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English Language Learner Programs in California

According to the Department of Education in California, the public school system is designed to “[equip] all students with the knowledge and skills to excel in college and careers, and excel as parents and citizens” (“California”). However, as was indicated by the Supreme Court in 1974¹, students lacking fluency in English are not able to gain the same knowledge and skills as students who do speak English, and therefore it was decided that steps needed to be taken to equalize the learning environments, allowing these English learner students access to the same quality of education as the rest of California public school children. The California education system is striving to serve the uniquely multilingual identity of the school-aged population as evidences from the political history and current legislation of the state, and these efforts are divided into two main learning styles, bilingual education and immersion programs. It is evident from political history and current legislation that the California education system is striving to serve the uniquely multilingual identity of the school-aged population, and these efforts are divided into two main learning styles, bilingual education and immersion programs. However, in addition to the problems inherent in all multilingual education models, the current sheltered immersion programs are not conclusively leading to improved academic success of English learner students. This lack of definitive evidence indicates that changes must be made to English Language learner programs throughout the state, though not necessarily in the type of program being offered. Rather, it is crucial to the success of the programs that more emphasis is

¹ Lau v. Nichols (Witt)

placed on adequate teacher training, sufficient funding for English language learner programs and supportive home-school relationships.

To fully explain the issues involved in multilingual education in California, it is imperative to first understand both the unique ethnic and language diversity of the state, and legislative history of English language learner programs. This background not only provides a more informed lens through which to view current programs, but also demonstrates the complexity of the issue. There is no question that California is a diverse state. According to the 2002 National Center for Education Statistics report on Public Elementary and Secondary Students, California had more than 13 percent of the entire nation's student population in public education, and slightly more than 25 percent of these students were enrolled in English Language Learner programs, which is well above the national average of 8 percent. There is only one other state that comes close to 6.3 million students in California public schools, and that is Texas, which hosts 4.2 million students. Also, although according to the report New Mexico had the highest percentage of students enrolled in English language learner programs at over 20 percent, these 65,317 students are less than 5 percent of the 1,599,542 students in California that are enrolled in the same programs.

Taking into consideration the importance of English language learner programs in California, how to assimilate non-native English speakers into the classroom has been a contentious issue in California since 1967 when Governor Reagan signed legislation allowing public school education to take place in languages other than English². Less than ten years later, the Supreme Court case of *Lau v. Nichols* used the precedents set by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to determine that lack of fluency in English should not adversely affect the education of

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In this amendment to the Education Code established in 1872, it is stated "bilingual instruction may be offered in those situations when such instruction is educationally advantageous to the pupils."

any students enrolled in public schools, and that schools have a responsibility to provide equal education opportunities to these students. In this manner, primary language instruction was meant to be introduced to the classroom through federally regulated English language learning programs, and while the eventual goal of these programs was to integrate English language learners into regular public school classes, there was also a focus on retaining primary language skills (Witt).

From these beginnings, two main English language learning program models have developed: bilingual and sheltered immersion, both of which will be explained more fully later. Both learning models have highly passionate and polarized followings, which translates into a lively legislative history. The conflict between these two models has been the driving force behind most legislation since the *Lau v. Nichols* case and the two have been developed as opposing forces. The most recent example of the legislative battle between the two ideologies is seen in the currently effective legislation of Proposition 277, which was signed into law in 1998, and the No Child Left Behind Act, which has been in effect since 2002. Prop 277, which states “all children in California public schools shall be taught English by being taught in English,” effectively sets the goal to eliminate primary language education. Instead, the proposition requires students to participate in intensive English language immersion courses with teachers who are to speak English as much as possible. This is meant to teach English language learner students the English language as quickly as possible, facilitating their entry into regular classes (Proposition 277). Furthermore, in Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act, the goals of funding for English language learner programs were defined such that any emphasis on retaining primary language abilities in the classroom has been dropped, making the focus entirely on

English language acquisition (Crawford “Section G”)³. These two most current pieces of legislation demonstrate a national and statewide trend favoring immersion only programs. One study on the effectiveness of Prop 277 went so far as to praise a school that was attempting to enact a policy of only allowing Spanish as a primary language to be spoken for 90 second consecutive intervals (Mora). However, although this indicates a strong trend towards immersion only programs, the variety of programs actually available in schools tends to be more varied than the legislation dictates.⁴

In accordance with the policies put in place by Proposition 227, schools are expected to structure their programs based on the sheltered immersion model of English language learning. This means that their programs must be taught “overwhelmingly in English” in “a temporary transition period not normally intended to exceed one year,” and then are to be assimilated into normal classrooms, although parents can sign waivers requesting that their children be taught in a bilingual setting (qtd. in Parrish 9). The limits on these programs are designed so that students will gain fluency as quickly as possible, based on the argument that the best way to learn a language is to be immersed in it (“Proposition”). In order to measure the advancements of students through the immersion courses, a scale has been developed, in which there are three main stages of English language development, from beginning, through an intermediate stage, and finally advanced, at which point the student is said to be entirely fluent in English and able to participate fully in a normal classroom setting (“English-Language”). Proficiency is further divided based on three main domains of language: speaking and listening, reading, and writing,

³ The closest Title III comes to referencing any foreign language instruction is in the fourth goal as stated by the Department of Education, that the funding will provide “high-quality instructional programs designed to prepare limited English proficient children, including immigrant children and youth, to enter all-English instruction settings” (“English Language Acquisition”).

⁴ Proposition 277 requires all students to be taught in sheltered English immersion programs, which are defined as “means an English language acquisition process for young children in which nearly all classroom instruction is in English but with the curriculum and presentation designed for children who are learning the language.”

each with its own separate standards to which all students must adhere. Despite this legislative model, however, it has been shown in various studies that there is significant flexibility in the types of programs adopted by individual schools, such that schools that were already opposed to bilingual education focused their programs more vigorously on immersion programs, while schools with popular bilingual programs continued them through use of the parental waivers (Jepsen 19). Thus, there are still bilingual programs, in which students are more gradually introduced to English over a period of years with instruction both in English and the primary language of the student. This program model is based on argument that “the more schools developed children's native-language skills, the higher they scored academically over the long term in English” and that quick exit immersion programs are not sufficient for teaching English as a second language effectively (“Does”). Of course, most programs employ some mixture of these two models, depending on the perceived needs of each student and the capabilities of the instructional atmosphere.

Although there are many different methods of teaching English language learners all of these programs are based on the common goal of teaching the English language to students from non-English speaking backgrounds, as well as educating these students at the same level as regular students in California public schools. It is important to gauge how effective these various methods are, but initially it is clear that there are various problems that plague all programs that must be addressed independently of type.

One of the problems that plague both immersion and bilingual education programs is that of teacher qualifications. Although state law requires teachers to have special certification in order to teach English language learners, in the 2006 – 2006 school year, “44% of the state’s veteran teachers lacked adequate... preparation.” (“English Language Learners”) As is stated by

the National Association for Bilingual Education, proper teacher qualification is extremely important in determining the success of English language learners. Other problems include sufficient school funding to support ELL programs, and also how to engage non-English speaking parents in their child's schooling. Regarding the financial situation of schools, although the 2007-2008 education budget in California increases spending by 2.7 percent, the annual projected inflation for 2007 is between 3 and 4 percent, which means that spending in all sectors of education will have to be pruned, which could adversely affect English language learner programs ("Governor's Budget", "State"). In the 2005 survey of teachers who were in charge of English learning programs, approximately 15 percent felt that they were not able to get the necessary tools in order to effectively teach and test their students, and even more teachers, particularly those of students in elementary school, felt that lack of ability to communicate with the families of their students was a major impediment to success ("English Language Learners"). To address the issue of family-teacher communication, there is state legislation that states that if there are at least 15 percent of the students in the school who speak a language other than English as their primary language that all parental notifications must be sent home in the primary language, and as recently as February there was particular emphasis to be placed on monitoring the appropriate execution of this law (Payne).

In order for current English language learner programs to be considered effective, there must be conclusive evidence that since the implementation of the most current programs, there has been improvement in narrowing the gap between the performance of regular and English learner students. However, such evidence is inconclusive. Although the number of students enrolled in English Learner programs from the 2004-2005 to 2005-2006 school year decreased by 20,000, this number is only 0.3 percent of the population, and can easily be attributed to the

changing criteria that identifies students as English learners (“Student Trends”). Also, in a five-year research study on the effects of Prop 277, it was found that since the implementation of Prop 277 there has been no appreciable change in the effectiveness of English language learner programs across the state. Furthermore, although there are many schools that reported meeting or exceeding their test score goals for English learners, the gap between English only students and English learner students has widened on the STAR tests results (Ceballos). As the primary goal of the programs is to provide instruction such that English learner students have the academic opportunities as regular students, the continuing disparity between the two must be seen as a sign of failure of the program.

Beyond the statistical evidence, there are strong objections to this type of programs from many experts in the field, as well as some parents of English learner students and teachers. James Crawford, a lecturer and writer who specializes in the bilingual education debate, recently published an article titled “A Diminished Vision of Civil Rights” in which he argues that the No Child Left Behind Act is not only ineffective, but is adversely affecting the civil rights of English language learner students (Crawford “Diminished”). His impassioned argument focuses on the elimination of certain terms in the No Child Left Behind Act, such as “bilingual” and “equal education opportunity” have allowed lawmakers who back the program to claim success of their legislation without taking responsibility for the flaws in the system, because the burden of accountability rests solely on the shoulders of teachers and students (Crawford “Diminished”). The website on which this article can be found is the homepage of the Institute of Language and Education Policy, whose self-described motto is “research-based advocacy for schools and communities.” (“Institute”) This advocacy group uses educational statistics like those given

above to demonstrate the failure of the No Child Left Behind Act, and recommends bilingual approaches to schooling.

Nevertheless, it is similarly difficult to prove bilingual education, the supposed opposite of immersion programs, to be any more effective. Although people such as James Crawford and groups like the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) posit that bilingual education is the most effective method of response to the number of English language learner students in California, there are problems with accumulating conclusive evidence supporting their claims (“Does”). In fact, although California is home to the undisputed majority of English language learner students, none of the bilingual education success stories listed on the NABE website are in California. Although it could be argued that this is because California effectively outlawed bilingual programs with the passage of Proposition 227, this is invalidated by the results of studies that have found that where bilingual programs were popular before the passage of the legislation, they were maintained with only slight alternations for the new laws (Jepsen). Also, there is staunch opposition to bilingual programs. A well-known example of this opposition is Richard Rodriguez. In a 1997 interview conducted by Scott London, Rodriguez stated that bilingual education, by encouraging the use of primary or “home” languages at school is inappropriately trying to close a gap between the student’s public and private life (London). Furthermore, in his book, titled Hunger for Memory, Rodriguez uses his own experiences in the California public school system as proof that immersion programs are more effective to assimilate English language learners into normal classrooms. His argument is that by being allowed to use Spanish in schools, students not fluent in English are being allowed to delay their rightful entry into American society, and that once he was forced to start using English, and not until then, did Rodriguez feel himself to be an American citizen (Rodriguez 22). Despite his

compelling argument, Rodriguez's narrative is conflicted. Although he is openly against bilingual programs, and believes that his immersion style education was beneficial, there are times throughout his narrative when he describes with melancholy nostalgia how his acquisition of English has alienated him from his Spanish identity, although he views this as a necessary part of being American (Rodriguez 33).

In light of the lack of significant and irrefutable evidence of the superiority of either bilingual or immersion programs in California public schools, it is clear that it is the factors that equally affect both the two models are most important in determining the effectiveness of English language learner programs. As a result of this, it is necessary to reexamine the common problems faced by both program models, namely teacher qualifications, financial resources, and school-home relations. In a previously cited study conducted by the American Institutes for Research, it was concluded that "that there is no clear evidence to support an argument of the superiority of one English language instructional approach over another"(Parrish). However, the study stated that their "findings suggest that it is not the language of instruction but rather the quality of instruction that matters most." (qtd in McQuillan) Furthermore, a study conducted by the National High School Center listed the development and support of "accomplished teachers" as one of the important factors in affecting the performance of English language learners in public high schools (Koelsch). The appropriate training of teachers is then clearly an important factor in determining the success of English language learner students, and in order to improve the programs for these students, no matter what education model they are based on, monitoring teacher quality is undoubtedly important. Referring again to the autobiography of Richard Rodriguez, it was only when the teachers of the then seven-year-old Richard contacted his parents, asking them to speak more English in the home, that he began to learn the language

(Rodriguez 21). However, this study does take care to mention that improving instruction will only be successful if there are good programs to teach. This is dependent on adequate resources being available to schools, and although inflation mostly negates the increase of education spending, if Governor Schwarzenegger continues to allocate more funding to public schools, there may be more funds available to special programs like English language learner classes (“Governor’s Budget”). As for building a rapport between students’ homes and schools, beyond sending home notices in primary languages, there must be regular communication between teachers and parents of English language learner students (“English Language Learners”). This could be difficult to achieve however, both because parents and teachers may not speak the same language, and there are no legal requirements that require teachers to meet with parents.

The final conclusion that results from research into the topic of the effectiveness of English language learner programs is that there is little difference statistically between the two methods of instruction. Instead, it is the common problems inherent in both bilingual education and immersion models that are must be improved to ensure the success of participants. Since the current system is clearly not optimally effective, it must then be the goal of education to improve the education system by better preparing and equipping teachers, providing the proper funding that allows effective programs to operate, and by facilitating communication and involvement between the school and home of the student. How these changes will be enacted depends on voter preferences, legislative trend in the Capitol, and certainly not least, willingness among all those involved in English language learner programs to accept change.

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