

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hello, everybody, I am so excited to be joined today by Brianna Smit, English Learners Coordinator at the Eau Claire Area School District. Thank you so much for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me.

**Brianna Smit**

You're welcome.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. So first it would be great if you could just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you arrived at your current position.

**Brianna Smit**

Yeah, so I have been in my current position for seven years. I've been in education for — this is my 14th year in the education field. I started my I guess, I think love for language back in my school district. My elementary school was like, back in the day when they had magnet schools, it was a magnet school that focused on languages. So I was exposed to languages at like an early age, very general, you know, generic colors, numbers, but I think it kind of spurred that passion of mine. And so I took Spanish through middle school and through high school, and then I was a Spanish minor in college, I studied abroad in Spain, and just really have kind of always had a passion for languages and other cultures. And so I went to school, for elementary education, and with the Spanish minor. And then after getting out in the field for a couple years, I realized that I kind of wanted to narrow my focus a little bit more. I went back and added on my TESOL, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, which kind of landed me where I am now in my 14th year. So that's what brought me here kind of always had a love for languages. And that just kind of came out more, you know, as my life went on.

**Claire Darmstadter**

So let's first start with Eau Claire's new dual language programming. And so can you talk us through what was the impetus to start this? And what was the research that went into deciding how you're going to structure the program?

**Brianna Smit**

Yeah, so the, actually, so we are in our second year of the program, with having students in the building. We have kindergarten in first grade in place right now. It was actually brought to our school district by our school board. We were very lucky to have a very diverse school board. And we had someone from our local university who was a professor, he's no longer there anymore, in Latin American Studies, and he brought forward why we don't have this type of programming in our school district. So initiated from a school board request just for our school district to look into this type of programming to see if it's something we could offer. And that's when it kind of got brought to me just with my background with working with our English learner program. And so, next steps were and this was two years before we even had the program up and running, we put together a committee, so a team of people, and we went and did some site visits at other school districts. So we went over and we visited the Menasha and Appleton area

and visited their programs. And then we also visited a program in Winona, Minnesota, as well, just to get a kind of initially to see what does it look like? What does it sound like? Hear from the people that are actually doing it every day, what do they see that is beneficial to the students, what have been some barriers or roadblocks as they've been implementing their program. So we just got a lot of really useful information from those tours. And then we added a committee where we, our dual immersion committee included family members from our district. We had community members, we had somebody from our local university and our technical college on it. And then the Eau Claire community also has a community group called El Centro de Conexión, and we had somebody from that group as well be a part of it. And so the committee's work was really to dig into the research. And so I would find all the research and then share it with them. And we researched different programming models to kind of decide, you know, what programming model would be a best fit for our district, what could we do with fidelity? We did land on a 50/50 2-way program model, but we did look at all that, you know, a 90/10, we looked at 1-way, we looked at different models, and that was what the committee recommended that we move forward as a district. And so the committee really kind of drove the work. We just wanted to make sure we had various voices, you know, represented on the committee. And then from there, it was about a year process of us going to our school board to get approval to move forward with the programming.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

And can you talk about how you rolled this out to the parents and families, because we know that it's a great program and it can be really beneficial for the majority of students, but at first thought, like, logically, I guess you could say, okay, two languages, you're dividing the time, most would think that that wouldn't support language development. But we actually know that it's quite the opposite. So how did you kind of walk through this with parents? And are there any big misconceptions or myths that you really wanted to be sure that you addressed when you're speaking to them?

### **Brianna Smit**

Yeah. So when we shared with the board, we, right away went over three of the, you know, three big misconceptions with language. You know, one of the misconceptions of it is that it's actually going to delay students' learning. And so we kind of went over that, we went over the research that backed it up, we talked about brain development, to kind of help clear up some of those misconceptions as well, especially with the younger age and the flexibility of the brain, and how easy it is for children to it's, there's a natural, you know, for brains to pick up languages so much quicker at a younger age. So we use a lot of the research to help clear up the misconceptions. Another misconception that a lot of our families had was, if my child speaks Spanish, they have to be in this program. And so we cleared that misconception up that it's a choice for every family. It is a lottery-based program, but it's not forced on any child. We do recommend it as the best fit for some of our families when we have families who move here and the child only speaks Spanish. And we do have that program model available. We do try to do some education with the family on how it would benefit their child in terms of bilingualism and biliteracy, but the families always get the choice. So we really tried to do a lot of education on the choice for all the families. And our community, we did not have any issues having families

whose children are monolingual English speakers enter into the program. We had quite the waitlist, actually, the education — the big lift was with our Spanish speaking families. We had quite a few who were hesitant for a couple reasons. One, it was a brand new program, they hadn't heard anything like this before. Two, they want their children to learn English and they feel that in order for their child to, you know, thrive in our community, they need to understand and speak and read in English. And so there was a lot of education on how we will not only make sure that their children are, you know, literate in English and can speak English proficiently. But we're also going to help them maintain their first language and become literate in their first language. So there was a lot more education honestly, on our families that are either bilingual or monolingual Spanish to help them understand the program model and how it would benefit their child.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, and I think that's characteristic of a lot of programs, whether it's in Wisconsin or other states. And we know that like, especially Milwaukee, in the 60s and 70s, there was a big push for bilingual programs or Spanish language programs that would support the development of those native Spanish speakers. But we also know in recent years that dual language or bilingual education has become really trendy, especially among financial advantaged monolingual families. So assuming positive intent, and that, you know, most if not all families want their kids to grow up to be multilingual and global and biliterate, how do we celebrate this while simultaneously ensuring that we continue to support those families that these programs originally were created for?

**Brianna Smit**

Yes, yep. Which was one of the big reasons we went with the two way program because we were you know, we are just a one section program currently. So we have 24 spots per grade level. And we really do save 12 of those spots for our students who come from an either bilingual household or a monolingual Spanish household to ensure that piece where we're making sure that you know, these students that are historically underserved in our current program model have an opportunity. So that was one of the reasons why that committee recommended a 2-way program.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And so you know, another challenge that these programs face is staffing and because it's very difficult to find people who are not only speakers of both languages, but are certified with all the state requirements. So how did you approach this? Was it like specials we're going to have in English, everything else will be dual language? Did you have certain morals and core values that you want to stick to? How did you go after that?

**Brianna Smit**

Yeah. And so I was very upfront with our district to start with that I obviously have a strong passion and belief system behind this but I do not have the bilingual certification myself. You know, I have the background of having, you know, experience in learning another language. I have the TESOL, but I do not have the bilingual licensure. So from the start, I was very open

that I'd like to make sure we have somebody who comes in that can support especially our implementation. So we actually worked with Tara Fortune, she's with CARLA out of Minnesota, and she was a consultant who came in and did a lot of PD with us around implementation. And one of those pieces was staffing, like, how can we make sure, how are we going to recruit because, honestly, in this part of the state, we are, I'd say one of the rare programs, once you get north of Madison or to the, you know, besides the Green Bay, there's not a lot of programs like this in this part of the state. So we kind of went on the model, we need to recruit from within our community, and our current staff, at least until we're a more established program, and people you know, from around the state might want to come to this area for the program. And so we were lucky enough where we did have a staff member who, in our district, who already had the bilingual licensure and actually taught in Madison for a year and then was relocated to this area for her husband's work. And so she was a part of our committee and really passionate about it. So we really lucked out. And she was our teacher the first year, but we also asked the district to help fund to hire another teacher so we could have — it'd be really difficult to work in isolation, you know, how do you collaborate when you're the only one who's doing your job? And then we would have somebody else who could help build our program, and, you know, go be our teacher for the next year. And so we were able to find another teacher. So actually, our first year program, our district backed us hiring two teachers for one class. So we could increase that collaboration, help build our program. You know, there's a lot to do with curriculum writing and everything that first year. And so to have two teachers just really helped, helped with that process. The second teacher we found did not have the bilingual licensure though. She was elementary certified, TESOL, and then she had to have a certain OPI score, as well to show us proficiency, obviously, in Spanish. So she is working on — our district with the licensing with the portfolio model, where as a district we are supporting by providing professional development and resources. So then at five years, they have that bilingual licensure, as well. So we're trying to build within that way. And so our second year, we did the same thing and COVID, it actually has been really beneficial, because we had to reduce our class size, and we were able to hire a second teacher again. And our first two teachers are not native speakers. They are Spanish as their second language. And so we were able to find a native speaker, which we thought was really important in terms of students hearing the exposure to an accent. You know, there's always like vocabulary when you're a native speaker, she also would fall under the portfolio licensure as well. So she is certified as an elementary teacher, is a native Spanish speaker, she actually has experience in a bilingual classroom, like in some field experience, but doesn't have that. So she also is a part of the portfolio licensure path. Our district is supporting that by continuing our work with Tara Fortune, who comes in and does PD with our teachers. And then she comes in and does some coaching cycles. So the first year, she came in three times throughout the year for a full day and did classroom observations and then went and met with the teachers after and did some coaching. This year with COVID it's been a little unique, it's all been virtual. And so we've been trying to record and send her stuff. It's just been, it's everyone else that's been unique. So we've been really trying to make sure our teachers feel like they have support in staying on top of what's current in the field. You know, in terms of high-quality professional development directly related to bilingual programming.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah that is so important. I think it's important to mention that that portfolio kind of method or pathway seems a little bit roundabout, but that's what most people end up doing. Even me at Madison, we don't have a bilingual education program. So I'm probably gonna end up doing that. And so it seems kind of like that's a little bit wonky, but that is how most people end up doing it. And so in your position, you work more broadly with the English Learner population in the Eau Claire School District, and Eau Claire is home to a lot of students from a lot of linguistic backgrounds that aren't English or Spanish. So can you talk about how you support and celebrate these additional languages and related cultures and some kind of special courses and programs you offer? I believe you have a really strong Hmong program with classes related to among students and culture.

**Brianna Smit**

So we service in our ELL program just over 400 students in our district, which isn't huge, you know, I think we have around 3-4 percent. Our district is about 11,000. And our Hmong population is our largest population of English learners followed by Spanish and then we have a wide — I think last time I counted, we have 21 languages other than English represented in our district. And so, we do have different program models, we use the transitional bilingual program model with our Hmong students, where we have a certified ESL teacher in our buildings. And we also have Hmong bilingual assistants in the building too. So we can, you know, all the research behind leveraging that first language helped them acquire English faster. And we do that with all of our other languages as well, if we can find a bilingual assistant. So we do have Mandarin, Vietnamese, Gujarati bilingual assistance as well in our buildings, but Hmong and Spanish would be our highest population of assistance. So we do have some of our, you know, like I was talking about, some of our families who choose not to do the dual immersion program at all. So we still leverage that bilingual support by having a bilingual aide in the schools to help bridge that language gap for our students. And so we do have you know, that that program model for families who choose not to enter into, you know, our dual immersion program, and we do and I think we're in our third year, at the high school level, we offer a Hmong culture and History course for our students. And that's an elective open to all students, because not only do we feel like it's important for our Hmong population, but for just our community, for all students to be aware of the history of our Hmong population, especially specific to Wisconsin. And then we are adding a Hmong language course as well at the high school level. So in our Hmong population as which, you know, is typical, like third generation, we're starting to see language loss. And so really trying to help our students understand the importance of maintaining that language. And so some of our students who have lost it have really, like, embraced having the course. We've also offered it the past two or three summers to our secondary kids to a Hmong culture and language course too that they can take in the summer where they can learn, a lot of our students know how I don't know how to read and write if they're oral, and so kind of a course that helps the students you know, learn some of those skills as well.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah that is so important. I would imagine. So validating to write seeing your language reflected in school. So finally, we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one

language. So can you give me one reason, you can answer English, in Spanish, whatever you want, why it's a superpower to speak more than one language?

**Brianna Smit**

Oh, wow. Gosh, okay, one reason. You know, the one reason that I think it's a superpower, I would have to say is the connection to your family and culture. To always be able to talk to, you know, grandparents, to keep that alive, and to keep that family history alive. Not only for yourself and your grandparents, but I think like, as a family grows, and like future generations. I always like it just like when I've had students say, like, I can't talk to my grandparents. Like, to me, I just think like, what a loss for that family. And so I just think multilingualism in the aspects of maintaining that family, a piece of who they are as a family, and to continue that for them. I just think it's so important. So that would be my one reason, I think a secondary reason would just be in terms of just a global economy and the world we live in. Whether you choose your post secondary path is to go right into the workforce or to go to a technical field or to go to a four-year institution. I think any path you take, being multilingual will open your door at any of those entry points to jobs that are monolingual, you know, adults don't have. So I just think to me, that's another strong reason why we should embrace multilingualism.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, so well said. Thank you so much for chatting.

**Brianna Smit**

Yeah, yeah, not a problem.

**Claire Darmstadter**

I know you have a lot on your plate, but I'm very excited to see what the future holds for your DLI program!