

## **ALL CHILDREN CAN LEARN... TO SPEAK ENGLISH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandate has pushed the debate on how to educate the limited English proficient child to the forefront. Thus, criticism abounds in several states surrounding the effectiveness of bilingual education programs in our nation's public schools. The opponents state that bilingual education is not working; it is an expensive funding pursuit for school districts; and that school children who receive such services are not performing any better academically than their peers who receive their instruction in English. On the other hand, the proponents of bilingual education claim that non-English speaking children must receive their academic instruction in their dominant language as second language acquisition learners. They need to acquire the language first before learning can result. Opponents further report that bilingual education program effectiveness in our schools is greatly misunderstood, and the increase of anti-immigrant sentiment and resentment toward special treatment for minority groups in our country has impacted the support of the English Only movement. This article takes a look at the historical background of bilingual education and the impact of the English Only movement. In the article, the author reviews briefly both sides of the debate.

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### **Historical Perspective**

Since the nineteenth century, the phenomenon of bilingual instruction has been in existence even though many may believe that this trend is relatively new. History shows that language diversity helped shape this nation. Before World War I, in schoolhouses across the urban and rural Midwest, bilingual instruction was the mode of instruction delivery for the German American children. It was the belief that bilingual instruction meant a greater chance for these limited English proficient

children to ultimately learn English while at the same time preserving the language of the home. It was not until the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the rise of Progressive education, that bilingualism became un-American and so became targeted for elimination (Blanton, 2004).

### **What Are They Saying About Bilingual Education?**

It is estimated that there are 3.2 million limited English proficient school children nationwide (and the number of immigrant children continues to grow) whose native language is not English and who are unable to participate successfully in the regular curriculum because they have difficulty speaking, understanding, reading and writing English (USCB, 2000). Moreover, 1.4 million of these school children are enrolled in state and local bilingual programs, while over 75% of them attend high poverty schools (Orellana, Elk & Hernandez, 1999). For these school children, bilingual education is the use of two languages for instruction- English and the native language of the student while English as a second language (ESL) or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is another instructional technique in bilingual education that uses English to teach non-English speaking children. Bilingual education programs are not limited to school children of Hispanic origin. Bilingual education is any language taught other than English, but Spanish is commonly found due to the increasing growth of Hispanic students in today's schools.

With the new federal mandate to leave no child behind, bilingual education programs will undoubtedly be under a microscope as a result of the accountability measures. Nonetheless, supporters of bilingual education programs say that bilingual education programs will fare well if students are taught by well trained teachers; provide specifically designed English instruction (which is linked to state and national standards) by incorporating native language instruction to support content learning. Furthermore, student language and content learning are periodically assessed with the results obtained to modify instruction as needed; and the program is evaluated on an ongoing basis to determine effectiveness.

Meanwhile, opponents argue that bilingual education gives limited English proficient school children a greater chance to learn English. For more than two decades, critics have raised questions about bilingual education where students remain in bilingual education classrooms well after they should have exited the program but remain due to not having learned sufficient English to transition out of the program (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Oftentimes bilingual teachers resort to delivery of instruction in their native language (which is usually Spanish) and miss the critical component of bilingual instruction methodology. Commonplace today are bilingual education programs taught by bilingual teachers who are not fluent English speakers and provide instruction at a

greater percentage in Spanish because that is their dominant language. This is one of the problems with bilingual education programs, and as a result, there are many harsh critics of bilingual education.

In 1998, a large majority of the California electorate, where almost a third of the nation's Spanish-speaking school children live and attend school, approved Proposition 227 which mandated the end to bilingual education instruction. This victory for bilingual education opponents proved to have an effect on other states (Thernstrom, & Thernstrom, 2003). This legislative mandate requires all public school instruction to be conducted in English; provides initial short-term placement, not to exceed one year, in intensive sheltered English Immersion programs for school children not fluent in English; and permits enforcement suits by parents and guardians if the schools fail to comply with its requirements. Furthermore, proponents for the English Only movement say that 40% of students across the country who have difficulty speaking English never complete high school (Rossell, & Baker, 1996). Additionally, they tout that the price tag for bilingual education programs is expensive; bilingual education programs are not effective since studies show that students still cannot speak English fluently after having been enrolled in such programs; and bilingual classroom teachers are not adequately prepared. Since the passage of Proposition 227, statewide academic scores of California's 1.4 million limited-English immigrant students have shown huge gains in the two years while those school children who remained in bilingual programs performed the worst (Orellana, Elk & Hernandez, 1999). This has served as strong ammunition for the proponents of English Only and as such is gaining support in other states. Bilingual education opponents continue to work incessantly to promote the English Only movement. They say that bilingual education does not work and that there is little evidence to support its efficacy (Rossell & Baker, 1996). There appears to be the sentiment of, "If you live in America, you need to speak English" (Crawford, 1995).

### **The Challenges and Implications**

In January 2002, the most recent education legislation known as "The No Child Left Behind Act"(NCLB) was signed into law by President George W. Bush. It is widely anticipated that this mandate, which moves into full compliance in January 2006, will significantly impact programs such as bilingual education. This bill reauthorized the Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) and transformed the Bilingual Education Act into the English Language Acquisition Act. As a result of this action, it repealed the Bilingual Act of 1968 (Crawford, J, 1995).

NCLB includes accountability provisions. One method of accountability is based on the percent of ESL students reclassified as fluent in English each year at each particular school. This requirement encourages schools to push ESL students into mainstream English classes before they are fluent. According to Krashen (1988), "language acquisition requires meaningful interactions in the target language- natural

communication- in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding.” Furthermore, researchers agree that it takes a limited English proficient child four to seven years to learn a second language well enough to function at grade level in an academic setting. Therefore, to meet this NCLB accountability requirement, a question arises: Will this really be an improvement in accomplishing academic gains for limited English proficient school children when they are expected to complete assessments in a language they cannot understand?

The English Only legislative mandate appears to be contradictory at best and challenges in the courts perhaps remain to be seen. One should not forget the various historical legislative mandates that were implemented to protect the language minority school child. Bilingual education came into existence in 1968 with the passage of the Bilingual Education Act. This legislation was an amendment to Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965. It was designed to meet the educational needs of limited English-speaking students in providing them with instruction that would achieve competence in the English language while using their native language. However, by this time the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had already passed prohibiting discrimination against individuals and students who were limited in English proficiency. Legislative mandates came about as a result of lawsuits that were heard and whose decisions set precedence for the schools. For example, *Lau v Nichols* (1974) found that school districts had to provide for the language needs of non-English speaking students, while *Plyler v Doe* set the standard for school districts to insure the legal right of immigrant students to education (Goldenberg, 1996). The Supreme Court ruled that states could not deny a free public education to the foreign born children of illegal immigrants. The Supreme Court held that the 1975 Texas statute, which allowed the state to withhold state funds from local school districts for educating children of illegal aliens, violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Consequently, the English Only mandate abolishes all of these rights.

### **The Battle Continues... Leave No Child Behind**

The debate over Bilingual Education vs English Only movement continues. While bilingual education proponents believe that when schools provide school children a quality education in their primary language due to the theory that language acquisition is a developmental process, the children gain two-fold: knowledge and literacy (Krashen, 1988). Furthermore, they make reference to the fact that English Only proponents have based their views on out-dated data. Nonetheless, the opposition disagrees. They state that bilingual education is not working; it is an expensive funding pursuit for school districts; and that school children who receive such services are not performing any better academically than their peers who receive their instruction in English. Therefore, as NCLB moves into

full compliance by the end of the 2005-2006 school year, the data and research that will evolve as a result of this controversy will be key in determining whether or not bilingual education programs are indeed effective, or if English language immersion or “sink or swim” methods prove to be useful in helping limited English language children learn to speak English. Regardless, policy makers at all levels and arenas must keep the school children’s best interests at the forefront of all decisions. The children are depending on it. We cannot afford to leave them behind.

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