Dual language education in the U.S. serves multiple goals. For language minority students, it has been shown to be the most successful model for learning English while simultaneously developing students’ first language. For English speakers, it provides a rich environment in which to acquire another language. These programs also lead to high levels of academic achievement for all students. We have copious data documenting students’ English learning and academic achievement outcomes, but what has received far less attention is their Spanish: What does it look like, and what are the implications of developing strong academic proficiency in Spanish?

After exploring a few myths about multilingualism that plague the U.S. and that serve to curtail these programs and squander the many non-English languages spoken in communities across the country, I present data on Spanish proficiency from two dual language schools in the Chicago area. Among the principal findings are these: (1) Spanish is not used as frequently as planned, which despite the value of translanguaging has potentially negative consequences for Spanish development; (2) A focus on form might bolster the acquisition of certain structures; and (3) Spanish-speaking parents would likely benefit from seeing examples of the decline in Spanish proficiency among students enrolled in all English programs, in particular when deciding what school to choose for their own children.

I conclude by describing the social justice implications of well-executed dual language programs as they push our nation to embrace greater cultural and linguistic democracy, outlining some concrete benefits for Latinos – who currently constitute one out of every four school-age children in the U.S. – as well as for the rest of the population.