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Si, por favor: earlier Spanish instruction a go for Mounds View Schools

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After a year of study, board approves cost-neutral plan to add language to fourth- through eighth-grade curricula

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SHOREVIEW — It's official: starting in the 2009/2010 school year, Mounds View Schools will offer Spanish language classes for fourth- through eighth-graders.

The School Board unanimously approved the decision at its Jan. 28 meeting following comments from seven parents and each board member. The implementation plan (called "7-B" in previous discussions) was chosen out of eight options considered.

Superintendent Dan Hoverman said the decision, which took place after a year of study, involved a lot of different factors including a need for more "inclusivity."

"We need to understand other cultures ... and one of the best ways to do that is to study other languages," he said. "But we're trying to do that in a way that's cost-neutral, and that's no small task."

School officials have said the goal is to create a greater number of eighth-graders ready to take high school language courses and to retain the district's place among the top 11 in the state, based on ACT scores, number of National Merit semi-finalists and number of AP scholars. In the state's other top districts, an additional language is offered in elementary, middle school or both.

Up to now, the district has offered Spanish, French, German and American Sign Language — but only at the high school level. In December it added Mandarin Chinese to its high school offerings for 2009/2010.

Under the new plan, four quarters of Spanish will be required for all middle school students. Offerings in family and consumer sciences (FACS) will be eliminated and requirements in technical education, art, and business education will be reduced.

No curriculum areas will be eliminated or reduced at the elementary schools, although the "Unit Studies" program that includes social studies and science will be redesigned. Director of Curriculum & Instruction RoAnne Elliot said that after talking to district staff at length she's convinced the change won't be detrimental to either subject.

"I was very encouraged to talk with them (staff) and get that level of support," she said. "I am feeling really confident that we're going to have a strong unit studies program in place."

Spanish was chosen because it's so widely spoken, because enrollment is high at the high schools and because qualified teachers are more widely available, she said. Other languages considered were Chinese, Japanese, Arabic and Russian.

Comments at the meeting

Discussion of the language issue has had a mixed reception from parents throughout the process.

Before the vote, five parents present — Brenda Walter, Teri Nelson, Sonya Wilson, Susan Nord and Sarah Steil — shared their ideas about the benefits.

Steil, who teaches Spanish at a private school, said she realized when she lived abroad that it's much easier to learn a second language as a child. She and Nord said they're among about 20 Shoreview-area parents who carpool so their children can attend a Spanish immersion school (Lakes International Language Academy) in Forest Lake.

Becoming bilingual is "where the country is moving and where we all want to move as global citizens,"she said.

Stein, Walter and Nord all said their children would attend Mounds View Schools if it offered an earlier language program.

"We moved here for the schools,"Walter noted.

Nelson praised the district for neither making a quick decision nor "hacking into other curricula"to make it happen. She said the decision process has been transparent, with information about the issue's progress consistently posted on the district's Web site.

"(Learning other languages) is crucial at as early an age as can be supported,"she said. "In my experience parents are fearful that nothing will happen and that their repeated requests will be ignored."

Parent Bill Nara said he'd prefer to see the middle schools begin the new language program in 2010-2011 out of concern that the district "may lose students and teachers needlessly"if the curricula is changed. He indicated that he will support the board in its decision but "I'm still anxious about implementing this."

Parent John Hakes said not enough research was done on whether the addition will affect the elementary schools' science and social studies offerings. He said the language program should be supplementary or optional.

"How do we know unit studies won't be negatively impacted?"he asked. "Getting the science and social studies house in order should be the principal concern."

He argued that the new plan is too "lightweight"to allow students to become proficient in Spanish, that it requires students to make tough choices between middle school classes and that it's "totally uncreative."

"More students and parents will process this .. and make their dissent known,"he predicted. "I'm heartsick for the reduced academic choice for families and the unwanted staff changes this plan will bring."

Board Chairman Jon Tynjala said the board has listened to parent comments throughout the process.

"Your concerns were incorporated into the final option, and we hope you go away feeling that way,"he told the audience. "(The addition) is not simply for the high fliers and the best and the brightest, but for all students."

Board Vice Chairwoman Barb Bollum noted that the district will evaluate the new language program at the end of 2010 to "review what worked and what didn't and to continue to improve on it."

Hoverman thanked Elliot, members of the language advisory committee and the teachers and parents who provided input during the decision-making process.

About the plan at the middle school level:

Over three years:

- Four quarters of Spanish will be required for all students
- FACS will be eliminated at all three middle schools

- Tech Ed. requirements will be reduced by one quarter at all three schools
- Art requirements will be reduced by one quarter at Chippewa Middle School only
- Business Ed. requirements will be reduced by one quarter at all three schools
- Students who choose not to participate in band, orchestra or choir may elect extra Spanish courses
- Course offerings not impacted include reading, language arts, math, science, social studies, physical education, health, band, orchestra and choir.
- The FTEs (full-time equivalent jobs) for allied arts teachers will be reduced to allow for the addition of world language staff.

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