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ABSTRACT

The United States continues to neglect and fails to utilize its many cultures and languages. These languages and cultures are valuable resources that can be used to prepare students for the international competitive economy. School boards must decide what role bilingual and multicultural education will play. Critics charge that bilingual and multicultural education are unnecessary, expensive, and threaten American education. But an increasing percentage of students require bilingual education. The issue of languages and multiculturalism in American education has a long and varied history. Today, the number and variety of students requiring bilingual and multicultural education is increasing. All these students, as well as monolingual students, must be prepared to be successful in the next century. Many people, however, have conflicting views on bilingual education, supporting second-language instruction, but opposing ethnic language instruction for language minority students. School boards must decide what kind of education non- and limited-English-speaking students will receive. They must keep in mind the increasing numbers of these students and the cost to the United States in lost opportunities and productiveness if students are not educated well. (JPT)

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In the highly competitive arena of the international economy, the United States continues to fare well. Despite the naysayers, the U.S. worker still outperforms all the competition, including the highly regarded Germans and Japanese. Let's face it: American products can be marketed anywhere in the world.

It is important that we not lose sight of this fact and of our many other strengths, which include the ability to acknowledge and overcome deficiencies. In that regard, we suggest that a deficiency in America's competitive status is our long-time reluctance to actively address our linguistic limitations.

While English remains the primary international language for conducting business and even diplomacy, ability to use other languages is important for Americans. It is, therefore, unfortunate that we continue to neglect our phenomenal natural resources in languages. The remarkable multicultural nature of modern American society affords an opportunity to reach across borders that is unequalled by any other nation.

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Our marvelous meld of languages and cultures provides us with the means for educating our future leaders (who are, potentially, future leaders of the world) to achieve even greater heights in influencing world events and international prosperity. We have but to take advantage of our multilingual and multicultural skills. Conversely, if we do not harness those skills, they can be a divisive and or debilitating element in our society.

Frankly, you — the school board members — are facing yet another critical set of value judgements. The truth is that in the 1990s, bilingual and multicultural education continue to evoke deeply held feelings. Some opponents say they threaten to divide the United States into many, small, internal "nations" that are defined by language. Others say they are expensive, inefficient and un-American.

Supporters maintain that it is both the obligation and the opportunity of a multicultural society with a strong immigrant heritage to provide a bilingual education. Indeed, we have been arguing the merits and the limitations of bilingual education since the colonial period, but rarely has the discussion been so important to our future national well-being as it is today.

Continuing changes in the make-up of the U.S. population illustrates the significance of this issue. A recent article in *Report on Education Research* states:

> "The number of U.S. residents speaking a language other than English at home reached an all-time high in 1989. According to the new Education Department trend data — the first to document recent changes in U.S. language characteristics — about 12 percent of the population speak a foreign language at home, up from nine percent in 1979. But 'contrary to popular belief, almost half of all non-English-language speakers in the population were born in the United States,' Commissioner Emerson Elliott of ED's National Center for

continued on page 2

Inside Updating. . .

Languages from page 1

> Education Statistics said when releasing the report." ("LEP Population Changing Dramatically, NCES Says," *Report on Education Research*, Vol.26,No.2, January 19, 1994)

In the not-so-long run, these non- and limited-English-speaking students in our public schools will make up a growing segment of the U.S. labor force. In the short-run, they represent an increasing proportion of public school students. We cannot afford to do less than our best in providing both English-speaking and limited-English-proficient (LEP) students with the language skills they need to succeed.

As school boards make the decisions that will affect bilingual education programs and the growing numbers of LEP students, it might be helpful to take a brief look at the history of bilingual education in the U.S.

A Look Back

As early as the 17th century, there were over 18 different "foreign" languages spoken in America, in addition to the hundreds of languages spoken by native Indian tribes throughout the country. English was the most prevalent language with French, German, Dutch, Swedish and Polish also widely spoken.

Indeed, no uniform national language was chosen in the U.S. until the 19th century when a nationalistic feeling swept across the country. As Italian and Jewish immigrants began to outnumber earlier immigrants from Germany, Ireland and Scandinavia, a concern for cultural and linguistic homogeneity developed and English became the "first" language.

The multicultural nature of early American society continued to be reflected in the nation's schools throughout the 18th,19th and early 20th centuries. For example, in Ohio, in the early 1900s, schools were required to educate students in English, German or both. Similarly, Louisiana required that either French or English be taught in its schools.

Two years after the annexation of the territory of New Mexico in 1912, Spanish and English were the authorized languages. In the same period, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska and Oregon all directed that a language other than English be taught in the public schools. In fact, whenever an immigrant group gained political power or attention, that foreign language was incorporated into the education system.

During World War I, anti-German sentiment resulted in the actual banning of teaching or even speaking German. An anti-foreign language, anti-immigrant fervor grew and the study of foreign languages, save Latin or ancient Greek, disappeared from U.S. public school classrooms.

The impact of the anti-foreign movement was felt for many years. As an illustration of this phenomenon, in some school districts in Texas with a student body that was 70 percent or more Mexican-American, it remained illegal to conduct a class in Spanish until 1973.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a teaching method called English as a Second Language (ESL) was introduced into public schools for language minority students. Originally developed in the 1930s, ESL was meant to instruct foreign diplomats and college students. Because it was designed to teach highly motivated adults, ESL was not originally successful when used with children.

Most language minority students remained in a "sink or swim" learning environment where many were simply unable to keep up with English-speaking classmates. Drop-out rates soared. (Data on drop-out rates by racial/ethnic language groups were not systematically tracked until the 1970s. However, qualitative data from educators supported the belief that we were losing many of our non- and limited-English-speaking students.) The children who remained in school were more often than not placed (or rather, misplaced) in classes for learning disabled students.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 barred national origin discrimination, granting all citizens equal opportunity. By 1968, Title VII was added to the Elementary and Secondary School Education Act, providing for a federal role and federal dollars for bilingual education. In May 1970, the Office of Civil Rights issued a memorandum stating that affirmative steps must be taken to "correct the English language deficiency of many minority children in order to provide them with equal educational opportunities."

However, it was not until the Supreme Court decision in *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974) that the "sink or swim" method was discredited. In Lau, Chinese students contended that the failure of their San Francisco school district to provide supplemental courses in English was a direct violation of the Equal Protection Clause and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Although the Supreme Court found in favor of the students, it declined to remedy the problem. As a result, the courts were suddenly flooded with similar cases in which claimants maintained that school districts were dis-

continued on page 3

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Languages –from page 2

criminating against non-English-speaking minorities. Thus, the Lau decision certainly influenced the opinions of lower courts on the issue of bilingual education, but the lack of guidelines left the education of LEP students to the individual interpretations of lower court judges.

As educators and legislators sought a solution, they found a program — the Coral Way Experiment (Dade County, Florida) — that provided a bilingual education method that, for the first time, could be evaluated by educators and non-educators alike and that was amenable to replication. The program's goal was to achieve fluent bilingualism for both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking children. By 1966, the district was reporting that the children in the bilingual program were "radically becoming culturally advantaged." In English, both groups of students did as well as, or better than, their counterparts in monolingual schools, and the Spanish-speaking children achieved equivalent levels in Spanish.

As the numbers of language minority children increased in school districts across the country, more bilingual education programs were established and new teaching methods were tried. The success of the Coral Way program was experienced by many other school districts in succeeding years, but there were also less successful bilingual education programs.

Educators and parents began to question the effectiveness of bilingual programs as the best way to educate LEP students. Thus, during the third century of our country's history, we ran the full cycle: rejection of second languages, adaptation to the need to teach them, then once again questioning the place of second languages in the education process.

Taking Stock

While it is pertinent to consider what has gone before, what has worked/not worked in addressing issues confronting the public schools, it is equally important to see those issues in the context of their time. A lot has changed since the 1960s, particularly in regard to non- and limited-English-speaking children in the U.S.

According to a 1994 report from the National Center for Education Statistics, the numbers of persons in the U.S. who speak languages other than English at home is at an all time high and increasing rapidly. Between 1979 and 1989, the number of persons five years of age and older who were reported to speak a language other than English at home increased by about 40 percent. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that one in seven Americans speaks a language other than English at home; that is an astonishing 31.8 million American. Two of every 10 Americans who speak a language other than English at home have limited or no English, i.e., about 6.4 million people.

As America struggles to adjust to this new reality, an understanding of how this change in language use affects education becomes particularly important. The U.S. Department of Education publication, *Language Characteristics and Schooling in the United States, A Changing Picture: 1979 and 1989*, takes a close look at the impact of language usage and includes some major findings:

- There was an increase of 65 percent in the number of Spanish speakers and of 98 percent in speakers of Asian languages. The numbers of speakers of other European languages, while still large, declined 18 percent overall. Major languages spoken in the U.S. in 1989 were Spanish, French, Italian, German, Chinese dialects, Philippine dialects and Korean.
- Contrary to popular belief, almost half of all non-English speakers were born in the United States.
- Nearly half of the non-English speaking population has difficulty speaking English. One quarter of those with difficulty were born in the U.S.
- In 1979, among children who were reported to have difficulty speaking English, 53 percent were enrolled below the modal grade for their age, a much higher rate than that of children who speak English only (24 percent). In 1989, this proportion had dropped 15 percentage points to 38 percent, and was about the same as for English-only speakers (34 percent) who are overage for their grade.

Obviously, the LEP student population is not a homogeneous group. There are, in fact, six distinctive group of students who may require some level of instruction in ESL or who are in need of assistance in improving their English-speaking skills:

- immigrants with no English skills at all
- non-English speaking, native born citizens
- those who are literate in English, but who have parents or grandparents at home who only speak their native language (These students frequently speak both English and their native language with fluency.)
- American monolingual children who have very poor language skills
- American monolingual children who speak English fluently but have no knowledge of another language

Advocates of bilingual education express concern for the last group, citing that in our pluralistic society people who speak only one language may be at a disadvantage, depending upon their locale or future education/careers.

Given the variety of English-speaking skill levels and needs represented within these disparate groups, it is little wonder that a variety of curricula and instructional techniques have been developed and that a variety of success rates are reported.

Into the 21st Century

Do not despair, dear reader. It is not the purpose of this article to provide a menu of programs or to assess their relative merits/disadvantages. Rather,

continued on page 4

Languages –from page 3

it is our intent to present the background information that will enable school boards to review current policies on bilingual instruction in the light of a reality in contemporary America: the continuing need to educate non-English-speaking and limited-English-proficient children in our public schools.

The numbers of non-English-speaking people coming to the U.S. show no signs of decreasing. The children, of course, enter our local school systems and are likely to remain in their new country as adults. These children are, therefore, as important to our future as are those students who come from English-as-a-first-language backgrounds. How well we prepare **all** our children to be productive citizens will determine how vital the country will be in the 21st century.

Few would disagree that we must provide the best education possible for all our students. We do, however, continue to debate about *how* to do it and, the debate is particularly heated. The most frequently heard criticisms of bilingual programs is that by teaching students in their own languages we delay their learning English and we send a message that English is not all that important.

Supporters of bilingual teaching methods say that every child should have the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills s he needs to advance in school and succeed in society, and no one should have to put off getting those basic skills in order to first acquire English proficiency.

We are often confused by the arguments. And to confound the issue further, many of us hold contradictory opinions abut bilingual education. According to editors M. Beatriz Arias and Ursula Casanova in *Bilingual Education: Politics, Practice, Research*, many political leaders and citizens, at one and the same time, hold opposing beliefs about bilingual competence. They tend to affirm the need to promote second-language instruction for English-speaking students, acknowledging the personal, academic, social and economic advantages in that accomplishment.

However, they frown on the use of ethnic languages for the instruction of language minority students in the schools, either on a part-time or an equal-time-with-English basis. The authors question "why we attempt to promote bilingualism where it is more artificial and least likely to succeed, and yet discourage it where it is more natural and likely to be reinforced through daily use."

Carl Petersen, President of the Mass.Assn.of School Committees, suggests another, clearer perspective that school board members might consider. Dr. Petersen, also an associate professor of social science at Wentworth Institute of Technology says, "It seems to me...that by narrowing the debate [about bilingual education] to whether or not children will be taught from the beginning in English or their native language, we are overlooking the larger, more important issue at stake: namely, what we should be doing to ensure that these children can achieve their potential to be educated, productive members of our society."

Dr. Petersen continues, "The issue... is a difficult one for those of us who guide educational policy. It tests our commitment to children — all children — that our concern must always be how best to educate all students. However, we will not be successful in this endeavor if we set educational policy that does not serve all students well, or if we deceive ourselves into believing that we need not provide educational alternatives to meet individual students' needs.

"In a very real sense we must come to recognize that by accommodating the needs of bilingual students we are putting ourselves one step closer to reaching our own long-term goals. For this reason, we cannot allow ourselves to abandon the attempt to effectively educate these children in our schools. Ultimately, bilingual education is in everyone's interest as we prepare our students for the challenges of the 21st century. It is the ultimate challenge for us in the 20th." ("A Case for Bilingual Education," MASC Journal, Spring 1993)

Conclusion

It is within the perspective of an excellent and equitable education for all of America's public school students that school boards must decide what kind of education they will offer to their non- and limited-English-speaking students.

Even school districts that may not have a significant concern about bilingual education programs (as determined by the number of language minority students in the district), are faced with deciding the importance of such programs for two practical reasons:

1) As we have mentioned, the multicultural nature of American society shows no indication of decreasing in coming years and, as effective school leaders know, visionary planning is the key to successful education now and in the future. Just as you conduct research and adopt policies for issues such as future facilities, you need to provide the structure, through policy development, for changing demographics in your school district.

2) The cost to the U.S. economy, in terms of lost opportunities to provide education and training for specific populations, is not restricted to those areas where language minority populations are located. When a child in an inner city or a rural area fails to succeed in school, we all pay the price — in lost wages and taxes, in reduced productivity, in increased support services required.

As the guardians of excellent and equitable education for *all* American public school students, you — the local school board member — are responsible for the education of our children. We are reminded almost *ad nauseam* of the African proverb that says, "It takes an entire village to raise a child." However tired we may be of hearing it, it is true that every decision you make in your local district impacts on the education of all of America's children. If some of those children have limited English skills, your challenge is that much greater. ■