

Installment #2 of Superintendent Alberto M. Carvalho's column for NABE newsletter.

### **Defining the Term "Bilingual"**

If you are reading this article, "Bilingual" is a term that is close to your heart because of your involvement with NABE, the National Association of Bilingual Educators. The term is often used colloquially to refer to someone who speaks more than one language. Dictionary.com holds the term "bilingual" to a much tougher standard, defining bilingual as "able to speak two languages with the facility of a native speaker". That's a pretty steep standard, and of course it is the dream of many language teachers, to educate their students in such a way that they sound like a native Spaniard, Francophile, or Italian.

How fluent does a person have to be to be considered "bilingual"? Can they switch from one language to another without effort? Did they grow up speaking two languages? Or are they simply able to communicate well in both languages?

In South Florida, many companies look to hire "bilingual" employees. The candidates who apply are often at different proficiency levels, some who are quite talented in one language and have a smattering of another language, others who are very able to communicate fluently in two languages. This is why at Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS), we have increased efforts to provide bilingual education over the years, and as a result of School Board policy efforts led by Chair Perla Tabares Hantman, we created Seal of Bilingual Literacy that is awarded to high school graduates who attain a high level of competency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in one or more foreign languages in addition to English.

We are finding that being considered bilingual has different meanings for different people. Some people who speak a language perfectly don't see themselves as bilingual because they don't live in a country that speaks that language, so they don't experience the culture, humor and social nuances that go along with being a resident. Others—the more optimistic—feel they are bilingual from the moment they can express themselves in another language regardless of the degree of competence.

I was born in Europe, where it is common for people to speak several languages, often in different degrees of fluency. I grew up speaking Portuguese and French, but over the years, with different interactions and circumstances, I have learned to speak Spanish, Italian, and English, too—to some degree. Presently, I am working on learning Latin, and yes, I know it is a dead language. "Per aspera ad astra." \*

What we do know is that approximately 50 percent of the world's population can use two languages with equal fluency. Fifty-six percent of Europeans and 35 percent of Canadians are considered bilingual. It is estimated that fewer than 22 percent of Americans in the U.S. can conduct a conversation in more than one language. The Census Bureau reports that roughly 41 million people speak Spanish at home, therefore 22 percent is relatively low when Spanish is considered to be the second most spoken

language in the world, with about 400 million speakers. (Chinese/Mandarin, with variations, is the most spoken language in the world, with 1.3 billion speakers.)

Putting aside the fact that bilingualism is difficult to define and identify, it is most important to understand that people learn another language because they want to communicate with someone—family, co-workers, friends. They want to understand and to be understood. Ultimately, being ‘bilingual’ leads to personal enrichment, ties together cultures and generations, increases job opportunities, improves memory, gives children academic advantages and makes it easier to learn a third language.

At M-DCPS, we strive to provide curriculum leadership and instructional support for the development of literacy in English and other languages, in order to positively impact student achievement and promote lifelong learning. Through academic offerings, we aim to help students become bilingual, communicating orally and in writing in English and in another language with proficiency commensurate with their experiential and educational level, age, and interests.

\*Translation: Through hardship to the stars.