

# The New York Times

FRIDAY, MARCH 2, 2001

A23 OP-ED

By Ron Unz

PALO ALTO, Calif.

In 1974, the New York City Board of Education signed a federal consent decree with *Aspira*, a Hispanic education and advocacy group, requiring that students who speak limited English be taught almost exclusively in their native languages.

Today, this decree requiring bilingual education still governs the schooling of some 170,000 students in the five boroughs. Most students who fail a test of English competence are placed automatically in bilingual classes, in which they learn subjects like math and social studies in their native languages. They can be switched out only at a parent's insistence. Some students linger in these classes for six years or more.

Although the seven members of New York City's Board of Education unanimously adopted this week a basket of purported reforms, they declined to challenge that underlying court order, leaving them merely to tinker at the edges of a disastrously failed policy.

The board suggested that immigrant students should no longer automatically be placed in bilingual programs, but as advocates for these programs have already made clear, this policy certainly seems to run headlong into the court order, which requires exactly that.

The new board policy requires students to remain in bilingual programs for no longer than three years under normal circumstances. New York state law already has this time limitation, but waivers allow many districts

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*Ron Unz, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, is chairman of English for the Children, which led the campaigns to dismantle bilingual education in California and Arizona.*

to ignore this restriction. The meaninglessness of Tuesday's vote is indicated by its unanimity. Real change on such a contentious issue would hardly be won by a 7 to 0 vote. In effect, the board decided to declare victory and go home, which hardly addresses the roots of the problem.

What are those roots? Our national

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## How New York City avoided true reform.

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system of "bilingual education" in New York and elsewhere has been based on the notion that immigrant students benefit from being taught for years — sometimes many years — in their native language, while they gradually learn English. Although such programs might have some plausible benefits if aimed at older, teenage immigrants, most of the country's more than 3 million limited-English proficient students are American born, and many of the remainder arrive as infants.

Thus, the vast majority enter public schools at the age of five or six, when children can most quickly and easily learn another language; instead they are placed in native-language programs, receiving perhaps an hour of English each day. Since most of these students in question are Hispanic, the most accurate translation of "bilingual education" is Spanish-almost-only instruction.

Does teaching Hispanic students in Spanish help them learn English? In 1998 this seemingly endless debate over the efficacy of the program received a dramatic test. California voters overwhelmingly approved Propo-

sition 227, generally replacing bilingual education with English immersion classes. Although bilingual advocates had predicted academic disaster, mean percentile scores in standardized tests for California's 1 million Spanish-speaking students rose. For example, among second graders, the average reading score of a student classified as limited in English rose to the 28th percentile from the 19th percentile in national rankings. In math, the average score for these students increased to the 41st percentile from the 27th.

Furthermore, districts like Oceanside that diligently adhered to the new law showed the sharpest gains. In the second grade, for instance, the average reading score of students in Oceanside initially classified as limited in English jumped to the 32nd percentile from the 13th, according to preliminary state figures.

New York is waiting for the same kind of reform. But hundreds of local bilingual education teachers and activists remain vehement foes of change. Faced with pressure from bilingual activists to do nothing and pressure from the media to do something, the conflicted leaders of New York schools have decided to do nothing but call it something. Two generations of failed bilingual instruction in New York City schools should be more than enough. □

# The New York Times

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 1995

## New York's Bilingual 'Prison'

Instruction in English alone may not be the perfect method of helping immigrant students into the mainstream. But neither is a system that dragoons children into bilingual programs that reinforce the students' dependency on their native language and then makes escape impossible.

The Board of Education made this point last year in a scalding report on bilingual education in New York. Its broad conclusion was that new immigrants instructed in English alone performed better than students in bilingual education programs, where comparatively little English is spoken. In a lawsuit based mainly on the board's report, a Brooklyn parents group charged this week that tens of thousands of immigrant children were being warehoused in bilingual classes well beyond the three years specified in state law, and taught neither English nor anything else very well.

Over the last decade and half, New York City has developed several programs to teach every subject in a range of foreign languages. The most common form of bilingual education involves one English lesson a day, with every other subject taught in the student's native language. The program presumes that foreign-born students will fall behind if taught in English alone.

Enrollment in programs for students who have been labeled "limited English proficient" — and therefore eligible for Federal funds — has nearly doubled in eight years, from 85,000 students in 1986-87 to 154,000 in 1993-94. A bustling bilingual bureau-

cracy is now hard at work, often drafting children into the programs whether or not they need them. Indeed, many of the students assigned to bilingual studies are born in this country and speak English better than any other language.

Moreover, once enrolled in a bilingual program, the student is soon trapped in what lawyers for the Bushwick Parents Organization call a "prison." The students speak so little English each day that they learn the language too slowly to test out of the program within the mandated three years.

According to the Board of Education study, 90 percent of the students who enter bilingual education between sixth and ninth grade fail to move on to regular classes within the required three years. Among students who enter between first and third grade, the failure rate is 75 percent.

The Bushwick parents also complain that children are often kept in bilingual classes despite protests from parents, who want their children mainstreamed. They also fault the State Department of Education for routinely issuing waivers that permit children to remain in the classes beyond the three year limit. The department claims that the waiver process is in keeping with the law and that the suit "has no merit."

That is too glib an answer for a program that, according to the Board of Education's own evaluation, is failing. Whatever the merits of bilingual education, the present approach may be harming more students than it helps.

## A failure in any language

**T**wenty-five years after the Board of Education promised a federal judge it would provide non-English-speaking students with "programs in which they can effectively participate and learn," the bilingual education program has evolved into a dead end on the road to the American Dream.

More than half the 177,000 students identified as Limited English Proficient can't read and write English after three years in special classes. Many also are failing math and science, which bilingual-education students take in their native languages. Yet instead of scrapping this failed program, school officials automatically place immigrant students in bilingual ed classes and keep most there far beyond the three-year state limit.

Forced on the Board of Ed by a consent decree obtained in 1974 by the Hispanic advocacy group Aspira, bilingual ed is one of two competing teaching methods. The other is English as a Second Lan-

guage, in which courses are taught only in English.

You don't have to be a linguist to figure out what most studies show: Students learn English faster when they are taught only in English. But the misnamed bilingual program is kept alive by a vocal ethnic-exploitation clique.

As City University Chairman Herman Badillo put it: "Politicians know they will get big applause if they stand before a Latino audience and say that bilingual education is the only way to preserve Spanish language and culture. What they don't say is that children are at a tremendous disadvantage because they are not learning English."

Governed by a tangle of consent decrees, court orders, state law and Board of Ed rules, the program has grown into a \$46 million-a-year monolith supporting 4,219 teachers and administrators. Large numbers of the teachers are uncertified — though, amazingly, the board can't say exactly how many. The program is run by individual school districts and principals with only the slightest supervision from 110 Livingston St.

Last year, city Controller Alan Hevesi complained that no one bothers to monitor the progress of non-English-speaking kids and that the Board of Education has never determined which of the two teaching methods is superior. Last month, the board finally released a report:

- 89% of non-English speakers who entered in ninth grade could not pass a standard English test three years later. Of those who entered sixth grade in 1992, 55% failed English and did not graduate last year.

- Nearly one in four elementary school pupils couldn't test out of language-support programs eight years after they entered.

- Students in English as a Second Language classes fared significantly better. Among kindergarten students, 84% in ESL were mainstreamed within three years, compared with 73% in bilingual ed.

These disturbing findings should come as no surprise. Bilingual education treats English as an afterthought.

The Aspira consent decree mandates that the Board of Ed teach all "substantive courses" — math, science, social studies — in Spanish; that it "reinforce and develop the child's use of Spanish" and that it "introduce Spanish to those [Spanish surnamed] children entering the school system." A 1977 court settlement expanded the mandate to all language groups — currently a total of 140.

**R**egulations governing the program are byzantine. The state mandates bilingual classes in schools where 20 or more students in the same grade speak the same language. Inexplicably, the Board of Ed has expanded the requirement to schools where 15 students speak the same language in two back-to-back grades — i.e., only 7½ students per grade.

The state Education Department makes this bad situation worse by failing to enforce its requirement that students be mainstreamed within three years. It routinely grants waivers to about 65,000 students, dooming them to a dead-end education.

After watching children fail year after year, parents finally are beginning to clamor for change. Typical is Elizabeth Pena, whose 8-year-old daughter is repeating second grade in the bilingual program. "The teacher informed me that my daughter was getting 15 minutes of English a day," she said last week in a meeting with Mayor Giuliani and Schools Chancellor Harold Levy. "I was sending her to school to lose one language and never gain the other."

Frustrated, Pena said she has taken a second job so she could send her daughter to private school. "I don't want to see her confused anymore," she said.

*Tomorrow: Ending bilingual education.*

**BEYOND  
BILINGUAL**

## New hope for new arrivals

In cities across the country, voters and enlightened parents have finally realized that bilingual education spells failure in any language. One by one, they are doing away with it. But in New York, with the nation's largest school system, the movement remains deeply entrenched, a monument to ethnic politics gone awry. If immigrants in the most diverse city in the world are ever to get their fair share of the American pie, that must change.

Fortunately, the federal mandate that created this educational monolith contains an escape hatch. The city has only to find the will to open it. Despite test scores and studies that prove bilingual education

to be the worst of any method to lift non-English speakers into the mainstream, the Board of Education continues to waste \$46 million a year to keep it. And the state Education Department grants waivers each year to tens of thousands of students who fail to reach English proficiency within the required three years.

It does not have to be so.

Two years ago, California voters approved Proposition 227, replacing bilingual ed with an English-immersion curriculum. Naysayers predicted catastrophe. Instead, the state's 1.4 million immigrant students are not only learning English faster, but they have improved in other subjects. Twenty-eight percent of California second-graders are reading at grade level now, compared with 19% last year; their math proficiency has jumped from 27% to 41%.

"I thought the change would hurt kids, but the exact opposite has occurred," said Ken Noonan, founder of the California Association of Bilingual Educators. "The kids began soaking up English like sponges and are not abandoning their native languages."

In Arizona, voters are expected to ban bilingual education when they go to the polls Nov. 7. And in Colorado and Massachusetts, forces are gathering to launch similar initiatives.

But in New York, bilingual education prevails. Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer has mixed feelings. But this much is clear, he said: "Bilingual education has become a bullet in the cultural wars." From City Hall to the Albany statehouse, pols have yet to find the moxie to stand up to the ethnicity-first crowd.

A key member of said crowd is Hector Gesualdo, head of Aspira of New York, the Hispanic advocacy group that forced this disaster on the city a quarter-century ago. "Bilingual education is as important to Latinos today as it was 25 years ago," he said, adding that his group would fight any attempt to change it.

But, thankfully, support among immigrant families is waning. A recent poll by the Hispanic Federation, an umbrella organization of not-for-profit groups, revealed that only 47% of the city's Latinos favor bilingual education. That's down from 53% last year. And recently, the Industrial Areas Foundation, a citywide network of churches, homeowner associations and neighborhood groups, met with Mayor Giuliani and Schools Chancellor Harold Levy, encouraging them to scale back bilingual ed.

Randy Mastro, chairman of a mayoral task force on the issue, says he will release a report this month calling for just that. He wants the Board of Education to introduce English-immersion classes, in which students receive no instruction in their native languages. But, sadly, the task force is not expected to call for doing away with bilingual education.

Concerned about how little English bilingual ed students learn, the state Board of Regents this year doubled the amount of time they spend in English classes. But, for most, that translates to only two hours a day. And, instead of rescuing failing students, state educators extend kids' time in the program beyond the three-year limit whenever they score below the 40th percentile on a language assessment test. Officials say the rules give them no choice.

And don't hold your breath for a solution from the state Legislature. "There are some real problems with how bilingual education is applied," Assemblyman Steve Sanders (D-Manhattan) conceded. "But I am not pretending to tell you exactly what the fix is." When you consider that Sanders is chairman of the Education Committee, that's pretty disheartening.

But there is hope. And, ironically, it is contained in the federal consent decree that mandated bilingual education. Article 14 says the court retains jurisdiction over the ruling "for all purposes, including the entry of additional orders as may be necessary or proper." Which means that if the city can show "a significant change in circumstances," it can appeal for relief. The Giuliani administration must do so. Pronto. The Board of Ed's own analysis, released just last week, confirms what has been known for years: Immigrant youngsters fare worse in bilingual ed.

That ought to be "significant" enough for any fair-minded judge.

**BEYOND  
BILINGUAL**

## Education hero takes on state's bilingual dragon

**W**HAT would you call a school system where it's illegal to teach immigrant children English?

Insane comes to mind. Idiotic. Abusive. Doomed.

Well, guess what? That system exists right here, in New York City.

With the recent focus on education reform — or rather, the appalling lack of it — a disturbing fact of New York's educational landscape often gets overlooked:

In 1974, the city's Board of Education signed a federal consent decree requiring that public-school students who are not proficient in English must be taught in the language they speak at home.

**Bilingual education.** The outmoded concept has proven an abject failure. It has sentenced generations of public-school kids — including some born in this country — to second-class status, unable to read, write or reason effectively in English.

For 27 years, no one has had the guts to take on this madness.

**Until now.** With the battle for school privatization a loss, the next great educational fight is already brewing. The man responsible for snuffing out bilingual ed in California is taking his show on the road and heading east.

The goal is to force city schools to immerse non-English speaking kids in the English language, the only teaching method that works.

Ron Unz is not an educator. He is a 39-year-old entrepreneur from California's Silicon Valley who's made

millions developing software. He also is the child of immigrants.

Three years ago, he took on California's bilingual-education establishment, leading the fight for a ballot initiative, Proposition 227, that no one thought would see daylight.



**ANDREA PEYSER**

Although badly outspent and outshouted by the teachers and administrators who profit from bilingual ed, Prop 227 captured the popular vote in a landslide.

Bilingual ed is now history in California. And guess what?

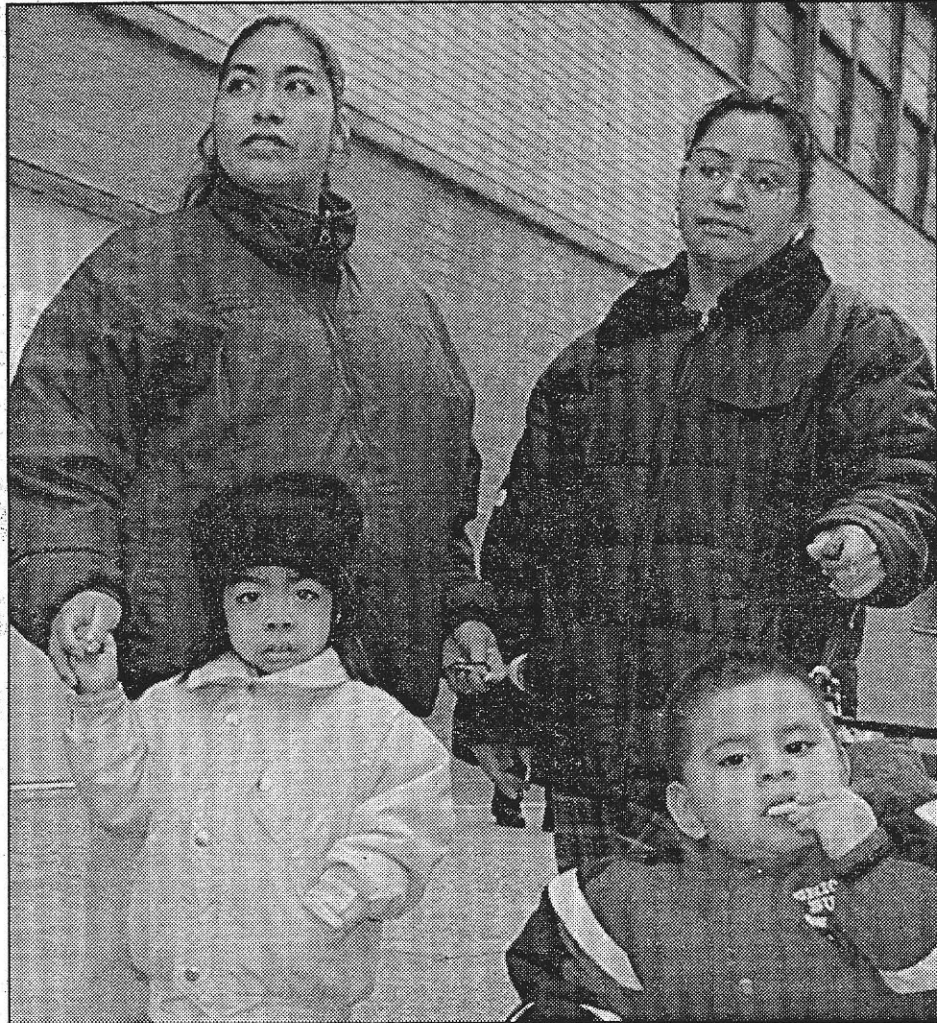
"Those students are improving in reading and other subjects at often striking rates, according to standardized-test scores," the incredulous New York Times reported in August.

"New York is much worse," Unz told me yesterday. "New York has one of the most extreme programs in the country."

"A literal reading of the consent decree says it is actually illegal to teach Hispanic children English in school.

"You have a situation in New York where children have to learn English after school or on weekends," he said. "Bizarre!"

Unz is assembling lawyers to mount a legal fight against the consent decree. He also wants help from angry parents.



**NO INGLES:** Rosalia Salazar (right), with Olivia Moran outside PS 161 last week, complains her 8-year-old is taught no English at the Harlem school. N.Y. Post: Luiz C. Ribeiro

Unz got inspiration from my column last week about Rosalia Salazar. The Mexican-born mother of four complained bitterly that her 8-year-old daughter, although born in the United States, had learned no English at her Harlem school.

Mrs. Salazar hoped the private firm Edison would take over PS 161 and give her little girl a chance. Her hopes were dashed when parents sent Edison packing.

What hope do mothers like Mrs. Salazar have now?

Unz's mother, who came from Europe, spoke no English as a child. Around age 5, she was immersed in the language in public school,

and quickly became fluent.

"That really was the case for millions, possibly tens of millions of immigrants," Unz said. "In New York 100 years ago, a huge fraction of Italian and Jewish and Greek immigrants didn't speak English at home. They went to school and did fine."

Unz lived in Queens for a short time in the late 1980s. So some might wonder why a West Coast kind of guy has such a keen interest in New York's schools.

He may have political aspirations. Unz mounted a failed bid for the Republican nomination for California governor in 1994. He did this, he said, mainly because

he disagreed with Gov. Pete Wilson's anti-immigrant policies.

Whatever his motives, his fight against California's bilingual-ed program — followed by another such battle in Arizona — has been a rousing success. New York may be ready for change, since polls indicate that bilingual ed is unpopular with parents right here.

But "since [Schools Chancellor] Harold Levy and the political establishment are unwilling to take on the consent decree, nothing can change," he said.

We should support this noble effort. Or condemn another generation of public school kids to failure.

# The New York Times

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2000 B1

## The Metro Section

JOHN TIERNEY

The Big City

### The Secret To Becoming Bilingual

**P**UBLIC school officials and politicians today will debate bilingual education in a hearing at City Hall, but their arguments will not carry much weight at St. Rose of Lima School in Washington Heights. The students and teachers there already have a program that works.

These students, proponents of bilingual education say, are just the sort who need special instruction in their native language. Most don't speak English when they enter St. Rose of Lima, a Roman Catholic grammar school on West 164th Street. Ninety-seven percent are Latinos, predominantly from the Dominican Republic, and most speak Spanish at home.

Yet they speak English quite well all day at St. Rose of Lima, not only in the classroom but also on the playground. During lunchtime the other day, the boys and girls scoffed at the idea that they needed years of bilingual education. That philosophy had sent many of them fleeing from the public schools.

Elva Alvarez, a seventh grader, recalled arriving from the Dominican Republic in third grade and being put in a bilingual program at a nearby public school. "They taught reading in English, but the rest of the classes were all in Spanish," she said. "My parents were really worried because I wasn't learning English." After two years in the public school, her parents moved her to St. Rose of Lima.

What was her English like at that point, after two years of bilingual education in the public schools? Some of her classmates on the playground responded in chorus: "Baaaaad." Elva agreed.

"At first, I couldn't understand what the teacher was saying. I was, like, really confused. By the end of the year, my English was a million times better than at the start, but it still wasn't perfect. But then the next year it got a lot better. Now I feel I know more words in English than Spanish."

But she still must use Spanish when she runs into some former public school classmates. They are still in the bilingual program, and the odds are that they will stay there, because after fifth grade most students in bilingual programs do not escape.

Meanwhile, success stories like Elva's are routine in Catholic schools, which still use the traditional immersion method. Joyce Oberthal, a teacher at St. Rose of Lima for 14 years, begins each school year with a kindergarten class composed mainly of children who cannot speak English.

"At the start of the year," she said, "I'll repeat words a lot and use a little Spanish. I'll say a chair is a silla. But they learn quickly. We haven't been in school quite six weeks, but already the kids can carry on a limited conversation and follow fairly complicated directions."

By the end of a typical year, Miss Oberthal said, virtually all the kindergartners are able to converse. "There might be one or two who are struggling to speak

But it's not difficult to tell in the public schools. Most kindergartners who start in a bilingual program are still there in second grade. After four years of bilingual education, a third still aren't ready for mainstream classes. After nine years, 17 percent are still stuck.

Bilingual educators have long argued that an abrupt transition to English hinders students from mastering basic skills, but there's scant evidence of that in the test scores at St. Rose of Lima. Of the school's fourth graders who took the state's reading and writing test in January, 59 percent passed. In the surrounding public school district, only 36 percent passed; citywide, only 42 percent passed. (And those figures don't even include all the bilingual students, because the weakest ones are excused from taking the test.)

**S**OME of the disparity could be due to the kind of homes the students come from: sending a child to a private school requires money and motivation. But St. Rose of Lima is hardly an enclave of affluence. Ninety-three percent of its students fall below the income guidelines of the school-lunch program, a poverty rate that's nearly double the average for city public schools.

Yet they can read and write better than most public school students, including many who grew up speaking English. Bilingual educators may think immigrants need special help — or, perhaps more accurately, the educators may want to preserve a jobs program for themselves. But the St. Rose of Lima students have figured out the secret to becoming bilingual: stay away from bilingual education.

### At a Manhattan school, immersion proves effective.

English, but even they can understand a lot. They just haven't made the leap to speaking it yet. They do that the next year. By the end of first grade it's very difficult to tell who came in speaking Spanish and who didn't."

# The New York Times

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2000

B1

JOHN TIERNEY

The Big City

## Learning The Value Of Immersion

**B**ILINGUAL educators may be in trouble in California, where evidence is mounting that their programs don't work, but in New York they're standing tall. A new report from the Board of Education hails the effectiveness of bilingual programs at helping immigrants to learn English.

Before delving into the report's statistics, I should disclose a personal bias. I was once enrolled in a bilingual program of sorts. My parents moved to Chile when I was 7, and I entered second grade knowing not a word of Spanish. The school had a British principal and a handful of foreign students, but the teachers and most of the students were Chileans who did not speak English.

The bilingual program consisted of assigning me a seat next to a British girl who spoke Spanish. She provided some help, but she quickly made it clear that she had better things to do than serve as personal translator for the new kid. When it came to my language instruction, she was a believer in what today's educators call the immersion method.

It was not an easy year. I had no idea what the teacher was saying for the first couple of months. I couldn't speak Spanish, and I was ashamed to speak English after I heard other kids doing imitations of me on the playground. They made a conversation between me and another American sound like two pigs grunting.

I got low grades in my classes (except for English) and even flunked an eye test because I was too embarrassed to admit I didn't know how to say Z and H in Spanish. My linguistic mistakes were a steady source of amusement on the playground. One day, after a couple of boys taught me what I thought was a new way to say hello, I was chased all the way home by an enormous fourth grader who took violent issue with my assessment of his mother.

But by the end of the year I knew enough Spanish to transfer to a school that was entirely Chilean, and by the end of that next year, I was fluent and getting good grades. The problems of the first year all seemed trivial: What could be more important than learning the local language as quickly as possible?

Learning a language in less two years didn't seem unusual at the time, since all the other foreigners I knew in Chile were doing it, too. Only in retrospect, thanks to the report issued last month by the Board of Education, do I realize what astonishing prodigies we all were.

Consider what happened in the New York City public schools to immigrants who, like me, started off in second grade unable to speak English. The board's report tracked a group that entered second-

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In mastering a new language, maximum exposure can help.

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grade in 1991 and were assigned to the bilingual program, which was supposed to teach them English while also easing the transition by letting them take classes in their native language.

After the first year, 90 percent of the students still did not know English well enough to transfer to a mainstream class. After the second year, 79 percent remained in the bilingual program. After three years, 58 percent remained. After four years, 38 percent of them still didn't know enough English to transfer to mainstream classes. And after *eight* years, 21 percent of them were still stuck. They had gone from second grade all the way to high school without becoming proficient in English. Bilingual education had kept them monolingual.

**T**HOSE statistics were stunning to me, but not as stunning as the interpretation the Board of Education offered. Bilingual education programs, the report concludes, "have demonstrated substantial effectiveness in developing the English language proficiency" of immigrants.

Substantial effectiveness? By those standards, my progress was nothing short of miraculous, as was the progress of the immigrants in the early 1900's who were not exposed to bilingual education. Why should today's second graders in New York today have so much more trouble?

You could try arguing that some of those children from Asia and Russia face bigger obstacles than I did, because English is closer to Spanish than to Korean or Chinese or Russian. But the board's own statistics show that Chinese, Korean and Russian students learn English faster than Latino students do.

You could also argue that many of today's immigrant students are especially disadvantaged because of poverty and their parents' lack of education. It's a popular excuse among bilingual educators, but before you take it seriously, you might consider what happens when those students get the same chance I did.

More on that next week.

# The New York Times

MONDAY, AUGUST 16, 1999

B1

**JOHN TIERNEY**

The Big City

## Polyglot City Raises a Cry For English

**A**FTER leading the revolt against bilingual education in California, Ron Unz would like to see one in New York City. Mr. Unz, a software millionaire who successfully promoted the Proposition 227 initiative last year, believes that New Yorkers are even more determined than Californians to see their children educated in English.

"The poll numbers in New York are stronger than just about any other place I've looked," said Mr. Unz, the chairman of a group called English for the Children. "We're seriously exploring the possibility of putting a measure like Proposition 227 on the ballot in New York City." He is considering sponsoring a petition drive for a referendum on amending the City Charter.

Mr. Unz tested the local sentiment for a version of Proposition 227 by commissioning a poll asking if all public school classes should be taught in English, with non-English-speaking students placed in an intensive one-year English immersion program (instead of the native-language classes now offered in bilingual education programs). Of the 1,411 residents of New York State polled by Zogby International, 79 percent said yes. Among New York City residents, 75 percent said yes.

The poll results may seem strange if you are under the popular impression that New York's many immigrants are clamoring for bilingual education. In fact, immigrants generally want English. In a national poll by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research organization in New York, 75 percent of foreign-born parents said the schools' first priority should be to teach English quickly.

Bilingual programs, begun as a well-intentioned experiment in the 1960's, proliferated thanks to Federal money and orders from bureaucrats and judges. With bilingual teachers and theorists comfortably entrenched, the programs persisted even as parents and researchers concluded that they didn't work. Instead of students gradually learning English and switching to mainstream classes — the ostensible goal of bilingual education — they remained

## A California crusader against bilingual education comes east.

year after year in native-language classes.

Hispanic parents at a school in Los Angeles got so frustrated in 1996 that they started a boycott, demanding that their children learn English. The protest led to Proposition 227, which leading politicians, most major newspapers and the educational establishment fiercely opposed.

The Superintendent of California's public schools, Delaine Eastin, said it would cause chaos in the classroom. Bilingual teachers predicted trauma for their students.

Mr. Unz's group was vastly outspent by the opposition, whose advertising campaign was financed by teachers' unions and by A. Jerrold Perenchio, the chairman of Univision, the Spanish-language television network that stood to lose viewers if students began learning English. But in the end, the initiative was approved by 61 percent of the voters.

**T**HE change took effect last year, and newspapers that had editorialized against Proposition 227 were soon running front-page headlines like "English-Only Teaching Is a Surprise Hit." Teachers around the state marveled at how quickly students were picking up English. Statewide tests yielded no evidence of trauma or chaos: the students in the English immersion classes had made just as much progress in all subjects as the students in regular classes.

Buoyed by the California results, Mr. Unz's group is supporting reforms elsewhere. "A ballot initiative is probably the only way to get rid of bilingual education in New York," Mr. Unz said. "It's enormously unpopular with the public, but the City Council and the State Legislature pay more attention to the special interests that benefit from the program."

Mr. Unz, who lived in Jackson Heights during the early years of his software business, was not surprised at the borough-by-borough breakdown of his poll. Bilingual education was opposed by 73 percent of the respondents in Brooklyn, 75 percent in Queens, 84 percent in the Bronx, and 85 percent in Staten Island. The least opposition, 68 percent, was in Manhattan.

"A lot of liberal intellectuals in Manhattan probably support bilingual education for ideological reasons," Mr. Unz said. "It sounds like a politically correct way to help immigrants, and they don't have enough contact with immigrants to know the truth. Manhattan intellectuals can afford to support bilingual education because they're not personally affected by it. If it were their own kids, they'd be fighting to get them into English classes."



# The New York Times

B1

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2000

## Immersion Promoted as Alternative to Bilingual Instruction

By LYNETTE HOLLOWAY

A draft report by a mayoral task force recommends that public school students who do not speak English be given the option of a speedier immersion in it, a proposal that would most likely curtail many of the city's long-running bilingual programs.

The task force is racing to build support for its recommendations even as the chairman of a Board of Education subcommittee is corraling board support for his more modest recommendations to improve the troubled bilingual program without dismantling it.

The Mayor's Task Force on Bilingual Education, headed by Randy M. Mastro, a

lawyer and former deputy mayor in the Giuliani administration, recommends that students who do not speak English be given the option of taking all their subject classes in English, a process known as English immersion, according to the draft report obtained by The New York Times.

Right now, students have two options. They can choose bilingual education, in which they learn academic subjects in their native languages and study English in separate classes. Or they can choose not to take bilingual education and be placed in English as a second language classes while taking their subject classes in English. English as a second language courses are taught in

### *A task force report casts a cloud over bilingual education programs.*

English, although native languages are used to help students move into the mainstream.

One model of English immersion, used in Oceanside, Calif., requires teachers to instruct non-English speaking students in English exclusively. If students do not understand a word or phrase after a teacher

repeats it three times, teachers are allowed to translate it into the child's native language and then resume teaching in English.

Two years ago, Californians voted to end bilingual education and make Spanish-speaking students spend the day taking classes in English. Initial test scores have been encouraging for supporters of immersion, and now the efficacy of bilingual education appears to be called into question across the nation. On Election Day, Arizona residents will vote on a ballot initiative seeking to outlaw bilingual education.

In New York City, the mayor's task force,

*Continued on Page B6*

## Immersion English Program Is Seen as Option

*Continued From Page B1*

according to the draft report, would also call for giving students a maximum of three years to achieve English proficiency. In the current program, students have been known to remain in bilingual classes for eight years or more.

Other areas of recommendations by the task force include plans for recruiting more certified teachers and increasing the amount of time English-language learners receive in instruction, according to the draft.

The task force is scheduled to hold a hearing today at City Hall. Members are seeking public comment before drawing up recommendations for submission to the Board of Education by the end of the month, Mr. Mastro said.

Some advocates for bilingual education are lining up to support the recommendations of the board subcommittee chairman, Irving S. Hamer Jr., who wants to preserve a

longstanding system that encourages immigrants and other non-English-speaking students to take their classes in both English and their native languages.

Dr. Hamer said yesterday that he had hoped to put his recommendations up for a vote before his six board colleagues tomorrow, but William C. Thompson Jr., the board president, said late yesterday that a vote would be premature and that the proposal was unlikely to appear on the agenda. Dr. Hamer released the recommendations to board members over the weekend.

The seven-member Board of Education will ultimately decide on the shape of bilingual education. The mayor controls two votes on the board, but he has been known to use his considerable influence to sway other members.

Both proposals are being circulated almost a month after the Board of Education released a study of bilingual education and English as a second language. The study evaluated

the performance of 16,000 students over nine years and found mixed results for both programs. The report found, among other things, that students in middle school and those in special education sometimes remained in bilingual and English as a second language programs for eight or nine years.

Support for the bilingual method, particularly by Hispanic groups like Aspira, became so insistent that New York State adopted a law in the 1970's giving non-English-speaking students the option of taking bilingual programs instead of English as a second language. The task force recommends taking a hard look at the law to see if any changes are needed. Any changes, however, would require a vote by the Board of Education and an amendment to the statute. Some advocates of bilingual education were pleased with Dr. Hamer's recommendations because they do not seek to dismantle the law.

"I fully endorse the recommendations that Dr. Hamer has put forth to

the board," said Luis O. Reyes, an assistant professor of education at Brooklyn College and a former Board of Education member. Dr. Reyes also served as a director of the Office of Research and Advocacy for Aspira of New York.

Dr. Hamer recommends changes that few bilingual supporters can quibble over, including a policy to stop switching non-English-speaking students between bilingual and English as a second language classes, because doing so hurts their academic performance.

# The Metro Section

## Answers to an English Question

### Instead of Ending Program, New York May Offer a Choice

By JACQUES STEINBERG

Now that California has repudiated bilingual education in a statewide referendum, and Arizona is expected to do the same in November, New York, with its large immigrant population, would seem to be another domino likely to tumble.

Not so fast.

A City Hall hearing last week — as well as the tentative recommendations of a mayoral task force, and the preliminary findings of a Board of Education subcommittee — made clear that bilingual education, at least in some form, is here to stay for the foreseeable future.

Where California voters chose, by a wide margin, to require children who spoke little or no English to be immersed in a yearlong crash course in English, and Arizonans are expected to endorse a similar requirement at the polls on Nov. 7, advisers to Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani trod a much more careful path last week.

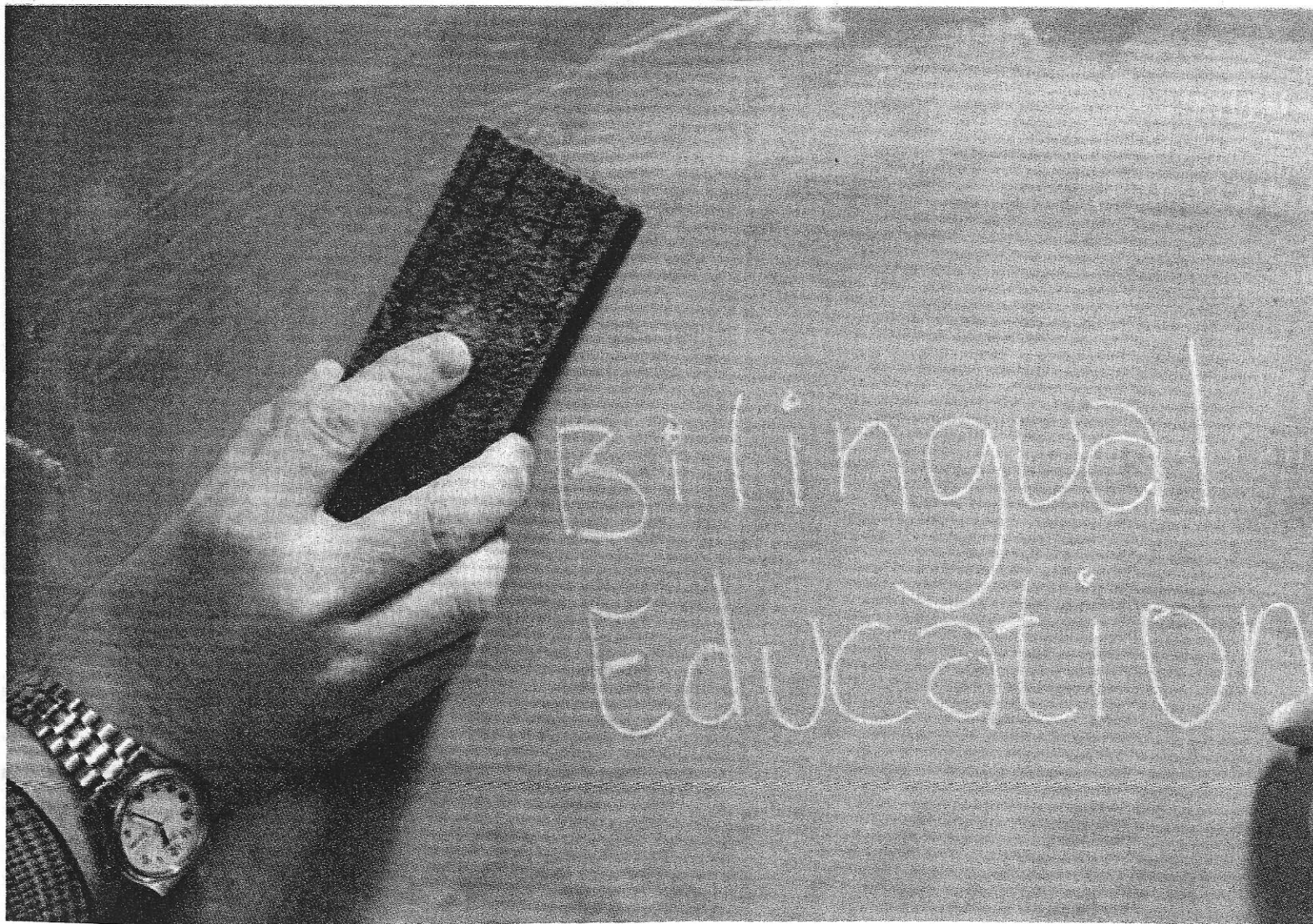
They suggested that an immersion course be offered only as an option to New York City parents, with the current bilingual program left largely in place. While the mayor advocated limiting a student's maximum stay in the program to two years, he expressed no desire to tear down the

entire system in the process.

It is not that critics of New York City's entrenched bilingual educational program — a virtual system within a system that educates nearly one in six public school students — are lacking ammunition.

Though such programs were intended to be transitional, nearly half of all students who are enrolled in bilingual education or the more intensive English-as-a-second-language classes fail to master English well enough to leave the program after three years, according to a study released last month by the City Board of

*Continued on Page 40*



# New York May Offer a Choice on Bilingual Education

Continued From Page 37

Education. And many of those same students fail to do so after as many as eight years, including more than half of those who enter such programs as sixth graders.

Those findings mirror the statistics in an earlier study commissioned in 1994 by Ramon C. Cortines, who was then schools chancellor. That study suggested that many students in bilingual programs were learning neither English nor their native language well.

How could such a flawed system be so impervious to criticism, let alone change? In part, the answer lies in the fierce desire of some parents, particularly those who speak Spanish, to have their children retain their native language.

But the bilingual program also endures, critics say, because it is insulated by an especially thick political and legal cushion, which protects its administration and the jobs of thousands of teachers and teachers' aides.

"It was a jobs operation," Mr. Cortines, who resigned in 1995, said in an interview last week. He added, "I think it is protected by a highly organized, politicized group of people that see anything that threatens bilingual education as threatening their position in K-to-12 education, higher education or some of the special interest groups."

"In an insidious way," he said, "they're holding kids — and parents who are not well educated — as political pawns."

Mr. Cortines, who was hounded into resigning by Mr. Giuliani over disagreements on a range of issues, said he agreed with the mayor's prescription for bilingual education. "You can give him my report with a ribbon tied around it," he said.

The seeds of the New York City bilingual program were sown in 1974. In response to a lawsuit, the Board of Education signed a federal consent decree with Aspira, a Hispanic education and advocacy group, that requires that students who speak limited English be taught at least partly in their native languages.

Since then, board officials say, Aspira, with the support of politicians who represent Hispanic neighborhoods, has sometimes taken a hard line on changing the program. Until 1995, for example, the group insisted that students automatically be tested for bilingual programs if they had Hispanic surnames, regardless of whether they were born in the United States. At times, fourth-generation Americans with no foreign language spoken at home were inadvertently assigned to the program.

Aspira officials have said they

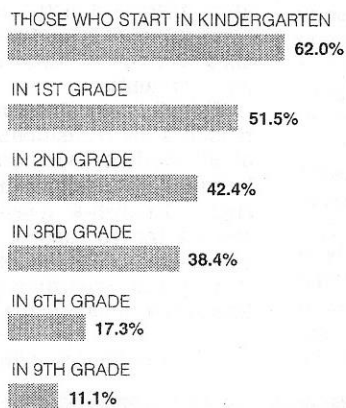
## KEEPING TRACK

### Learning English as a Newcomer

Statistics on student performance in New York City add to the debate over the best methods for teaching English to young children.

#### Students who start young pick it up faster . . .

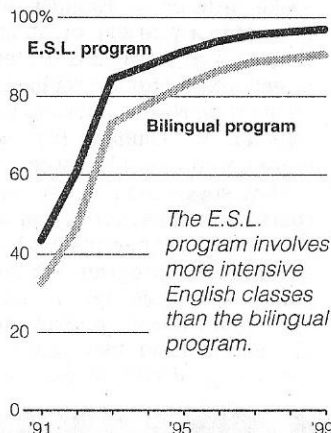
Percentage who achieve the fluency to leave bilingual or English-as-a-second-language programs in three years:



Source: New York City Board of Education

#### . . . and programs with more intensive English dominate

Cumulative percentage who achieve fluency after starting in kindergarten in 1990:



The E.S.L. program involves more intensive English classes than the bilingual program.

The New York Times

feared that, without the testing, some students who needed services might fall through the cracks or be ignored. But Mr. Cortines, among others, was skeptical.

Popular opinion would seem to be running against bilingual education.

At the behest of Ron Unz, a Silicon Valley millionaire who bankrolled the effort to defeat bilingual education in California in 1998, Zogby International, the polling organization, asked 1,411 likely New York State voters that same year whether they would support legislation that would require "all public school instruction to be conducted in English" and require "students not fluent in English to be placed in an intensive one-year English immersion program."

Seventy-nine percent of those questioned said they would support such legislation, including 62 percent of those who identified themselves as Latino. The overall poll had a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points.

Why would a politician, armed with such numbers, be reluctant to challenge the bilingual establishment?

For one thing, anyone who raises questions about bilingual education runs the risk of being labeled anti-immigrant or racially insensitive.

"Politicians tend to be risk-averse, and this looks a little risky," said Lee M. Miringoff, the

director of the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion in Poughkeepsie. "There isn't a huge constituency clamoring to change it, even if public opinion may be on that side generally."

Parents who might seek to make an end run around the bilingual or political establishment to eliminate bilingual education, much as the parents in California and Arizona did, would find that the weapons available to Californians and Arizonans do not exist here.

Unlike the referendum process in California, Arizona and 24 other states, New York's does not allow citizens groups to place measures on the state ballot. (The State Legislature can.) And while it would take only 30,000 signatures to place a measure on the New York City ballot, it would not necessarily be binding on the Board of Education, which is chartered by the state.

Then again, there is no organized group of parents or others actively seeking to eliminate bilingual education in New York City. Mr. Unz, the California entrepreneur who is looking to establish a foothold in New York, had pinned his hopes on the Metro Industrial Areas Foundation, a coalition of church and neighborhood groups that has been among the most outspoken critics of bilingual education.

But at the City Hall hearing on

Tuesday, parents and leaders of the foundation made clear that they did not seek the radical surgery advocated by Mr. Unz.

Though the parents told emotional stories about children who failed to learn English in bilingual classes and principals who assigned children to bilingual classes regardless of the parents' wishes, the parents said that they wanted to work within the system to change it.

They spoke of limiting a child's stay in the bilingual program to three years and of ensuring that principals advised them of the choices for their children: a bilingual class, in which major subjects like biology and social studies are taught extensively in the native language, or an English-as-a-second-language class, in which at least three periods are devoted to English language instruction and major subjects like mathematics are often taught using props, with no specific language affiliation.

Munira Daoud, 35, who arrived from Sudan with her husband and 6-year-old daughter last year, said it took 14 months to persuade a Queens principal that the girl, who had been educated in a British school, had been placed in the bilingual program in error.

"I'm not against bilingual education," she said. "But let the parent decide."

Though even supporters of the citywide bilingual program say it is in need of serious repair and needs better-qualified teachers, the program is not without its success stories.

Board statistics show that those students who do manage to successfully complete bilingual or English-as-a-second-language programs do better on the English Regents exam, for example, than all other students. Students who pass bilingual programs also have a higher graduation rate (77.4 percent) than all other students who receive a mainstream education (66.1 percent), though critics say that those who exit bilingual programs fastest are high-achieving to begin with.

Among those who attended the hearing last week was Victor Levy, 15, a sophomore at Gregorio Luperón Preparatory High School in Washington Heights. Victor spoke of how much he was enjoying the intensive, two-year bilingual program at the school, in which instruction in Spanish gradually gives way to English, though not entirely.

He spoke flawless English even though he had arrived from the Dominican Republic only five months ago, speaking no English at all.

For those searching for an argument to retain bilingual education, Victor said, "Look at me."



## **Kids Learn Better When They're Taught in English**

Editorial, Thursday, October 24, 2000

In all the hullabaloo over bilingual education, the only really important thing to keep in mind is which system helps students master English the fastest. In other words, what works.

On that score, the New York City Board of Education's figures speak for themselves: The more English a student hears, the better. So an instructional program of total immersion in English is likely to be the best.

The board is considering offering total immersion as an option. It should not only be offered, but students should be encouraged to choose it.

Overall, the present situation is discouraging: Only 49.6 percent of English learners in New York's public schools graduate into mainstream programs within the three years recommended by the state. That's a sorry state, especially since the majority of foreign-language speakers start school here as kindergartners, when their nimble young minds are uniquely primed to absorb a new language.

Children who are placed in programs that teach the course work in English do consistently better than those who elect "bilingual" programs, in which courses are taught in the native language, with English language instruction provided on the side. The reason is obvious: Children who spend much more of their day surrounded by and immersed in English while they are at school are going to become proficient in the language that much sooner.

It's as intuitive as the notion that the best way to learn French is to spend a year in Paris.

California's experience has been instructive. Just two years after immersion programs were introduced by popular ballot there, standardized test scores of immigrants in all grades spiked upward in both math and reading, turning around a lot of skeptics.

Parents who still want to choose the city system's other language programs for their children will be able to do so, since the option must be offered by law.

But all English proficiency programs should be viewed as a means to an end, not a way of life. Within a few years, students should be as comfortable saying "see you later" as they are saying "adios," or "au revoir."

# DAILY NEWS

Thursday, December 21, 2000

44 NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

## End, don't mend, this double-talk

Schools Chancellor Harold Levy's ambitious plan for revamping bilingual education — which calls for recruiting thousands more specialized teachers and extending the school day — is being touted as the biggest reform to the program since it was foisted on school children by a federal consent decree 25 years ago. Problem is, bilingual ed does not need reform. It needs elimination.

The chancellor's recommendations, which would add \$75 million to the school budget, come despite Board of Education data showing that bilingual education is the worst way to teach kids with limited

English proficiency. Retaining it, not to mention expanding it, would be throwing good money — lots of it — after bad.

The just-released report by the Mayoral Task Force on Bilingual Education, of which Levy is a member, contains page after page of Board of Ed stats documenting the program's failure:

More than half the students enrolled do not transfer to regular

classes within the state-mandated three years. Of those who start in kindergarten, 73% make the cutoff. Only 58% of second-graders and 43% of third-graders are mainstreamed on time. Many languish seven years in the program.

By contrast, students taught by the Board of Ed's alternative method, English as a Second Language, fare much better: 84% of kindergartners, 75% of second-graders and 70% of third-graders make the state deadline. That's not surprising. Unlike kids in bilingual classes, who are taught almost exclusively in their native languages, these youngsters learn exclusively in English.

Eliminating bilingual ed requires action from the federal courts and from Albany. But pols seem to think the program is sacred to their ethnic constituents, especially Hispanics. Recent studies show otherwise. A Zogby International poll completed last month found that 74% of New Yorkers surveyed favored an all-English curriculum for students who are not fluent in English. The figure was even higher — 84% — in Queens, the city's most ethnically diverse borough.

Additionally, a 1998 study by the nonpartisan group Policy Agenda showed that, nationwide, 66% of Hispanic parents and 75% of all foreign-born parents want their children to learn English "as quickly as possible, even if this means they fall behind in other subjects."

All this should make immigrant parents wonder why the mayor's task force did not call for scrapping bilingual ed completely. And why the chancellor wants to boost by 44% the price tag for teaching their children, instead of redirecting bilingual ed's \$46 million budget to something that actually works. Like English as a Second Language or the one true reform Levy recommends be offered to parents as an option — intensive English, i.e., immersion.

The most important recommendation in the 30-page task force report is buried in a single sentence: "An intensive review of both the Aspira Consent Decree [which mandates bilingual ed] and New York State law should be completed to determine what changes in the binding legal structures surrounding bilingual education programs in New York City should be undertaken."

That — and not regurgitating well-known data — is how the mayoral panel should have spent the past two years. Precious time has been lost, but it's not too late. Breaking bilingual education's legal stranglehold should be the Board of Ed's prime goal — not expanding a program that cheats immigrant kids of their American dream.

**BEYOND  
BILINGUAL**

# NEW YORK POST

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2000 2

## Bilingual-ed study: Even teachers don't know enough English

By CARL CAMPANILE  
Education Reporter

Thousands of bilingual education students don't learn English because many of their teachers aren't qualified to teach it, a report released yesterday by Mayor Giuliani found.

"Too many teachers of bilingual education are not themselves bilingual — they lack sufficient proficiency in English," said the report by the mayor's task force on bilingual ed.

"That's a euphemism for 'They don't know English,'" Mayor Giuliani said.

The task force — whose

members included Schools Chancellor Harold Levy, who endorsed the report's recommendations — said beefing up recruitment of bilingual-ed teachers is a top priority.

Giuliani said bilingual teachers should be paid on a scale based on how quickly their students learn English. The teachers union, currently without a contract, opposes merit pay.

"We'll see," Levy said when asked if he was willing to pay hard-to-recruit bilingual teachers higher salaries to woo them to city schools.

Giuliani and Levy agreed yesterday on other major proposals to overhaul the Board of Education's much criticized bilingual education programs, including:

- Creation of a new "accelerated" and "intensive" English language instruction program to get students to learn English within a year.

- Giving parents the power to decide whether their children should be enrolled in traditional bilingual classes — where they are mostly taught in their native language — or English immersion programs.

- Abolish mass waivers that permit students to remain in bilingual programs for more than the state-required three years, and change the testing criteria that steers students into bilingual courses, but makes it harder for them to get out.

Bilingual advocacy groups such as Aspira and the Puerto Rican Legal Defense

were skeptical of the mayor's report, and said they will have to study whether any of the proposals violates a court order governing bilingual education.

But Aspira released a statement agreeing that steps should be taken to ensure that "only fully bilingual certified teachers" are teaching in bilingual-ed classes.

A full 27 percent of bilingual-ed teachers are uncertified to teach, the task force found. That means they couldn't pass state teaching license exams, or had yet to take them.

Giuliani said immigration is "the source of our city's strength." But he emphasized that learning English as soon as possible

was vital to assimilation and success.

Levy — who endorsed the report — will propose that the Board of Education adopt some of the recommendations, and will offer others at a board meeting today.

"We want children to learn English. On that, there's no disagreement," the chancellor said. "I am confident the board will see fit to make appropriate changes."

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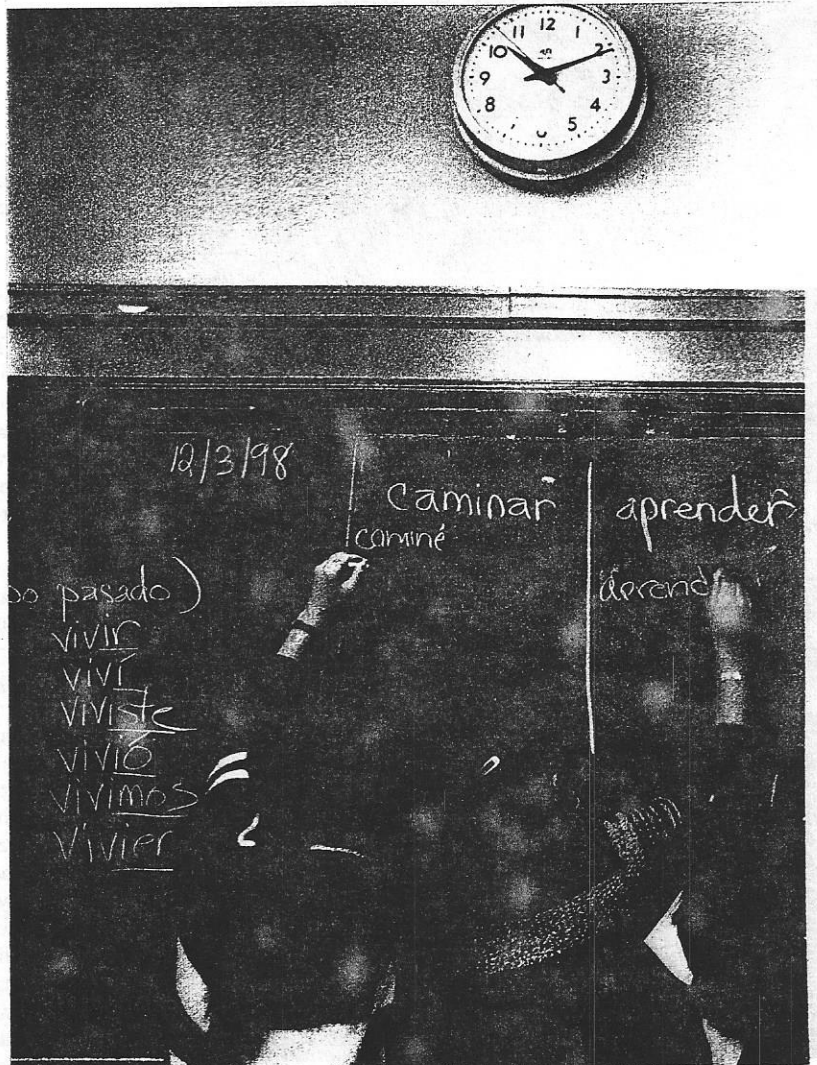
■ Levy poised to privatize five schools / Page 18  
■ Levy's lament / Editorial: Page 46

# The Bilingual Barrier

Why is it that bilingual-education programs work least for the Hispanics who put the most stock in them? A junior high in Brooklyn may hold the answers.

**Intermediate School 223**, a junior high school in the Borough Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, is a square brick building with a paved yard in back where kids chase one another around after lunch. Everything about it looks worn and scuffed and old-fashioned, right down to the ancient desks and fold-down seats mounted on cast-iron frames. The Montauk school, as it is rather incongruously known, is one of the venerable institutions in New York's public-school system. It opened its doors in 1925, and in streamed the children of the newly arrived Irish, Italian and Eastern European immigrants. History has repeated itself, and the students who now swarm through the door are Mexican, Russian, Chinese, Pakistani, Yemeni, Bengali, Polish, Dominican — the children of the second wave of immigration.

The first-wave immigrants, by and large, eagerly embraced their New World identity, in a process of assimilation that seems brutal in our own multicultural age. The children who attended the Montauk school in those days learned English by sitting in class until they got it. Many of them probably never did get it — high-school graduation was a rare achievement in the early years of this century — but the schools were often more concerned with assimilating children than with educating them.



By James Traub

Left to his own devices, Montauk's principal, a silver-haired veteran educator named James Hayden, would be teaching children pretty much this same way today. The school is a stubbornly old-fashioned institution that greets visitors with a big sign that reads, "A Traditional School, and Proud of It." But Hayden is not left to his own devices. I.S. 223, like schools everywhere, is obliged to offer bilingual instruction to its non-native speakers. What makes the Montauk school unusual is that it offers bilingual classes not only in Spanish but also in Russian and Chinese.

"I've got so many new Bengali-speaking kids coming in that they could make me offer Bengali bilingual," Hayden said last summer. "I'm just hoping they won't notice." By "they," he meant school officials at the city's central board of education. Hayden has a low opinion of bilingual classes in general and doesn't think his Bengali students would benefit from bilingual instruction in particular. (To his relief, school officials apparently didn't notice, and besides, there was no guarantee he could find a Bengali instructor.)

Bilingual education is one of those human interventions on behalf of the disadvantaged that date from the 1960's. The question is whether, like some of those other interventions — say, special education — it is

Photographs by Sylwia Kapucinski



In Mr. Garcia's seventh-and-eighth-grade bilingual class, Spanish is the language of the instruction, textbooks and homework. English is reserved for key words.

doing more harm than good for its intended beneficiaries. Certainly the tide of public opinion appears to be turning against it. Last year, voters in California passed Proposition 227, forbidding mandatory bilingual instruction. Hispanic parents in both New York and California have filed lawsuits to get their children released from bilingual programs where, parents allege, they are often being held against their will.

Nothing so significant is happening at I.S. 223. But what is intriguing about the school is that it provides a kind of laboratory of comparative cultural and linguistic adjustment. Although in theory the program should be the same for all students, the Russian, Chinese and Spanish bilingual classes at I.S. 223 vary widely. That shouldn't come as a shock. Assimilation is, after all, an interaction between an institution and its values and immigrants and their values. Most of the Chinese kids, and even more of the Russian kids, seem to be progressing well toward the mainstream curriculum. Bilingual instruction seems to be hurting only the Hispanic kids — the one group it was initially designed to help.

BILINGUAL-EDUCATION ADVOCATES ARE PERFECTLY CANDID ABOUT its origins. "It was not a pedagogical response to a previously document-

ed problem," writes a scholar and a former bilingual teacher, Ursula Casanova, "but rather the result of political strategies designed to funnel Federal poverty funds to the Southwest." Chicano leaders, looking for some means to address the dire problems of immigrant children in the schools, pressed Senator Ralph Yarborough of Texas to introduce the Bilingual Education Act, which passed in 1968. Bilingual programs began to proliferate over the ensuing decade as a result of court decisions and new state laws. Various experiments led to the practice that is now known as transitional bilingual education, in which a student moves from native-language instruction to English instruction over the course of three or so years. Only afterward did a body of theory emerge to explain academically a practice whose roots were really in ethnic and identity politics.

The idea of bilingual education is that students can learn a subject in their native tongue, and then "transfer" their skills to English once they have gained English proficiency. Some bilingual theorists, like the linguist Jim Cummins, argue that children should not switch to English until they have attained academic mastery in their native tongue, which takes at least five to six years — a staggering idea given the speed with which young children attain verbal fluency. If this is true, of course, transitional bilingual education can't work — which is Cummins's own position. More orthodox advocates also draw a sharp distinction between conversational fluency and formal language skills, although most insist that children are ready for the transition after a shorter period.

It stands to reason that children could learn math or science more easily in their own language, but it's harder to see how they could learn English faster that way. After innumerable studies, the empirical support for transitional bilingual education is scanty. A major study commissioned by the United States Office of Education in 1974 found that the Bilingual Education Act "does not appear to be having a consistent significant impact in meeting its goals as set forth in the legislation." Kenji Hakuta, a strong advocate of bilingual instruction, writes: "An awkward tension blankets the lack of empirical demonstration of the success of bilingual education programs. Someone promised bacon, but it's not there." A recent review of 72 studies by two critical scholars, Christine Rossell and Keith Baker, found "no consistent research support for transitional bilingual education as a superior instructional practice for improving the English-language achievement" of children with limited English proficiency. They also found no evidence that bilingual programs boosted achievement in other subject areas.

The guidelines in New York stipulate that any student whose native language is not English and who scores under 40 on a language-assessment test has a right to special language instruction. If there are 15 or more such speakers of any one language in a grade, or two adjacent grades, they must be provided an entire bilingual program. Students in bilingual classes study all their subjects — and often English, too — in their native tongue. They also get one period a day of instruction in "English as a second language," or E.S.L. If there are fewer than 15 children who speak a language other than English, or if the language they speak is so uncommon that an instructor can't be found, the students take only one period of E.S.L. — a rule that, were bilingual instruction truly indispensable, would be condemning tens of thousands of Arabic and Czech and Urdu speakers to academic failure.

Another rule, however, is that teachers can do pretty much whatever they want once they close the door, and the differences between the various bilingual programs inside I.S. 223 are startling. The sixth-grade Russian class seems to spring directly from Alfred Kazin's or Irving Howe's memoirs of Jewish immigrant life. The students are earnest and eager. When their teacher, Nonna Yelan, asked one morning who wanted to read from the day's story about a billy goat, the kids shouted, "Ooh,



ooh, me, me!" Yelan spoke to them only in English; they responded only in English. They read textbooks only in English. Almost all of them had a sufficient stock of English words to read with a fair show of fluency.

One girl, Daria, had arrived from Russia all of three weeks before. The other kids were slumped over their desks, but Daria sat with her back perfectly straight, her arms crossed; she was wearing polished saddle shoes. She watched and did whatever the other kids did. And even Daria, in her reedy, little-girl voice, plowed her way through a paragraph.

I sat in on three of Yelan's classes, and they were all conducted in English. Most of the kids had come here in fourth or fifth grade; the only English they knew when they arrived was "hello" or "get lost." Yet they had mastered conversational English their first year and were making real progress in reading. How? By violating the tenets of bilingual education. They had not used their Russian proficiency to gain English proficiency. They hadn't "transferred" their skills. They had simply spoken English from the moment they arrived in school. The fact that they had arrived in this country without English was much less important than the fact that they came from educated, middle-class backgrounds and had been taught early study habits that made them good at school. One boy, Yuri, said that five of his six uncles were doctors. The mother of another boy, Ilya, had been a pediatrician back in Tashkent. When I spoke to her, she said, "When Ilya came to school, I help him because he didn't know English for homework, and I study English with him." She hadn't needed bilingual instruction any more than Ilya had.

It was a matter of not only preparation but also attitude. "The parents only want them to learn English," Yelan said. A recent poll by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research organization, found that 75 percent of recent immigrants oppose bilingual instruction. Very few immigrants care about multiculturalism or bilingualism; they want their children to learn English as fast as possible in order to make it into the American mainstream, where good jobs are available — and they take the common-sense position that the best way to learn English is by, well, learning English. The beneficiaries are much less attached to bilingual instruction than its advocates, the professionals and academics who already have the luxury of being firmly ensconced in the middle class.

Christine Rossell, an expert on bilingual instruction who has recently been studying the New York City school system, says that Russian as well as Chinese classes are typically conducted in English, no matter what the rules say. At I.S. 223, however, the Chinese instructor, Wang Ip, conducted the class almost entirely in Mandarin or Cantonese. Ip is an old-fashioned figure who taps on the kids' desks with a metal ruler and countenances no back talk. The kids answer in short sentences, often in unison. It is, in short, a very Chinese classroom, just as Yelan's is a very Russian one.

At the same time, Ip did not practice bilingual orthodoxy. "They want me to use Chinese books for every subject," he said. "But I use English books. This is the math book I use" — he pulled out an English-language text. "If I use Chinese books, they can never learn." Fluency was not an issue with Ip, but academic mastery was. He used English terms for math and social studies, and then, when it came time to take the mandatory subject tests in Chinese, gave the students translations. "All the students want to take the test in the English version," he said. Several of his kids, in fact, were taking advanced math in English instead of regular math in Chinese.

The Chinese students were not working their way from conversational fluency to proficiency in academic English (or transferring their mastery from Chinese to English, as Cummins would have it); they were taking a shortcut directly to academic English. Their spoken

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*James Traub is a contributing writer for the magazine. His most recent article, about Jerry Speyer's real-estate empire, appeared in December.*

English was far below the level of the Russian children, but they knew that the royal road to success lay through reading and textbooks, and so they studied in English. Chinese parents often came to Aaron Oberstein, a six-foot-five Orthodox Jewish version of Mr. Chips who coordinates the school's second-language program, to ask to have their children moved into mainstream classes. During parents' night, I sat with Oberstein as he met with Lilly, an eighth grader in the Chinese bilingual program, and her cousin Ying. Lilly's mother was worried that her grade-point average had fallen, from 90 to 78; she was a cashier in a Chinese restaurant and couldn't get away from her job, so she sent Ying, a college freshman, to talk to Oberstein. Ying wanted to get Lilly out of bilingual. Ying had been placed in bilingual his first year in America, when he was a high-school sophomore, and had got himself transferred out.

"You don't learn very much in bilingual," Ying said. "And if you don't speak with the American people, you don't know how they speak or write. You learn to write in a very formal way, not the way people really write." He told Oberstein that he was worried that Lilly would have trouble gaining admission to a good high school if she stayed in a bilingual class. "Lilly's mother doesn't want her to be a cashier in a restaurant," he said.

The Spanish bilingual classes presented yet another picture. During one math class I attended, the teacher, Luisa Martinez, asked the students to write down numbers as she recited them in English — this in a class for seventh and eighth graders. "Si no comprende, raise your hand," she said. Most of the children raised a hand. The contrast with the Russian children, who had probably spent less time in this country on average than the Spanish kids, was almost unfathomable. Martinez and her colleague, Jose Garcia, used slightly more English than Ip did, but classes were nevertheless conducted largely in Spanish. The class's science textbook had English and Spanish on alternating pages; all the other texts were in Spanish, and the kids did their written work in Spanish.

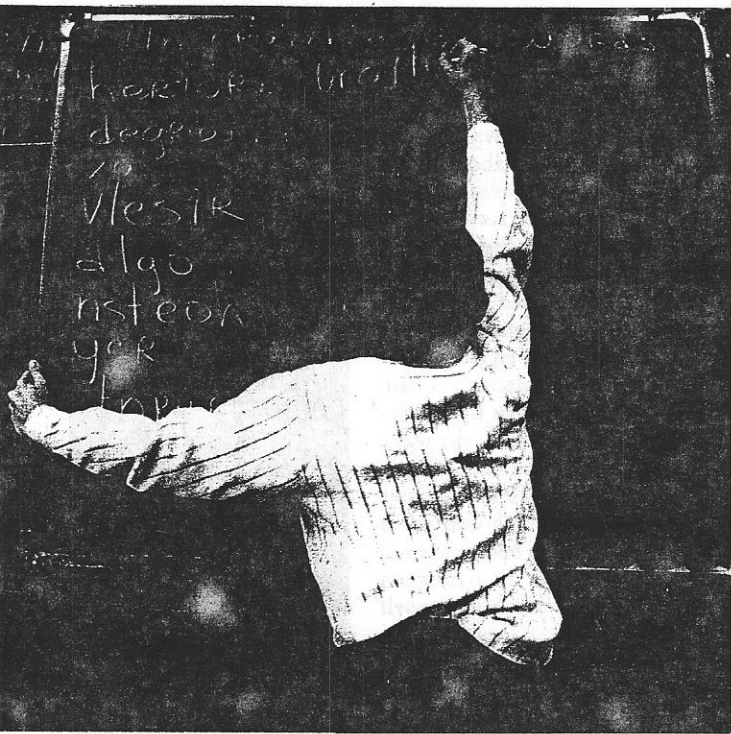
This was precisely how bilingual instruction was supposed to operate. Indeed, Christine Rossell says, "The only kids getting bilingual education by the theory are the Spanish kids." Bilingual instruction was created by and for Spanish speakers; and while others used it as an expedient, the Spanish bilingual teachers typically follow the rules. Martinez explained: "In social studies, we'll use key words in English. Instead of saying 'Pennsylvania' — with a Spanish accent — 'I'll write it on the board. I'll say 'New York,' not 'Nueva York.' I'll teach grammar in Spanish, and when I feel like they've really got the whole thing set, I'll say it in English."

This seemed like an extremely modest foray into English. I asked Martinez if she could teach in English, as Yelan did, and she said, "There's no way they'll understand me."

"Wouldn't they catch on?"

"Absolutely not." Neither Martinez nor Garcia was a bilingual-education ideologue. Neither worried about linguistic or cultural imperialism. But both believed that many of their kids would fail in an English-only environment. "With Dominican kids," Garcia said, "you can talk about science and math in English. But the kids from the farms and villages, mostly the Mexican kids, they have a very hard time." Some of them, Garcia explained, had been selling trinkets by the highway when they should have been learning to read. It was unreasonable to expect





Violating the tenets of bilingual education, the students in Mr. Yelan's sixth-grade Russian bilingual class speak only English. Most are already conversationally fluent.

children who had never been in school before to learn English. "The Mexican parents feel that at least their children are learning to read and write their native language," Garcia said.

Perhaps they do. And yet the Public Agenda poll found that 56 percent of recent Hispanic immigrants opposed bilingual education. (Thirty-seven percent of Hispanic voters favored Proposition 227.) Virtually all the Mexican parents whose children attend the Montauk school were poorly educated immigrants who were in no position to challenge whatever orthodoxy the school advanced. They could scarcely manipulate the system, or perhaps fathom it, as fully as the Russians could. There's no reason to believe that Mexican immigrants have different values from, say, the equally rusticated Italians who came to New York a century ago; the differences lie in the institutions, and in our own culture. It is educators who have lost faith in the old assimilationist ideal.

For many students, bilingual classes are a well-upholstered trap. Martinez said she had three children in her combined seventh-and-eighth-grade class who had been born in the United States. "There are some kids who don't want to get out of bilingual," she said, "even if they don't read Spanish." One pint-size boy, Oscar, told me in accentless English that he'd been in his bilingual class for seven years. "My mother wants me to stay in bilingual," he said. "She's worried that I'll lose my Spanish." When I asked if he'd like to go into regular classes, he said, "No, I want to stay."

There were no such children in either the Chinese or the Russian classes; anyone who had attained that level of fluency would have left bilingual for mainstream classes, and perhaps taken E.S.L. on the side to help complete the transition. Whatever wish they might have had to stay inside the comfort of their own language group was not as strong as their ambition to escape. They could not, in any case, readily live in an all-Chinese or all-Russian-speaking world. You can, of course, live in an all-Spanish-speaking world in New York. "I try to tell the kids at least to watch TV in English," Jose Garcia said. "But these kids go home and they speak Spanish; they watch TV and listen to music in Spanish; they go to the doctor, and the doctor speaks Spanish. You can

go down the street here to the Chinese fruit store, and the Chinese grocer speaks Spanish." Spanish-speaking children don't ever have to break out of their enclosed world: New York has high schools that are virtually all Spanish, and even a bilingual community college. Only when students leave school do they discover that their English isn't up to the demands of the job market.

It's possible to forget, when reading learned critiques of monolingualism, that assimilation is not one of several interesting options for new immigrants, but a matter of survival. This is especially true for impoverished Spanish-speaking children, who are in far more peril of failure than less disadvantaged immigrants from Russia or Pakistan or even Cuba. Garcia and Martinez are absolutely right in thinking that the language barrier that these children face masks a deeper and more stubborn academic problem. Like so many inner-city students, they haven't had the exposure to the range of words and phrases that would allow them to interpret even fairly rudimentary written passages. What these children need is a serious grounding in basic reading and computing skills. The real problem is that so few schools are providing that.

## Ninety percent of the students in Spanish bilingual programs fail to make it into mainstream classes after three years, as guidelines stipulate they should.

And yet it's terribly hard to be a 13-year-old boy or girl dropped down in the middle of Brooklyn from the other end of the earth. Children at I.S. 223 who spoke less common languages like Vietnamese told me that their initiation into school had been lonely and frightening. Indeed, all the bilingual teachers favored at least a year of bilingual instruction in order to provide the children with a familiar environment. It's not a harmful proposition — unless the children aren't learning English in their safe harbor. And many aren't. The argument for compassion is creating a self-reinforcing situation in which kids don't learn English well enough to leave their bilingual classes, and so stay in a setting where they continue to fail to learn English. Ninety percent of the

students in Spanish bilingual programs fail to make it into mainstream classes after three years, as guidelines stipulate they should.

There ought to be a way to soothe their loneliness without retarding their progress. One possibility is "structured immersion," which consists more or less of what Yelan does with her Russian class. Second-language students are grouped together with a teacher who speaks their language, but they are taught in English. Christine Rossell describes it as "a warm, protective environment, with a teacher moving at a slower pace." This is, in fact, the method used with Spanish-speaking elementary-school students at a nearby parochial school, St. Mary Mother of Jesus.

Aaron Oberstein offers his own version of sanctuary for the Chinese kids, who tend to get picked on more than the other children. They are free to sit in his empty classroom and play chess or checkers, or homemade card games, or a version of Scrabble involving English and Chinese words, or they can just horse around. One day I dropped by and talked to the girls sitting in the back. Eunice, a short, dark girl with her hair parted down the middle, was telling me how her mom, who doesn't speak any English, was always after her to speak English at home. Eunice said that her parents would like her to be in a regular class. I asked if she thought she would learn English faster that way, and she and her two friends looked at me, and all said at the same time: "Of course." ■