

# Bilingual Education Is Ineffective

"Bilingual education is more expensive than other programs and is the least educationally effective."

Christine Rossell is a professor of political science at Boston University and the author of *School Desegregation in the 21st Century, Bilingual Education in Massachusetts*. In the following viewpoint, she argues that bilingual education is the least effective and most expensive method of teaching students who are not proficient in English. She says that English Language Learners (ELL) learn the language more quickly when they are placed in special classrooms and taught entirely, or almost entirely, in English. She also says that ELL students should take the same statewide tests in English as other students.

As you read, consider the following questions:

What statistics does Rossell provide to show that the number of students in Texas public schools who are not proficient in English continues to grow?

According to Rossell, how did former bilingual education teachers react when they switched to teaching sheltered English immersion?

Why does Rossell believe that universal testing of ELL students on state proficiency tests in English is possible in Texas?

Texas is a large, growing state due in part to high birth rates and individuals choosing to move to Texas from other states and countries. According to the state demographer, one rapidly expanding demographic is the Hispanic population, which is expected to double between 2000 and 2025 from 6.6 million people to more than 13.4 million people.

The Goal Should Be Learning English

The number of students in Texas public schools who are not proficient in English continues to grow. In the 2008-09 school year, Texas had 448,917 students in bilingual education. Between 1992 and 2006, Texas' English Language Learner [ELL] student population increased by 84 percent. Currently, 99 percent of the students enrolled in Texas' bilingual education programs are Hispanic.

As Texas' Hispanic population and immigrant population continue to grow, it is critically important that state leaders and policy makers look at the facts on how to best teach English to non-English-speaking children.

The goal of any type of program teaching English to non-English-speaking children should be learning English. Yet, opinions vary and tempers flare over which program—bilingual education or sheltered English immersion—teaches English most effectively.

Sometimes the term "bilingual education" is used loosely to refer to any type of English teaching program. For the purposes of this study, bilingual education is defined as instruction provided to students in their native tongue in all subjects in a self-contained classroom with other students that speak the same language. English is typically taught by the bilingual education teacher. English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction is defined as a program of small group English instruction by a certified ESL teacher whose students typically spend the rest of the day in a mainstream classroom. Sheltered English immersion is defined as instruction provided to students in English at a pace they can understand, taught by a trained ESL teacher, in a self-contained classroom with other students learning a second language.

Consider some key facts:

Texas is one of only four states currently requiring bilingual education. The other three states are Illinois, New Jersey, and New York.

Texas is one of only 10 states that have ever required bilingual education. The other nine states are California, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Washington, and Wisconsin.

Bilingual education is more expensive than other programs and is the least educationally effective. (Bilingual education is more expensive than mainstreaming or sheltered English immersion, and is less effective.)

Students in bilingual education are not required to be tested on the English TAKS [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, the statewide tests] for the first three years. Testing all English Language Learners in English is the best way to hold schools accountable for the English language acquisition of their students and an excellent way to give schools credit for the extraordinary job they do of teaching English and content such as math and science to non-English-speaking students.

Recommendations:

Adopt sheltered English immersion as the default for Texas public schools;

Give parents choice to pick the program that best meets their child's needs in learning English; and

Test all English Language Learner students on the English TAKS....

#### Bilingual Education Is Least Effective

The data analyzed in this study suggest that bilingual education is the least effective program for ELL students if one's goal is achievement in English.

ELL students in bilingual education are tested in English on the TAKS at significantly lower rates than those students not in bilingual education. This indicates that bilingual education is less effective than all-English programs in teaching ELL students English and subject matter that they will have to know in English. The fact that Texas law allows such a discrepancy does not excuse it.

The statistical analyses presented in this [viewpoint] demonstrate that it is the lowest-scoring students who are not tested in English. The correlation is clear: the lower the testing rate for ELL students, the higher the ELL achievement. The fact that Texas law allows local language proficiency committees to designate a Spanish rather than an English test, or exempt an insufficiently prepared ELL student altogether, does not invalidate a reality, namely, that both possibilities grow likelier if the student is in a bilingual education program rather than an alternative. When more weight is given to ELL TAKS English test scores in schools where ELL students have higher testing rates, bilingual education has a negative effect on achievement in English.

Finally, as noted in every other study of the question, bilingual education in Texas is more expensive than other programs for ELL students. That it is also the least educationally effective suggests that it is not the best program for Texas.

#### Recommendations

1) Adopt sheltered English immersion as the default assignment for ELL students.

Given that bilingual education is both more costly and less effective than other programs for ELL students, it is recommended that Texas follow the lead of other states and adopt sheltered English

immersion as the default assignment for ELL students. At the very least, Texas should consider giving schools a choice as to the program that elementary ELL students receive, particularly in light of the fact that only three other states mandate bilingual education.

Research indicates that sheltered English immersion is the most successful program for ELL students if one's goal is the highest level of achievement in English that a child is capable of.... A sheltered English immersion course involves second language learners only, taught by a teacher trained in second language acquisition techniques. Instruction is almost entirely in the second language, but at a pace the child can understand. Sheltered English immersion is mandated as the default assignment for English Language Learners by Proposition 227, passed in June 1998 in California; by Proposition 203, passed in November 2000 in Arizona; and by Question 2, passed in November 2002 in Massachusetts. It is also implemented at the discretion of schools and districts throughout the United States.

My analyses and those of [researcher Valentina] Bali of the effectiveness of sheltered English immersion in California show a positive effect on reading and math achievement from dismantling bilingual education in a school. Through teacher and principal interviews in California in spring 1999 and fall 2001, strong support was revealed among teachers and principals for sheltered English immersion, even among those who had lobbied to stop the initiative from passing.

The former bilingual education teachers were now the sheltered English immersion teachers. The ones I talked to, loved it. In their previous experience as bilingual education teachers, they had worried about how much English their students were learning, but did not want to send their students to a mainstream classroom. Now these teachers felt they had the best of all possible worlds—a sheltered classroom in which they could use Spanish when needed to communicate with a parent or new child, but in which almost all of the instruction was in English.

2) Parents should be given choice.

Not every parent of an ELL child wants their child to be in a self-contained classroom consisting only of other ELL students, even if the language of instruction is English. In addition, parents who want their ELL child to be educated in two languages and understand the educational cost should have the right to request an alternative program, including a bilingual education program if demand squares with resources. However, the parent should have to come down to the school and talk to the staff about the programs for ELL students in order to understand exactly what they are and what the benefits and costs are.

One of the more shocking findings in years of talking to parents of ELL children assigned to bilingual education is that, despite being notified of the assignment, the parents had no idea of all its implications. They were unaware their child would be in a classroom in which instruction was at least partly in Spanish: almost completely so in the case of kindergartners. This confusion is undoubtedly a problem in Texas, where the default assignment is bilingual education. Although parents have the authority to opt out of a bilingual education program in Texas (as in every other state with mandated bilingual education), they are more prone to approve than to reject the default assignment made by the school, because they do not understand what their child is being assigned to and assume the educational experts know best. Thus, it is important to make the default assignment the program that is the most effective—sheltered English immersion—and not the one that is least effective—bilingual education. Then parents can become educated about the programs before they switch their child.

#### Testing Is Required

3) All ELL students must be tested on the English TAKS.

This is the most effective way to hold schools accountable for the English language acquisition of their ELL students. Interestingly, it is also an excellent way to give schools credit for the extraordinary job they do of teaching English and subject matter in English to non-English-speaking students. If a school or district tests ELL students only in English on the state proficiency tests many years after their arrival, they miss out on being given credit for the gains in English that ELL children made in the years before that.

Universal testing of ELL students on the state proficiency tests in English is required in California, so it is possible to do this. English language proficiency tests designed solely for ELL students—the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS)—are not a substitute for the state proficiency test, as one cannot compare the scores for, and the gains in, a test taken only by ELL students to the scores on a different test taken by non-ELL students.

The above recommendations are based on empirical research nationally and in Texas. Instruction in English (and the elimination of bilingual education) is overwhelmingly supported by the public, according to a number of national surveys and by voters in three states (California in 1998, Arizona in 2000, and Massachusetts in 2002).

A large majority of immigrant parents want their children taught in English, not their native tongue. Sheltered English immersion has already been adopted and accepted in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts—all states with large Spanish-speaking immigrant populations—as a more effective method of teaching English to English Language Learners. The Texas legislature should consider embracing sheltered English immersion as the default program in place of bilingual education.