

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Teach English

MONDAY'S DATA from the Census Bureau should sharpen the debate on bilingual education. The bureau reported that immigrants make up 11 percent of the U.S. population, the biggest share since the 1930s. This influx is a source of economic and cultural energy but also a potential source of social strain; the net effect depends on how successfully the immigrants blend into the mainstream and share in the nation's upward mobility. But the bureau also reported that nearly one in five Americans do not speak English at home. Among Spanish speakers, only half the adults described themselves as speaking English well. Ensuring that the children of these families are equipped with fluent English should be a national priority.

Unfortunately, the bilingual education offered in most parts of the country does not promote English fluency. The Census Bureau reports that only two-thirds of school-age children in Spanish-speaking homes describe themselves as speaking English very well. This is a shamefully low number: Children pick up languages with relative ease, and the school system ought to be able to deliver near universal fluency. But bilingual programs often involve teaching mainly in Spanish, with rather desultory efforts to teach English as a second language on the side. Though empirical studies deliver a mixed verdict on this question, it seems likely that students would learn more English if they were immersed in it.

A ballot initiative in California did away with bilingual education in 1998, and Arizona followed two years later. The early evidence

from California is encouraging. In last year's standardized tests, second-graders classified as having limited English greatly improved their scores in both reading and math. This success has encouraged the proponents of immersion to organize further initiative campaigns in Colorado and Massachusetts. Oregon and Nevada are two other possible targets.

These promising state experiments should be coupled with support from the federal government. The most plausible argument for bilingual education is not that the method has worked but that it has failed for lack of resources. Poor schools, they say, fall short in almost everything they do; if they embrace immersion teaching, they may fail at that also. Fortunately, the education bill in the Senate authorizes a quadrupling of spending on children with limited English. The House bill, meanwhile, usefully pushes states to set a three-year target for moving students out of special programs into mainstream classes. Until now students have been allowed to spend years in bilingual programs, turning them into a trap rather than a steppingstone.

Given the president's interest in education and in policy toward Mexican immigrants, the administration ought to take a strong stance on this issue. Mr. Bush should lobby the House-Senate conference committee to retain the Senate's extra money and the House's time limits. He should follow up with some cheerleading for the cause of English teaching. Immersion classes may not be a silver-bullet solution. But the status quo is not acceptable.

The Washington Post

MONDAY, AUGUST 20, 2001 A15

William Raspberry

Speaking Two Languages, Both English

Can it be that one of the reasons why inner-city children tend to do poorly in school is bilingual education?

No, not bilingual as in English and Spanish. I mean bilingual as in standard English and the nonstandard English that poor children often bring to school.

The first sort we recognize as a deliberately chosen approach to teaching. Youngsters whose home language is Spanish are, under the bilingual-ed theory, first taught in Spanish for beginning reading, arithmetic, early social studies and so on. Then, as they master content, they are gradually switched to English. The idea, at least in part, is to honor and build on what the children already know.

I suspect something like that is going on in many inner-city schools, where teachers, fearing to make children ashamed of themselves and their families, accept the language they bring to school and try to use it as a base for their teaching. I doubt that this second sort of bilingual ed involves much pedagogical theorizing. It probably has more to do with the feeling that these youngsters have it tough enough already without the added indignity of forcing them to "talk white."

But whether conscious theory or sympathetic practice, bilingual ed may not be the best approach to helping children who don't speak standard English to become successful in school.

My doubts on this score were confirmed a year ago in a newspaper article written by Ken Noonan, superin-

tendent of schools in Oceanside, Calif., but more relevantly, a former bilingual teacher who was a spirited campaigner against California's Proposition 227 forbidding bilingual ed in the state.

When the proposition passed, Noonan at first resisted implementing it, but finally—reluctantly—gave in. Then:

"At the end of the first year, I was amazed by the results. State tests showed dramatic academic gains for Spanish-speaking students in reading and writing—especially in the early grades, where we had reduced class size to 20 or fewer students and implemented phonics reading instruction. . . . Without 227, we would have been teaching these students in Spanish; they would certainly have performed poorly on the state tests, which are administered in English. And we never would have seen how quickly and how early they could learn to read English."

Something similar could happen for urban and rural poor children—if we could see the similarity to bilingual education in the present approach. The difficulty is that the language these children speak is sufficiently close to the standard English of the educated classes that we think of it not in terms of a different language but as a marker for class or race. We don't see the urgency of switching these kids to (standard) English because we think they already speak English.

But the English they speak is usually not the English of

their texts—or of their tests. We tell ourselves that because they speak the language well enough to be understood, it's better to get them used to expressing their thoughts—in whatever dialect—than to shame them into silence. Or we say we'll teach them proper English later, after they've gained confidence in their ability to learn. And we let them go on using their "home" language in a sort of unintended bilingual ed.

Wouldn't it be fascinating to see what would happen if an inner-city school decreed an end to bilingual education, instituting instead a requirement that only standard English would be used in the classroom?

Would the children clam up, or would they take to the "new" language with the alacrity of California's Hispanic kids? And if it started in first grade and remained consistent, would they internalize the language we associate with smart people?

And isn't the likelihood that the results would show up, not only on the standardized tests that everybody seems to be pushing these days but also in the children's confidence of expression, in their ability to glean meaning from the printed page and in their ability to impress others with their intelligence?

A voluntary Prop 227 won't fix everything. Smaller class sizes, phonics and other reforms played a part in California. But ending bilingual ed helped, too. Won't some inner-city principal be bold enough to try it?