Honoring Language, Building a Camino: The Evolution of a Dual Language Program

by Dr. Alberto Carrero—Director of Multilingual Education and Ana Lynn Romero—Bilingual Program Lead, Chelsea Public Schools, Chelsea, MA

Chelsea, MA is a city of roughly 40,000 residents, nestled along the Mystic River, just across the Tobin Bridge from Boston. But geography alone does not define Chelsea. Its story is one of migration, resilience, and esperanza.

Long before it became Chelsea, the land known as Winnisimmet was stewarded by the Naumkeag people. Over the centuries, Chelsea has been shaped by successive waves of immigrants who transformed this small city (2.2sq miles!) into one of the most linguistically and culturally dynamic communities in Massachusetts. Families have arrived from all over the world: England, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Bosnia, Eastern Europe, Puerto Rico, México, América Central, Somalia, Ethiopia, Morocco, Afghanistan, Iraq and countless other countries. Each generation came seeking something similar: seguridad, oportunidad, and a better future for themselves and their children.



Chelsea High School graduates beam with pride.

Today, nearly three-quarters of Chelsea Public Schools students speak a language other than English at home. It is not uncommon to hear Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, and many other languages spoken in our hallways. For us, multiculturalism is not a novelty –it's who we are. Nuestra diversidad es nuestra fortaleza.

That identity has challenged us to continually ask an important question: How do we create schools that honor every language and every culture our students bring with them while preparing them to thrive in an increasingly globalized world?

The answer has not come easily and has evolved over time.

Seeing Our Students Differently

My name is Dr. Alberto Carrero. I recently participated in a mock interview with one of our sophomore students. As we practiced common interview questions, I asked her to describe her greatest strength.

Without hesitation, she smiled and replied, "I am very determined. When I set my mind to something, I don't stop until I accomplish my goal."

Her response perfectly captured the spirit of the Chelsea community. Our students inherit the determination from their families: parents and grandparents who crossed borders, learned new languages, rebuilt their lives, and sacrificed everything so the next generation could have opportunities they could only dream of.

Yet there was one strength she never mentioned.

¡Su bilingüismo!

Spanish is her first language, but she hesitated to identify it as an asset. In today's climate, where speaking another language or identifying as Hispanic can sometimes make young people feel vulnerable to misunderstanding or prejudice, I understood why she focused instead on her determination.

As educators, our responsibility extends beyond teaching reading, mathematics, history, and science. We must also help students understand that their language, culture, and lived experiences are sources of strength. When students develop pride in who they are, they develop confidence in what they CAN become. That belief has guided the evolution of the Caminos Dual Language Program at Chelsea Public Schools (CPS). *—continued on page 7—*

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The Roots of a Vision and Mindshift

CPS offers three instructional programs designed to meet the diverse needs of multilingual learners, including Caminos, our Spanish English two-way dual language program.

Years ago, former Superintendent Dr. Mary Bourque identified expanding dual language education beyond the elementary as a district priority, recognizing that the linguistic strength of Chelsea's students represented one of the community's greatest assets. The goal was never simply to help students learn English. The goal is to develop bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural graduates who could desenvolverse in multiple contexts with confidence.

That vision planted the seed.

Its greatest growth has taken place during the tenure of Superintendent Dr. Almi G. Abeyta over the past five years. What began as a successful elementary dual language program initially serving approximately 200 students, has expanded into a comprehensive dual language pathway serving nearly 900 students across elementary, middle, and now high school. That growth reflects much more than increasing enrollment. It represents an evolution in how our district understands bilingual education. Instead of viewing multilingualism as something students bring to school, we now see it as something schools must nurture.

Evolution Through Expansion

As Caminos expanded, so did our aspirations. District leaders began asking different questions: How can we ensure students continued developing literacy in both Spanish and English beyond elementary school? How could we provide equitable opportunities for newcomer multilingual learners? How could we create a seamless educational experience that honored bilingualism from kindergarten through graduation?

During the 2023 school year, those conversations intensified as district leaders explored expanding the dual language pathway through eighth grade, while simultaneously redesigning one of our middle schools into a fully dual language campus. Naturally, there were many concerns that needed to be met de frente:

Staffing: Who would like to take part in this process? How can they be supported?

Scheduling: What will the master schedule look like? How can the school accommodate this?

Curriculum: Not available unless it is teacher created.

Resources: What do we still need? What is missing?

Yet despite the challenges of creating a K-8 pathway, the Office of Multilingual Education was already asking an even bigger question: ¿Por qué detenernos en octavo grado?
We needed to create opportunities for our students to continue developing as bilinguals in high school.

With the support of district leadership and in partnership with Dual Language Education of New Mexico (DLeNM), Chelsea Public Schools is committed to building a comprehensive K-12 dual-language pathway.

Investing in Educators

The success of a dual language program depends not only on students, but also on the educators who bring its vision to life each day. Becoming an effective dual language teacher is not something that happens overnight simply because an educator is bilingual. High-quality dual language instruction requires specialized knowledge of bilingual language development, biliteracy, culturally and linguistically sustainable pedagogy, curriculum design, and instructional practices that intentionally cultivate proficiency in two languages.

Recognizing this, Chelsea Public Schools has made a purposeful investment in developing the expertise of its educators alongside the growth of Caminos. Teachers across the district have or are currently working towards the credentials and licenses necessary to strengthen their practice as bilingual educators, curriculum designers, and instructional leaders, and they participate in focused professional learning in best instructional practices.

As our teachers continue to grow as learners, they create richer learning experiences for students, strengthen bilingual instruction across grade levels, and ensure that the program continues to evolve with fidelity, while adapting to new opportunities and challenges. The impact of this sustained

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investment in educators is already evident in our students' success.

Ending the Desierto Bilingüe

My name is Ana Lynn Romero. As a Chelsea High School alumna and Spanish teacher for the past nineteen years. I have spent a large part of my career working with multilingual students. For much of my career, I have wondered what happened to the students after they exited the elementary Caminos program. I referred to those years as el desierto bilingüe.



CPS has made a purposeful investment in developing the expertise of its educators.

Besides having them take courses in the Spanish for Heritage Speakers program and then an AP course when they finally reached high school, what else could we offer them?

Working alongside Dr. Mishelle Jurado of DLeNM and Spanish teachers in the World Languages Department, we have collaboratively developed the first iteration of a rigorous progression of coursework that prepares students to go from Pre-AP Spanish Language and Culture to AP Spanish Literature and Culture. This sequence ensures that students can continue strengthening their bilingüismo and biliteracy throughout high school. This pathway has also allowed us to build interdisciplinary partnerships with ELA and other disciplines.

Chelsea High School now offers Honors Biology and Music in Spanish allowing students to engage in foundational academic content while nurturing or expanding both languages. Students now have a clear pathway to graduate fully bilingual and biliterate by the end of the 2028-2029 school year.

The Measure of Success

It is difficult to quantify success, but easy to spot the impact of this work.

Just three years ago, approximately 30 Chelsea High School graduates earned the Massachusetts Seal of Biliteracy. Now over each of the past two years, that number has nearly doubled to 60 graduates. As the K-12 pathway continues to expand, our goal is for approximately 150 students each year to graduate with the Seal, demonstrating proficiency in English and Spanish while opening doors to college, careers, and civic leadership opportunities.

Those numbers are important, but the most meaningful measure of success cannot be captured in data alone. To us success is watching first graders proudly read their first books in two languages. Success is listening to middle school students debate complex ideas in English and Spanish. Success is seeing high school students conduct scientific investigations and experiments, analyzing literature from multiple perspectives, and graduating knowing they never have to leave any part of themselves behind.

Honoring Language, Building a Camino

The evolution of Caminos is ultimately not a story about enrollment growth or course expansion. It is a story of a district evolving alongside the community it serves. It is the story of educators who refuse to see bilingualism as a deficit and instead recognize it as one of our students' greatest strengths, of families whose languages and cultures are no longer viewed as something to be preserved at home, but an integral part of academic excellence. And it is the story of students beginning to understand that every language they speak expands the opportunities available to them.

When Dr. Carrero thinks back to that sophomore preparing for her interview he hopes that if he'd asked her the same question before her graduation, she would still tell him she is determined. But he also hopes she will proudly add something she didn't say that first day: "Soy bilingüe."

Because in Chelsea, bilingualism is more than a skill. It is our history. It is our identity. Es nuestro presente, y, sobre todo, es nuestro futuro.