SALT LAKE CITY — Utah may trail the nation in school funding, but the state is leading the way in language immersion programs.

Thousands of Utah second-graders can speak in French, write in Chinese or read in Spanish. Their parents have learned about language immersion programs and they're seeking out schools for a coveted spot.

"I think the future is, for them to succeed they will need to know a second language. And I think Chinese is a great opportunity," said Nancy Wood, mother of both a fourth-grader and second-grader.

"(We spend) about 40 minutes a day driving back and forth, but it's definitely worth it," says Verona Mauga, also the mother of an immersion program student.

The scramble creates pressure for parents with kids who are already too old or who don't get in.

"My son does have a friend who did not get selected by the lottery, and I think that will be hard maybe with friendships," said Rian Jensen, mother of three.

In typical dual-immersion programs in Utah, students divide their time between English and a second language to learn academics.

"(We) speak English half of the day, and then French the other half," explained Sadie Bowen, a second-grade French immersion teacher at Morningside Elementary School.

"Academically, there's no difference," said Carolyn Schubach, associate director of dual immersion programs in the Granite School District. "The children are learning the exact same subjects. They're following the state's standards just like anyone. They're just learning it in another language."

No state is adding immersion programs faster, and Gov. Gary Herbert hopes to quadruple enrollment within four years.

One-third of the U.S. elementary schools that offer Mandarin Chinese are in Utah. The Chinese and French governments are so impressed they're sending and paying for teachers to take part in Utah's program.
The National Security Agency, which is building a huge facility in Utah, just awarded schools $300,000 so students can continue Chinese immersion programs in the summer.

"I think it'll help me get a good job," said second-grader Alaina Nielson.

She's right, according to state leaders who are driving the push to create a future global workforce.

But that's down the road. Educators in and out of the system say, right now, the very process of learning any language at a young age changes a child's brain.

"There is research that children who learn or acquire two languages simultaneously, that their brains are sort of stretched in the process and they are actually better equipped in other cognitive areas because of acquiring two languages," said Johanna Watzinger-Tharp, associate dean for international and interdisciplinary programs at the University of Utah.

Preliminary data backs that up. In the Granite District, dual immersion students are scoring higher than English-only students across the board. One principal sees it, too.

"You can actually see that those (students) are performing at and above their peer that aren't in the immersion program," said McKay Robinson, principal at Lone Peak Elementary School.

For all these reasons, students and parents are grateful to be among the trendsetters taking advantage of what they see as a world-class opportunity.

"I am happy about it, and I sure appreciate it," said fourth-grader Leslie Ochoa Mendoza.

"This program just opens so many doors, and the benefits that come along with it for him in the future," said Mauga.

"I have neighbors who pay a lot of money to go to private schools that can't offer a program that I can get here in my neighborhood school," Jensen said.

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