

Time to Fix Bilingual Education

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There are at least 35.3 million Hispanic residents of the United States, up by 13 million over 1990, according to the 2000 Census. Those of school age are, on average, experiencing much less academic success than white non-Hispanic, Asian, or black pupils, scoring poorly on national assessments, failing to complete high school, and under represented in higher education.

Something is going wrong, and it is natural to look to the educational strategy “transitional bilingual education”—teaching pupils first through their home language while they learn English—favored in many states since Massachusetts mandated it 30 years ago.

California and Arizona have abandoned bilingual education as a result of referenda organized by Ron Unz; similar campaigns are under way in Colorado and Massachusetts. As the state official responsible for the Massachusetts program when it started, I’ve been forced to ask whether we chose the wrong approach.

In other nations with large numbers of immigrant children, it is considered appropriate to educate them separately from the majority for only a year of intensive instruction in the language of the host country, in contrast with the three, five, or seven years urged by bilingual education advocates. This is especially true because educational segregation is more harmful to language minority students than to any of the groups we have worked so hard to integrate—special needs students, black students, and female students. Language minority students have a compelling need to be with peers for whom English is the first language if they are to learn the language well.

They also need to be held to the same educational standards as other students. Too often they are instead subjected to “Jim Crow” educational standards, which almost guarantee that they will not participate in secondary and higher education on equal terms.

Blame for these separate but unequal expectations must be shared by educational progressives and conservatives alike. The former recoil from holding language minority children to expectations which seem culturally insensitive and threatening to their self-esteem; bilingual education becomes a sort of comforting cultural bubble bath for too many students who deserve to be challenged instead.

Conservatives, on the other hand, have sometimes focused so single-mindedly on the acquisition of English that other academic objectives are neglected. Even as a technique for teaching English, this is unwise: proficiency in a language, beyond an elemental level, is developed by using it for real tasks, tasks which matter, such as mastering academic materials, not by artificial exercises.

The fundamental mistake made by both sides in the debate over educating language minority students is to focus on language rather than education as the central issue. State and federal programs to support the education of language minority students should not prescribe teaching methods or the language used, but should hold schools accountable for the steady progress of these students in all required academic subjects. It’s time that the emphasis shift to ensuring that whichever method is chosen in particular circumstances be implemented by competent teachers following a demanding curriculum and with accountability for clear and measurable results.

Since schools will choose different strategies for language minority students, it is appropriate that their parents be allowed to choose among schools. For some, the maintenance and development, in a school setting, of the home language will be much more important than for others. Parents should be able to opt for a school that supports their own educational goals.

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