

The Nation.

IN THE FACE OF A BALLOT CHALLENGE, SUPPORT FOR BILINGUAL EDUCATION IS WAVERING.

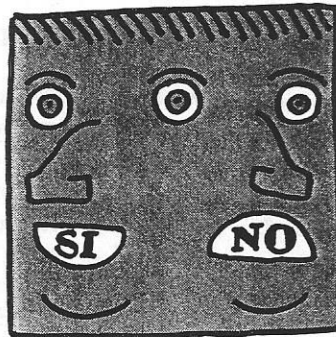
English Lesson in California

GREGORY RODRIGUEZ

Early this past February, thousands of bilingual teachers and advocates descended upon San Jose, California, to attend what may wind up being the very last annual conference of the California Association of Bilingual Educators. CABE, as the group is known, is facing the greatest threat to its controversial profession since the advent of bilingual education a quarter-century ago.

Two months from now, on June 2, the California electorate will be casting votes on "English for the Children," a popular ballot initiative that would effectively put an end to bilingual education in California's public schools. But while CABE and its members will actively fight the measure they refer to simply as the Unz initiative, after conservative software entrepreneur Ron Unz, who is sponsoring the campaign, they will not be on the front lines of the battle. Strategists for the "No on Unz" campaign have decided not only that bilingual teachers don't make the best spokespeople for the cause but that debating the efficacy of the teaching method is counterproductive. Indeed, until Election Day, the No on Unz campaign will seek to avoid mentioning bilingual education at all.

For a generation, while federal law has required schools to provide special language instruction to assist English learners in ob-



taining an equal education, it has never mandated the form that this assistance must take. Since the seventies, a mixture of blind faith and administrative arrogance has not only kept bilingual education afloat but made it unassailable. In their zeal to protect the program from any challenges, its ardent supporters have also consistently opposed any attempts to reform it. California's powerful teachers' unions—one of the Democratic Party's strongest constituencies—made the issue a mainstay of that state's liberal agenda.

Because activists had early on identified bilingual education as the primary Latino civil rights issue, the equivalent of what busing was to blacks, foes and doubters of the program were routinely branded as racists. Unfortunately, this defensive posture insured that bilingual lobbyists were more concerned with preserving the program than making sure it was benefiting the children it served.

For decades, bilingual education has been debated in cultural rather than pedagogical terms, its supporters citing the benefits of maintaining children's ethnic and linguistic heritage, its opponents insisting that immigrants should learn English and fretting that today's immigrants are not as eager to assimilate as their predecessors. Lost in this racialized hubbub was the only question that should have mattered: Is bilingual education helping or hurting limited-English speakers in U.S. public schools? Unfortunately, after a generation of politicized debate over the

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issue, there is still no definitive answer. There are plenty of studies showing that bilingual education works if implemented well. There are also studies proving that English immersion works when properly implemented. Last year, the National Research Council released a report calling most evaluations of bilingual-education programs worthless. The report claimed not only that politicization of the issue has hampered reliable research but also that scholarly efforts to prove the superiority of either English-only or bilingual education are pointless. Instead, the report's authors urged, studies should focus on identifying the teaching methods that work best in specific communities, according to local needs and available resources.

Despite its name, bilingual education has nothing to do with bilingualism. The vast majority of bilingual programs in California use "early-exit transitional bilingual education," in which students are expected to make a transition into "mainstream English" classes after three or four years of instruction in their primary language. Early-exit programs are designed to teach children how to read and write in their native language in the belief that they will be better able to learn a second language, in this case English.

In California, even bilingual-education supporters don't think the current system is working. While defending the integrity of primary-language instruction, CABE concedes that perhaps 10 percent or fewer of the state's bilingual programs are well implemented. A perennial shortage of bilingual teachers is one of the main reasons. California currently needs more than 20,000 additional bilingual teachers to serve the state's 1.4 million limited-English students adequately. Supporters blame the shortage on the lack of political and fiscal support for the program.

But even in Los Angeles, the second-largest school district in the country, which has fully supported bilingual education for years—both financially and politically—there is no evidence that the program is achieving its stated goals. Despite the controversy that has engulfed the program since its inception, the Los Angeles Unified School District administrators have never found it necessary to compile reliable longitudinal data to evaluate it. School board members and administrators have usually relied on rhetoric to defend the widely misunderstood program. Instead of referring to data to prove success, one district administrator took pleasure in warning that "if we got rid of bilingual education, we'd be creating a huge underclass."

The absence of persuasive evidence has left school districts open to equally insubstantial charges by the "English for the Children" campaign that bilingual education is an utter failure. But because the state and federal governments have spent hundreds of millions of dollars in public money implementing the controversial program over three decades, the burden of proof would seem to lie with its proponents.

The least subjective study to date on the efficacy of bilingual education was recently released by two young Mexican-American economists. Rather than compare test scores and measure the relative efficiency of opposing pedagogical methods, Mark Lopez of the University of Maryland and Marie Mora of New Mexico State

University decided to measure the effect bilingual education has on the earnings of Latinos. They found that first- and second-generation Latinos who attended a bilingual-education program earn significantly less than their otherwise similar peers who received monolingual English instruction.

In fighting against "English for the Children," advocates of bilingual education attack the measure as an untested, one-size-fits-all mandate that robs both local school districts and parents of their right to choose which teaching methods are appropriate for their children. It is of course ironic that liberal activists have chosen the traditionally conservative themes of arguing for greater local control and against big-government intervention.

This argument and others are marshaled against a critical political factor: Proponents of bilingual education have lost crucial portions of their core support groups. Today, as in the past, bilingual advocates can rely on both teachers' unions and Latino advocacy organizations to defend their cause. (Both the California Teachers Association and the Mexican

American Legal Defense and Educational Fund are actively opposing the initiative.) But whereas in past years leaders of such associations were commonly assumed to be representative of the people for whom they spoke, recent polls and surveys indicate otherwise. Unquestioning support for bilingual education has eroded among teachers. Last November, the rank and file of United Teachers Los Angeles voted on whether the union should endorse "English for the Children." Even though the mass of U.T.L.A.'s executive leadership urged a vote against the referendum, 47 percent of the members supported it.

When "English for the Children" surfaced last May, it looked like the logical political descendant of recent state campaigns against illegal immigration and affirmative action—the newest target for the state's disproportionately large Anglo electorate. Presumably, much of the white electorate, led by conservatives and anti-immigrant activists, would line up to support the initiative, while liberals and Latinos would reject it. But a different political dynamic has emerged. Neither the Latino political leadership nor the state Republican Party has spearheaded a campaign for or against the initiative.

Surprisingly to some, early surveys by the *Los Angeles Times* and the Field Poll showed that Latino registered voters supported the initiative by a wide margin. That evidence alone was enough to make members of California's state Latino Legislative Caucus rethink their strategy on bilingual education. Although not long ago the state's Latino leadership would have gone down fighting any proposal that sought to overhaul bilingual education, no one is now willing to dedicate large amounts of money or political capital to defeat an initiative that may prove popular among Latinos. Many longtime observers have predicted that the Latino vote will be split. Monica Lozano, associate publisher of the daily *La Opinion*, believes that Latinos will vote 60 percent to 40 percent in favor of the initiative. The most recent Field Poll, released in late March, showed that likely Latino voters supported it by a margin of 61 percent to 34 percent. According to a survey by the Center for the Study of Los

Does bilingual education help or hurt children? After a generation of politicized debate, there is still no definitive answer.

Angeles at Loyola Marymount University, L.A.'s Latino leadership does not consider defending bilingual education to be among the top five cutting-edge issues facing Latinos. Political scientist Fernando Guerra, who conducted the survey, says the issue has been steadily declining in importance on the Latino political agenda.

Meanwhile, the leadership of the state Republican Party has distanced itself from the initiative so as not to open the G.O.P. to more charges of immigrant- or Latino-bashing. State G.O.P. chairman Michael Schroeder has defied both a rank-and-file vote supporting the Unz initiative and his own distaste for bilingual education to publicly distance the party from the ballot measure. This is a notably cautious response from the man who was Robert Dornan's lawyer in the ill-fated battle to invalidate Representative Loretta Sanchez's 1996 victory over Dornan in Orange County's 46th Congressional District. Nor will Governor Pete Wilson utter a word on the initiative, in part out of personal dislike for Ron Unz, who impertinently ran against the incumbent Governor in the 1994 Republican primary on a pro-immigrant platform.

Indeed, the political no-man's land into which this initiative has descended is strangely reflective of its sponsor, the libertarian physicist-cum-software-designer millionaire, who does not include immigrant-bashing in his portfolio. While Wilson was riding the anti-immigrant wave of Proposition 187 to re-election, Unz was a featured speaker at a 70,000-strong pro-immigrant rally in October 1994.

But the wide appeal of the Unz initiative doesn't necessarily make it good policy. No matter what the issue, California's initiative process is usually the worst way to solve complex problems. By nature, voter initiatives are the legislative process least amenable to political compromise. As such, "English for the Children" could still become the instrument by which an overwhelmingly Anglo electorate asserts its displeasure with the state's Latino-bound demographic metamorphosis. If passed, "English for the Children" will require that most of California's limited-English students be taught in English. These students will have no more than one year of "sheltered English" instruction—teachers using simple, accessible language—before being moved into regular classrooms. No research supports the premise of a one-year sheltered English approach. The broad and sometimes imprecise wording of the initiative leaves many aspects of the state's language-learning policy unclear, even outright confusing. For instance, there is no plan to deal with children unprepared to make the transition to mainstream classes. While the ballot measure seems to make exceptions available to parents who want their children to remain in bilingual programs, it is unclear what criteria will enable them to receive a waiver.

Administrators at L.A. Unified, the largest school district in California and home to close to a quarter of the state's limited-English children, are predicting chaos if the ballot measure passes. In a preliminary review, district staff have painted a picture of a school district torn asunder, one with test scores dropping even lower than their current unacceptable lows. The lack of a peda-

gogical plan other than the one year of "sheltered English" makes it unclear how and what educators will teach newly transitioned students, let alone those whose bilingual programs collapse under them. It is also unclear what fiscal effects the Unz measure will have on the 682,000-student district.

Members of the state Latino Legislative Caucus have been trying to reform the program to take the urgency out of the Unz initiative. There is near-universal consensus that bilingual education desperately needs repairs. Once-intransigent bilingual supporters are willing to make significant changes in order to save the program. Echoes of "Mend it, don't end it" are in the air. Before officially voting to oppose the Unz initiative, a majority of the Los Angeles School Board publicly acknowledged the shortcomings of the district's bilingual-education programs.

Political scientist Guerra believes that the No on Unz campaign may still be able to garner a majority of Latino votes if it is able to reframe the ballot measure as anti-immigrant or anti-Latino. "Even if it's not true, if they paint the initiative

Proposition 227 is worded so broadly that even if passed, it will leave many aspects of California's language-learning policy unclear.

with a broad stroke as being brought to you by the same people who gave us Propositions 187 and 209, at least 60 percent of Latinos will vote against it," he says. But

playing the race card could just as easily backfire. Arturo Vargas, executive director of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, thinks a racialized campaign may have strategically negative unintended consequences. "The [Latino] leadership was using race in 1994 and 1996. That rhetoric may have driven up the yes vote," he says. "If you get up to say it's racist, you tend to lose credibility."

Going into the last leg of the campaign and still riding high in the polls, Unz may find his hubris to be the only force that can sink his campaign. Having said from the start that a victory for his ballot measure would be morally hollow without Latino support, he has been lax in creating a media campaign to appeal to voters. But some institutional heavy hitters are taking aim at what is officially termed Proposition 227: The White House is expected to come out against the measure, as is the Spanish-language television network Univision (whose C.E.O. was one of the biggest donors to Governor Wilson's re-election campaign). The No on Unz campaign, run by veteran Democratic political consultant Richie Ross, may both outspend and outstrategize Unz in the final weeks of the campaign. Ross is planning a sophisticated multimedia attack, and Unz says he may not have the money for production of television ads.

Pass or fail, the challenge to primary-language instruction can at least claim to have made bilingual advocates more open to compromise. "Our bilingual program is not the greatest in the world," said L.A. School Board member Barbara Boudreaux with striking candor. "This may be a wake-up call for us to do the right thing for all the children we serve." Board member David Tokofsky went a step further, calling on colleagues to order an immediate review of the district's instructional programs for non-native speakers and to undertake any necessary reforms. Vicky Castro, a school board member who supports bilingual education, acknowledged that her district's past inflexible approach

to the program had helped fuel a backlash against it. Indeed, Ron Unz claims that the catalyst for the measure was the protest that immigrant Latino parents staged two years ago at Ninth Street Elementary School near downtown L.A. after school administrators rebuffed requests for additional English-language instruction for their children. "English for the Children" has effectively

upgraded the urgency of the long-running controversy over bilingual education. The newfound openness to reform evident among supporters of bilingual instruction may have meant a great deal two years ago. Now, it may prove too little, too late. Their last-minute politicking may wind up being the meaningless prelude to a disaster of their own making. ■

Cause Without Rebels

Anti-bilingual ed initiative of Ron Unz draws neither praise nor fire

BY GREGORY RODRIGUEZ

When "English for the Children" first surfaced, this proposed ballot initiative against bilingual education looked like the logical political descendant of California's recent campaigns against undocumented immigrants and affirmative action. Bilingual education would be the latest target for the state's disproportionately large and cranky Anglo electorate. Presumably, much of the white electorate, led by conservatives and anti-immigrant activists, would line up to support the initiative, while liberals and Latinos would amass forces on the other side.

But so far, an entirely different political dynamic has emerged, according to political consultants and senior officials from both major parties. Neither the Latino political leadership nor that of the state Republican Party wants anything to do with this initiative. Many Republicans are reluctant to be identified with an issue that could expose them to further charges of being immigrant bashers or anti-Latino. The Latino political establishment, on the other hand, is reluctant to defend bilingual education, a program whose success many privately question. Nor do some want to con-

demn openly an initiative sponsored by Ron Unz, one of the rare Republicans who have stood strong with immigrants in the past.

The proposed initiative, which proponents hope to place on the June 1998 primary ballot, would require limited-English-speaking students to be taught in English unless their parents request otherwise. English learners would then have no more

than one year of "sheltered English" instruction — where teachers use simple, accessible language — before being moved into a regular classroom. The ballot proposition also calls for adding \$50 million a year for 10 years to pay for more adult English-literacy classes.

Plainly, this initiative has a born constituency among the conservative supporters of propositions 187 and 209. As for Latinos, initial public-opinion polls are not necessarily adverse. A *Los Angeles Times* poll of Latinos in Orange County indicated that a majority of immigrant parents support English immersion. Behind the scenes, initiative sponsor Unz is engineering a statewide poll that he hopes will yield similar results.

Yet despite the initiative's broad potential voter base, the state GOP is so far keeping its distance. Although Republicans

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made a tremendous run on the back of Proposition 187, they tripped on the short coattails of Proposition 209, and some leaders question the political benefit of what could become the third racially divisive initiative in as many election years. The party is still reeling from the punishment delivered by Latino voters in last November's general elections.

State Republican Party chairman Michael Schroeder, for one, has publicly distanced the party from the initiative. "The Democrats will certainly run out there and say this is just another example of [Repub-

lican] Hispanic bashing," Schroeder said in a June interview with the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. "It's not true. It's not a party-sponsored initiative." Speaking with the *Weekly*, Schroeder was more circumspect. He said he has "instructed Hispanic groups within the GOP to study the matter and come back with a recommendation."

This is a notably cautious response from a politico not known to shrink from two-fisted partisan politics: Schroeder is Bob Dornan's personal lawyer in his battle to invalidate the narrow electoral victory of Loretta Sanchez in a working- and middle-class Orange County congressional district.

His lukewarm disposition toward the Unz initiative may derive in part from the

funds Unz would mandate for immigrants' English-literacy classes. These funds could support exactly the sort of pro-immigrant, community-based organizations that Dornan and Schroeder are charging with electoral fraud in Orange County. Along the same lines, anti-immigrant activists would be hard-pressed to back any initiative that increases state spending on immigrants, a point underscored by the blistering e-mails Unz has received that label him a "traitor" and worse.

For their part, Latino politicians are unwilling to dedicate money and political capital to a campaign against a measure that may prove popular with their constituents, including immigrant parents. In fact, de-

fending bilingual education is not even among the top five cutting-edge issues facing Latinos, according to a recent survey of the city's Latino leadership by the Center for the Study of Los Angeles at Loyola Marymount University. Political scientist Fernando Guerra, who conducted the as-yet-unreleased survey, said the issue has been declining in importance on the Latino political agenda.

And unquestioning support for bilingual education also has eroded in other areas of traditional support. A referendum that would have undermined the policy of bonus pay for teachers with bilingual training received surprisingly strong support in June among the membership of United Teachers-Los Angeles (UTLA). Even though the mass of UTLA's executive leadership urged a vote against the referendum, some 43 percent supported it anyway. The measure would have directed the union "to use all personnel and resources necessary to eliminate all state-mandated bilingual requirements for teacher credentials, teacher certificates and for teacher in-service training."

In the Legislature, state Senator Richard Polanco, the chair of the state Latino Legislative Caucus, reportedly has no plans to mount an organized challenge to the initiative. Another key player, state Assembly Majority Leader Antonio Villaraigosa (D-Los Angeles), by contrast, has said he would strongly oppose the initiative, calling it a vehicle to bring out Republican voters. "I think the Unz initiative is the third installment in the Republican trilogy of polarizing initiatives," said Villaraigosa in a recent interview. "We will fight it."

But other than such rhetoric, there are no signs that he or any other elected official will marshal opposing forces. Thus far,

the California Association of Bilingual Educators has reportedly tried without success to get the Latino political leadership to put its weight behind an opposition campaign.

The political no man's land into which this initiative has descended is strangely reflective of its sponsor, iconoclast Ron Unz, the physicist-cum-software-designer millionaire who impertinently challenged Governor Pete Wilson in the 1994 Republican primary.

Unz, who describes himself as both a Ronald Reagan Republican and a libertarian conservative, does not include immigrant bashing in his portfolio. To the contrary, he recently compared the Federation of Americans for Immigration Reform (FAIR), the nation's most prominent conservative immigration-reform group, to the 1920s Ku Klux Klan. And while Wilson was riding the anti-immigrant wave of Proposition 187 to an electoral landslide, Unz had the audacity to appear as a featured speaker at a 70,000-person-strong pro-immigrant rally in October 1994. Unz repeatedly predicted that 187, if enacted, would be the worst moral disaster in California since the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Unz also claims to have persuaded prominent national Republicans William Bennett and Jack Kemp to publicly oppose 187.

One year later, he derisively referred to Democratic California Senator Dianne Feinstein as "Big Sister" after she proposed a national identity card.

Such pro-immigrant bona fides have so far inoculated Unz from any serious charge of Latino bashing by liberals since the initiative was officially announced in May. Unz opted for a voter initiative, he said in an in-

terview, because he has neither the patience nor the time to pursue the "slow" route. In recent sessions, proposed reform of bilingual education has gridlocked at the hands of competing special interests.

In pushing his initiative, Unz seems more interested in getting Latino Democratic support for his measure than in courting his own party. Unz has chosen a Latina bilingual teacher to be his co-chair on the initiative, and only last week received an endorsement from a prominent Bay Area Latino Democratic politico. "It's important to keep this as a stand-alone issue," said Unz. "I want this to be a bipartisan initiative." Ultimately, some activists may hold their peace because their organizations

could receive portions of the \$50 million allotment for adult language instruction.

In the meantime, Bok Pon, the Chinese-born vice chairman of the state GOP in Northern California, is among those lobbying party leader Schroeder to let Republican delegates decide whether to support the initiative at their next convention in September. "A majority of delegates will support the measure," Pon predicted in an interview. If the initiative fails to qualify for the ballot prior to this gathering, the issue may be tabled until the party's next convention in February.

The flaccid reaction to date on both sides of the aisle doesn't ensure that the ballot measure won't become divisive. By na-

ture, voter initiatives are the electoral process least amenable to political compromise. "English for the Children" could still become the instrument by which an overwhelmingly Anglo electorate asserts its displeasure with the state's Latino-bound demographic metamorphosis.

Republican strategist Allan Hoffenblum foresees politicization from the other side. "I'm sure there are plenty of left-wing Latinos who would love to turn this into a racial issue," he said. Indeed, it wouldn't take much for wary Latino voters — no matter how they feel about bilingual education — to feel browbeaten if the initiative's campaign takes on even the slightest racial tinge. **L**