

Bringing Italian to NYC's Public Schools

Roberta Cutillo (February 10, 2020)



Parents, teachers, institutional representatives all gathered in Harlem's cozy neighborhood pizzeria Sottocasa to celebrate the progress of Manhattan's first dual language Italian program at the local PS 242. Together they discussed the benefits of bilingualism, shared their experiences and planned for the future of the program.

Back in April 2019, Harlem's [Public School 242, also known as the Young Diplomats Magnet Academy](#) [2], [officialized the launch of Manhattan's very first Italian Dual Language Program](#) [3], a project initiated by [InItaliano](#) [4], a grassroots initiative that promotes Italian language and culture in various public and private educational settings, conceived by three Italian parents with the aim of filling the lack of resources for Italian speakers within the school system.



With the support of institutions such as the [Italian American Committee on Education](#) [5] (IACE), the Italian Consulate in New York and by collaborating with the Board of Education, Stefania Puxeddu, Benedetta Scardovi, and Francesco Fadda of Initaliano, managed to identify a public school willing to test the program and, after a pilot phase, the first class of Italian dual language students entered kindergarten last September.

And that's what they were celebrating last Thursday in the warm and inviting neighborhood pizzeria Sottocasa, located in Harlem, a few blocks from PS 242. Parents, teachers, Italian entrepreneurs and institutional figures, and even a few children, all came together in the restaurant's brick-covered back room, to thank each other, share stories, and discuss the way forward, as oven-fresh pizzas flowed through the crowd.

The first to speak was the Consul General of Italy Francesco Genuardi, who stated that "the program is a great way to spread Italian language through the arts, sports, through the Italian way of life," and stressed the Consulate's support and admiration for the work that Initaliano has done to make this happen. To signify this, the entire consular team came along and even brought an official Italian flag.

As Francesco Fadda explains to us while waiting for the event to start, dual language students are not only taught a second language, they learn every subject in both languages, from history to math, science, and so on. By the end of the cycle, they are perfectly bilingual, a great advantage for their future academic, professional and personal lives, particularly in an increasingly global society.

Bilingualism is a constant part of the children's lives, expanding beyond academic courses and into afterschool activities, from art and music classes to sports. For example, with the support of CONI, the Italian Olympic committee, the school is currently working to launch a track and field team and potentially bring the students to participate in the annual Italy Run, which takes place in Central Park in the Spring.

"At the moment, only 3 children out of 20 are Italian, most of them are American or come from third countries," Fadda explains, "which is great, it creates a multicultural environment. But we also want to spread the word so that Italians who move to New York are aware of this option."

Such a program would allow Italian families living in New York to give their children an American education - which can help them integrate and experience New York life and culture fully and eventually prepare them for American universities - without running the risk of them losing their mother tongue and their connection to Italy. And they can do so without having to pay the exorbitant sums demanded by private international schools (as a public school, PS424 remains free.)

"Since dual language programs are not widely spread, you don't need to live in the neighborhood to attend this school," Fadda tells us. "though priority is still given to those who reside in school district



3.”

“The program makes a lot of sense here. We want the children to be proud to speak Italian in Harlem,” added the Consul General, “And we are excited for this program to expand to all of New York’s boroughs.”

He was echoed by Christine Loughlin, the superintendent of the city’s School District 3, who stated that “the Department of Education is committed to this program and is looking forward to partnering and spreading it.”

Each year, the program grows and a new dual language class enters kindergarten. The idea is to eventually spread to Middle and High school. And Initaliano is confident that they will reach this goal within the next few years. Meanwhile, they are also looking to get more elementary schools to adopt the program as well. At the moment, there is only one other New York school, PS112 in Lefferts Park, Brooklyn, with an Italian Dual Language Program, the city's very first one.

The Principal of PS 242, Denise Gomez, thanked the institutions for their support and the faculty for “putting on different hats” and working hard to provide the students with effective dual language education. “We’re making it happen as a family, as a community and I invite everyone to come and see for themselves.”

Afterwards, each guest began to come stand by the Italian flag and share their own stories. Some talked about how speaking different languages shaped who they are, it brought them experiences and opportunities. In some cases, it’s what landed them their jobs or even helped them meet their spouses.

Those who weren’t brought up with two languages, wish they had been and more importantly recognize the need for bilingual education in today’s society. As the director of the Italian Trade Agency Antonino Laspina justly remarked, “Italy needs more bilingual people.”

Overall, everyone agreed that being bilingual is an advantage and that sending your kids to a program such as this one, where they will not only learn an additional language but also be immersed in a truly multicultural environment, means investing in their future.

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[2] <http://www.ps242.com/>

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[4] <https://dlitaliano.org/>

[5] <https://iacelanguage.org/>