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MINO- GIGIZHEB



The secret **SUPERPOWER** of being bilingual from an early age

BY SANDRA GUZMÁN AND CLAUDIA M. CARUANA

When Max Saunders came home from his first day in kindergarten, he remembers being confused and flustered. "I had no idea what the teacher was saying all day," he recalls with a laugh. His parents had placed him in an immersive Spanish-language program at Rock Creek Forest Elementary School in Chevy Chase, Md. As part of the program, all the instruction — reading, arts, math and even playtime — was done in Spanish. Saunders, who grew up in a monolingual home, only spoke English. >

“

I definitely feel that being bilingual has helped me think quicker, clearer — like its has expanded the way I see the world, maybe even given me a secret superpower.”

— MAX SAUNDERS,
rising senior at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School



MAX
SAUNDERS

“By the third grade, I spoke better than my mom, who used to struggle to help me with homework,” he gushes. Today, the rising senior at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School is fully bilingual and he thanks his parents for encouraging him to continue studying Spanish.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population speaks more than one language at home. That number almost tripled in three decades from 23 million in 1980 to nearly 68 million in 2019 and it is certain to grow.

In the fall of 2023, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona launched “Being Bilingual is a Super Power,” an initiative to promote multilingual education, bolster high-quality language programs and increase the diverse multilingual educator workforce across the country.

“Make no mistake: Multilingualism is a superpower.

Knowing more than one language, acquiring a new language through school, or learning new languages later in life can provide tangible academic, cognitive, economic and sociocultural advantages,” U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said at the time of the announcement. “As our nation continues to grow more diverse, and as our global economy becomes more interconnected, we cannot seize our nation’s full potential to compete and lead the world unless we raise the bar and provide all students with opportunities to become multilingual.”

As part of the initiative, priority was given for the preservation and revitalization of Native American languages. The Department of Education awarded \$33.2 million to Native Hawaiian educational and community-based organizations. It also awarded nearly \$2 million in grants under the Native American and Alaska Native Children in School Program.

LANGUAGE RECOGNITION

The nonprofit Californians Together, a coalition of education, civil rights, parent, community and advocacy organizations, developed the concept of a Seal of Biliteracy in 2008 and worked throughout California to help school districts implement it.

The program “was created to recognize and honor the many languages spoken by California’s students and to create a new narrative on the benefits of bilingualism and the assets our students and families bring to our schools, community and the state,” according to Tamara Orozco, senior communications manager of the Long Beach, Calif.-based organization.

The Seal of Biliteracy recognizes that a student has attained a certain level of proficiency in two or more languages. It is typically awarded in the form of a certificate and can be used as a credential to convey a student’s achievement.

Legislation passed in 2011 made California the first to establish a state-level seal of biliteracy. Earlier this year, South Dakota became the 50th state to offer the seal. Washington, D.C., also offers this recognition.

According to Orozco, nearly 73,000 graduates in 2021 earned the California state seal, more than any in previous years.

“Every seal awarded sends a message that multilingualism is not a deficit but a symbol of academic excellence, cultural richness and career potential,” Orozco says.

She adds: “Mastering fluency in one of the 41 different languages represented is a tremendous accomplishment for any student. Bilingual students do better academically in English and their home language, have better college-going and completion rates, are preferred by employers and for language heritage students (it helps) to maintain strong connections to their family members, >

BY THE NUMBERS



20

percent

of the U.S. population speaks more than one language at home

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau



\$33.2

million

in federal funding was awarded to Native Hawaiian educational and community organizations

SOURCE:
Department of Education

language and culture.”

Saunders received his gold-seal certificate in the spring, a year before graduation, and he could not be prouder.

“It was a long and rigorous test, but because I have been studying and speaking Spanish since I was in kindergarten, I was confident I would pass,” he says.

BILINGUALISM HELPS A CHILD’S BRAIN

Numerous medical studies show multilingual proficiency can strengthen brain functions such as memory and problem-solving and may help forestall the development of dementia-related conditions.

A study on bilingualism led by research scientist Naja Ferjan Ramírez at the Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences at the University of Washington compared the brain response to language sounds of babies from monolingual and bilingual households. The most obvious difference they saw was in two brain regions associated with executive function — the prefrontal cortex and orbitofrontal cortex. In these regions, the babies in Spanish-English bilingual households had stronger brain responses to speech sounds, compared with those in English-only households.

“The boost bilingualism gives to executive function areas in the brain could arise from bilinguals needing to switch back and forth between languages, allowing them to routinely practice and improve executive function skills,” says Ferjan Ramírez.

Saunders confirms the findings. “I am always thinking in two languages and toggling back and forth. Sometimes I even dream in Spanish,” he says.



A SUPERPOWER THAT KEEPS GIVING

Fluency in more than one language can also help students’ future earning potential.

According to Salary.com, bilingual workers are paid on average 5 percent to 10 percent more than their monolingual co-workers.

Carola Otero Bracco, executive director of the Westchester, N.Y.-based nonprofit Neighbors Link, stresses that the immigrant bilingual learners her organization serves want to be active members of their new communities and that



mastering English is a priority for them and their children.

Bracco says that it is not uncommon for some young people to downplay their home language or bilingualism due to cultural assimilation pressures, societal norms or individual preferences.

“By creating inclusive environments that value and validate multilingualism, we can empower individuals to embrace and showcase their linguistic identities confidently,” she says.

Saunders agrees. “I definitely feel that being bilingual has helped me think quicker, clearer — like it has expanded the way I see the world, maybe even given me a secret superpower.” ■

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