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## **FLEXIBILITY CAN IMPROVE BILINGUAL EDUCATION**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Bilingual education has been a controversial issue for some time. In the past three years, however, public opinion has begun to congeal in favor of using bilingual classes primarily to teach English to limited-English-proficient students, rather than to maintain their native language and culture. Even Congress, which for the past dozen years has favored language and cultural maintenance, now has begun to take a new, hard look at this issue.

The House of Representatives in May reauthorized the 1967 Bilingual Education Act. The Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee that month proposed an amendment to the Act. Both measures would allow local school districts greater flexibility in choosing methods to teach English to limited-English-proficient and non-English-speaking children. Current law effectively mandates a single instructional method, known as transitional bilingual education, in which targeted students are taught for the most part in their native language. The law bars spending more than 4 percent of federal bilingual education grants on new approaches. The Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee approved legislation which would raise to 25 percent the 4 percent cap on funding of alternative methodologies. The House measure removes the cap altogether, but authorizes \$246 million, double the current appropriation of \$143 million, and ties funding of alternative instructional approaches to this increase in appropriations.

These bills would improve the federal bilingual education program. The reasons:

- 1) **They would introduce greater flexibility** allowing school districts to tailor the method of instruction to local conditions. At the moment, the federal government discourages such flexibility.
- 2) **They would recognize alternative** instructional methods used by those schools that must accommodate students from many different language backgrounds.

3) **They would recognize that transitional** bilingual education had proved no more effective in teaching students English than have other instructional methods.

Despite such improvements in the federal program, however, the bills fall short of what is truly needed--budget conscious funding for programs that address the bilingual concerns effectively, regardless of instructional methodology. Congress would be wise to consider the Reagan Administration's proposal that would allow unrestricted use of the money currently appropriated for transitional bilingual education for alternative instructional approaches.

## **HOW CONGRESS HAS UNDERMINED BILINGUAL EDUCATION**

The Bilingual Education Act became law in 1967 as Title VII of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Its ostensible purpose was to provide short-term, startup program funding to local education agencies with high concentrations of limited-English-proficient (LEP) students from low-income families. Congress made it clear that no single instructional method was required by the Act. A 1967 Senate Education Committee report stated that "the proposed legislation does not intend to prescribe the types of programs or projects that are needed. Such matters are left to the discretion and judgments of the local school districts to encourage both varied approaches to the problem and also special solutions for a particular problem of a given school."<sup>1</sup>

In 1974, however, following the Supreme Court's Lau v. Nichols decision requiring school districts to give special help to limited-English-proficient students, Congress effectively mandated that the way to provide this help was by transitional bilingual education (TBE). In TBE, reading is taught both in English and in the language spoken in the student's home. Other subjects are taught in the home language until the student has sufficient mastery of English to be placed in an English-only classroom. This usually takes three years, although it can take as long as seven.

**Concocting an Eskimo Language.** The Office for Civil Rights then began using Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act<sup>2</sup> to enforce unofficial guidelines called the "Lau Remedies," named after the Supreme Court decision. These were used to require school districts receiving federal funds to use transitional bilingual education. The Office for Civil Rights even ordered an Alaskan school district in 1978 to

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1. 1967 Senate Committee Report 90-726 issued to accompany H.R. 7819, pp. 48-49. In Susan Gilbert Schneider, Revolution, Reaction, or Reform: The 1974 Bilingual Education Act (New York: Las Americas Press, 1976), p. 23.

2. Title VI prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin.

develop a written Eskimo language to enable Eskimo children to receive transitional bilingual education in reading.<sup>3</sup>

In 1980, Secretary of Education Shirley Hufstедler proposed making the "Lau Remedies" official regulations that would require public schools receiving federal funds to teach limited-English-proficient students in their home language. Because of congressional opposition and mounting evidence that there is no case for mandating transitional bilingual education, the Reagan Administration's first Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell, in 1982 revoked the proposed regulations and withdrew the unofficial "Lau Remedies." Congress's statutory language remained, however, effectively restricting federally funded bilingual programs to the transitional bilingual education method.

**1984 Amendments.** In 1984, the Bilingual Education Act was amended. These Amendments specifically declared that the objectives of bilingual education are: 1) to ensure that the LEP student meets grade promotion and graduation standards; and 2) to help the student become English proficient. To meet the first objective, it is argued, subject matter must be taught in the student's native language until English proficiency is attained. The 1984 Amendments require that 96 percent of the Act's instructional funds be used to support the transitional bilingual education method.

As a result, only 4 percent of the federal instructional funds can be spent on such alternative instructional methods as "Structured Immersion" and "English as a Second Language." According to Carol Whitten, former Director of the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs at the U.S. Department of Education, in fiscal 1985, the first year in which schools were eligible for alternative program funds, the Department received 105 applications for just 35 allowable awards for alternative programs.

In FY 1986 no money was available for new alternative programs because the FY 1986 appropriation was used to continue the grants awarded in FY 1985. Nevertheless, the Department in 1986 received 127 inquiries about funding possibilities for alternative programs. Whitten testified this March that, within ten days of the Department reopening its competition for alternative funding, her office had received over 150 application requests.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, local school districts increasingly are seeking federal help to support teaching methods other than transitional bilingual education.

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3. Northwest Arctic School District v. Califano, No. 077-216, cited in Christine H. Rossell and J. Michael Ross, "The Social Science Evidence on Bilingual Education," Journal of Law and Education, Fall 1986, pp. 385-419.

4. Carol Whitten, Director, Office of Bilingual Language and Minority Language Affairs, testimony before the House Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary and Vocational Education, March 24, 1987.

## TEACHING METHODS – WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

The debate over bilingual education centers on whether the transitional bilingual education method is more effective than other methods. Research indicates that it is not.

### Transitional Bilingual Education

At least 40 percent of limited-English-proficient students are being taught using the transitional bilingual education method.<sup>5</sup> For some time there has been heated debate over the effectiveness of this instructional methodology because of its emphasis on the child's native language and culture. Those who oppose TBE do so on the grounds that:

1) **TBE tends to reinforce** the minority language rather than provide a transition to a society based on English;

2) **Students too often are kept in TBE** classes after having attained sufficient mastery of English;

3) **English-speaking students** with Spanish surnames or from homes in which another language is spoken are often placed in TBE classes, even though they need not be there; and

4) **Competent studies** show TBE to be no more effective and in many cases less effective than other teaching methods.<sup>6</sup>

Native language instruction advocates argue, among other things, that students find it easier to learn English if they first learn to read in their native tongue. They also maintain that English-only programs denigrate the student's native language, culture, and self-esteem. They charge that non-TBE approaches are not properly "bilingual."<sup>7</sup>

TBE proponents recently have cited as evidence for their position data from an ongoing U.S. Department of Education study--the "Longitudinal Study of Immersion, Early Exit and Late Exit Transitional Bilingual Education Programs for Language Minority Children." First-year data from this study, say TBE advocates,

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5. Rossell and Ross, op. cit., p. 388.

6. Keith Baker and Adriana de Kanter, "An Answer from Research on Bilingual Education," 19 American Educator 40 (1983); Keith Baker and Adriana de Kanter, "Response to Evaluation and Incrementalism: The AIR Report and ESEA Title VII," 6 Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 189 (1984); Engle, "Language Medium in Early School Years for Minority Language Groups," 45 Review of Educational Research 283 (1984); Noel Epstein, Language, Ethnicity and the Schools: Policy Alternatives for Bilingual-Bicultural Education (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership 1977); Rotberg, "Some Legal and Research Considerations in Establishing Federal Policy in Bilingual Education," 52 Harvard Education Review 149 (1982), reported in Rossell and Ross, op. cit.

7. "Controversy Over Bilingual Education: Pro and Con," Congressional Digest, March 1987.



indicate that students in immersion programs do less well on standardized tests than those in the TBE programs.

**Pre-existing Differences.** This, however, is a misreading of the data, explains Program Analyst Keith Baker of the Department of Education. At the end of the first year of the four-year study, says Baker, the researchers issued a report on the fall pre-test scores of the kindergarten and first grade students in the study. These pre-test scores constituted the base line data from which future achievement would be measured. In other words, the scores did not represent the effects of the programs but rather the achievement levels of the students before the programs began.

TBE advocates are correct when they cite evidence that students in immersion classes had lower scores than children in TBE classes. But since the tests were administered before any classes began, the test scores reveal nothing about the relative merits of either TBE or immersion techniques. The scores simply indicate pre-existing differences between the immersion and TBE experimental groups which need to be taken into account when interpreting the effects of any instructional methodology.

### Structured Immersion

A method that traditionally has not been eligible for federal funding is structured immersion. In this approach the teacher understands the home language and uses it for clarification, but otherwise teaches all subjects in English. The curriculum is specially structured to introduce content at a rate allowing students to comprehend both the material and their new language. Extensive research from Canada documents the advantages of structured immersion with language majority students.<sup>8</sup>

That the Canadian study is relevant for a U.S. setting is confirmed in two studies reported by University of Oregon Professor of Education Russell Gerstein and Research Associate John Woodward. They cite the effectiveness of structured immersion in two programs with America's two largest language minority groups: Hispanics and Asian Americans. Both programs use the highly structured "Distar" method for reading, language, and arithmetic. At the end of three full years, spanning the first to third grades, Hispanic students in the Uvalde, Texas, structured immersion program "achieved above or near the national normal on the language subtest of the Metropolitan Achievement Test." In math, six out of the eleven experimental groups scored at or above the 45th percentile on an achievement test, while comparable low-income Hispanics in bilingual education programs nationally scored near the 30th percentile. In reading, Hispanic students in Uvalde's structured

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8. N. E. Lambert and G. R. Tucker, Bilingual Education of Children: The St. Lambert Experience (Rawley, Massachusetts: Newbury House, 1972); and Henri Barkik and Merrill Swain, "Three-Year Education of a Large Scale Early Grade French Immersion Program: The Ottawa Study," Language Learning, 1975, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 1-30.

immersion program fell within the 30th to 34th percentile range, while low-income Hispanics in bilingual programs scored below the 20th percentile.<sup>9</sup>

**Significantly Outsoring.** Two- and three-year follow-up studies find the experimental structured immersion group significantly outsoring a comparison group. A second follow-up study comparing the experimental group with similar students who had not been in structured immersion classes for the first three years concludes that the experimental students are "more likely to receive a high school diploma and less likely to be retained in any grade."<sup>10</sup>

The second study cited by Gerstein and Woodward concerns two groups of Vietnamese immigrants in a northern California school district. One group received TBE instruction; the other was taught English with Distar. After two years, "75 percent of the immersion students had reading scores at or above grade level, whereas only 19 percent of the transitional students were at that level. In language, the proportions were 71 percent for immersion versus 44 percent for transitional; in math, 96 percent versus 62 percent."<sup>11</sup> A follow-up study two years later in the regular English-speaking classroom shows the former structured immersion students' average scores falling at the 65th percentile in reading and math and at the 67th percentile in language.<sup>12</sup>

### **English as a Second Language**

English as a Second Language (ESL) is another teaching method that appears effective in teaching English to limited-English-proficient students. ESL speeds the child's transition from the home language to English by providing extra English instruction through a special curriculum. The teachers do not need to be conversant in the child's native tongue.

The ESL approach appears particularly well suited to those schools that cannot find teachers fluent in the many languages their students speak. Schools in Montgomery County, Maryland, for example, contain students speaking over 60 different languages, including Afrikaans, Gujarati, and Tagalog. Schools in Fairfax County, Virginia, serve students with over 70 different language backgrounds. And schools in Maryland's Prince George's County in December 1986 contained LEP students speaking 126 languages, and the number was growing.

**Winners at Science Fairs.** ESL receives high praise from the bilingual educators in these counties. Lillian Falk, Coordinator of the English for Speakers of Other Languages Program for Maryland's Prince George's County Public Schools, noted in a recent hearing before the House Education Subcommittee that "To date

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9. Russell Gerstein and John Woodward, "A Case for Structured Immersion," 43 Educational Leadership 1, September 1985, pp. 75-79.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

no Prince George's County [ESL] student has been denied graduation because of inability to pass" Maryland's required functional tests for high school graduation. She added that "[ESL] students are winners at school science fairs and have even participated in scientific experiments that were selected for space. The percentage of [ESL] students who achieve honor roll status is one-third larger than one would expect from their proportion in the total student body. In the recent past, we had two valedictorians who were foreign-born students."

## **CONCLUSION**

The House and Senate Education Committees have approved measures to alter the Bilingual Education Act to allow greater funding of alternative instructional approaches. The Reagan Administration argues that the 4 percent spending ceiling on federal funds for alternative programs ought to be lifted entirely and that the Act should remain level-funded at \$143 million.

### **The House**

This May, the House approved an omnibus School Improvement Act, which reauthorized the major elementary and secondary education programs, including bilingual education, through fiscal 1993. The new measure authorizes \$246 million for the bilingual education program and eliminates the 4 percent spending ceiling on alternative methodologies. Substantive funding of the alternative category, however, is made dependent upon this increase in appropriations. Any funds appropriated above the 1987 funding level of \$143 million first must be used to offset inflation. Of the remaining funds, not less than 70 percent and no more than 75 percent can be used for alternative instructional programs.

### **The Senate**

The Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee approved in May a measure to amend the Bilingual Education Act. The amendment raises the 4 percent cap on alternative program funding to 25 percent. The measure also limits bilingual class enrollment to a maximum of three years. Currently there is no maximum. Unlike the House bill, the Senate would not reauthorize the Bilingual Education Act. Senate lawmakers intend to address this next year, since the Act does not expire until October 1989.

Although the House and Senate bills are a step in the right direction, they fail to do what is needed to encourage excellence in America's bilingual education programs. The House bill, moreover, violates federal budgetary constraints.

**Promises, Challenges, Rewards.** Since it is unclear whether transitional bilingual education is superior to other methods of teaching limited-English-proficient children English, the federal government should not favor TBE over other legitimate teaching methods. The primary goal of bilingual education, after all, is to help limited-English-proficient children enter the American mainstream with all its promises, challenges, and rewards, and that means to help them become fluent in English. Whatever method can do this best, within the Supreme Court's broad

guidelines, ought to be on equal footing with every other legitimate method in the federal grantmaker's mind. Congress should not only lift the spending limit on alternative methods but also maintain the current appropriation level of \$143 million.

The original purpose of the Bilingual Education Act--to encourage various approaches to the problem of teaching limited-English-proficient students English--has been skewed over the years by Congress and the Education Department. Congress needs now to reiterate the Act's original goal and to make the changes that will put the program back on track.

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