Holy Rosary School is a 122-year old accredited, pre-K–8 Catholic school in Tacoma, Washington that hasn’t let age get in the way of innovation. Although the school has been in existence for well over a century, their dual immersion Spanish–English program is a popular new approach introduced in 2012.

Holy Rosary is the first Catholic school in the state of Washington to offer such a program. Dual language immersion programs—integrating native English speakers and speakers of another language—provide instruction in both languages for all students. They promote bilingualism and biliteracy, grade-level academic achievement, and positive cross-cultural attitudes and behaviors in all students.

It is this new program that may indeed be the saving grace of the once struggling school.

MAKING A CHANGE

The reinvention of Holy Rosary was pioneered by Principal Timothy Uhl. When Uhl first came to the school, he was met with a dramatically dwindling enrollment list.

"The school was struggling to stay open year after year after year. It was probably struggling with financial issues for 20 years," he says. “When I was hired, I thought something has to be done to turn this school around, or it’s going to close.”

Uhl says the superintendent also warned him that the school’s days were numbered unless a major change was made.

“I am always up for a challenge, but I wouldn’t have stuck around if we couldn’t do something unique,” he explains. “I was able to turn the curriculum around so quickly because there was no one around to resist; there were a lot of empty seats. When half your seats are empty, that’s 50% less [opposition].”

Student numbers had been steadily dropping for years at Holy Rosary. Fortunately, the focus of Washington’s archdiocese and archbishop was on outreach to Catholic Hispanics, coinciding with Uhl’s initiatives.
“[Hispanic] representation in Catholic schools is very low. So we found the archbishop was very supportive financially in giving us the resources to research and develop this program.”

Joe Womak is the director of The Fulcrum Foundation, the fundraising arm for the archdiocese of Seattle, who assisted the effort.

“He and I both have young kids the same age—pre-K and K,” recalls Uhl. “Both of us are of the mind that we want our kids to be in a dual language program. In Seattle, there are immersion schools that are very popular; people are aware that this program is very popular among young professional parents,” he says.

So, in the fall of 2012, Uhl breathed life back into Holy Rosary, and the pre-K and kindergarten classes became the Juan Diego Academy, unifying the newly enrolled children in their unique language program. The first class participating in the program includes Uhl’s own two children. ACTFL Board of Directors Member Bridget Yaden also has a son in the kindergarten class at Juan Diego Academy.

“We chose the school based on the dual immersion program,” says Yaden, an Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies and Language Resource Center Director at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma. While she had not been considering sending her youngest son to a private kindergarten, once she saw a newspaper article highlighting what was happening at Holy Rosary and took a tour, she knew she wanted to enroll him.

“As a parent and educator, I’ve always wanted all my kids to learn the language as early as possible,” says Yaden, who has two older children that have studied Spanish in middle and high

“The dual language component has added a level of focus and motivation that we can even see at age five; that’s a difference in performance.”

—Principal Timothy Uhl
school. She sees a great advantage for her son in the immersion program—even after just a half a year. For one thing, she says, “his accent is perfect.”

Yaden continues: “He has this awareness of language and he’ll tell me that ‘Today is Spanish day’ or ‘Today is English day’— and when it’s Spanish day, he comes home and says it’s Spanish day so I need to only speak Spanish to him. To see a five-year old have that kind of awareness that these are two different languages and he knows that; it’s pretty exciting.”

“One of the things I’ve noticed in this kindergarten is that the classroom seems much more focused,” notes Uhl. “They have an academic motivation that they didn’t have last year. Kids do have to learn to [use scissors], they have to develop their motor skills, but now they’re cutting out Spanish words. The dual language component has added a level of focus and motivation that we can even see at age five; that’s a difference in performance,” he says.

**Positive Reactions**

Many other parents, like Yaden, were inspired to take advantage of the opportunity which had never before existed in Tacoma and the school doubled enrollment in the kindergarten class for 2012–2013. There is also great diversity among the class, including both native English and Spanish speakers, as well as a number of Vietnamese speakers who are learning English and Spanish as their second and third languages in class.

“You can see kids of all different backgrounds mixing and mingling; it’s phenomenal,” says Uhl.

Parents have responded with strong enthusiasm. One woman e-mailed Uhl and said: “I heard my daughter during playtime this evening speak Spanish for 20 minutes. Some were phrases I recognized from homework, but most of them I didn’t know. It was pretty exciting!”

He recalls this mother’s concern last year about the change in the curriculum. “She didn’t know what to think. She thought it would be interference, getting in the way of the important stuff. But here we are, this year, and she and her husband are now interested in learning the language themselves.”

The school expects to incorporate the program at all levels by 2020, as each new grade begins in kindergarten. The students receive instruction in both languages equally, but in different deliveries. For example, the Spanish-speaking students receive written instruction in their native language, and oral instruction in English. Because they are encouraged to help each other learn, the children are sharing not only their languages but their cultures as well. The expectation of the program is to cultivate bilingual students who are able to read and write in both languages by eighth grade, once the Juan Diego Academy has reached its full potential.

Yaden, as a college professor, has an additional perspective on what is happening at the school and thus in her community.

“I think that when we see these kids progress with their language education and eventually show up at the postsecondary
level, they’ll be starting out in 300- and 400-level courses, purely content. They’ll bypass the lower language levels entirely and a lot of them will be ready to start their third or fourth language,” she says of the native English-speaking students.

When it comes to the Spanish speakers—many of whom come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds—Yaden thinks it is more likely that these students will end up in her classes than it would have been before this early start. “Their English and Spanish skills will be much stronger from this model and so I think it’s going to add to the growing population of heritage Latino students that we see coming to college that want to continue their Spanish language study at higher levels,” she says.

STARTING SMALL CAN WORK

For language educators and administrators throughout the country, the successful turnaround of a small school like Holy Rosary can be an inspiration to look to language education to solve problems of dwindling enrollment. The hope in this case is that the dual language immersion model spreads to other Catholic schools in western Washington.

Yaden thinks it is a good example that language advocacy efforts do not need to be on a large scale to be successful. “As an ACTFL member, I go to the convention and read The Language Educator, and I might hear about Utah’s emphasis on dual immersion or read that big city school districts are adopting immersion, and I can think, ‘Well, my city is never going to do that.’”

Yaden continues: “To see that one school just did it all on their own as a turnaround model is inspiring. “They knew that they were going to have to close the school or come up with something innovative to keep it open and that can give us all hope. When it comes to advocacy, we can get nervous or scared when we think we have to go talk to our school board or governor about language education, to change how things are done in our states. You may hear about these big successful models but it doesn’t have to only start that way; it doesn’t have to come from top down. It could be about making changes at one small school—and then who knows where it can spread from there.”

Learn more about Holy Rosary School
www.holyrosarytacoma.org/

Learn more about Dual Language and Two-Way Immersion
A comprehensive site from the Center for Applied Linguistics, including resources for two-way immersion and dual language practitioners
www.cal.org/twi/

Join the ACTFL Immersion Special Interest Group (SIG)
www.actfl.org/membership/special-interest-groups-sigs/immersion

Discuss immersion in the ACTFL Online Community
community.actfl.org/actfl/communities
Choose the Discussion Group: IMMERSION