

Executive Summary

California has a responsibility -- legally, morally and in its own future self-interest -- to provide an opportunity for education to all children, not just the "easy" ones who come to school with pre-school polish, involved parents and the kind of high self-esteem that makes achievement routine. But the State's record in meeting that responsibility for one-fifth of the five million students in today's classrooms is spotty at best.

Under federal law and state policy, the one million students who do not speak English fluently are supposed to be taught English as efficiently and effectively as possible. In addition, they are supposed to receive any necessary services to allow them to progress academically in other subjects, just as their English-speaking peers do. Instead, one-quarter of them receive no special services whatsoever -- not even instruction in the English language. The other three-quarters are often caught in a tug-of-war between advocates of different educational theories.

The situation was summed up cogently in a recent newspaper editorial:

For the better part of two decades, bilingual education programs -- in California as elsewhere -- have been as much a problem as a solution for the education of

children who come to school speaking little or no English.

But what had begun as a well-intended and urgently necessary effort -- to provide teaching appropriate to the needs of children who had too often been neglected -- calcified into a self-serving machine that paid less and less attention to the real children it was supposed to serve. Frequently it became an ideologically based program more concerned with the intrinsic virtues of bilingualism and biculturalism -- and with keeping children indefinitely in those programs -- than with its supposed mission: getting them into the English-speaking mainstream as quickly and efficiently as possible.

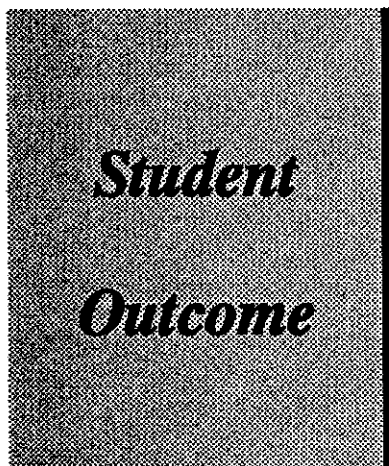
Not surprisingly, the results have often been precisely opposite to what had been intended -- locking students into separate programs for years on end. And sometimes they run to the absurd: Native English speakers who, because they tested poorly and had Hispanic names, were placed in bilingual classes conducted largely in Spanish; children from Chinese and Russian families who were assigned to the program but who, since no classes in their language were available, ended up in a Spanish bilingual class.¹

The effectiveness of California's efforts to teach English learners can be gauged by the low number of students who are reclassified as fluent English speakers, the high dropout rates, the lack of college applications and the dissatisfaction often expressed by parents, teachers and administrators. All point to a system that has failed to meet the needs of these at-risk students.

An examination of the facts surrounding the education of English learners by the Commission shows that success comes, not when some particular method is employed, but whenever dedicated individuals within the school system are able to provide the supportive atmosphere that encourages learning and achievement. That this so rarely occurs stems from an educational system that has refused to concentrate on the children themselves, rather than on ideology and bureaucracy. As a result of its study, the Commission believes the blame can be shared by:

- * School districts that, in the absence of financial rewards for positive student outcomes, have failed to put together creative and innovative programs that meet local needs.
- * The State Department of Education, which has failed to focus its energies and expertise on ensuring outcome accountability by devising statewide assessment tools and performance standards. Instead, it has pursued a single-minded educational strategy ill-suited for the challenge and magnitude of linguistic diversity in California.
- * Teachers who have not adapted to changing conditions and who have failed to employ teaching strategies that have proven effective in building self-esteem, achievement and language proficiency.

Those who have placed the interests of the children at the center of their convictions -- rather than protecting turf or serving special interests -- know the present system must be revamped. Towards that goal, the Little Hoover Commission conducted a study of the education of English learners in California and has made the following findings and recommendations:

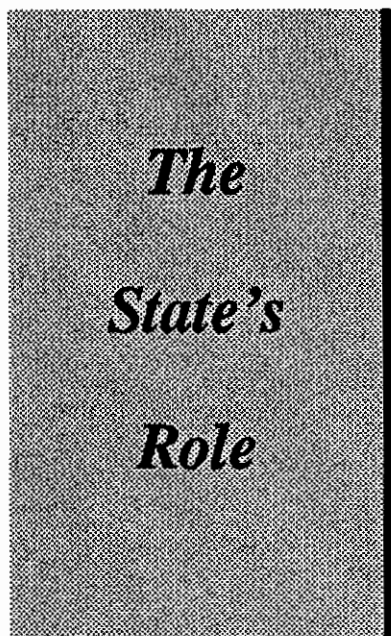


Finding 1: Schools are not meeting the primary goal of education for immigrant students: helping the children to become fluent in English quickly.

The education system is expected to take in young, untutored children and 12 years later turn them out as knowledgeable and skillful budding adults. While this mission is challenging enough with mainstream students, schools find it even more difficult to attain in the face of ever-increasing numbers of children who do not speak English fluently. The schools' first and primary goal with this population is to teach them English effectively and efficiently. Unfortunately, by almost any measure -- fluency transition rates, dropout statistics, college eligibility and community satisfaction -- schools are failing to meet that goal. At least one reason is the failure of schools to dedicate adequate resources to serving the needs of English learners.

Recommendation 1: The Governor and the Legislature should enact legislation to revise the state funding mechanisms for educating English learners so that schools have an incentive to help students attain English proficiency rapidly.

Whatever reform is adopted by the State should be targeted at encouraging quality performance by the schools and maximizing incentives for the schools to devote the needed resources to meeting the needs of English learners.



Finding 2: The State Department of Education's emphasis on native-language instruction is inappropriate, unwarranted, not feasible and counterproductive.

The State Department of Education favors native-language instruction as the best method for educating students who do not speak English. This bias permeates all of the Department's policies and procedures, effectively punishing schools that wish to pursue other options. The Department's support for native-language instruction is:

- * Inappropriate since federal law, court cases and state policy all recognize that various methods of instruction may be effective in helping English learners become fluent.
- * Unwarranted since a multiplicity of academic studies have yielded conflicting results about a single, "best" method of teaching non-English-fluent students. The one conclusion that can be drawn from studies is that a variety of approaches work depending on implementation, demographics and resources.
- * Not feasible since about one-fourth of California's non-English-fluent students speak a language other than Spanish and there are relatively few bilingual teachers -- a key

element to native-language instruction -- for languages other than Spanish. In fact, teacher credentialing procedures are not available for the majority of languages spoken in California schools.

- * Counterproductive since schools are required to expend energy and resources documenting the success of other options or providing plans on how native-language instruction can be achieved in the future. The Department's energy also is absorbed in enforcing native-language instruction rather than fulfilling its two primary functions of overseeing school districts: ensuring that students are progressing academically and documenting that earmarked funds are being spent to supplement the education of English learners.

Recommendation 2: The Governor and the Legislature should enact legislation that establishes a state framework for local control of educational methods for non-English-fluent students.

To be effective, the framework would replicate the three standards established by the federal courts to determine if a school district is making an acceptable program choice:

- * The adopted method must be based on a recognized academic theory.
- * The school district must dedicate a reasonable amount of resources to make the chosen method viable.
- * Students must make academic progress and move toward English proficiency.

Only if a school district failed to satisfy the three criteria would the State step in with a more directive approach to meeting the needs of English learners.

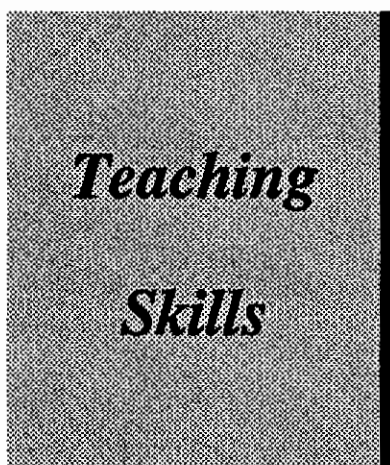
Recommendation 3: The Governor and the Legislature should enact legislation to direct the State Department of Education to focus on holding schools accountable for student achievement rather than on directing the

implementation of a single academic approach.

The Department needs to establish immediately a statewide protocol for academic testing for students of all languages. To accomplish this, the Department should devote its considerable energies to identifying and/or creating, if necessary, adequate assessment tools for non-English-fluent students. Once the protocol is in place, the Department should monitor student progress annually and give assistance to districts that are unable to demonstrate student achievement.

Recommendation 4: The Governor and the Legislature should direct the Department of Education to produce a report examining funding for English learner education and documenting the supplemental use of earmarked funds.

Understanding the role and magnitude of the present funding system is critical for ensuring accountability. Districts should be spending money allocated for English learners in a way that supplements the general funding received for those same students. In addition, it is futile to argue that more funding is needed -- as the Department, its consultants and advocates have maintained -- without being able to provide policy makers with a clear picture of what is now being spent.



Finding 3: There is a severe shortage of teachers with the expertise in language acquisition, the training in cultural diversity and the skills to enhance the classroom learning environment that are vital for meeting student needs in today's schools.

All students need to be stimulated to think, encouraged to question, and inspired to express their ideas verbally and in writing. The needs of English learners are no less in these important areas -- yet the supply of teachers who understand language acquisition theories, cultural influences on learning styles and specialized techniques to break

through language barriers is far outstripped by the demand represented by 1 million students who are not fluent in English. The state entities responsible for teacher training have responded with new programs that are making progress on solving this problem. Because a diversity of language groups is scattered throughout the State, a key element in any solution is to ensure that all teachers have at least a working knowledge of how to address the needs of English learners.

Recommendation 5: The Governor and the Legislature should enact a resolution directing the State Department of Education and the Commission on Teacher Credentialing to focus on improving teaching techniques rather than on creating a cadre of bilingual teachers.

Because sooner or later most of the State's teachers will find students in their class who speak no or limited English, it is important that all teachers have training in language acquisition theory, cultural diversity and techniques that enhance learning ability. The Department and the Commission on Teacher Credentialing should work together to ensure that all teachers have the tools that are needed to meet the challenge of language diversity in California's schools.

The efforts needed and goals envisioned by these recommendations are not so very extraordinary. Advocates have argued that English learners need a supportive learning environment that will enhance self-esteem, encourage respect for cultural diversity, stimulate complex thinking skills and produce knowledgeable, productive members of society. The Commission believes, however, that the same prescription for success is needed for all the State's children. And the strategies for putting such a program together are more similar than dissimilar, regardless of the language spoken when a child enters the classroom door.

The clear need is for Californians -- whether they are parents, school employees or state bureaucrats -- to focus on educational outcomes. Once society's goals for its children are clear and a system of accountability is in place, methods best suited to varying local conditions will emerge. The Commission believes the end result will be a brighter future for all of California's children.