

# Bilingual Education in Texas

## Lighting the Path, Leading the Way

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I am proud to be a bilingual educator in Texas and a member of the Texas Association for Bilingual Education. We are leading the way toward a biliterate and multilingual America, as enrichment bilingual programs, both one-way and two-way, flourish throughout Texas. We should be grateful for the support that bilingual education has enjoyed in our state, unlike many others.

While similar programs in other states are often challenged and even dismantled—as in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts—in much of Texas, students' bilingualism is used as a resource in

the learning process. While rancorous political debates are raging elsewhere, with confusing claims and counterclaims about the value of bilingual education, Texas is poised to be the model, a paradigm of what is possible when children's cultural and linguistic diversity are treated as the assets they are.

This is our potential in Texas—to be a leader for the nation. For that to happen, however, our programs for English language learners (ELLs) need two things: a guarantee of adequate funding and a fair and rational system of accountability. Right now we have neither.

### **Obstacles to Progress**

Despite three legislative sessions this year, the Texas legislature has failed to do the right thing for school finance equity in general, and for ELLs in particular. Instead, it has punted the ball to the Texas Supreme Court, which some people believe is planning to punt it back to the legislature.

One thing is clear. According to Judge Dietz in the *West Orange-Cove* decision, which the court is considering, bilingual programs in Texas should be receiving at least four times the funding “weight” that they currently receive if children are going

to receive an adequate education.

Given the politics we are dealing with, equity in school finance is likely to be a long-term struggle. TABE was wise to hire an experienced and professional legislative advocate, Jesse Romero, to represent us in Austin. I am proud that NABE was able to help out financially in this effort as well. Unless the legislature provides the

direct attack on bilingual education. It pretends to remain neutral about pedagogy. But the high stakes that NCLB attaches to English language learners' scores on English language achievement tests are damaging to bilingual programs.

As a result of this pressure, more and more districts across the country are eliminating native-language instruction in the

National Literacy Panel looked at existing studies and conducted a "meta-analysis" to summarize their results. It found that children learn to read better in English if they are enrolled in bilingual programs. There was a clear edge for approaches that develop children's native-language skills.

That's welcome news—which the American public deserves to hear. Unfortunately, the public will not be hearing those results from the Bush Administration. The Department of Education claims that the research methodology is not rigorous enough and it does not plan to release the study.

As James Crawford has written: "The Department refuses to stand behind its own report. Is the Bush Administration worried about offending its conservative political base by endorsing scientific findings that indicate the effectiveness of bilingual education?"

The federal government dumped plenty of money into this report—\$1.8 million of our tax dollars to be exact—and the study shows that bilingual education works. We know that, of course, but the public in general does not. Even here in Texas, some districts don't seem to understand what the research has shown.

That's why it would be important for the Bush Administration to release the National Literacy Panel report. It would have a significant impact that would benefit children. If the study has flaws, fix them. But don't back down for political reasons, because of fears about the English-only lobby. Let's put children first.

When George Bush was governor of Texas, he said supportive things about bilingual education. He even spoke out against Ron Unz and the English-only initiative in California. As a result, he received a lot of Hispanic votes. But since George Bush arrived in the White House, the words "bilingual education" have rarely if ever passed his lips.

His No Child Left Behind bill eliminated every reference to bilingual or bilingualism. Has he forgotten all about the wonderful bilingual programs that he praised in Texas? Did he ever sincerely believe what he said? Does he care that his Department of Education is refusing to release an important report showing the effectiveness of bilingual education?

Who knows what George Bush really thinks? That's unimportant. What truly

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necessary funding, program decisions for our students will be made—not on what works best in the classroom but on the basis of what program model costs the least.

### **NCLB vs. Bilingual Education**

The second obstacle to progress is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). However well intentioned, this law neglects the special situation of ELLs and the educators who teach them. The accountability system imposed by NCLB relies on high-stakes testing, despite the fact that the validity and reliability of these tests are questionable for our students.

Even in Texas, which is ahead of most other states in developing native-language assessments, schools know that children must soon be assessed in English. So the pressure is growing to phase out bilingual instruction as rapidly as possible, before children become fully bilingual and biliterate.

This is not a response to the failure of bilingual programs. We know they are succeeding. It's simply because of anxiety about making AYP—adequate yearly progress—in English.

Unlike the English-only movement, No Child Left Behind does not include any

false hope that this will speed up English acquisition. Nothing could be further from the truth. But that is the clear effect of this law. That's why NABE has made reforming NCLB its top legislative priority. Ultimately, the future of bilingual education in the nation—and in Texas—depends on it.

### **"Science" and Politics**

No Child Left Behind requires schools to use "scientifically based research" as a guide to all their programs. This mandate is repeated more than 100 times in the text of the law, and the Bush Administration uses the phrase constantly to justify its decisions. Yet the principle only seems to apply when scientific findings are politically convenient.

Three years ago U.S. Department of Education commissioned a group of researchers, the National Literacy Panel, to study effective practices for English language learners. This wasn't just a random group. It was handpicked, to make sure that the panel members agreed philosophically with the Administration on its education policies and with its approach to educational research. We all know that President Bush doesn't like surprises.

But a funny thing happened when the

matters is what George Bush *does* as a politician. Politicians understand and care about one thing above all: numbers. They count votes.

They assess political strength and weakness. And right now they don't see a lot of strong support for bilingual education. Why is that? It's because we are not doing enough. We must act. And we must act politically.

Bilingual education has made great advances. As a professional association, we have made great advances. With one exception: we have been politically naïve. Thus, we cannot afford, and our children cannot afford for us to refrain from entering the political arena. The task of TABE and NABE is to move away from strategies-only, research-only, pedagogical-methods only. All these are necessary but they are not sufficient. As advocacy organizations, we must lead the way, because bilingual education will live or die in the political arena.

### Training for Advocacy

We cannot be unprepared and disorganized like FEMA. We need to train a new generation of bilingual educators in advocacy. We need to act in advance of calamity; we need to be prepared; we need to lead the way. All the ABE's—both the national and the state associations—must reorient ourselves to be politically savvy and effective.

No one else is going to do this work. We have made tremendous progress in research, in the implementation of quality programs, in the preparation of teachers. In advocacy, we have not made that kind of progress.

Bilingual education serves those who lack the power to demand more, the least well-off and least powerful in our society, those without a voice in English. We must be their political voice until such time as they can speak for themselves. The stronger our bilingual education programs, the sooner English learners can speak for themselves.

We must monitor what is happening in Congress, among our state legislators, in our school districts, and among board members. We must let those we elected know that we are watching. We must remind our representatives that we sent them there and that we can bring them home! That's true for school board members, superintendents, state representatives, senators—all elected officials.

Policymakers should not think about

making decisions about English language learners without consulting the experts. Why didn't Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger consult with the California Association for Bilingual Education last week before vetoing a bill that would have provided testing for ELLs in their native language? Because he doesn't see bilingual educators as a force to be reckoned with. That has to change.

This is our challenge: to deliver a message that compels politicians to listen. And when they listen, what is it they must hear?

- That students in bilingual programs, especially those in one- and two-way developmental programs, acquire at least as much English as those in all-English immersion programs, and usually acquire more.
- That learning to read in the primary language is a shortcut to learning to read in English.
- That children in bilingual programs consistently outperform those in all-English alternatives on tests of English reading.
- That bilingual education has a positive effect on English language development.

### Getting Political

Why has this research been overlooked? Because of politics, pure and simple. The English Only movement has been effective in spreading its message. We have not. This is unacceptable. Our children depend on us to be their political voice. We should have thousands of letters going to Washington. How many of us have written to the President or to our representatives in Congress demanding that the Department of Education release that favorable report on the effectiveness of bilingual education?

I don't pretend that any of this will be easy. We are educators. Politics does not come naturally to us. Educators are accustomed to thinking in terms of educational objectives. So let's think about this call to action in terms of educational objectives:

- We must train teachers about the political process. Infuse at least one course on the policy and politics of bilingual education.
- We must reconceptualize our role, developing a strategy and vision for NABE and its affiliates over the next five years that is both politically active and supportive of advancing research and practice in bilingual education.

- We must enhance communication with our members about policy and legislation affecting bilingual education programs and teacher training, tracking the record of every legislator on these issues.
- We must reach out to parents and communities, by effectively using the news media to provide accurate information about bilingual education and mobilize grassroots support.

Who will do these things—if not us? Unless we are vigilant, in fact, hyper-vigilant, children could lose the right to learn in their own language as well as in English.

No longer can we assume a defensive, reactive posture. We must be proactive. In the face of stiff odds, we must use our imagination, creativity, and energy as advocates for our children.

The movement toward enforced monolingualism, the imposition of a single dominant language, is tantamount to the subjugation of a people. If we wanted to destroy a culture, we would sever its language roots. If we wanted to subjugate a rising generation, we would separate children from their native language.

Language is the life of a people. In the context of schools, the native language is the pathway toward second language acquisition, academic achievement, and intellectual development. And a second language for monolingual English speakers is essential to maintaining our strategic place among the nations.

Let me close my observations with the wise words of Frederick Douglass: "If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning."

We have the passion and the knowledge and the brain power to make that thunder and lightning. To lead the way for all those who care about the needs of English language learners. Let's highlight the bright spots, like Texas, where many things are being done right. Our state can and should be a model for the nation, a showcase of effective programs that make children bilingual and biliterate. But only if we unite effectively for political action. ■■■

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