



## BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN THE HOUSTON AREA

### *A Synopsis of Study by the League of Women Voters of Houston Education Fund*

#### **Introduction**

The influx of immigrant children into the Greater Houston Area has prompted communities and educators to examine and evaluate methods of instruction in education in order to ensure that all students receive reasonable opportunity for quality education. The value of education in a society is not disputed. However, methods used to achieve desired results vary not only among school districts within a given area, but also among schools within those districts.

The bilingual education debate is complicated. First, confusion surrounding the term "bilingual education" contributes to dissatisfaction of methods and results. Secondly, political and ideological perspectives, rather than academic performance, have become the focus and have added to confusion surrounding the debate. As a result, different groups have different goals for the use of bilingual education in schools. For some, the goal is proficiency in reading and writing in the English language. For others, the goal is academic achievement, and still for others the goal includes preservation of another language and an ethnic culture.

Variability among definitions and how bilingual education is actually interpreted in the classrooms is of critical concern, since it makes discussion of the pros and cons of methods difficult and greatly weakens the validity of research finding. Furthermore, a key point of disagreement is over the amount of native language needed to educate limited English proficiency (LEP) students. Some advocates of bilingual education insist that six or even seven years of instruction in the native language are necessary for students to achieve academic English proficiency, while critics of the system believe that although some use of the primary language, or native tongue, can facilitate education and English literacy, the use of the primary language should be minimal.

In 1997, there were 454,883 limited English-speaking students in Texas (Garcia & Morgan, 1997). During this period, of 93,145 Hispanic eighteen-year-olds, only 58% were high school graduates; of these graduates, only 6% were eligible for college. (Texas Justice Foundation, 1999) As educators, parents, and legislators debate, a growing number of LEP children (approaching 50 percent in some districts) continue to fall significantly behind Anglo peers.

Because of the large number of school districts in the Houston area, the League's study had to be limited to samples and included eleven districts that were considered to be representative of immigrant population in the schools: Aldine, Alief, Cypress-Fairbanks, Deer Park, Galena Park, Fort Bend, Goose Creek, Houston, Katy, Pasadena, and Spring Branch. This study consisted of research into federal and state law on bilingual education, its history, accessible research reports and articles, student academic results, and interviews with bilingual education administrators in all eleven districts.

In May 1998 the *League of Women Voters of Houston* adopted a two-year study of bilingual education in the Greater Houston area.

#### **SCOPE**

To review and evaluate:

the federal and state laws, funding mechanisms, and policies relating to bilingual education;

how programs are being implemented in the Greater Houston Area;

criteria used for evaluating the success or effectiveness of the programs, and who makes the evaluations.

## BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN TEXAS



By 1959, Texas had instituted several preschools for Hispanic children, and by 1964, Laredo and San Antonio districts were experimenting with bilingual programs in the elementary grades.

The national Bilingual Act of 1968 provided funds for school districts to establish and operate bilingual education programs for students, targeting low-income children. However, this bill neither defined bilingual education nor stated the purpose of the Act, other than to provide money for local districts to develop and implement innovative elementary and secondary school programs. Amendments to the 1968 Act did not advocate one option over another and allowed states the right to determine programs to best meet students' needs.

In the following year, 1969, the first Texas state law was passed to permit, but not require, bilingual instruction through grade 6, with the goal of enabling LEP students to become "competent in comprehending, speaking, reading, and writing English language through the development of literacy and academic skills in the native language and English." (*Texas Education Code*). Then in 1970, basic requirements using the child's primary language were established by Texas law.

A landmark decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1974 (*Lau vs. Nichols*) ruled that language assistance must be provided for LEP students, without prescribing bilingual education or any specific program. Subsequently, for over twenty years various legislation led to further development of English language programs as debate continued about effectiveness of bilingual education versus other special language programs, methods, and assessment for determining effectiveness in achieving English language proficiency for LEP students.

### TEXAS LAW

The following information is from the *Texas Education Code*.

#### State Policy 29.051

**English is the basic language of this state. Public schools are responsible for providing a full opportunity for all students to become competent in speaking, reading, writing, and comprehending the English language...The mastery of basic English language skills is a prerequisite for effective participation in the state's educational program. Bilingual education and special language programs can meet the needs of those students and facilitate their integration into the regular school curriculum. Therefore, in accordance with the policy of the state to ensure equal educational opportunity to every student, and in recognition of the educational needs of students of limited English proficiency, this subchapter provides for the establishment of bilingual education and special language programs in the public schools and provides supplemental financial assistance to help school districts meet the extra costs of the programs.**

In Texas, bilingual education is designed to ensure that students master the content of knowledge and skills of the state-mandated curriculum, beginning in their primary language and "transitioning" into receiving content instruction in English while learning the English language. English as a second language (ESL) is an intensive program of instruction designed to develop student proficiency in English and in content areas using second language methodologies. Students in ESL receive instruction in English.

The goal of the Texas Education Agency (TEA) is to assist LEP students in meeting or exceeding levels of the general student population, and “parental involvement” in education of their children is considered to be essential for success. (TEA 1998)

All bilingual programs in the Houston area included in this study, with one exception, are designed for Hispanic students, with the term “Hispanic” being inclusive of immigrants from different cultures of Spanish descent/influence. The one exception is the bilingual education program in Anderson Elementary, Houston Independent School District (HISD), for Vietnamese students, the second largest group of LEP students in HISD. After second grade, they are placed in ESL classes and take the TAAS in third grade, in English, unlike most Hispanic students who exit the programs much later.



### Identification and Placement

Within the first four weeks of the school year, LEP students are identified as prescribed by the *Texas Education Code* (TEC). Standardized criteria are used for identification, assessment, and classification of LEP students to determine eligibility for entry into the program, placement within the program, or exit from the program.

Following a home language survey, a student may be tested and assessed by the *Proficiency Assessment Committee* (composed according to state law) of that school district. Then, a written notice must be provided to the parent, in English and in the parent’s primary language. The parent’s approval is required for entry, exit, or placement in the program. (29.056) A parent who disagrees with placement of the student may appeal the decision which shall be handled in accordance to prescribed procedure by the board of trustees. If the district does not comply with requirements of law or the agency, that parent may appeal to the commissioner. (29.064)

During the League’s study, some school district personnel indicated that not all parents are notified that the bilingual program requires parent’s approval. Personnel in other districts stated that if a parent does not want to enroll a student in the bilingual program, that parent is informed that no other tutoring or help is available and the parent is required to sign a waiver.

According to the *Texas Education Code* (29.053), each district with twenty or more LEP students of any language classification in the same grade level is required to offer a bilingual or special language program designed with consideration of the students’ learning experiences and incorporating cultural aspects of the students’ backgrounds. This includes bilingual education K through elementary; bilingual education, ESL, or another transitional instruction approved by TEA, post-elementary through grade 8; and ESL grades 9 through 12. Non LEP students may enroll in the special language programs, but must make up no more than 40 percent of the class. In addition, preschool, summer school, and extended time programs are encouraged, but are not to be considered as substitutes for bilingual programs.

Exceptions to the above TEC mandate require documentation to be filed and approved by the agency for a program other than bilingual education, and this exception is valid for one year. (29.054) This exception usually applies to lack of sufficient certified teachers (described in the following section). In this case, documentation is required to show that the district has made reasonable effort in hiring policies and procedures for appropriate bilingual instruction, and a detailed plan must be submitted for eliminating conditions leading to the need for exception. Many school districts in the Houston area rely, some more extensively than others, on waivers due to lack of certified bilingual education teachers.

## **Bilingual Teacher Certification**

Under the *Texas Education Code*, Subchapter G, minimum requirements include a baccalaureate degree with academic major or interdisciplinary academic major. In addition, a candidate for certification must have proficiency in the English language. “It is particularly important that candidates for certification be able to communicate in clear, correct English” (230.191).

Certification requirements for bilingual education and ESL are in addition to valid teacher certification, and teachers are compensated for additional certification. Prescribed professional development is required. (230.199)

**Emergency** permits require the individual to be at least 18 years of age, have a bachelor’s degree from an accredited institution of higher learning, and to be able to speak and understand the English language to “sufficiently use it easily and readily in conversation and teaching” (230.503).

**Alternative Certification** provides two options: training while teaching as a bilingual teacher followed by passing required testing, and the Traditional College Program requiring semester hours of an approved program in bilingual education followed by passing required testing. (230.199)



## **Program Content: Method of Instruction**

A full-time program of instruction in the primary and English languages must be offered that provides for learning basic skills in the primary language of the students enrolled in the program and for carefully structured and sequenced mastery of English language skills. An ESL program is a program of intensive instruction in English from teachers trained in recognizing and dealing with language differences.

Art, music, physical education classes, and extracurricular activities are to be conducted with all enrolled students participating together. Although additional programs are encouraged, they are not substitutes. (TEC 29.055)

The typical bilingual education program, and the one used in most Houston area schools, is transitional bilingual education characterized by Hispanic children learning core content in Spanish in the elementary grades while gradually transitioning to English by the sixth grade (see attached chart). Programs based on this method are often based on concepts in the Thomas-Collier report of 1997 which concludes that students, in order to achieve academically, must first be literate in their native language before acquiring literacy in a second language. However, critics of this report consider results unreliable because of the methods used for this study and the anonymity of population and schools chosen for the study. (Rossell, 1998) The study committee did not see a variety of other models/programs for comparison in the districts we studied.

Facilities, by law, must be in regular public schools of the district, and students must be placed in classes with the same age and level of education attainment. (299.057) However, school districts may cooperate to provide bilingual education and special language programs for a student living in a district that does not provide an appropriate program. (29.059)

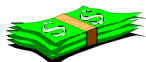
## **Compliance**

An on-site visit by TEA must be made at least every three years to each school district and open-enrollment charter school to monitor the program, staffing, various procedures learning and testing materials, and other activities. Failure to comply with state mandates can result in

severe sanctions such as removal of accreditation, loss of foundation school funds, or both. (TEC 29.062)

As evaluation, the *Texas Education Agency* has scheduled testing for LEP students after the 1999 school year. These students have been tracked since the 1992-93 school year when they entered first grade.

## Funding



**Federal** The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 made funds (grants) available to school districts with high concentrations of language-minority students from low economic families. Four different grants are available to use in direct instructional services by local educational agencies, and two grants assist schools in carrying out direct services to students. Additional grants increase the supply of teachers and educational personnel trained to serve LEP students. These grants vary in the number of years they are available and the amount of money involved. Districts individually apply for the grants.

**State** For each student in a bilingual education or special language program, a district receives an additional ten percent of basic allotment for each student. This amount differs for each district, depending on cost factors, but the average allotment per student is about \$3000.00. Therefore, the average extra funding for each child is about \$300.00.

State funding must be used for program and student evaluation, instructional materials and equipment, staff development, supplemental staff expenses, salary supplements for teachers, and other supplies for quality instruction and smaller class size. Bilingual teachers receive an extra \$3000.00 a year, and some districts also give a bonus when the teacher starts in that district. (School Finance Act) Still, bilingual education receives the lowest amount of state funding among special programs.

## Testing and Assessment



Increased emphasis on school accountability in the 1990s has led to inclusion of LEP students in state and national assessments.

The TAAS testing has been controversial not only for the general school population, but to many educators, it is unsatisfactory as a measurement of achievement for LEP students. Policy for testing of LEP students and exemptions from testing and reporting practices is in transition. In March 2000, all LEP students grade 3 – 12 will be tested to focus on proficiency level, based on reading essential knowledge and skill. This should include a statewide measurement of all students presently exempt from taking the English TAAS.

## What Factors Affect Achievement?

A number of factors can influence development of English language skills and academic performance.

There is as yet no easy way to determine the effect of the high mobility rate of Hispanic students on the effectiveness of any one bilingual education program over another. For example, some LEP students enter schools at the beginning of a school year and are enrolled in bilingual programs, only to be moved with their families to other districts and into other programs, with inconsistency in those students' education, especially bilingual education.

The impact of family and cultural values on educational outcome cannot be precisely predicted, nor can that of the impact of poverty, along with other positive or negative factors in combination.

Educators agree that certified, experienced teachers and a well-implemented program over a prescribed period time are necessary for an effective bilingual education program. Yet, school districts in the Houston area are still working to formulate effective programs, and of the school districts included in the League's study, certified bilingual education teachers ranged from 75 percent to 90 percent; up to 25 percent of bilingual education teachers are not certified.

Students who leave school for reasons other than completion or graduation are often referred to as "dropouts." According to TEA, a dropout is a student who is absent without approval or documented transfer and does not return by fall of the following year. This generally includes students who do not complete a qualified education program or whose whereabouts are not known. (*TEA, 1997-98 Report on Public School Dropouts, Texas Education Agency*) However, there is disagreement over the method used to calculate dropout rate, which is based on the number of dropouts in grades 7 through 12 expressed as a percentage of the total enrollment for these five grades. Some critics insist that, in reality, dropout rates are higher than those published, since the early grades in which most students cannot legally drop out should not be used to calculate percentages; doing so distorts the dropout rate. For example, Houston Independent School District published 1998 single digit of 4.2 percent while other observers believe that the correct dropout rate is in the double-digit range of 52 percent. (Greene 37)

Nevertheless, because of different methods of calculating the dropout rate and lack of adequate data on students who have been in bilingual or other special language programs, we do not have accurate information on students in bilingual education who actually complete the program and graduate from high school.

## **Conclusion**

To many educators and parents, the role of bilingual education is unclear and methods used are inconsistently applied. Studies of bilingual programs and their effectiveness are usually not conducted by individuals outside the bilingual education system who are most likely to be objective in assessing the merit of bilingual education, but by individuals within the system who often are already strongly aligned for or against "bilingual education." This presents bias that affects both the method and the outcome of the research.

Critics of bilingual education believe that to many educators, political leaders, and ethnic activists, bilingual education has become the end rather than the means to academic achievement for predominantly immigrant Hispanic children. As a result, goals and methods among districts, and even among schools within districts, are fragmented and inconsistent.

Instead of pro-or-con bilingual education as the overarching theme, some educators of bilingual education programs suggest a reframing or redirection, including policies that clearly state intended goals, identifying successful models/programs achieving these goals, and implementing them throughout the system. The programs would be monitored for their progress according to stated goals and modified as needed to achieve intended results. Reliable, unbiased research could then indicate success or effectiveness of programs.

Even with differences of opinions regarding methods, educators and leaders of the community bear the responsibility to keep their focus and work together toward their common goal: educating children toward becoming responsible, productive citizens.

## DEFINITIONS

**Bilingual (Transitional Bilingual)** Instruction is in the primary language for most of the day in Kindergarten. In each successive grade, the amount of English instruction increases and use of the primary language decreases. The exact amount of time devoted to instruction in the primary language varies for each program and each school district. (See attached chart as one example.)

**Early Exit Bilingual** Gradual transition is made to English in two or three years. Texas has guidelines in order to determine if a child is ready for transition.

**English as a Second Language (ESL)** An intensive program designed to develop student proficiency in English and in content areas using second language methodologies in which students receive instruction in English.

**Late Exit Bilingual** Instruction is in English for half a day and in the primary language for half a day through grade five or six.

**Limited English Proficiency (LEP)** A student's primary language is other than English and language skills are such that the student has difficulty performing ordinary class work in English. This is determined by oral and written tests.

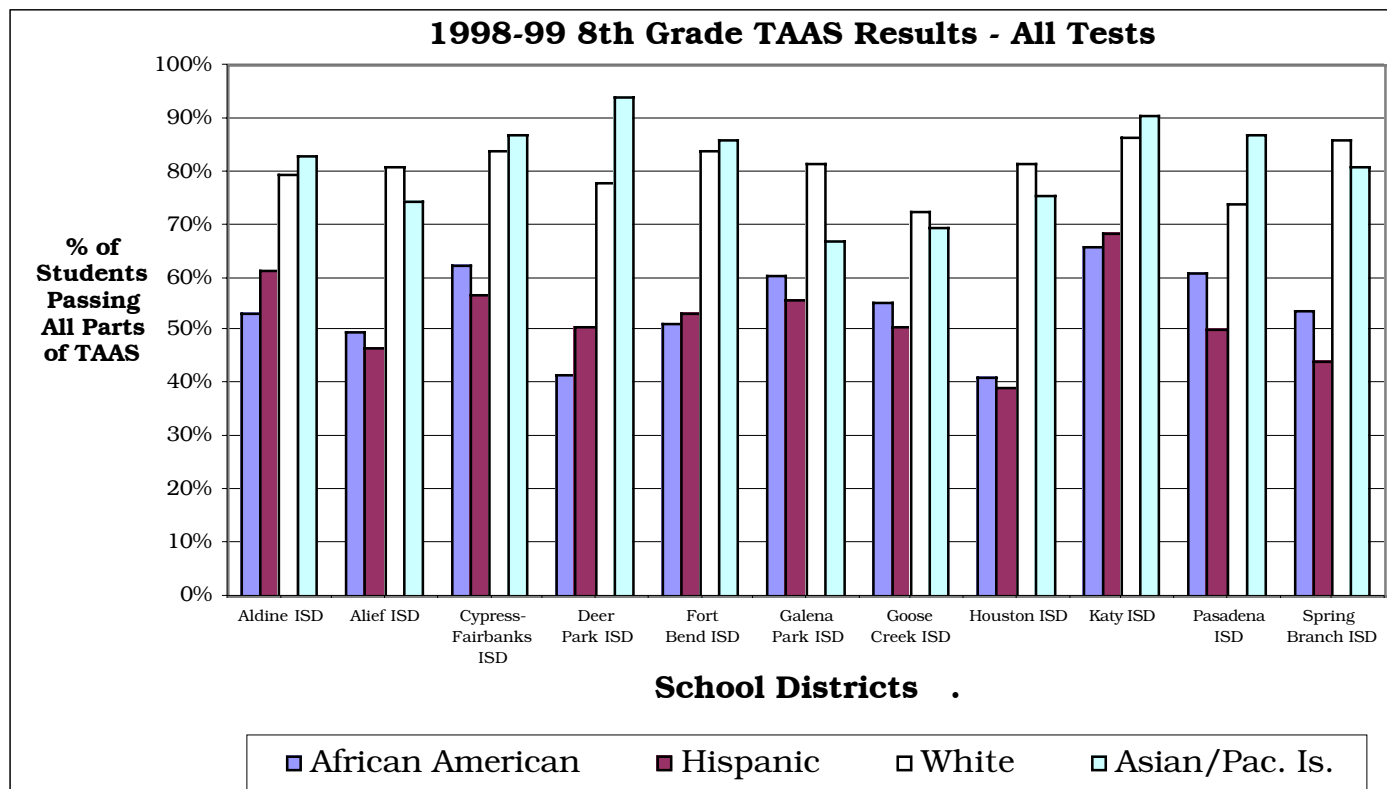
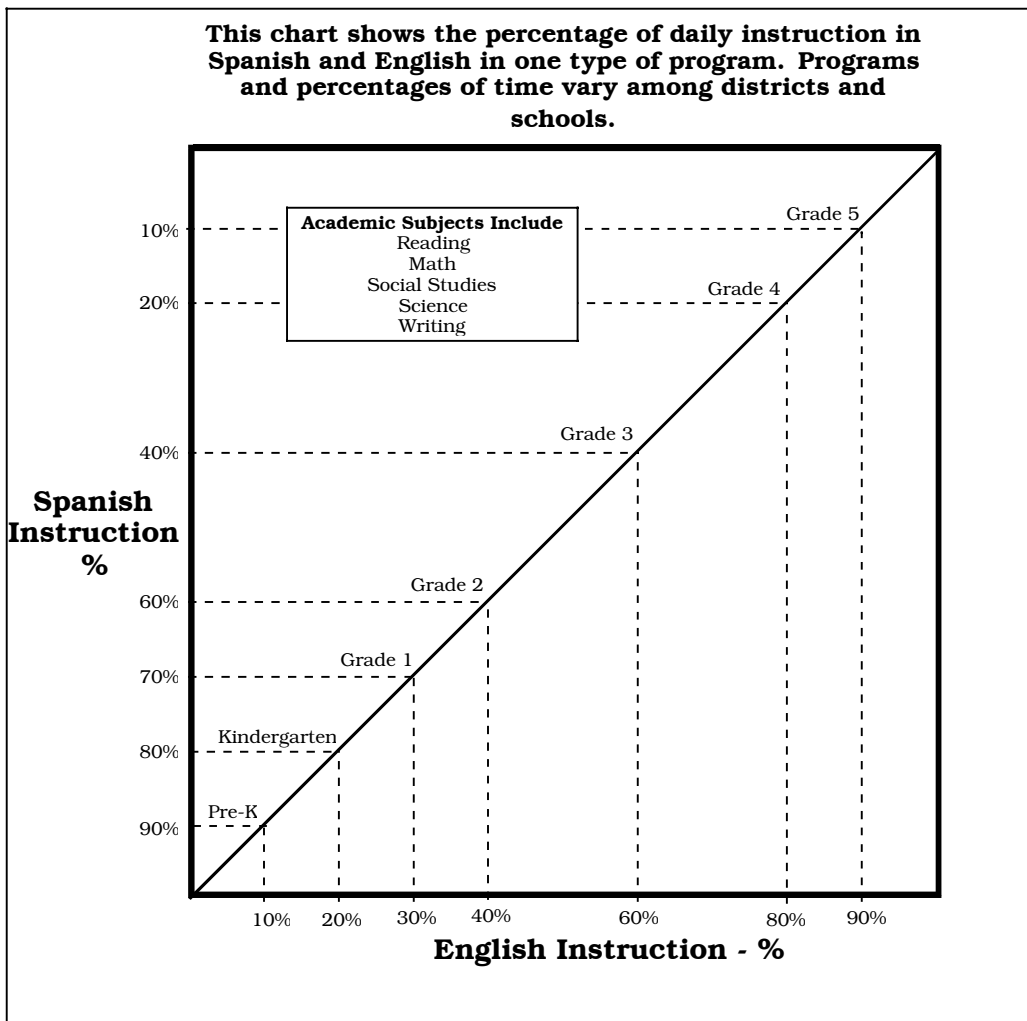
**Primary Language** The first language a child learns to speak; also referred to as native tongue.

**Structured Immersion (Straight English Immersion Program)** Everything is taught in English, no matter what the primary language of the child. There is usually some additional help for the non-English speaker.

**Submersion** No instructional support is provided by a trained specialist and everything is taught in English.

**Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)** This test measures academic knowledge and skills in each grade, according to state academic standards.

**Two-Way or Dual Language** Language majority and language minority students are placed in the same class with the instruction in both the native tongue and English.



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