The storm over bilingual ed

A real debate: That's what California needs to help non-English speaking students learn the language

RACIST’S out, students in! Bilingual’s gonna win!” That was the crowd’s chant at a UC-Berkeley debate on Ron Unz’s “English for the Children” initiative, which bans bilingual education, except by parental waiver. Most of the public comment consisted of denunciations of Proposition 209 (affirmative action) and Proposition 187 (immigrant bashing).

“English for the Children” has the signatures to qualify for the June ballot. California could be headed for another bitterly divisive debate that misses the real issues.

I propose some basics for a genuine discussion of what policies might help more students succeed.

Everyone wants children to learn English well — especially their parents — and do well in school. People disagree on the best way to achieve that result, or whether there's one best way in all circumstances.

Nobody thinks it's bad for students to be bilingual and biliterate. People disagree on whether bilingual education is achieving that goal, or leaving students "limping along in both, masters of neither," as a frustrated bilingual teacher described it to me.

Bilingual educators believe kindergartners may pick up "playground English" quickly, but take five to seven years — some say six to nine years — to master the "academic English" needed to read textbooks and participate in class discussions. Nobody else believes this.

On today's page you'll see columns by Alexander Sapiens, a professor who strongly supports bilingual education, and Lisa Dilles, a long-time bilingual teacher who questions how often the theory is working in reality.

They raise critical issues.

Bilingual education doesn't work if it isn't done right, research shows. And bilingual education usually isn't done right in California. For starters, only a third of supposedly bilingual classes are taught by trained, truly bilingual teachers, Sapiens estimates.

School officials have been trying to recruit and train more bilingual teachers for 25 years. There are programs to help bilingual aids get through college and qualify as teachers, programs to import teachers from Spain or Mexico (who may not be able to teach in English), lots of waivers.

California can't offer a high-quality bilingual program to more than a small number of students — perhaps 1 percent of English learners. So what should we do?

I agree with Dilles: Let schools do whatever works — based on measurable student success. But that choice won't be on the ballot.

"English for the Children" has another answer: English learners would be placed in "sheltered English" classes, in which the teacher uses simple English, dramatization, context and other techniques to help students understand lessons. Once they have "a good working knowledge" of English, "normally" within a year, students would transfer to mainstream classes.

It would be fair for parents who prefer bilingual classes to get a waiver for a child 10 or older, harder to do so for a younger child. Let's talk about whether it's smart for the majority of state voters to pick the best way to teach.

Let's hear why pretend bilingual is better for Spanish-speaking elementary students than sheltered English, and why mainstreaming will fail for them but works for kids who speak Vietnamese, Chinese, Farsi or Russian. Let's ask why the state hasn't tracked the achievement of English learners, leaving us with virtually no useful data.

Let's stop shouting worn-out slogans.

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Is it working? Find new ways to teach to improve achievement

BY LISA DILLES

Since 1978, I have been a bilingual classroom teacher, an English as a second language teacher and a bilingual resource specialist in a variety of districts. I have yet to see acceptable, measurable outcomes for most children whose initial reading instruction has been in Spanish. I define acceptable as at least 70 percent receiving C or better in classes taught in English by sixth or seventh grade.

Bilingual education was an attempt to remedy the high failure rates of immigrant students (usually Spanish-speaking) placed in "sink or swim" classes. We need to ask: Is it working?

It is unconscionable to have bilingual programs in place where only the brightest 10 to 20 percent of students are adequately prepared for academic work in English.

Being a bilingual teacher means running two parallel literacy curricula. It is intensive, demanding work, and it is done with the best of intentions. But there is often a wide gap between good intentions and good outcomes.

Over the years, when Spanish-speaking parents have asked for more English instruction, teachers (including me) have told them their kids should learn in Spanish first. We've said: It takes seven years to become fluent in another language. Your children eventually will learn English and do their schoolwork in English.

Parents heard the theory at a meeting I attended last year. Then a mother stood up and said (in Spanish): "Señor, you are talking about philosophy but my family is living it." She said that she was not going to let happen to Juanito what had happened to big brother Jorge. Jorge had left elementary school reading adequately in Spanish but with only one year of English reading. He was three years below grade level. When he saw the level of writing middle-school teachers expected, he almost dropped out. She wanted her second son to start reading in English as soon as possible to avoid the same near-catastrophe.

I love languages, and speak Spanish, Italian and some French. I tell my students everyone should know at least two languages. I think non-English-speaking students need some help in their first language to get oriented when they start school.

But I have come to believe that my students need to learn English as richly and smoothly and as soon as they can.

Even if bilingual education works in an ideal setting, with highly trained, truly bilingual teachers and excellent English as a second language teachers, can many schools duplicate that?

Class-size reduction (which is wonderful) has made the 25-year shortage of bilingual teachers even more acute. If the conditions required for bilingual education to be effective are so hard to achieve, is it a realistic policy?

I'm not endorsing the Unz initiative. I think districts should be allowed to design their own programs for students with limited English skills, and required to measure their outcomes. We must be accountable. If you say your students are doing well, great! Show me the data.

We can use what we now know about second-language acquisition to do a much better job than those old "sink or swim" classes where too many kids sank. But let's move forward and prove we can meet our students' needs.

Lisa Dilles' bilingual second-grade class in Santa Cruz includes eight students who speak English as their first language, and 12 whose native language is Spanish, three of whom are making the transition to English.
Mother tongue-tied

CALIFORNIA'S law mandating bilingual education expired in 1987. So it's not the law anymore, and school districts can't be required to obey it.

That is the common-sense conclusion of a Sacramento judge, who ruled recently that school districts don't need a state waiver to teach students in English, rather than their native language. There's no law to waive.

In response, the California Board of Education voted unanimously last week that local districts may decide how best to educate students with limited English skills, using any method that develops English fluency "effectively and efficiently." Bilingual education remains an option, but not the preferred option.

"Local school districts will now have the flexibility they need to provide the best English language instruction to their students," Board President Yvonne W. Larsen said in a statement.

Until last week, the debate over bilingual education has focused mainly on the June ballot measure sponsored by software entrepreneur Ron Unz. Proposition 227 would eliminate most bilingual education programs and substitute "structured English immersion" (classes designed for English language learners), with most students moving to mainstream classes in one year. Parents who prefer bilingual education, or other methods, would have to apply for a waiver, citing their child's special needs.

"Preserve local control" is the rallying cry of opponents of the Unz initiative. But they are the same people who now oppose the state board's restoration of local control. Superior Court Judge Ronald B. Robie ruled that native-language instruction may be required "when necessary" to meet students' needs.

The bilingual defenders argue that the court ruling changes nothing, since they believe native-language instruction is always "necessary" for children who aren't fluent in English.

In fact, the state badly needs a sensible policy for educating these students. But what it needs to do is monitor how well they're actually learning English, instead of monitoring how they're taught.

The Legislature has failed to act for 11 years, allowing education officials to continue to enforce the expired law, which required districts to offer native-language instruction when it was feasible.

Of 1.4 million "limited English proficient" students, about 30 percent mostly Spanish-speaking elementary students — now in bilingual education classes taught primarily in their native language. Another 20 percent receive some native-language tutoring from an aide. The rest are in mainstream classes with extra tutoring in English, or in "structured" or "sheltered" English immersion classes designed for limited-English students.

About 20 percent receive no special help. Known as "sink or swim," that method is a violation of federal law, which requires that limited-English students get the help they need to receive an equal education. It doesn't specify how they should be taught, however.

The Legislature could give Californians an alternative to Proposition 227 by passing SB 6 by Sen. Dede Alpert, D-Corona del Mar. It pairs local control with accountability. Students would take a state test measuring English fluency and mastery of academic subjects. The state could intervene only if students weren't making adequate progress.

The Latino Caucus has blocked passage of this bill for two years running, and liberal Democrats are still demanding that SB 6 be amended to require native-language instruction, once again eliminating local control. The bill's chances don't look very bright.

At its April meeting, the board of education will adopt new policies to monitor how programs for limited-English students are meeting students' needs. The board could try to enforce the accountability part of SB 6 as policy. But if the board can't enforce a law that's gone out of existence, it's going to have trouble enforcing a law that never passed.

That will leave voters with a choice between Proposition 227 and the status quo, which bilingual education advocates will defend to the death. If there's no alternative to 227, death will come on Tuesday, June 2.
ENGLISH INITIATIVE'S
SPANISH-SPEAKING
ROOTS

How Latino parents' boycott of a Los Angeles school
led to a statewide proposal to scrap bilingual education

Alicia Benavides holds up a letter from a student. Benavides, who teaches at Budlong Elementary in Los Angeles, is bilingual but does not support the district's bilingual education program. She teaches most of her first-graders in English, including those who came to school speaking Spanish.

PHOTOS BY JUDITH CALSON

INSIDE
PHOTOS BY JUDITH CALSON
STORY BY MICHAEL BAZELEY AND LORI ARATANI

LOS ANGELES
ROUND ZERO of the bilingual education revolt is a squat concrete and glass storefront on the edge of Los Angeles' gritty skid row district.

There, in the Los Familias del Pueblo community center, Spanish-speaking garment workers two years ago plotted a campaign to get their children out of mostly Spanish-language classes at nearby Ninth Street Elementary School.

Now they are at the epicenter of a controversy that has rippled across the country, igniting passionate debate among academics, politicians, civil rights groups, parents and teachers. As a result of those parents' rebellion, California voters will decide in less than three months whether to scrap bilingual instruction in public schools.

The parents' motivation was uncomplicated: They wanted their children educated in English, the language of opportunity in the land of opportunity.

"It was important for the parents to unite and get what we want," Hilda Mendez, who kept two of her children out of Ninth Street for the two-week boycott in February 1996, said in Spanish. "We wanted them to learn English, because in this country, that is the language that is spoken. I want my children to be better than me."

The protest might have remained a historical footnote in the continuing tug-of-war over bilingual education were it not for Ron Unz. But when the Silicon Valley millionaire read news accounts of the parents' cause, he made it the foundation of Proposition 227 — the statewide initiative to eliminate bilingual education — on the June ballot.

It seems inevitable that the bilingual conflict would start in Southern California. This is where the challenge is the biggest and the stakes are the highest.

Los Angeles County took in more immigrants in 1993 than any state other than

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‘We wanted them to learn English, because in this country, that is the language that is spoken. I want my children to be better than me.’

HILDA MENDEZ, WHO BOYCOTTED A LOS ANGELES SCHOOL IN PROTEST OF BILINGUAL PROGRAMS

FAMILY INCOME
Poverty plays significant role in classroom performance

BY LORI ARATANI
Mercury News Staff Writer

Bilingual education has been roundly criticized for failing California's children — blamed for high dropout rates among Latino students and for dooming children to failure because they never master English.

But researchers and educators say how well children will do in school is far more complex than just the lessons they receive in the classroom. A strong academic program is crucial, but many other factors, including family income and the parents' education, have been found to significantly influence achievement.

That doesn't mean children who come from poor families cannot succeed, but they do face more obstacles. Studies show they are more likely to move frequently or attend schools with less experienced teachers and lower standards for academic achievement.

One in five California children lives in poverty, according to statistics from the state Department of Education. And Latino children — who make up the vast majority of the state's limited-English-speaking population — are twice as likely to come from poor families than white children are, according to a soon to be published paper by the California Policy Seminar, based at the University of California-Berkeley.

“These are the same kids that if they spoke English, schools would still not be dealing well with them,” said UC-Davis Professor Patricia Gandara, one of the authors of the paper. “It's not just...”

Children in the play yard at Los Familias del Pueblo center in Los Angeles wait after school for their parents to pick them up. Many of the parents are garment workers, as were those who wanted their children taught in English instead of their native Spanish. Their protest led to the initiative to cut bilingual education in public schools.
Parents see English as kids’ key

Schools — was educating students primarily in Spanish while it slowly introduced them to English. But parents demanded their children be placed in English-language classes — their legal right.

Kids removed from school

By February 1996, when the school district still had not moved their children despite repeated requests, the parents pulled them out of school. After two weeks, the school agreed to place the children in English classes that fall.

The parents’ main advocate and advising the boycott was the Rev. Alice Callaghan, a soft-spoken Episcopalian priest who watches their children’s children at Los Feliz’s Pueblo community center.

These garment workers can barely make it,” Callaghan said during a recent tour of the nearby sweatshops. “They don’t want their kids working in factories, or selling soda at the street corner or cleaning offices. They want them to be successful lawyers, and they can attain that through learning how to read and write in English.”

Even the children prefer English.

“It’s better to know English,” said 10-year-old Sandra Leivas, a fifth-grader who switched into English-language classes after the boycott.

“We understand everything better now. We can read books and understand the teacher.”

Jose Cortez is learning to read in Spanish in first grade at Cahuenga Elementary School in Los Angeles. For years, Cahuenga teachers have taught students English by teaching them in their native language first.

SHIFING EMPHASIS

For students with limited English skills, Los Angeles Unified School District offers a bilingual education program that combines instruction in the student’s native language with instruction in English. This is how a student’s day would typically be broken up:

- 8 a.m. to 8:30 a.m.: Spanish instruction.
- 8:30 a.m. to 11:45 a.m.: English instruction.

Native English language

- First grade: 30% English
- Second grade: 50%
- Third grade: 50%
- Fourth grade: 80%
- Fifth grade: 100%

Source: Los Angeles Unified School District

L.A. Unified officials are apolgetic for the Ninth Street trend, and acknowledge “an unfortunate consequence of the boycott.”

But the controversy did nothing to shake the district’s faith in its bilingual program. As a result, Cahuenga Elementary has intensified its efforts to provide a bilingual education, and it is now offering classes for students with limited English skills in the district.

This commitment is clearly apparent at Cahuenga Elementary School. For more than a decade, teachers at the 1,200-student campus, in a neighborhood of public, stucco houses on the edge of Koreatown, have taught students English by teaching them in their native language first.

Principal likes approach

It’s an approach that principal Lloyd Houtske and his staff say makes sense. Students feel more comfortable and their ability to speak English doesn’t hamper them from learning subjects such as science and math because they are taught these lessons in their native language at the same time they are learning English, Houtske said.

“Teachers see little benefit in the English-only approach advocated in the Tzu initiative. They fear that students now flourishing in Cahuenga might fizzle out in all-English classrooms.”

When students are in English-only settings, “they’re not learning any thing except English,” said Adria Soto, Cahuenga’s lead counselor. “They can’t grasp any of the other concepts because they’re still struggling with the language.”

Reflecting current thinking in bilingual education, Soto said that maintaining students’ native language is important. “It’s not just about teaching. It’s about learning the language.”
When students are in English-only settings, "they're not learning anything except English. They can't grasp any of the other concepts."

ADELINE SHOJI, BILINGUAL COORDINATOR AT CAHUENGA SCHOOL IN LOS ANGELES

L.A. Unified teachers divided on bilingual instruction issue

What really started to get me was kids who were quick and teaching themselves English — and there were plenty of them. And I would ask to get teachers from introducing written English materials to students before tests indicated they were ready. "What really started to get me was kids who were quick and teaching themselves English — and there were plenty of them," Lasen said. "And I would ask to get them tested out of the program, and it was very difficult."

Support for Prop. 227

Many longtime proponents of native-language instruction found themselves in Lasen's camp, and some are saying they intend to vote

Students with limited English proficiency

1996: 1.38 million
One out of four students

Millions of students in California public schools

Orange County districts revolt in different way

BY LOUIE ARATA
San Jose Mercury News Staff Writer

In the debate over the best way to teach children who speak little or no English, it seems logical that the first school districts to rebel against bilingual education would be in Orange County — an area long known for its conservative politics.

While immigrant parents in Los Angeles were demanding that their children be taught in English, trustees in four Orange County districts were staging a rebellion of their own. All sought waivers from the state Board of Education to teach students predominantly in English.

"Bilingual education helps to foster the notion that students can succeed in America without really knowing the language," said Bill Lewis, president of the Orange Unified school board.

The county's demographics have shifted rapidly over the past two decades, prompting local officials to question the need for bilingual education in the forefront, points out Mark J. Baldassare, a University of California-Irvine

that the state board had no right to require districts to seek waivers, because the California law that required students be taught in their native language expired in 1987.

Less than a week later, the state Board of Education lifted its requirement that school districts like Orange seek permission for the right to teach non-English-speaking children in English.

Those recent actions have alarmed advocates of bilingual education, who fear that districts may no longer feel obligated to teach students in their native language. They say students could be left behind in classrooms where teachers speak a language they can't fully comprehend.

Proposition 227, the June initiative that wouldnational eliminate bilingual classes, has prompted many to fear that bilingual advocates be-cause it may start students to learn English. However, whether it allows for the use of a student's primary language in class is still up for debate.

Orange County educators believe their program would comply