

The Balanced View: **Research Updates**

Summary of new research on Balanced View topics

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Bilingual Education: The California Experiment

In 1998, Proposition 227 dismantled California's bilingual education programs. The mandate required public schools to teach English-language learners (ELL) in special classes conducted primarily in English (English immersion) and, within one year, mainstream these students to regular classes. Bilingual instruction, in which ELL students are taught both in their native language and in English over several years, would be permitted only where parents submitted a written waiver request.

Because Proposition 227 is the most sweeping measure yet serving the ELL population, there has been keen interest surrounding its impact. The focus of attention, understandably, has been on the academic achievement of English-language learners. On this front, California statewide achievement test (SAT-9) results have shown a steady increase in the performance of ELL students in the three years since the passage of the law. It is in the interpretation of these findings that the bilingual debate has gathered momentum. What if anything, can be learned from the results?

To date, two major studies have spoken to the issue. Their conclusions have fueled support for both advocates and opponents of Proposition 227. The first study conducted by the READ Institute interpreted the rise in SAT-9 scores as a validation of English immersion programs and the success of Proposition 227. However, looking at the same data, researchers at Stanford University warned that the above conclusion was unwarranted for several reasons. First, SAT-9 scores rose not only among ELL students but also for all students statewide. Second, and more importantly, districts that retained bilingual programs *and* those that strictly adhered to English-only programs, showed similar gains in their SAT-9 scores. Finally, the greatest gains were made by elementary ELL students and could be the result of any number of causes not distinguishable from 227, chiefly, the significant class size reduction effort in the elementary schools.

Given these conflicting interpretations, the jury is still out on the California experiment. In an effort to clarify the matter, California plans to embark on a three-year rigorous investigation of Proposition 227 using experimental and control schools. Additional insight could come from the results of the *new* California English Language Development Test—an instrument designed to specifically address the acquisition of English for non-native speakers of the language—which are due this February.

The two studies reviewed are available on the Web:

READ Institute Study (2000, August): <http://www.ceousa.org/html/227rep.html>

The Stanford University Study (2000): <http://brj.asu.edu/v2412/articles/art10.html>