Juan Verdugo has been torn this school year.

The principal of East Memorial Elementary School and a native Spanish speaker, Verdugo remembers being humiliated at school for not knowing English. He was immersed in the language, learning it because he had to. But it was emotionally troubling for him.

When he became principal, he hoped that a popular dual-language program would ensure that his Spanish-speaking students would not be embarrassed like he was. He envisioned a school where English and Spanish speakers were taught in the same classroom, with each group learning the other's languages and cultures while focusing on academics.

For years the program has faced challenges. Native English speakers have been transferring to other schools, and now the majority of students in the program speak Spanish. State and federal laws require that students become fluent in English and be tested in the language after one year.

Verdugo came to a difficult conclusion this year: The way English was being taught at the school was not working. Students needed to learn English faster.

"I've always been a supporter of bilingual education," Verdugo said. "I also believe there's a reality to everything. The fact is that there are mandates we must meet."

Verdugo's decision to halt the dual-language program is being felt all over Greeley-Evans School District 6. The district knew it would have to make changes when it was placed on a state watch list for poor-performing districts. District reports and statistics show that finding the right formula for teaching English language-learners will be vital to the district's success.

The key, however, will be finding that formula in today's politically and emotionally charged atmosphere.

How bad is it?

English language-learners in District 6 aren't performing up to par, even when compared
to other English learners across the state. A look at the performance of these students produces some sobering realities:

» State analysis of test scores show that English language-learners in District 6 are performing 12 to 18 percentage points below other English learners across the state.

» District studies show that in 2005, 51 percent of English language-learning students showed no improvement or declined in their English skills.

» An audit of academic programs found no consistency in the way English language-learners are taught in the district. Depending on which school the English-learners attend, they may be spending most of their day speaking Spanish or English. In rare cases, the audit team found native English speaking students who were being taught almost entirely in Spanish.

» Even though some of the programs were originally designed to be dual-language -- where half of the students speak English and half of the students speak Spanish -- the demographics of these programs show they are made up primarily of Spanish speakers.

District 6 Superintendent Renae Dreier said the situation must improve.

"Those children are not hearing English at home and to get to school and not learn English means that we are not giving them access to the tools they need to be successful," she said.

The district is working on a plan to overhaul the way English is taught. The goal, Dreier said, will be to have a program this fall that is consistent from school to school and accelerates English skills. The plan will be completed by the end of April, she said.

Changes happening

A few schools are already making significant changes in the way they teach ELL students

Billie Martinez Elementary School, where English-learners made up 83 percent of enrollment 2004, has dramatically changed the way it teaches English. In the past, the school taught students mostly in Spanish their first years and then slowly transitioned them to English. Now that transition is much faster. In kindergarten, for example, English-learners used to spend 90 percent of their day learning in Spanish and 10 percent learning English. Now, half of their school day is taught in English. The school wants the students proficient in English by the third grade, when they first take the CSAP. But it still hopes students will keep their native Spanish.

"Our parent population really values having Spanish instruction for their students," said Martinez Principal Virginia Guzman. "While their goal is also to make sure their children are speaking English, they really value having both languages."
At East Memorial, where 69 percent of the students were English-learners in 2004, the changes are more dramatic. The school has had a dual-language program for several years and now is transitioning to total English immersion. In a survey distributed to East Memorial parents, many said their children were not learning the language fast enough, Verdugo said.

"Their concern was saying to me that they supported change," he said.

Students at East Memorial are taught in English and Spanish at the beginning of the school year but have transitioned to an English-only model. Only a single third-grade class is being taught in Spanish, and that class will change to English this spring, as soon as students finish taking the CSAP.

What works best?

The debate in District 6 has been mirrored across the state and country. Last week, three Weld residents -- including County Commissioner Bill Jerke -- started the process for a ballot initiative that would require Colorado schools to limit bilingual education. If it happens, the initiative would be much like California's 1998 Proposition 227, when schools there were required to teach almost exclusively in English.

Some educators worry this kind of political pressure forces decisions that are based on popular opinion rather than what is best for the students.

"That makes it a harder situation for the kids," said Carolann DeSelms, a professor of modern languages at Marymount College in Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif. "They are seen as a threat or a nuisance."

There still is no consensus. Many studies tend to be inconclusive about the best method for teaching English, and experts are duking it out on both sides of the debate.

the Benefits of immersion

The practice of English immersion has changed significantly from old horror stories of students being punished for muttering a Spanish word.

What is happening in many schools now, including East Memorial and in the Aurora public school system, is a kind of teaching called sheltered or structured immersion. In this type of immersion, teachers speak in English but use teaching strategies, such as often repeating what they say. Students taught this way learn their regular course work, like reading and math, while still learning the English language.

In an environment like this, students quickly pick up the language, said Christina Bosemark, founder of the multilingual children's association and co-founder of a Swedish-language immersion school in San Francisco.
At her school, students usually are speaking the language within three to six months, she children go through this process, she is convinced that it is the best way to learn the language.

"If you put them in a Spanish-speaking program, then, yes, it will help them learn academics, but it will put them further and further behind in the language," she said. "If the ultimate goal is to learn English, then they have to get as much exposure to English as possible."

Benefits of bilingual education

The term "bilingual education" can encompass everything from receiving some Spanish instruction during a day to being taught all core subjects in the language. District 6 schools vary in the amount of Spanish used, but most use the language to teach reading skills so the kids can build a foundation in their native language.

The theory behind bilingual education is that if Spanish speakers learn to read in their native language first, those skills will translate into English.

If properly implemented, the model is effective, said DeSelms.

"There needs to be some sort of bilingual education to ease the students into English for social and learning reasons," she said. "Socially, if you feel your language is de-valued, that gives you a negative attitude toward school. Just immersion and forgetting about the other language is not the best way."

The trick is that bilingual education needs to be implemented correctly, she said. If students get too much English, it can be frustrating. If they are taught too much Spanish, it may slow down their English skills.

"There needs to be a bit of both," DeSelms said. "The children need to be weaned into English."

In District 6, Madison Elementary uses this model. Students there learn their core skills in Spanish while still working on their English. By third grade, most of the students are fluent in English. Out of all of the bilingual education schools in the district, Madison was the only one that reached its federally mandated goals.

Where do we go from here?

District 6 is still working to determine the best way to teach its English learners, but the process of finding the right fit won't be easy or without public pressure.

Last year, Crawford Elementary in Aurora discontinued a popular dual-language program because there were not enough English learners. Crawford parents were so angry that many opted their children out of CSAP.
"Parents are passionate about these issues," said Laura Munro, Aurora's director of student achievement for diverse learners. "Communication with stakeholders is crucial."

The perfect program for District 6 may be impossible to find.

The California Department of Education recently received a report designed to determine if the state's Proposition 227 improved the way that students learned English. Two nonpartisan research agencies were hired and after the five-year, $2.5 million study, there was one definitive conclusion: There is no best way for teaching English learners.

The study found failures and successes of both bilingual and immersion programs.

"It appears that we have been arguing all these years over slight, or no, differences between bilingual versus immersion approaches," the study states. "We conclude that Proposition 227 focused on the wrong issue."

Dreier said District 6 is working with parents and community members to find the best solution. In the end, she promises, the district will use the best method for the kids.

"We will use a research-based program that won't be based on what people like or what's popular," she said.

WHAT'S NEXT

The Greeley-Evans School District 6 school board will be presenting the district's strategic plan to the Colorado Department of Education at Monday's school board meeting at 7 p.m. in the district administration building, 1025 9th Ave. The plan is one of the first steps to getting off of an academic watch list.

Dual-language program didn't work as expected

Maria Sanchez-Traynor
March 26, 2006

The idea sounded great.

Some schools in Greeley-Evans School District 6 would teach English- and Spanish-speaking students together in the same classroom. Students' time would be divided between the two languages, and they could learn academics while mastering a second language.
Four schools received federal grants to pay for the dual-language programs.

The school district's enthusiasm for the programs was quoted in the Tribune:

"When we did the research, we found the Rolls-Royce was the dual-language programs," said Jorge Garcia, former District 6 director of bilingual programs, in 2001. "We wanted to be more inclusive rather than excluding English speakers. Why would we settle for a Yugo?"

The problem was the Rolls-Royce in District 6 was a bit of a lemon.

Angela Goetz sent her English-speaking daughter, Ariel, to the dual-language program at East Memorial Elementary School. Goetz hoped that Ariel would become a fluent Spanish speaker. Goetz was happy with her daughter's progress, but a few problems surfaced.

When Ariel had a hard time understanding an academic concept, the problem was compounded by the fact that she was learning it in a different language. Even though Ariel started school with about an equal number of English speakers, those numbers dwindled by the time she got to the fifth grade.

"Looking back now, it seemed that some of the kids struggled a bit," Goetz said.

Some District 6 principals now say the model dual-language program doesn't exist in Greeley. Programs that are supposed to have an equal number of English and Spanish speakers now are filled mostly with Spanish speakers.

"When dual-language started, you had to have at least a 50/50 model," said Juan Verdugo, East Memorial principal. "That's not happening in this school, and it is not happening here in Greeley."

Federal and state mandates have also gotten in the way, principals say. Schools used to take their time to teaching the language, but now the federal No Child Left Behind Act requires that students be tested in English a year after they enroll in school.

"As we were developing the program, the CSAP came along, and the testing has caused us to re-look at what we are doing," said Virginia Guzman, principal of Billie Martinez Elementary School, where the majority of students are native Spanish speakers. "We have moved away from our original vision, which was dual-language. The truth is that we've never had a true dual-language program in our building."

Experts say there can be successful dual-language programs if the schools adhere to the true model. For example, Harris Bilingual Elementary in Fort Collins pulls it off and earns a "high" rating on its school report card from the state. The school has a population composed of about half English and Spanish speakers and is 40 percent free and reduced lunch, the federal standard for poverty.
DISTRICT 6's LANGUAGE LEARNERS

«English language-learners make up 22 percent of student enrollment in the district.

« Of those students, 9 percent were born outside of the United States.

«In 2005, 51 percent of the students showed no growth in their English skills or declined.

«15 schools had to meet federal target goals for English language-learners. Most of the schools did not meet the targets.

«Of the five bilingual education elementary schools -- Billie Martinez, Bella Romero, East Memorial, Jefferson and Madison -- only Madison met its federal goals.