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The case for dual language education

Rabia Hos and Erin L. Papa

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More than one in five Rhode Island residents speak a language other than English at home. Rhode Island employers across sectors recognize the value and critical importance of a multilingual workforce — for international trade, health care, education, and careers we have yet to imagine. Rhode Island is failing to capitalize on this potential.

English learners (ELs) represent the fastest growing student population in Rhode Island. According to Rhode Island Department of Education's student census, Rhode Island's EL and monitor population has grown from 9,683 students in 2012 to 13,593 students in 2017, a 40 percent increase over a five-year period.

The top six languages spoken by ELs are: Spanish, Portuguese-based Creoles, Arabic, Portuguese, Mayan languages, and Chinese, many of which are key languages for the Rhode Island economy. Although the research is clear that dual language (DL) is the only program model for ELs that closes the achievement gap (Thomas & Collier, 2012), only 1 percent of Rhode Island ELs are enrolled in DL programs.

In a 2017 report from the Annie Casey Foundation, Latino children in Rhode Island were found to be last in the nation in terms of progress on the national and state levels in key education, health and economic milestones. While not all Latinos are receiving EL services, the vast majority are bilingual or multilingual when they enter Rhode Island schools, yet are losing their home languages through our public education system.

This news is not new for Rhode Island. The question is, are we going to act?

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We urge Rhode Island to commit to developing our languages and providing pathways to multilingualism for all students. Teaching our children multiple languages starting early in Pre-K or kindergarten is a great investment that will increase their competitiveness in an increasingly global economy.

We have seen an increased emphasis on certifying Rhode Island teachers to work with English learners, which is positive. Yet there has been minimal emphasis from the state on preparing dual language immersion/bilingual education teachers, who teach all academic subjects in a partner language. Dual language programs serve all students, regardless of special needs, native language, or ability.

In two-way immersion programs, about half of the students are native speakers of English and half are native speakers of the "partner" (non-English) language, as in the DL programs in Providence public schools. In one-way programs, most students in the classroom are new to the partner language, as in the South Kingstown DL program.

For every seat in a dual language classroom in Rhode Island, there are two children vying for that seat. Students in only nine out of 306 Rhode Island public schools are currently enrolled in dual language immersion programs leading to full bilingualism and biliteracy.

Rhode Island has the opportunity to capitalize on its linguistic and cultural strengths and position itself as an educational leader, preparing its youth for careers in the global economy. Rhode Island has made record investments in education with the expansion of career and technical education, computer science for all, and early childhood education programs. Now it is time to ensure that all Rhode Island students have access to a multilingual education. The state's future depends on it!

We can start by supporting the World Language and Dual Language Immersion Act (S-0198 and H-5192). These bills would establish a dual language program fund and a world language and dual language immersion specialist position at the Rhode

Island Department of Education to lead and coordinate efforts across the state. Join us to advocate for state-level support for these changes at the State House on April 23, from 3 to 5 p.m.

Rabia Hos, of East Greenwich, is an assistant professor of education at the University of Rhode Island. Erin L. Papa, of Providence, is an assistant education professor at Rhode Island College. Both are members of the Rhode Island Foreign Language Association.