

Successful Bilingual Education Programs



María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., and Josie Danini Cortez, M.A.

Twenty-five characteristics contribute to the high academic performance of students served by bilingual education programs. The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) identified these characteristics through funding by the U.S. Department of Education. IDRA rigorously and methodically studied exemplary bilingual education programs in schools across the nation as determined by limited-English-proficient (LEP) students' academic achievement. IDRA now is helping others identify successful programs or raise the bar with their own bilingual education programs.

Amid a backdrop of great language diversity among the students and parents that U.S. schools serve are schools with exemplary bilingual education programs and extraordinary individuals who are committed to equity and excellence. This commitment manifests itself as academic success for *all* students, including LEP students. These schools refuse to make excuses for a lack of student achievement; they refuse to settle for anything less than excellence and high standards for all.

While there are many such schools and classrooms across this country, time and resources dictated that IDRA work with only 10 schools and use their lessons learned as a guide for developing criteria that others can use to assess their own programs.

This study comes at a critical time. There are 4.4 million LEP students in the United States, a persistent achievement gap between LEP and non-LEP students, and a critical shortage of bilingual education teachers with the preparation, skills and tools to ensure that *all* of their students succeed.

The primary purpose of this study was not to prove that bilingual education works - there are years of rigorous research that prove it does work when implemented with integrity. Instead, the purpose of this research study was to identify the characteristics that are contributing to the high academic performance of students served by bilingual education programs.

As IDRA visited, interviewed, and surveyed the teachers, administrators, parents and students in 10 different bilingual education programs and their schools, one thing became evident: leadership is an essential ingredient in the formula for student success. Leadership manifests itself in different ways, such as commitment to students, valuing of students and their families, and openness to innovation and change. But, one aspect was evident in all of the individuals involved with the programs: each had the ability to inspire and see what was possible.

Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal write of this ability in *Leading with Soul*: "Perhaps we lost our way when we forgot that the heart of leadership lies in the hearts of leaders. We fooled ourselves, thinking that sheer bravado or sophisticated analytic techniques could respond to our deepest concerns. We lost touch with a precious human gift - our spirit" (1995). This aspect of leadership is difficult to measure but immediately recognizable. And it is this aspect that is critically needed to achieve equity and excellence for all students.

Research also finds that exemplary bilingual education programs hold school staff accountable for their students' success, while providing them with the support and tools they need. These programs also nurture meaningful parent and community involvement. Our study of 10

exemplary bilingual education programs confirms this.

IDRA researched school- and classroom-level indicators of successful bilingual education programs. Our extensive review of other research provided a strong theoretical framework with indicators conducive to successful programs for LEP students. IDRA framed these indicators as research questions in areas of leadership, vision and goals, school climate, linkages, school organization and accountability, professional development, parent involvement, staff accountability and assessment, staff selection and recognition, and community involvement.

IDRA's primary research question for this study was, "What contributed to the success of a bilingual education classroom as evidenced by LEP student academic achievement?" In addition to the student data, qualitative and contextual research questions for other indicators emerged from our extensive review of the research and IDRA's own history in bilingual education.

To help others identify successful programs or improve their own bilingual education programs IDRA has produced *Good Schools and Classrooms for Children Learning English*. This guide is a rubric, designed for people in schools and communities to evaluate five dimensions that are necessary for success:

- School Indicators,
- Student Outcomes,
- Leadership,
- Support, and
- Programmatic and Instructional Practices.

This research study, and the corresponding publication, highlight some of the practices in schools that enable students to grow academically and socially in their native language as well as English.

Students who speak a language other than English have the right to comprehensible instruction that fosters learning. In 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the failure of schools to respond to the language characteristics of LEP children was a denial of equal educational opportunity (*Lau vs. Nichols*, 1973).

The Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 states, "No state shall deny equal educational opportunity on account of his or her race, color, sex or national origin by... the failure of an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional program" (20 U.S.C., Section 1703 (f)).

This was followed in 1975 by detailed guidelines for determining the language characteristics of students and appropriate educational responses to those characteristics.

Most recently, President Bush signed into law the *No Child Left Behind Act*, in which Title VII (the *Bilingual Education Act*) has become Title III. In the 120 pages of the new Title III regulations, the term *bilingual education* is never used. It has been replaced by *English language acquisition*. But the primary purpose is the same.

One key distinction is that the new regulation does not specify the methods for achieving such

standards. The former law specified the development and implementation of exemplary bilingual education programs, development of bilingual skills and multicultural understanding, and development of English and the native language skills. Now, schools must determine for themselves how they will implement effective bilingual education programs.

As the country enters this new legislative era, it must be remembered that the civil rights of children remain unchanged. Educators must use the most appropriate tools available to ensure their students' success. One of these tools is bilingual education.

Thirty years of research have proven that bilingual education, when implemented well, is the best way to learn English. Children in such programs achieve high academic standards.

IDRA's research re-affirms what is possible when committed and dedicated individuals use research to develop and provide excellent bilingual education programs for their students.

This article is excerpted from a series of articles that appeared in the IDRA Newsletter between September 2001 and February 2002. The series is available online at http://www.idra.org/IDRA_Newsletters.



Bolman, L.G., and T.E. Deal. *Leading with Soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit Revised* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995) p. 6.

María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., is the IDRA executive director. Josie Danini Cortez, M.A., is the IDRA production development coordinator. Comments and questions may be directed to them via e-mail at feedback@idra.org.

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