

California School Principals' Perceptions of the Effects of Proposition 227

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Abstract: Few studies provide insight into how California principals perceive Proposition 227 and its impact on bilingual education. The findings of a survey distributed to 100 randomly selected California principals with bilingual programs, indicate the law passed by California voters has not changed the perceptions of California principals towards bilingual education.

It is now eight years since Proposition 227 passed on June 2, 1998, with a majority vote of 61 percent. On that day, Californians voted to end bilingual education and the use of languages other than English for instruction in the public schools. Proposition 227 became law in California on August 3, 1998, governing the education of language minority students in California. Specifically, Proposition 227 requires a one-year English immersion program rather than instruction in the student's

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native language. The proposition, also known as the "Unz Initiative" was the creation of Silicon Valley millionaire, Ron Unz, who personally financed \$700,000 of the \$1.2 million campaign cost.

Throughout the Proposition 227 campaign, Unz blamed bilingual education for the increasing numbers of limited-English-proficient students in California. He claimed that the state's bilingual programs had a "95 percent annual failure rate," based on the percentage of English learners who "failed" to become fluent in English each year. In addition, Ron Unz promised that "structured English immersion"—an English-only program—would speed up the acquisition of English. Unz further insisted that Proposition 227 would eliminate bilingual education in California, assuring voters that language-minority parents would embrace English-only immersion programs. These claims became the basis for the mandates of Proposition 227 (Crawford, 2003, p. 1).

Since then, numerous studies and reports have been undertaken to determine the effects of Proposition 227. The most recent report performed by the California Department of Education announced "significant" gains in the percentage of English learners reaching English proficiency over the last three years in grades 3-11. These gains, a total of 23%, are based on results from the annual (2005) California English Language Development Test (CELDT) taken by the state's 1.3 million continuing English learners each year. On the other hand, the California Standards Test was measured against the CELDT. The results of this report show that only 10 percent of the English learners who took the CELDT in 2005 were proficient in the academic English (Rumberger & Gandara, 2005).

It has also been suggested that at the present time there is no scientifically defensible way to compare districts that have implemented 227 and those that have maintained bilingual programs because there was no statewide English proficiency test in place before 2001 (Rumberger & Gandara, 2003; Thompson, DiCerbo, Mahoney, & MacSwan, 2002). In addition, proponents of bilingual education say that despite Proposition 227 language victory claims, the enrollment numbers and transient rates of English learners have not changed. Bilingual Education advocates such as Jim Crawford (2003), indicated that these trends are a reflection of immigration patterns and not an alleged failure of bilingual education programs as Ron Unz originally claimed.

While many of these reports and/or studies provide useful information on English language development, bilingual education, and student achievement, very few provide insight into how principals perceive the law and its impact on bilingual education. After all, principals as school administrators, act as gatekeepers for reform policies, and their translation, interpretation, support, or neglect of these policies can make a

crucial difference in implementation efforts and thus, results (Pristine, 2002). With the importance of the perspective of school principals in mind, the purpose of this study was to determine how principals in California schools perceive the impact of Proposition 227 on the bilingual programs at their schools.

Methodology

From a review of the literature, survey questions were developed and piloted with a small sample of persons knowledgeable about the issues of Proposition 227 and bilingual education. The piloted survey was then distributed to principals of 100 randomly selected schools in California with bilingual programs. The survey was developed to gather data about (a) how these principals perceived the effects of Proposition 227 on the bilingual instruction at their schools and (b) their personal feelings regarding bilingual education.

A stratified sampling procedure was used to ensure geographic representation of schools throughout the entire state. The surveys that were received from the respondents varied in school enrollment, community size, and type. These schools represented high, medium, and low English-learner student enrollment with a mean English-learner student percentage of 41 percent within a range of zero to 93 percent. This may be considered as a fair representation of the state's English learner population.

The survey contained six closed-ended response items and one open-ended response item (see Appendix A). Four of the seven items on the survey were measured using a five point Likert-type scale. These items also included a space for comments. The returned surveys were numbered and all responses were entered into a database for analysis. It should be noted that in this study, the percentage of responses reported is based on the actual number of responses to a particular question rather than on the total number of respondents, since not every individual answered every item.

Analysis of the open-ended responses was done using Coded Measures, an inductive qualitative research technique used to find regularities among the data (Patton, 1990). This technique was completed across all data sources in search of commonalities and complementary factors. This allowed categories significant to the respondent's comments about the implementation process to emerge. Through triangulation of data, potential problems of construct validity were addressed. From this analysis, an understanding of principal perceptions regarding the impact of Proposition 227 was developed.

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Results

A total of 47 respondents (i.e., 47 percent of the surveys mail to principals), which included forty-three principals and four superintendent/principals from 47 California school districts, participated in the study. Of the 47 principals, 23 labeled themselves as bilingual. Since the rest (24) did not label themselves as bilingual, they were characterized as speakers of English-only. In addition, 30 of the 47 principals had English immersion programs and 13 had dual-English/Bilingual programs in their schools.

The coded measure analysis revealed that the highest percentage of principals (47.73 percent) believed that Proposition 227 had minimal impact on their schools. Approximately 27 percent felt that the effect was positive (the two positive categories were combined) and 25.01 percent felt it was negative (the two negative categories were combined). In addition, 52.17 percent (strong and moderate supporters categories were combined) were in favor of bilingual education and 26.09 percent (somewhat and adamantly opposed categories were combined) were opposed. These results seem to indicate that Proposition 227 was perceived by principals as having minimal effect on instruction at their school, and that the majority (52 percent) favored bilingual education (see Table 1).

Two items were designed to address principals' perceptions of the effects of Proposition 227 on English learner student enrollment and transient rates. For most schools, student transient rates and English learner populations remained relatively stable. Approximately 16 percent of the principals reported an increase in transient rates whereas

Table 1
Principals' Perceptions of Proposition 227 and Bilingual Education ($N=47$)

Perceptions	Very Positive Effect	Somewhat Positive Effective	Minimal Effect	Moderate Negative Effect	Very Negative Effect
Effect of Prop. 227 on bilingual instruction at your school? (Q #5)	6.82%	20.46%	47.73%	20.46%	4.55%
	Strong Supporter	Moderate Supporter	Neutral	Somewhat Opposed	Adamantly Opposed
Personal feelings regarding bilingual education? (Q #4)	34.78%	17.39%	21.74%	21.74%	4.35%

Note: This table presents the principals' perceptions of the effect of Proposition 227 on their schools from questions 4 and 5 of the survey.

approximately 11 percent reported a decrease. However, approximately 39 percent of the principals reported an increase in English learner student enrollments whereas approximately seven percent reported a decrease. This is an indication that perhaps principals saw Proposition 227 as having a small effect in increasing or no effect on transient rates or the English-learner student enrollment population (see Table 2).

These data were then analyzed using correlation analyses (Pearson *r*). A correctional analysis between principal's perceptions, English learner enrollment, and the effects of Proposition 227 on bilingual instruction were moderately correlated ($r = .317$). These results indicate that principals at schools with low percentages of English learner students generally expressed a more negative attitude toward bilingual education. Conversely, principals at schools with a higher English learner enrollment generally expressed a more positive attitude towards bilingual education.

A stronger relationship was found regarding bilingual education and whether or not the individual was bilingual. The correlation ($r = .438$) was moderately high, indicating that principals that reported they were bilingual generally expressed a more positive attitude toward bilingual education, compared to principals who were not bilingual.

Perceptions about the effects of Proposition 227 on bilingual instruction were slightly correlated negatively ($r = -.255$) with perceptions about bilingual education, indicating a weak relationship between attitudes toward bilingual education and the perceived effects of Proposition 227 on bilingual instruction.

There was also a very weak positive correlation ($r = .102$) between being bilingual and the perceived effects of Proposition 227 on bilingual instruction. This indicated that there was not a strong relationship

Table 2
Transient Rate and English Learner Population ($N=47$)

Perceptions	Increased Significantly	Increased Somewhat	Remain Stable	Decreased Somewhat	Decrease Significantly
Change of transient rate since Prop. 227? (Q #2)	0%	15.91%	72.73%	9.09%	2.27%
Change of ELL population since Prop. 227? (Q# 3)	13.64%	25.00%	54.55%	6.82%	0%

Note: This table contains the transient rate and English learner enrollments taken from questions 2 and 3 of the survey.

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between individuals reporting themselves as bilingual and their perception of the effects that Proposition 227 had on bilingual instruction at their school.

Comparison of mean responses for bilingual principals versus those who were not bilingual yielded a slightly moderate positive correlation among language disposition, bilingual instruction, and perceptions of the effects of Proposition 227 (see Table 3).

The results of the principals who identified themselves as bilingual were significantly more positive in their attitudes towards bilingual education than principals who were not bilingual. However, the difference between bilingual principals versus those who were not bilingual regarding their attitudes towards the effects of Proposition 227 on bilingual instruction at their school was not statistically significant. This is an indication that language disposition had little effect on the perception of the effectiveness of Proposition 227 by the principals.

Even though all the items on the survey include an "additional comment" option, items 4, 5, and 7 generated the most comments. Of the thirty-seven comments, the most common responses were about bilingual education programs (17 comments). The following responses taken from the survey highlight this area:

"If bilingual education were truly bilingual, then it would be fabulous."

"It [bilingual education] has been very misrepresented in the public. We still have to abide by the Federal Law and give children equal access with no extra funding since 227."

"We had a strong bilingual program at the onset. It remained strong."

"I was not a strong supporter of bilingual education until I saw the body language of students in classes taught in their native language."

Table 3
Comparison of Attitudes toward Bilingual Education, Proposition 227, and Language Disposition

Survey Items	Yes	No
Feelings about bilingual education in general	1.96	2.96*
Feelings about effects of Prop. 227 on bilingual instruction	2.91	3.19

*t-test $p \leq .001$

Note: This table contains the comparison of attitudes toward bilingual education, Proposition 227, and language disposition.

Of these 17 comments, nine were directed at bilingual education program implementation, four at parental intervention, and four at bilingual staff.

The second most commonly cited comments dealt with the levels of language proficiency needed to succeed academically (11 comments). The most frequently cited comments in this area were about the successful acquisition of English as a result of Proposition 227. The following comments highlight this point:

“Our students learn English quickly because there are no other students that speak their language at recess.”

“We believe it is the quickest way to learn English while learning grade level content.”

“Students are making great gains in English acquisition through immersion and support.”

The third most commonly cited remarks were administrative in nature (10 responses). The majority of administrative comments cited the increase in test scores. The comments highlighting this area were as follows:

“Our test scores are WAY UP!”

“... our API scores have shown amazing progress ...”

“Check on our API growth and “exemplary” status at AES.”

“We re-designated 40 students.”

Limitations of the Study

Since this study was based on only 47 respondents, the generalizability of the results should be considered with caution. Although the demographic data characteristics of the 47 respondents appeared to generally match those of principals statewide, the sample is not large enough to confidently accept the results. The results should be considered for interpretation of possible trends and their implications.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study provide several conclusions and areas of discussion. In general, three assertions can be made from the data collected on principals' perceptions: (a) Proposition 227 has not diminished support for bilingual education; (b) Proposition 227 has had a minimal effect on bilingual instruction; and (c) Proposition 227 has had little or no effect on English learner enrollment or transient rates.

For the last eight years, Proposition 227 has advocated the ideals of

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English-only instruction. While early thought and practice was to eliminate students' primary language instruction and replace it with English, the data collected from the survey show that principals perceive Proposition 227 as having very little effect on the bilingual instruction at their schools. Based on these results, it appears that the principals in this study see first language instruction as a resource to be used for educational growth. As one respondent candidly noted, "We had a strong bilingual program at the onset and it remained strong even after Proposition 227." Evidence such as the preceding statement suggests that the majority of the principals in this study believe that English language can be successfully fostered through strong bilingual education programs. These findings also illustrate that in spite of Proposition 227, an attitudinal fracture still exists between principals who are proponents and opponents of Bilingual Education.

While English learner enrollments and transient rates are important environmental learning indicators, they were not viewed by the principals in this study as being affected by Proposition 227. As a matter of fact, since Proposition 227 took effect, more than half of the respondents perceived no change in either student enrollments or transient rates. However, principals with high English-language learner enrollments did see Proposition 227 as having an impact on student test scores. Many of these principals reported significant academic gains. As one respondent noted, "We re-designated 40 students." This comment and others like it underscore that an "English-plus," pro-bilingual outcome was valued by the majority of the principals who participated in this study.

Given the findings provided by this study, Proposition 227 has not changed the perceptions of California principals towards bilingual education. The question is why? Perhaps the answer is because change cannot be realized by simply introducing legislation. It can only occur by changing the mental models that drive their implementation. Given this suggestion, the results of this study underscore the need to rethink the ways in which legislation is implemented in order to better understand the effects of Proposition 227 and the future of bilingual education in California.

References

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Appendix A
School Site Survey

CONFIDENTIAL: Please take less than 5 minutes to respond to the following questions regarding bilingual instruction and the effects of Proposition 227. Your responses are very important in evaluating the effects of Prop. 227 on children. Thank you.

1. Please characterize the current bilingual instructional program at your school.
____ English Immersion
____ Dual Language: languages _____ and _____
____ None

Comments _____

2. The overall student transient rate annually at your school for the past 5 years has been approximately _____ % and has ... (Please circle one):

Increased Significantly	Increased Somewhat	Remained Stable	Decreased Somewhat	Decreased Significantly
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Comments _____

3. The LEP student population annually at your school for the past 5 years has been approximately _____ % and has. . . (Please circle one)

Increased Significantly	Increased Somewhat	Remained Stable	Decreased Somewhat	Decreased Significantly
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Comments _____

4. How would you characterize your personal feelings regarding bilingual education? (Please circle one)

Very Strong Supporter	Moderate Supporter	Neutral	Somewhat Opposed	Adamantly Opposed
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Comments _____

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5. What effect do you feel that Proposition 227 has had on bilingual instruction at your school? (Please circle one)

Very Strong Negative	Moderately Negative	Minimal or No Effect	Somewhat Positive	Very Positive
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Comments _____

6. Are you bilingual? Yes In which language(s)? _____

7. Additional comments: