

Capitalizing on Diversity and Immigration

by Carol Franz, Principal

At Bailey's Elementary School in Falls Church, Virginia, parents—including two folklorists—rallied to create a magnet theme for the school, where English is a second language for most students. Several large apartment complexes within walking distance of the school house a growing population of new immigrants from around the world. For many of these families, Bailey's is the first point of entry to American life and culture. The school community decided to focus on putting students and their families at the center of the curriculum and helping recent immigrant students succeed. Their success with this approach has drawn national attention.

“**B**AILEY'S IS A SCHOOL for all nations. Let us stand and pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, the nation that brings us together through freedom.” With these words, 900 students from 45 nations speaking 25 languages stand to pledge. The school represents the face of the future and is a model for integrating language minority students into the mainstream.

Bailey's and schools like it are an investment in the future of America. With an increasingly diverse population, we are showing the way to an equitable education that will result in retention of students' own cultures as well as respect and value for our common and shared experience. How do we do this?

We have created an infrastructure within the school and the community that supports the acquisition of skills that foster independence. Although it is an enormous undertaking, it is a satisfying one. We opened up the school to parents who wanted to learn how to provide day care. A considerable number are now certified day care providers. We provide a food cupboard and a clothing closet. The INOVA Partnership for Healthier Kids connects families without insurance to health care. A Latino parent liaison provides assistance in a number of ways, including pointing parents to agencies and resources to meet their needs. Often native English speakers with vastly different backgrounds will take a new family under their wing and teach them the intricacies of our system. These are mentorships that promote respect and understanding. We realize that much more than classroom instruction must take place for our students to be successful, and we carefully lay that groundwork. Having basic needs met is important to a sense of family well-being that translates into worry-free children who are ready to learn.

Bailey's is an elementary school composed of 75 percent language minority students. Half our population is Latino with most students coming from El Salvador and Guatemala. Our 17-percent Asian population is mostly Vietnamese. We have students from the Middle East, Bosnia, and Somalia. The smallest segment of our population is African American. As a magnet school, we draw 200 students from outside our boundaries to help balance our population with proficient English

speakers. The heterogeneously grouped program is integrated, one program for all students.

Walk through our halls, and you will see that we value each student and all their stories. Teachers display large maps with individual pictures of students surrounding the maps and yarn stretching from picture to country of origin. This map presents a vivid portrait of our global school. Student work is everywhere. For example, in Liban's picture, he is peeking through the tall savanna grasses of Somalia at a wild animal. He explains in his writing that they do not have lawnmowers there.

On numerous occasions, I speak to graduate classes on multiculturalism. Often the students are required to read Arthur Schlesinger's *The Disuniting of America*, which expresses the fear that the famous melting pot will "give way to the Tower of Babel." It also states that "If separatist tendencies go on unchecked, the result can only be the fragmentation, resegregation and tribalization of American life." I tell the students that nothing can be further from the truth. Although we encourage the honoring of native cultures, our student body comes together as one in a myriad of ways. We group heterogeneously so that we enrich each other. We delight in honoring and encouraging Family Story Nights, when students and parents, as a family, share some of their most heartfelt stories about their origins. Maya, who came to us after fleeing Bosnia with her family, sobbed each day because of what she had lost—her house, the river by her house, and the family dog. It helped her to draw pictures and write about her loss. She said she did not want this to happen to any other child.

A Vietnamese family who lives in a small house near our school provides a good example of living in two worlds. When I visit their home, I remove my shoes because I see many shoes parked at the door. The children show me a room that was once a sunroom and is now a shrine with an altar to CaoDai, or the Eye—the image of universal and individual consciousness. Outside, the once grassy yard is filled with pots of growing shrubs and flowers to be sold to nurseries. The American flag flies high and proudly at the front door and typical decorations of the Christian Christmas season appear outside in December.

The second language children who come through Bailey's and other schools where they are respected and given all the opportunities available in the same way as native English speakers will come to recognize themselves as part of this culture even if their parents may never feel as vested. As these students grow, they will hold onto their native cultures with pride. As Americans, they will also embrace the customs of their new country.

We also learn from our students. It was more than a new experience for a number of Bailey's staff who attended services, with scarves covering our heads, for two Somali boys who drowned in a neighborhood lake. We entered the mosque, as all women do, by the back door, removed our shoes, and remained with the women and children throughout the service. We refrained from attending graveside services as is the custom for Muslim women.

In another very different cultural experience, six Bailey's staff members recently spent the summer in Guatemala learning the culture and language of a region that sends us many children. We saw children who could have easily been ours selling handmade wares in the Antigua city square. The visit vividly promoted understanding of a segment of our students' origins. The students who come to this country have a dual framework from which to draw. They use this dual framework to create a new one. The staff's experiences in brief encounters on other cultures' respective "turf" give us a new perspective also.

Juxtapose the image of the pledge of allegiance shared by children from 45 nations with a Muslim prayer. A parent in Middle Eastern dress raced up at a Family Story Night to share with my husband his thanks for my work at Bailey's. He and all his family in Pakistan, he assured him, pray for me every day. These are powerful images of multiculturalism in action at Bailey's, a school for all nations.

Carol Franz has been principal of Bailey's Elementary School for the Arts and Sciences for 11 years.