



Harnett County Abruptly Closes Two Additional Dual Language Immersion Programs, Ignoring Families' and Students' Requests to Remain Open

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The closure of seven DLI programs in [Harnett County Public Schools](#) has now expanded to nine, eliminating both middle school options for students in bilingual education and [affecting over 1,100 students and families](#). The abrupt closures lack support from families, students, and teachers. Parents and students have emailed, called, spoken at school board and district meetings, written grievances, given media interviews, signed petitions, distributed flyers, and led advocacy groups. The superintendent, [W. Brooks Mathews](#), has not addressed the DLI closures, nor has he responded to letters, emails, or calls. Most of the district's school board members merely acknowledge communications initiated by families, but have told parents they support the district's decisions.

On March 2, 2026, [during their monthly board meeting](#), Mr. Chris Pearson, Assistant Superintendent for Auxiliary Services, stated the district would phase out Dual Language Immersion (DLI) programs by fall 2026, stating,

the original thought [...] was language acquisition for English speakers has shifted very heavily toward *native* speakers being in that program, and, in reality, we're not preparing them for developing the second language as they need to if they are a native speaker in that program.

The term "native" allegedly refers to native speakers of Spanish learning English as an additional language.

Following the meeting, the principals in Harnett County Schools with DLI programs received a letter from Dr. Steven C. Murphy, Director of Grades 6-8/Title III/ESL to inform families about the discontinuation of the programs and forcing them to choose between two unreasonable options: Transfer their children to one of the two schools elementary and two middle schools which will continue to offer the DLI program without school transportation, which for some families is up to 29 miles each way every day to school, or keep their students in the school with all-English instruction only.

In response to this drastic measure, which was taken without consulting families or experts in bilingual education, dozens of parents, students, teachers, members of the media, and members of the research community attended the [March 30 school board meeting](#) to voice public opposition to the program closures and to present data refuting claims of declining enrollment or poor performance. Most of those remarks were neither recorded nor posted on the Harnett County Schools' official YouTube channel, citing technical issues. Although attendees recorded their public comments and formally requested that the board include them, their voices and requests were ignored and omitted from the public records.

At the school [board work session on April 20](#), Mr. Pearson and Mr. Ashley Porter formally presented reasons for the closures, framing their rationale as school "consolidation." Pearson also compared DLI programs to Career Technical Education (CTE) programs that were formerly closed, such as the Fire Academy or Orchestra programs, demonstrating profound misinformation about the purpose and structure of DLI, which is not an extracurricular enrichment option. DLI is a long-term instructional model grounded in research-based language development, biliteracy development, and academic achievement. Unlike elective programs, DLI shapes students' daily academic instruction and requires years of continuity and family commitment to achieve its intended outcomes. In fact, when families enrolled in the programs, they were required to sign [a letter](#), indicating that they would remain committed to the program for between five and seven years. It appears that the school district is not keeping up its end of the agreement.

Then, at the April 20 work session, for the first time the district referred to the programs as Dual Language for Acceleration, explaining that "it was designed to accelerate academic achievement for students who were proficient or nearly proficient in English," in other words, not for native Spanish speakers. The District's [website](#) states that the district offers Dual Language Programs as "options for parents who want their children to experience a rigorous academic program while also learning two languages — English and a target language." However, this contrasts with the nature and objectives of DLI programs as indicated on the [North Carolina Department of Public Instruction \(NCDPI\)](#), which acknowledges that DLI programs use two languages as mediums of instruction for literacy and content development for *all* students.

The district claims students in DLI programs underperform relative to their peers in non-DLI programs based on recent data. Inaccurate data were presented during all of the school board meetings. Initially, [Pearson stated](#) that "third-grade proficiency for Multilingual Learners (MLs [simultaneously, English language learners]) at Coats Erwin is less than 5%" even though Coats Erwin is a middle school and does not serve third-grade students.

The inconsistencies in the data continued as parents' grievances mounted. The district reported that during the 2023–2024 school year, 67% of Dual Language classrooms at Coats Elementary

outperformed non-Dual Language classrooms on either mCLASS assessments (K–2) or state End-of-Grade assessments (Grades 3–5), and that in the 2024-2025 school year, only half of the dual language classrooms performed higher than non-dual language classrooms at Coats Elementary. These shifting interpretations of the data raise concerns about the consistency and transparency of the criteria used to evaluate the programs, especially when the district alternates between percentages and raw numbers in ways that can confuse Board Members or that misrepresent the overall performance of DLI students. What shocked families is that, despite the lack of reliable and consistent data, none of the board members critically questioned the information presented during the April 20 meeting beyond [asking for copies of the presentation slides](#).

Moreover, these results do not consider other measures of achievement, such as Spanish language or content assessments, bilingual development, student engagement through classroom observations, and student growth, among others. They also fail to recognize factors like poverty, mobility, interrupted schooling, ML status, or disability status. Without a valid comparison group, it is impossible to determine if DLI is associated with lower performance or improved outcomes. An accurate evaluation of students' achievement would include a comparison of DLI students with similar non-DLI peers by achievement, language status, and socioeconomic background. Data should be disaggregated to show meaningful differences across different groups of students. Assessments for all students in the DLI program should be conducted in the languages in which the students have learned, not only English. The current decision relies on confusing terminology and selective data, undermining equal access and sound educational reasoning.

Dual Language Immersion (DLI) programs have functioned as a bridge between families and Harnett County Public Schools, encouraging cross-cultural awareness and in accordance with the district's mission of developing globally competitive citizens. Some families stated that they relocated to this area and purchased homes specifically to access quality bilingual education opportunities for their multilingual children, as one parent explained in an [interview with WRAL](#). In spite of these core values, the district's actions contradict its promise. Instead of respecting the parents' 5 to 7 year commitment to the program and honoring relationships fostered by DLI, Harnett County Schools is abruptly and unilaterally closing DLI. The silence of Superintendent Mathews, broken promises, and disregard for parent voice undermine the mission statement of the school district and rupture the very foundation of trust on which these educational partnerships rest.

Last week, parents at Coats Elementary received yet another [letter](#) stating that “the board meeting to consider the appeal will take place on June 1,” while at the same time urging families to make decisions regarding their children’s future “no later than May 15,” before the appeal could even be considered. Advocacy groups, including members of NABE and the [Carolina Association for Bilingual Education](#) (CarABE), are currently encouraging families and community

members to attend the Board Work Session on May 18, 2026, at 9:00 am and make public comments in support of retaining the DLI programs at 601 S. Main Street, Lillington, NC 27546.

The closure of Harnett County's DLI programs is fundamentally about accuracy, transparency, trust, and educational opportunity. The impact of these decisions also extends to teachers and school leaders who have dedicated their careers to dual language education. Some educators are now facing the loss of their positions by being reassigned to other schools or required to teach exclusively in English despite having been specifically hired and trained to work in DLI programs. This sends a discouraging message to educators who have committed themselves to multilingual classrooms in this district at a time when North Carolina is already struggling to recruit and retain teachers, ranking [46th in the nation](#) for average teacher pay during the 2025–2026 school year.

It is time for educators to protect and stand for DLI programs where and when districts are attempting to close them using inflammatory narratives about Spanish speakers, misrepresenting achievement, and disguising closure as “consolidation”. DLI has united children across languages and cultures, strengthening identity and preparing them for a multilingual and global world. If Harnett County Schools sincerely values partnership and global competitiveness, they must listen, share clear data, and ensure every child's right to bilingual education is honored in action, not just words.

To help advocate for DLI Programs at Harnett County, you can:

- Sign the Change.org petition and share widely. <https://www.change.org/p/keep-dual-language-immersion-programs-in-harnett-county-public-schools>
- Sign FLANC's petition. Add your name to our support letter on this Google Form: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSd_Qsggn-8iY1gEm7Ub5921rbHbuTJtKycEjfRlxbCzYLOuqw/viewform
- Write a letter indicating your organization's endorsement (we will add you as an endorser to the petition). Email to: mcoady@ncsu.edu
- Write a letter on behalf of yourself or your organization to the school board members and the school superintendent.
Jpowell3@harnett.k12.nc.us, babate@harnett.k12.nc.us,
sgainey2@harnett.k12.nc.us, dgodfrey@harnett.k12.nc.us, jhairr@harnett.k12.nc.us,
tjohnson7@harnett.k12.nc.us, wmatthews@harnett.k12.nc.us
- Share media coverage on DLI school closures in Harnett County on your social media.
<https://www.wral.com/news/education/harnett-schools-dual-language-program-closing-april-2026/>
<https://enlacialatinonc.org/en/parents-and-teachers-raise-concerns-over-lack-of-transparency-amid-closure-of-dual-immersion-programs-in-harnett-schools/>