natural next step in Ravenswood, one of the most racially mixed districts in San Mateo County. According to 1992-'93 figures from the San Mateo County Office of Education, more than 80 percent of the students in the district are members of ethnic minorities. More than half of the students who attend Ravenswood's eight elementary schools are Hispanic, and more than one-third are black.

The approach is the product of eight months of work by the Task Force on Academic Excellence through Multilingual Education, a group with members from a wide circle of individuals, including teachers, parents, two Stanford professors and several school board members.

"It's definitely a positive step forward," said Todd Gaviglio, a third-grade teacher at Brentwood Oaks Elementary and member of the task force.

District officials said they hope to implement the multilingual concept in September but must first get board approval, which is expected this summer.

On the surface, the three pages of recommendations seem hardly revolutionary. In fact, many of them are viewed as an attempt to formalize practices already being done in the district, Fittoria said.

For example, while the district already hires bilingual teachers and staff members, there is not a set policy for doing so. Task force members also hope to set formal standards for identifying students with limited English proficiency.

But the document contains new recommendations, including an emphasis on foreign language education for students who already speak English. While foreign language is offered in Ravenswood schools, and several elementary schools throughout the county, it's not required that students take it, superintendent Knight said. If the task force's recommendations are accepted the hope is that it eventually would become a requirement in Ravenswood, she added.

Tapping the diversity

Task force members hope to encourage schools to offer Tongan, Spanish and other language courses, a move which Fittoria said will help take advantage of the district's diversity.

"The multilingual concept demonstrates a respect for the child's native language," added Ruben Abrica, the school board member who chaired the task force. "We don't want to tell kids not to

... speak their native language, we want to teach them that it's OK, but also emphasize the importance of learning another."

A recent survey showed that almost 52 percent of the students in the district speak Spanish in the home, 37 percent English and 6 percent Tongan.

Stanford Professor John Baugh said Ravenswood's approach is one many educational reformers are advocating.

"For many years people were overtly discouraged from maintaining their first language," he said. "To be American was to learn to speak English. But now reformers are recognizing the importance of preserving the native language."

A different distinction

Members of the task force concede the concept of "multilingual" is similar to "bilingual" education, where the emphasis is on teaching the child in primary language while also offering English education. But, they add, the new term more accurately portrays what they're trying to accomplish.

"Generally you think of bilingual education as Spanish/English, we like the multilingual concept because it says we embrace the idea of not just two languages but many," Fittoria said.

Officials at the district are also hoping to make schools a more comfortable place for parents to visit.

"We want them to feel like they have access to staff and administrators without language being a barrier," Fittoria said. She said if the recommendations are accepted, the school will make more of an effort to send notices home in as many languages as needed. Currently notices are sent home in English, Spanish and if resources permit, Tongan.

"The thing is that it's building on the strengths of the children," Abrica said about the new approach. "In a multilingual population, the goal is to develop multilingual children."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED Copies of the multilingual task force's recommendations are available at the Ravenswood School District offices 2160 Euclid Ave. in East Palo Alto. The recommendations are available in English, Spanish and Tongan.

SPOKEN HERE The languages primarily spoken at home by the 4,277 students in the Ravenswood district: ... Spanish 51.6% English 37.2% Tongan 5.8% Hindi 2.1% Samoan 1.6% Other 1.8% Source: Ravenswood City Elementary School District

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