

Bilingual Education

Reviving an American Tradition



BY CLAUDE GOLDENBERG AND KIRSTIN WAGNER

In the United States, bilingual education continues to provoke fierce debate. It seems that nearly everyone—from educators to policymakers to parents with school-age children to those without children—has a strong opinion on whether children with little fluency in English should be taught academic content in their home language as they learn English.

Many people, however, regardless of whether they support this approach, would be surprised to learn of our country's legacy when it comes to bilingual education.

Bilingual education has been a part of the American educational landscape since before the United States was forged from a collection of fractious colonies. According to one report, the first instance of bilingual education in the future United States occurred with 17th-century Polish settlers in the first permanent

English settlement of Virginia.¹ At the time, the colony was in severe need of the Poles' manufacturing skills for shipbuilding and glassworks. So the colonial government extended to Poles "the rights of Englishmen," permitting them to establish the first known bilingual schools on the American continent.

The American Bilingual Tradition by the German scholar Heinz Kloss, first published in English in 1977, further documents the little-known history of bilingual education and other types of support for those whose first language was not English.² From its colonial beginnings, bilingual education in the United States has existed in one form or another to the present day, with a brief interruption during and right after World War I in the wake of virulent anti-German sentiment and a more general nativist opposition to the use of non-English languages.

There have been German bilingual schools in Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and other states; bilingual schools for Scandinavian languages in the Dakotas, Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, among other states; Dutch bilingual schools in Michigan; Czech bilingual schools in Nebraska and Texas; Italian and Polish bilingual schools in Wisconsin; French bilingual schools in Louisiana, Ohio, and throughout the northeast; and Spanish bilingual schools in the southwest and, most recently, in Florida and the northeast. By 1900, contemporary estimates were that more than 1 million elementary grade students—more than 6 percent of the 16 million elementary grade students at the time—were receiving bilingual instruction in English and another language.³ This is almost certainly a greater percentage than are enrolled in bilin-

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gual programs today, at most around 3 percent of the elementary grades population (prekindergarten through grade 8).⁴ The schools educating these 1 million students in 1900 form part of the American bilingual tradition, which is essentially ignored in contemporary debates over bilingual education.⁵

Political Support for and Challenges to Bilingual Education

The modern bilingual education era in the United States had its origins in the Cuban Revolution.⁶ Cubans fleeing their native island after 1959 were overwhelmingly from the professional and business classes and were intent on succeeding in their new English-speaking home while maintaining their language and culture. The bilingual programs they established in Florida were and remain among the most successful in the country. These expatriates did nothing novel, much less radical. In keeping with the American bilingual tradition, they were becoming part of the fabric of American society while maintaining their own distinct linguistic and cultural strands, both in and out of school.

The most important impetus for widespread adoption of bilingual education, however, was the 1960s civil rights movement. At a time of national liberation struggles and demands that our society live up to the ideals of “equality under the law,” Latino activists, educators, and academics made the education of Spanish-speaking children a top priority. Among their principal tenets, as a matter of civil rights, was that the education of Latino children build on their native cultures and include instruction in Spanish.

The culmination of this political movement on the educational front came with the passage and 1968 signing into law of the Bilingual Education Act (also known as Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA), which Kloss calls “the first major measure adopted at the federal level in order to promote bilingualism.”⁷ On the one hand, this was indeed precedent setting. But on the other, the act was an extension of a legacy reaching back to the 17th-century Polish settlers in Virginia mentioned earlier. It was “much more in keeping,” Kloss observes, “with widespread though little known American traditions than some of those who fought for its adoption may have been aware of.”⁸ Contrary to its title, however, the Bilingual Education Act did not require bilingual education, even though in practice all of the early programs it funded used students’ native languages in the curriculum to one degree or another.⁹

For the next 30 years, through different presidential administrations, the status of bilingual approaches to educating language minority students rose and fell. Studies, evaluations, and research reviews appeared that presented differing views of bilingual education’s effects on student achievement. Polemics proliferated. Caught up in the culture wars, bilingual education pitted “traditional” American values and visions of a unified America against presumed “radical” attempts to promote multiculturalism and linguistic pluralism, both of which were feared to result in a fractured and Balkanized America.

At times, bilingual education was favored, or at least not slated for elimination. At other times, most recently with the 2001 reauthorization of ESEA under the No Child Left Behind Act, bilingual education was left far behind, no longer part of the federal framework for the education of English learners as it had been since 1968. Tellingly, under the administration of President George W.

Bush, the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs became the Office of English Language Acquisition.

Throughout its history, bilingual education has always had its share of doubters and detractors.¹⁰ The present era is of course no exception. In addition to federal policies that were at best indifferent, if not outright hostile, to bilingual education, starting in 1997 voters in Arizona, California, and Massachusetts enacted the country’s most restrictive language policies, severely limiting the use of the home language in the education of language minority students.

These political moves were understandable, given the widespread frustration with naggingly low achievement by many of the nation’s 11 million students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. But have such moves worked? Results suggest not so much.

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In a 2006 study of the effects of Proposition 227, California’s “English for the Children” ballot initiative, researchers found that even after 10 years in California schools, an English language learner has less than a 40 percent chance of being considered proficient in English.¹¹ A similar examination of Boston’s public schools, conducted in 2009, showed increases in out-of-school suspensions, grade retention, and dropout rates for most of the five largest non-English-speaking language groups after Massachusetts restricted bilingual education.¹² In Arizona, the achievement gap in reading between English language learners and non-English language learners has increased by about one and a half grade levels for fourth- and eighth-graders, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In California, the gap has increased almost as dramatically as Arizona’s in eighth grade and has increased slightly in fourth. In Massachusetts, the achievement gap has increased somewhat in both grade levels. In contrast, in the country as a whole, where generally bilingual instruction remains an option, the reading achievement gap has *decreased* by nearly a grade level in fourth grade and has *decreased* slightly in eighth grade.¹³

To be fair, it’s difficult to draw hard and fast conclusions based on state data, since policies vary in many ways and other trends might suggest different conclusions. For example, the rate at which Arizona’s English learners are considered “English proficient” has increased since 2005. But even so, the test scores of the

70 percent of English learners who do not become proficient in English each year have plummeted. In California, the rate of English learners considered English proficient has also increased, although very little—from 7 to 12 percent.

One thing is clear, though: restrictive language policies are no silver bullet. As the data reported above suggest, they might even be counterproductive.

In order to assess the advantages and disadvantages of bilingual education, it's more useful to look at research than at messy state data, where we know little about what types of bilingual education students are receiving, how many are receiving it, and how the redesignation rates—the rates at which students who are initially classified as “limited English proficient” gain sufficient English proficiency to be designated fluent English speakers—have changed. And, unlike earlier periods in American

around the sun rather than the other way around.)

Other studies have found that, at worst, instruction in the home language produces English results that are no different from results for English learners in all-English instruction, with the added bonus of allowing them to maintain and further develop their home language. In fact, these were the findings of researchers from Johns Hopkins University in the most experimentally rigorous study of bilingual education conducted to date.¹⁶ The researchers, who studied data from Spanish-speaking students in Texas's Rio Grande Valley, found that bilingual education can help promote *bilingualism* without significantly sacrificing English proficiency. Comparable findings have been reported with Mandarin and English speakers in Northern California.¹⁷ In these studies, students in Mandarin immersion—whether they were English or heritage Mandarin speakers—developed Mandarin proficiency while outperforming their nonimmersion peers on standardized reading and math tests *in English* in the upper elementary grades.

Why, then, the opposition to bilingual education? Despite the evidence that bilingual education can actually boost achievement in English, or at a minimum not detract from it, many continue to subscribe to the “commonsense” logic that English-only instruction will lead to faster acquisition of English proficiency. Moreover, opposition toward bilingual education is inflated by critics who falsely frame it as a choice between proficiency in English or in the student's home language.¹⁸

Resistance to bilingual education is sometimes rooted in xenophobia and ethnic prejudice, although clearly not all bilingual education skeptics are prejudiced xenophobes. But the anti-foreign-language and anti-immigrant rhetoric that peaks during periods of increased immigration is clear evidence that nativist sentiments can lead to fears that the use of languages other than English in school will somehow fracture the national identity.¹⁹

For many Americans, this national identity is tightly bound to speaking English. Liberal historian and John F. Kennedy confidant Arthur Schlesinger worried that encouraging multiple languages and cultures would lead to a “disuniting” of the United States.²⁰ But Heinz Kloss's monumental study that we mentioned earlier demonstrates just the opposite: “non-English ethnic groups in the United States were Anglicized not *because of* nationality laws which were *unfavorable* toward their languages but *in spite of* nationality laws relatively *favorable* to them.”²¹ This seems paradoxical, as does so much having to do with bilingual education.

The explanation Kloss offers should give pause to bilingual education's detractors. Language minority groups became assimilated, Kloss persuasively argues, not because of “legal provisions” restricting the use of their native languages but because of “the absorbing power ... of the manifold opportunities for personal advancement and individual achievements which this society offered.”²²

From Bilingual Education to Bilingualism

Whatever the reasons for opposition, it's time to move the discussion away from bilingual education—which in the United States is invariably about *those kids*—and focus instead on bilingualism and its benefits for *our kids*—all of our kids—and the adults they will become. Experience and research in the United States and other countries around the world, including Canada,



history, we now have a credible research base to determine whether the American bilingual tradition benefits individuals and society at large.

A Closer Look at the Research

It may seem counterintuitive, but in fact instruction in a student's home language can improve achievement *in English* (or whatever the national language may be). At least six meta-analyses (quantitative research syntheses), involving dozens of studies, support this conclusion.* A recently published long-term study by two Stanford University researchers found that students enrolled in bilingual programs since elementary school were, by high school, more likely to be deemed proficient in English compared with similar students who had been in all-English programs.¹⁴

A likely theory to explain these results is that students develop their academic skills most readily in their home language while acquiring English proficiency, and then, as they learn English, transfer what they have learned in the home language to their new language.¹⁵ (If this sounds implausible, just think of those skeptics who believed Columbus was out of his mind when he suggested one could reach east by sailing west, or those who condemned Copernicus and Galileo for suggesting that the earth revolved

*For more on effective instruction for English learners, see “Unlocking the Research on English Learners” in the Summer 2013 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/summer2013/goldenberg.

Finland, and Sweden, have demonstrated that children can learn their own and a second or even a third language—for example, French, Spanish, and English; Swedish, Finnish, and English; or Mandarin, Cantonese, and English—and turn out academically and linguistically competent in both, all three, or more. Canada, despite language-based political tensions that seem to appear occasionally in Quebec, has a relatively seamless approach to bilingualism that spans from school instruction in both English and French to official government business to road signs and to labels on merchandise.

Far from being a problem, bilingualism is an asset both to individuals and to society. Bilingual education (a means) can help us take advantage of this asset by promoting bilingualism (a goal) *both* for English speakers and for students who come from non-English backgrounds.

languages, particularly Chinese and Spanish. Referring to bilingual candidates, a New York City executive coach noted, “It’s easier to find them jobs and they often get paid more.”²⁷

The economic benefits of bilingualism can vary significantly depending on factors such as age, location, industry, and languages spoken. For instance, in towns along the U.S. border with Mexico, fluent bilingualism may help individuals obtain certain occupations, while at the same time making employment in other positions less likely.²⁸ Specifically, research has shown that fluent bilinguals have an advantage over monolinguals in obtaining occupations above low-skill services and manual labor but not necessarily in higher status occupations. For instance, fluent bilinguals are more likely than English-speaking monolinguals to gain employment in middle-tier public service roles such as police officers, medical assistants, and reception-

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Apart from the obvious intellectual and cultural advantages of speaking two or more languages, bilingualism has been linked to a number of other positive outcomes. In a comprehensive review of 63 studies, researchers from Washington State University found that bilingualism is associated with cognitive benefits such as increased control over attention, improved working memory, greater awareness of the structure and form of language, and better abstract and symbolic representation skills.²³ Other research, widely publicized when it first appeared, has even shown that bilingualism delays the onset of Alzheimer’s disease.²⁴

Beyond the cognitive benefits, recent studies suggest that bilingualism may also have economic benefits for young adults related to employment, promotion, and earnings. One study has found that fluent bilingualism is associated with a decreased likelihood of dropping out of high school and an increased probability of obtaining a higher status job and higher annual earnings.²⁵

Conversely, monolingualism may have costs: one study has found that for young adults in the United States, a lack of proficiency in one’s home language is associated with annual income losses of between \$2,100 and \$3,300 (after controlling for cognitive ability, educational attainment, and parental socioeconomic status).²⁶ A University of Phoenix Research Institute survey, reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, found increasing demand among prospective employers for workers who speak foreign

ists. On the other hand, fluent bilinguals are less likely than their English-speaking monolingual peers to have occupations such as physicians, lawyers, and public safety managers, even at similar levels of education. These findings suggest that bilingualism can confer important economic advantages, but that the advantages might be constrained by other factors, such as the social status of bilinguals’ first language or discrimination against immigrants.

To the extent that these other factors constrain the advantages bilingualism confers, it appears that bilingual education can also play a role in reducing their effects. In a review of the research on bilingual education in Canada and the United States, researchers found that bilingual education can have positive effects on intergroup relationships, identity, and self-esteem.²⁹ Likewise, others have found that white, English-speaking children who participated in Spanish bilingual instruction were more likely to choose Latino children as potential friends compared with their white, English-speaking peers who, though in multiethnic classrooms, did not take part in bilingual education.³⁰

The United States has great linguistic resources we are not only failing to use—our schools are actually quashing them, if only through neglect. More than 11 million of the country’s 50 million public school students speak at least one of 400 different languages other than English at home. Yet only a negligible fraction of these students are in programs that simultaneously nurture

their home language while using it to help them acquire English and also to help English-speaking students acquire a second language.

Last year, 17 years after California (followed by Arizona and Massachusetts) began its assault on bilingual education, California state Senator Ricardo Lara introduced a bill in the California legislature, recently approved, to put a proposition on the 2016 California ballot that would give students more access to bilingual and even multilingual instruction. Passage of the proposition by California's electorate would be an important step forward in increasing the state's and the country's linguistic resources.

Lara's bill was timely, as demand for bilingual education has been rising in many states. In Oregon, an explosion of interest in dual-language programs led the state to award nearly \$900,000 in grants for additional programs in 2013, adding to the programs



that already existed in 70 schools throughout the state.³¹ Parents and students in Washington, D.C., have also demonstrated their desire for bilingual programs. At one of the city's eight dual-language immersion schools, nearly 1,100 applicants applied for 20 spots in 2013.³² The Seattle area now boasts 30 bilingual preschool options, and the parents driving this demand are not necessarily bilingual themselves. In fact, at one of Bellevue's Spanish-English immersion public preschools, 96 percent of the children have monolingual English-speaking parents.³³ Interest in bilingual programs crosses lines of language background, neighborhood, and income as parents across the United States realize the social and economic value of bilingualism.³⁴

School districts, seeing the benefits bilingual education offers to their students, are also actively fighting for these programs. Despite legislation in California that has come close to eliminating bilingual education, 30 percent of students in the San Francisco Unified School District are enrolled in bilingual programs.³⁵ This is in large part due to the district's efforts to reach out to parents and notify them of the option to authorize their children's placement in one of these programs. New York City has partnered with foreign governments that provide funding for bilingual programs in their languages and is developing or expanding 40 dual-language

programs for the 2015–2016 school year.³⁶ To ensure the success of their investments, districts like Arlington Public Schools in Virginia are undergoing extensive evaluations of their bilingual programs.³⁷

Support for bilingual education is evident at the state level as well. Nine states have approved the "Seal of Biliteracy," which will appear on the high school graduation diplomas of students who have studied and attained proficiency in two languages.³⁸ Hawaii's Department of Education established the Hawaiian Language Immersion Program in 1987,³⁹ and Montana's governor recently signed into law a bill that will fund Native American language immersion programs in public schools.⁴⁰

For its part, in reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Congress is missing an opportunity to capitalize on this groundswell of support by including provisions and even providing funds to encourage and help states and localities develop and implement bilingual instruction, not just for language minority students but for *all* students to have the opportunity to become bilingual.

Such provisions were part of the ESEA legislation of the 1960s but were eliminated under No Child Left Behind—a dysfunctional aspect of the law that should be corrected. Federal legislation cannot and should not attempt to impose bilingual education, of course. But it can help strengthen an important American tradition that we risk losing, to everyone's detriment. □

Endnotes

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