

English Language Learners enrich our schools

By Jeff Thielman

When parents talk about the benefits of Arlington schools, they often describe the friendships their children develop with students from different parts of the world.

Our location, in the midst of world-class universities and many high-technology industries, attracts many residents from abroad. As a result, Arlington is blessed with 180 English Language Learner (ELL) students. Many are sons and daughters of graduate students whose families will return to their native countries after a few years, some have parents whose careers have relocated them permanently to the United States, and others have lived in Arlington for more than a generation but are being raised in bilingual and bicultural households.

Last year 38 children entering kindergarten were in the ELL program, and another 40 kindergarten students were English speakers from homes where the first language is not English. Enrollments so far this year indicate a similar trend. Town-wide, ELL students speak, read and write twenty-six languages and come from Japan, China, Korea, Greece, Russia and 20 other countries. Forty ELL students are from Japan, making Japanese the most popular second language in the Arlington Public Schools.

Since students learn from their peers as well as their teachers, the presence of ELL students in our schools presents a rich educational opportunity for Arlington's young people.

The ELL population is not a group that we elected officials naturally pay attention to because many of their parents cannot vote. In 2005, however, the state Department of Education determined that the district was not providing adequate services to children in ELL and Special Education programs.

The School Committee met with the new superintendent, Nate Levenson, and established a goal that required our district to correct the problems outlined in the state report. We brought in a new English Language Learner Program Director, Jill McCarthy, and in two short years she has been able to move Arlington forward. A state Department of Education official recently described Arlington as a "turn-around" district in regards the ELL program. This suggests great promise!

This school year the district will fulfill the last unmet state requirement by providing professional development to classroom teachers and others who work with ELL students. The program will give faculty new strategies for teaching students learning English as well as new ways to build literacy skills in all children. To date, 25 teachers have signed up for the training, which begins this month.

New teaching techniques will improve learning in our schools, but there is no better way for our children to prepare for the global economy than to befriend and learn from young people from a variety of cultures. Today's young people will have more opportunities

and a greater need than their parents to interact with people from different parts of the globe.

While ELL students learn English and absorb as much U.S. culture as possible, they can teach our English-speaking children about their home country through a history, current events or geography lesson. In some classrooms across our district, this is already happening.

Perhaps some of the 40 Japanese students in our schools will be invited to teach a few words of their native tongue to their classmates. Learning to count to ten or learning colors in Japanese or another language could lead some students to a deeper relationship with another culture.

Whether you are an American venturing abroad or a newcomer to Arlington from another country, navigating a new language and culture can be a humbling experience. With the aim of creating a positive learning experience for ELL and non-ELL students, Arlington's World Language Network (www.worldlanguagenetwork.org) has established a Family Partnerships program that connects local families with families from other nations, easing their introduction to our schools and the Arlington community.

World Language Network (WLN) volunteers provide critical support to the district's ELL program. Under the direction of WLN Board members Charlotte Pierce, Robin Zeltz, Judi Bohn, Hilary Rappaport and John Page, the group co-hosts monthly international games and social gatherings in collaboration with the Fox and Robbins Libraries. The group's website has many resources for practicing and learning English and other languages.

Back in second grade many years ago, I had to count to ten in Spanish for a small role in a class play. Memorizing and then reciting those numbers on an elementary school stage sparked a lifelong interest in the culture of Spain and Latin America. I studied Spanish in college, studied in Spain one summer, and lived for three years in Perú, where I maintain strong ties to this day.

If a small role in a class play had such a positive influence in my life, I can only imagine the opportunities that will unfold for students who attend Arlington's schools in the 21st century. By developing relationships with students and families from other nations, our children can have an educational experience that transforms their lives and ultimately makes the world a better place.

Jeff Thielman is a member of the Arlington School Committee