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## BILINGUAL EDUCATION

### *What Is Bilingual Education?*

Bilingual education refers to a range of instructional programs for children whose native language is not English. Started by the federal government in 1968, when services for limited-English proficient students (LEP) were virtually nonexistent, bilingual education now reaches an estimated 2.2 million children.

The goal of bilingual education is to help students acquire English so they can enter and succeed in mainstream classes. But how best to accomplish that goal has been the topic of considerable academic debate for nearly three decades.

The controversy centers on the role of the native language in instruction – whether it should be used and for how long. On one side of the debate are supporters of native language instruction who recommend aggressive development of the primary language prior to the introduction of English. On the other side, are proponents of all-English instruction who feel that the English curriculum should be introduced at the very beginning of the student's school experience, with minimal use of the native language.

In practice, schools generally opt for an instructional approach based on pragmatic considerations, such as the number of LEP students in the school and the availability of bilingual teachers. The three most common approaches are the following:

- ***Transitional Bilingual Education*** (TBE), where children are provided with English language instruction, and academic instruction in their native language for some portion of the day. The goal is to prepare students for mainstream classes without letting them fall behind in subject areas. In theory, children transition out of these programs within a few years.
- ***Developmental Bilingual Education***, which aims to preserve and build on students' native language skills as they master English. The goal is fluency in both languages.
- ***Immersion Programs***, which offer instruction entirely in English and use the native language only for clarification. The goal is to mainstream students within one or two years.

Immersion programs are typically combined with an English-as-a-second-language (ESL) pullout component.

About one-quarter of LEP students, nationwide, are enrolled in TBE or developmental bilingual programs. Another half receive ESL instruction with minimal native language support. The remaining students – over 25% – receive no special services to teach them English or accommodate their linguistic needs.

### ***Why Is Bilingual Education Important?***

Over the past 10 years, the number of LEP students in the nation's schools has increased by 50%, to 3 million students – a figure that is expected to double in the next decade. Along with rising numbers of students, have been rising costs. The federal government spends an estimated \$250 million a year on bilingual education, and large urban districts such as New York City, spend even more. But it is not just the large urban districts that face an increasingly diverse student population. Many suburban and rural schools now wrestle with the issue. In years to come, experts say that few districts will be left untouched by the nation's changing demographics. While growing diversity

would be enough to put bilingual education on the front-burner, other issues are prompting educators to examine the capability of their bilingual programs. A disproportionate number of LEP students experience school failure; among Hispanics, for example, there is a 40% dropout rate, a 35% grade retention rate, and a two-four grade level achievement gap. Standards-based reform also raises questions about program capacity. Today, it is neither socially nor economically acceptable to be content with minimal standards for any group. How to provide equal educational opportunity to all children, regardless of their English proficiency, will be an ongoing challenge for schools.

### ***What Do People Say About Bilingual Education?***

Bilingual education has received decidedly mixed reviews since it was first legislated three decades ago. Its supporters and critics heatedly argue their side, with both waving “definitive” research, to back their points of view.

Advocates of an all-English approach say that bilingual education with native language instruction, harms children's academic performance, prolongs the time it

takes them to learn English, and delays their integration with other students. Harsher critics contend that bilingual education is another example of bloat – a self-serving, costly bureaucracy concerned more with job protection than with teaching English.

Other charges from bilingual opponents include *a) misplacement*, that many LEP children are put in bilingual classes because they don't read well not because of their English-speaking ability; *b) isolation*, that students can spend up to six years virtually isolated from English-speaking classes, and *c) paltry outcomes*, that many LEP students are coming out of school with poor reading skills in both English and their native language.

But advocates of bilingual education say it's not fair to blame bilingual programs for the slow progress students are making. They cite research showing that it takes a child from three to seven years to attain academic proficiency in English, and that instruction in the native language can actually enhance English development. They also claim that native language instruction helps students to keep up in core subjects and that if they were thrown into English-only classes, they would quickly fall behind, become discouraged, and be at risk of drop-

ping out. Finally, proponents of bilingual education express concern that English-only programs can strip children of their native language to the point where they are not able to communicate with their parents.

Advocates also acknowledge that bilingual education could be improved—by hiring more qualified teachers, by ensuring that students don't languish in programs forever, and by using more innovative instructional strategies. Their overall view is that bilingual education does well when people do it right.

### ***What Does The Research Say About Bilingual Education?***

Numerous evaluations of bilingual education have been conducted, but their conclusions differ sharply and have mainly fueled the arguments both supporting and opposing bilingual education. In a January 1997 report, the federally run National Research Council (NRC) criticized the research on bilingual education for being too political and riddled with methodological problems. According to the NRC, political debates have driven much of the research into proving whether an English-only or bilingual approach works best with

LEP students. That simplistic focus, says the NRC, is impossible to address, and instead research should be asking different questions such as: What components of programs work best? Under what conditions? And for which children?

Despite the need for better—and less politically motivated—research, studies that most closely approximate “true experiments” point toward a consensus: *children learn English faster and are more likely to excel academically if they are given several years of instruction in their native language first.*

A recently completed George Mason University study—the largest ever conducted on bilingual education—also recognized the benefits of native language instruction.

The researchers, who studied the performance of more than 40,000 LEP students over 13 years, concluded the following: LEP students who receive English-only instruction take 7-10 years to catch up to their English-speaking peers in all subjects; in contrast, students taught in their native language, with some instruction in English, reach and surpass their peers in all subjects after 4-7 years in a quality bilingual program. A key word in the George Mason study is *quality* bilingual programs, which the researchers describe as highly

interactive programs that teach cognitively complex content through problem-solving and discovery learning. Although quality varies enormously among bilingual programs, there are model programs that do seem to work.

A 1996 University of California study identified 75 exemplary schools that successfully provided LEP students with a high quality academic program. The schools shared several key features:

- ***Inclusion***—The program for LEP students was an integral part of the school; it was neither conceptually nor physically separate from the rest of the school.
- ***Enrichment***—LEP students were provided with a rich intellectual diet, not a remedial curriculum. The instructional approach for all students emphasized critical thinking, hands-on learning, relevance, and connection across the disciplines.
- ***Flexibility***—A continuum of bilingual services were provided based on students' needs including full native language instruction, immersion, sheltered English, pullout ESL, etc.

- **Coordination**— A premium was placed on coordination both horizontally and vertically. Schedules were designed to provide common planning time for teachers amounting to several hours a week.
- **Internal Impetus**— The teachers and principals were the driving force and key players in designing and implementing innovative curricular and instructional approaches. The process of change was clearly inside out.

Other features found in quality bilingual programs include

- solid leadership and management that anchors attention to key teaching and learning issues,
- clearly articulated program goals that emphasize high standards,
- innovative use of learning time,

- integration of computers and other technologies into the curriculum,
- valid, reliable, and multiple assessment methods, and
- genuine school/family partnerships.

### ***What Is The Status Of Bilingual Education In New York State?***

Since 1990, New York State has witnessed a 55 percent increase in the number of LEP students served by the public schools. As with other states in the nation, New York is grappling with how to help this growing population meet the same high standards expected of all students.

A recent State Education Department report indicated that building the field's capacity to prepare LEP students for new standards and assessments would require changes in several areas including 1) increasing the pool of certified bilin-

gual/ESL teachers; 2) providing the existing work-force with intensive professional development on how to work effectively with LEP students; 3) revising certification requirements for both bilingual and ESL teachers; 4) ensuring that testing requirements for graduation do not violate the civil rights of LEP students; and 5) increasing the availability of technology for LEP students.

According to the Department, extensive work has already begun in many of these areas. Commissioner Mills, for example, has proposed that the Regents exams be translated into four foreign languages to ensure that LEP students have a fair chance of passing and earning a high school diploma. While many educators have hailed Mills' proposal, others have said that it would be a disservice to students who eventually would have to master English to attend college or succeed in the workplace. The proposal requires the Board of Regents approval.

### **For More Information:**

**National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences**  
<http://www.nas.edu/nrc>

**National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education**  
<http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu>

*The Balanced View* welcomes your comments and questions on this topic.  
 Please e-mail us or send us a FAX.