

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody I am here today with Liz LaNou, principal of Banta Elementary School in Menasha. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to talk to me!

Liz Lanou

You're welcome

Claire Darmstadter

So before we talk about your work with Banta, would you be willing to give a little bit of background about your personal language and educational experience?

Liz Lanou

Sure, so I grew up just speaking Spanish as a foreign language. I didn't grow up in a bilingual household or anything like that. Like most Americans, I learned Spanish. And then I learned Spanish in college and started teaching Spanish to high school students and then taught ELL in Menasha and as far as the bilingual program, I became the bilingual principal about 9 years ago, so that's how long I've been part of the dual language program here in Menasha. This is my 9th year.

Claire Darmstadter

And can you talk a little bit about that transition going from positions where you weren't in admin and you weren't necessarily in a bilingual program and school. What's that like going from one position to a totally different position where you're working with different students, in a different position, and in two languages?

Liz Lanou

Yep, so the transition for me was a little slow because I was a teacher and then I went into a coordinator position, and then an administrator position. So, I took a few baby steps. But it was a little slow. It was interesting and I think if you have natural leadership it's a little easier, but in an elementary school it's nice because it's always a community feel, so you have leaders around you as well.

Claire Darmstadter

And could you give us just a little bit of background history about how and why Menasha decided to create a dual language program, why it was implemented in this particular school, and then how the learning continues post elementary school when the kids move into higher levels of education?

Liz Lanou

Menasha has one of the longest running dual language programs in the state; it's about 20 years old. It was implemented like many dual language programs in the state for the benefit of ELs, and that's why we continue the program, for the benefit of ELs, and the service is to the language learners. And so 80% of the students in the program are language learners, and even though we say it's a two-way program, so 50% of the students are native English speakers and

50% are native Spanish speakers, technically right now it is about 80%, although a lot of our students who are native Spanish speakers are dual language learners coming from birth, right, and so the program that we have right now is going through 10th grade. And so it's a pretty long-running program. In middle school they learn Spanish in math and social studies, and then they have a language arts program as well. And then in high school they also have it in social studies and language arts as well. It used to be in a regular elementary school, so Eagen Elementary, which is where I was the principal of, and then about 5 years ago they transitioned the program into its own school, so just it's not a charter school, it's just a magnet school.

Claire Darmstadter

And I know the school has been recognized for being an especially high-achieving program. Are there any secrets behind the program's success or do you have any tips you can share with others who are looking to create or improve a dual language program?

Liz Lanou

Well, there's no real secret. I think it's really about focusing on growth. I think that's really important. A lot of professional development in Menasha, in general we focus a lot on professional development. And we do a lot of focusing on curriculum, rigorous curriculum. I always tell our teachers when they are coming into the district, you know, new teachers always ask about curriculum and professional development. I always say there is no lack of professional development here in the district. Every day that they have open will be filled with professional development. We have a lot of job-embedded coaching, so every school that we have in Menasha has literacy coaches, math coaches, and then at Banta we also have an EL coach, so our school has the opportunity to have not only a math coach, a literacy coach, but a language coach on top of that as well that is available to them. And what's tricky at Banta is that every teacher is a bilingual teacher, right, but they are also the language teacher. So the kids don't have an additional EL teacher, that bilingual teacher is the EL teacher as well, so those teachers have a lot on their plate. So they have to scaffold and support everything in their day, so I think it's important for them to have all those tools in their toolbox so professional development is really important for us to frontload in the summer and any break that we have.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah and you mentioned that all the teachers working there are bilingual, and in Wisconsin we definitely have tons of multilingual individuals, but it may not be as much as say California, for example, so is finding and recruiting teachers difficult for you, or is it pretty easy to staff your building?

Liz Lanou

Nope. It is very difficult. So we partner with area universities. We have Project Estrella with UW-Oshkosh, so we have different partnerships that we'll have classes with and they will have their university students — right now with covid, it's a little difficult to allow students in our buildings — but those partnerships really help us expand our program. Our hope is that our students will one day come back to us and be our teachers. But next year we'll have two openings for teachers, and we're always open to have student teachers in our building because

it's best to grow our own. They know our curriculum, they know our standards, they know our practice, but there is overall a lack of teachers coming back into the practice. So maybe five years ago we used to have 250 teachers apply for a position, and now maybe there's 70. So you take that for a bilingual teacher and you divide that and it's a scary number.

Claire Darmstadter

I know you also work with the Wisconsin Association for Bilingual Education. And you worked on their coalition document I understand that has the goal, and I'm going to quote it here, to be "a resource for educators, administrators, community members and families to help grow the capacity of schools in the state of Wisconsin and to ensure an asset-based bilingual education for multilingual learners." Could you speak a little bit more about your contributions here and your involvements in general with the organization?

Liz Lanou

Yeah so that organization comes from many in the state, and what we're trying to do — and it's a big project — we're trying to get educators and professionals from around the state to form a group where we can just share resources. And I think that's the number one goal for most of us. We all feel so isolated, and a lot of it is as administrators and professionals and even teachers in the classroom, you close your door and it's tough to share resources. And in bilingual teaching too, there's not a lot of schools that are bilingual schools, and it's tough to share those resources, and when you go looking for even a bilingual school handbook, it's tough to find that handbook. So we're trying to find resources and share resources for one another in one place. The first thing we were working on was one resource that has like a glossary and a toolkit for parents that we can use.

Claire Darmstadter

Right and because we have tons of students who are in these programs and they're learning both languages, but it might be difficult for parents to feel like they can adequately support them if they don't speak both languages, and so I would imagine that would be a really valuable tool to help them feel like they are more involved or like they can help their students in this language learning journey.

Liz Lanou

Yep, and parent involvement is the number one thing that is going to be successful for kids. When we have kinders enter the program, we ask them to make the commitment for at least six years, we want to see them through sixth grade for the success of their students, so it's very important.

Claire Darmstadter

And one final question - can you share with us one final reason why being multilingual is a superpower? We say that to kids a lot, but what's your main reason why we should celebrate it?

Liz Lanou

Well I think it really opens up kids' view of the world and relationships and I think it really has them give empathy to others and when they are learning in both languages, they understand how to learn not only the language, but they understand how to learn many many other topics and ideas for culture and for even science, social studies, so kids aren't just learning the language in our school and district, they are learning through the language, and that's really important for our students and families to understand. They are learning through themselves as well, and they learn a lot about themselves and how they learn when they are learning through the language.

Claire Darmstadter

Well thank you so much for taking a couple minutes. I know things are super busy right now with covid and everything, but I think it will be really great for people to hear the perspective of someone who has worked in the classroom as a teacher and in administration, and I will definitely link what the coalition comes up with if it's available by the time I release this because I think it is a great tool, so thank you so much and have a great rest of your school year!

Liz Lanou

Yeah, thank you!