Thompson schools' dual immersion brings in teachers from Spain

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Thompson's Toni Theisen nets national honor

Toni Theisen, a longtime language teacher who spearheaded the dual language program within the Thompson School District, received a national leadership award.

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages honored Theisen with the 2018 Florence Steiner Award for Leadership in Foreign Language Education for her contribution to that field. The award was presented in November.
Theisen, who is the district's dual language immersion/world language teacher on special assignment, was chosen for the honor because of her contributions to language education at the national, state and regional levels through workshops, papers, associations and more as well as the quality and impact of projects she has developed.

Florence Steiner was a teacher, department chair and professional speaker who was widely known for her professional knowledge and communications skills, according to a news release. She inspired foreign language teachers and challenged them to improve their better communication, a press release states.

The principals of the two dual immersion elementary schools within the Thompson School District looked all the way to Spain for their newest Spanish teachers.

Truscott Elementary in Loveland hired Adrian Seijoso from northwestern Spain; and Cottonwood Plains, on the far southern edge of Fort Collins, hired Ana Llorente from Madrid through a program that works with the Spanish embassy to place teachers in America.

Their students are learning their culture, accent and regional phrases from the teachers, who like the students who immerse themselves in Spanish half their day, are now immersed in American culture.

"It's been a really rich cultural experience for our kids," said Karen Hanford, principal of Truscott.

Both schools launched dual immersion programs in kindergarten four years ago. The students enrolled split their day between two classrooms and two teachers, one solely in English and one solely in Spanish. At Truscott, all students enrolled in kindergarten through third grade are in dual immersion, while families at Cottonwood Plains can choose dual immersion or traditional programs.

As the first kindergartners have progressed through the grades, so has the dual immersion program, so it is now offered kindergarten through third grade.

Hanford said the goal is to incorporate the program into middle school when the original classes reach that level. Then when the students reach high school, they can enroll in
college level Spanish classes through concurrent enrollment and, perhaps, graduate from high school with an associate's degree in Spanish.

The elementary schools already had a mix of teachers with backgrounds tied to Mexico, Puerto Rico and Guatemala, which have different cultures and dialects. Both Seijoso and Llorente are excellent teachers who bring unique experiences to the schools and the students, the principals said.

Llorente, who taught for one year previously in Texas through the program from the Amity Institute, said her students are understanding and learning Spanish at an amazing rate and are comprehending the math lessons even if Spanish is not their first language. She said the program is amazing and that she, too, is learning daily from the system of education within Thompson.

"I love how much you can learn," said Llorente, who also has taught in Ireland, Norway and Puerto Rico. "The program is just amazing."

The teachers were hired through a teacher placement program from the Amity Institute that works with the Spanish embassy. They first interview with someone in their country and, if accepted into the program, choose a state in which they want to teach. Then principals in that state can interview the teachers for their open positions. Hanford and Eric Harting, principal at Cottonwood Plains, interviewed six possibilities through Skype, hiring Seijoso and Llorente.

Both said they are pleased with the quality of teachers and the cultural, language and teaching skills they have brought to the Thompson schools.

While Llorente is teaching literacy and math to kindergartners, Seijoso is teaching literacy and science to his third-graders. His lessons include cultural aspects such as holidays, traditions and even lessons in the euro, the currency used in Spain.

"The kids love to learn Spanish," he said, noting that having the student fully immersed in Spanish half the day helps them learn. "The dual is better because you really are learning in both languages."
And, so far, the theory behind the program is being borne out. Hanford and Harting say that their dual immersion students are not only succeeding in Spanish but also in English, math, science and social studies. They are learning all their subjects, as well as critical thinking skills.

"The ability to think about things from different angles benefits them from a problem-solving angle as well as being well-rounded citizens," said Harting.

Across both schools, about 330 students are enrolled in the dual immersion program, which aims to teach the normal school content and two languages so, when they graduate, the students are biliterate on top of other educational skills.

"It really does provide opportunities for our kids to work globally or locally," said Hanford. "If you're bilingual-biliterate, you really will be able to have any job you want. It's in demand."
For some students in the program, English is their second language, and Spanish their first. Dual immersion is working the same for them as well as increasing their self-esteem and confidence, the principals said.

Host families in each of the schools gave the new teachers a place to stay when they first arrived in Colorado as they worked to find the house rentals and vehicles they would need to thrive here, where each can stay as a teacher for up to five years.

Both Llorente and Seijoso, who moved here with his wife, Carlota Obelleiro, said they love the people they have met, the mountains, the new experiences and the students.

Obelleiro, who is a social worker in Spain, is volunteering at Truscott and working toward a work visa that will allow her, too, to work in Northern Colorado.

Both teachers said they will grow as teachers by working here, while their students will grow with their language skills and understanding of other cultures.

"You can never expand their horizons too much," added Harting, "when it comes to educating them about how other people live."