

# Is It Working?

By Emily Sharrer, Daily News Record

HARRISONBURG - The expansion of elementary-level Spanish instruction programs is putting city students on a fast track toward language proficiency, according to Jeremy Aldrich, foreign language coordinator for Harrisonburg City Schools.

In the current school year, 1,678 students at the elementary level will receive some type of Spanish language instruction, thanks to the expansion of two programs in the division.

"We have a target that [elementary school students'] proficiency would be the same as a Spanish I student," Aldrich said.

Last year, Spanish was offered as an "encore" class in the city's elementary schools for the first time. That means it entered a rotation with such subjects as physical education, music and art.

For 2011-12, the program was only approved for kindergarten, first- and second-grade students. This year, some schools are offering it through fourth grade.

Aldrich said the division hopes that eventually all five elementary schools will be able to offer Spanish as an encore class for kindergarten through fourth grade to promote language learning.

"Hopefully, it will build in them a lifelong love of learning languages and learning in general," Aldrich said.

At all but one school - Smithland - students received 50 minutes of Spanish instruction per week. At Smithland, students received 20 minutes of Spanish.

Students who receive instruction in kindergarten through fourth grade have the ability to enter middle school with 150 hours of language instruction under their belt, exceeding the 135 hours of instruction given in the Spanish I course offered at the middle and high school level.

This year, school officials expanded the program at no cost above the original \$200,000 spent on four new positions and supplies last year, Aldrich said.

Officials also have expanded another program at Smithland Elementary School, called dual-language immersion, where students can elect to have half their day taught in English and half taught in Spanish.

It used to be open to kindergartners and first-graders but is now open to second-grade students as well. Aldrich said the division would have "serious conversations" about expanding dual-language immersion to other elementary schools.

An assessment conducted at the end of the 2011-12 school year shows so far what's been put in place is working, Aldrich said.

"Students who had Spanish as a home language performed better, but even students who did not have Spanish as a home language demonstrated a lot of learning," Aldrich said. "We're going to, hopefully, get to that point where students are graduating high school as bilingual."

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