

NEWS

La Familia, only all dual-language school in district, holds ribbon-cutting

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WORCESTER — Led by a student speaking Spanish, audience members gathered outside of La Familia Dual Language School and recited the Pledge of Allegiance to kick off the school's ribbon-cutting event Tuesday morning.

The event, which was originally scheduled for the beginning of the school year before being delayed due to COVID-19, brought together students, family members, community leaders and city officials to celebrate the school's opening.

"In the end, everything worked out for the better because it was such a nice event," said Carmen Melendez-Quintero, manager of multilingual education for the district and one of several people who spoke at the event. "It also felt like an appreciation event for the teachers and the principal and the multilingual admissions department, everyone who worked really hard to get this school up and running and a reality for this district."

She said that everything about the event "breathed diversity and bilingualism" and provided a space for students and their families, as well as educators to come together and feel like one big family.

The celebration included students performing songs and poems in both English and Spanish, as well as appearances by musician José Castillo, Youth Poet Laureate Adael Mejia and the Worcester Pirates.

"Just seeing kids use language that way was amazing," Melendez-Quintero said.

Melendez-Quintero said that she was happy to not only see the students get the spotlight to perform and show off their language skills but also celebrate the teachers who she said had a "difficult year."

"We did an appreciation lunch for our teachers that day and we were able to get quotes from families and students and videos for each teacher," she said. "That was also a highlight for me to see the quotes students wrote in appreciation to their teachers, both in English and Spanish, and families and their videos and drawings."

Enmanuel 'Manny' Familia honored

Fallen Worcester Police Officer Enmanuel "Manny" Familia was also honored at the event, with Officer Rebecka Mailea acting as a liaison for the Familia family and accepting a plaque honoring him, Melendez-Quintero said.

"As we were coming up with the name La Familia and why we wanted to call the school La Familia, coincidentally, Officer Familia passed away around the same time we came up with the name, so in our mind, we immediately realized that we should probably make a connection even though it may not be necessarily named after him," Melendez-Quintero said.

She said that the name La Familia was initially chosen because of the school's mission to "come together, to grow and learn together and support each other," but that after learning about Officer Familia's death, as well as the fact that he was in a dual-language program as a child, the connection became clear.

"We wanted students to also make connections with positive role models in the community and we thought 'What a perfect match to use Officer Familia as a role model for our bilingual students,' " she said. "He was part of a bilingual program, he grew up in the city, he became a serving member of our community and we wanted to make that connection."

The plaque will be hung in the school for the students to see and honor his memory, she said.

'Dreams do come true'

Melendez-Quintero, who spoke in English and in Spanish about the importance of the dual-language school and its mission, kicked off her speech by saying "Los sueños se hacen realidad," which translates to "Dreams do come true," in English, she said.

She said that she never thought a dual-language school would come to Worcester but that it was a dream come true when it did.

"Even though we've had dual-language programs in the district for many years, having its own school with the same focus and vision is very exciting," Melendez-Quintero said. "Everyone is working to make sure all students excel academically but that all students also become bilingual and biliterate, and that they also all develop social and cultural competence in a community of diversity, inclusion and equity."

Out of all the speakers at the event, which included Mayor Joseph M. Petty and Superintendent Maureen Binienda, Melendez-Quintero was especially struck by Acting City Manager Eric Batista's speech, she said.

"I love his speech because he said that when he came as a child at 11, he didn't know any English and he was put in a bilingual program in the Worcester public schools and how that program really helped them," Melendez-Quintero said.

She said that it was another opportunity for students to see their language and culture represented in the community by different city officials.

Showing support

While Elizabeth Lupafya said she was initially worried about how the delays might impact attendance at the event, she was ultimately happy about the turnout and to see parents and city officials showing up to support the school.

"It's a real celebration that we are really here as a school," Lupafya said. "It was wonderful that we were able to have all of the students out in front be part of the celebration."

Plans to expand only all dual-language school

La Familia, which currently has about 152 students from pre-kindergarten to sixth grade, is the only fully dual-language school in the district, Lupafya said.

She said that the school has plans to continue expanding the number of classes it has in each grade, eventually having two classes at each grade level in the next few years.

"Eventually, when the school is full, we'll be at a capacity of about 400 students that we'll be servicing," Lupafya said.

Currently, she said, the school is made up of one-third native English speakers, one-third native Spanish speakers and one-third who are bilingual.

A student's grade level determines how much of the school day is spent learning content in Spanish, Lupafya said.

"Preschool and kindergarten is 80%, first grade is 70%, second grade is 60% and then grades three through six, they're at 50% of the day," she said. "Half their day is learning in English and half their day is learning in Spanish."

An aspect of dual language she said she wants people to understand is that there is a difference in teaching a language versus teaching content in a language.

"When students are learning, for example, world history, they're not learning U.S./world history in English. They're learning U.S./world history in Spanish," she said. "That's the content base, which is a little bit different than a middle school or high school model where they're teaching you the actual language. Here, they're learning language in content in the target language of Spanish."

While some classes, such as Spanish or English, would remain in those languages for students, other classes such as history would alternate between English and Spanish, depending on the teacher.

Lupafya said she is already looking forward to next year with all of the new families who will be joining the school.

"It's been a very busy year and we're very happy that we were able to cut it and make it official," she said. "It's been an honor to be the principal here and to work with the families has been amazing. The teachers here have been amazing to get this building up and running."