Policy Dialogue

Bilingual Education Reform in Massachusetts

On April 19, 1996, Pioneer Institute held a forum to preview our new book, Bilingual Education in Massachusetts: The Emperor Has No Clothes. For 25 years, the Commonwealth has mandated a single approach to teaching students with limited English proficiency (LEP) in Massachusetts public schools, called transitional bilingual education (TBE), despite the fact that there is virtually no reliable evidence to support its effectiveness. In their book, authors Christine Rossell and Keith Baker describe how the law is actually being implemented only for Spanish speaking students and recommend reforms to improve the education of language minority children in Massachusetts.

Our forum participants included:
** **Christine Rossell** (keynote), principal author of Bilingual Education in Massachusetts: The Emperor Has No Clothes and Professor of Political Science, Boston University*
** **Charles Glenn**, Chairman of Educational Administration and Policy Studies, Boston University*
** **Jorge Amselle**, Communications Director, Center for Equal Opportunity,Washington, D.C.*
In the following pages, Pioneer Institute has reproduced an edited transcript of the forum.

Christine Rossell: Bilingual Education in Massachusetts: The Emperor Has No Clothes seeks to answer three important questions.
* Due to the language barrier, should limited English proficient (LEP) children receive special instruction not given to other children with learning problems?
* Should LEP children be taught to read and write in their native tongue?
* Should time be taken out of the regular instructional day to teach LEP children about their particular cultures?

These are the three burning political issues.
Bilingual education is basically a way of educating children who do not know English. There are four different approaches to teaching these students. The first is to do nothing. Let children sit in a regular classroom and hopefully they will learn English. This approach is often called "submersion."
The second is regular, or mainstream, classroom instruction with English as a Second Language pull-out. Students are pulled out of the classroom for about 50 minutes three to five times per week and taught English in a small group setting.
The third approach is structured immersion. A teacher trained in second language acquisition techniques teaches LEP children, who are grouped together in a self-contained classroom, in English at a level and speed they can understand.
The final program is bilingual education, or transitional bilingual education (TBE), which is supposedly the program being implemented in 51 school districts across Massachusetts as required by law. They qualify as TBE school districts because they have at least 20 students in the district who share a common native language other than English.
TBE is a program in which children learn to read and write in their native tongue, then gradually transition to English once they have achieved literacy in the first language. The theory behind TBE is that children will not attain full cognitive development until they learn to read and write in the language they know best, and that they learn these skills most easily in their native tongue.
The problem with this theory is that it was created a decade after the policy was in place. Civil rights, not empirical evidence of TBE's success, caused its implementation. It came about in 1968 as Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. At the time, Hispanic children in the United States, many of whom grew up speakiing Spanish at home, had lowe achievement scores than English speaking children. It was thought that English instruction made Hispanic children feel inferior and that teaching them in their native tongue was the solution.
A decade of research produced no consistent, positive evidence that TBE improved the education of Hispanic children. What few scientific studies there were showed that its effect was either nonexistent or, more often, negative, although it occasionally did have a positive impact. The evidence was so mixed that the developer of the original theory behind TBE came up with a new theory that TBE students did not learn English well because of their failure to achieve full literacy in their native tongue.

Keith Baker and I read 300 studies that looked at the effect of transitional bilingual education compared to other approaches. We found that bilingual education usually has either no effect on a child's achievement or a negative effect, particularly in language and math. Every once in a while, for some reason, it seemed to have a positive effect.

The other problem is that most of these studies are not scientific. I will not bore you with the details of scientific research standards, but I am trained in research methods, I teach courses in it, and Keith Baker is also trained in research methods. Of the 300 studies, beginning from the 1920's up to 1995, we found only 72 scientifically valid program evaluations. Those studies provided no consistent support for the theory that native tongue instruction is the best way to learn English and to learn subject matter a child will eventually be taught in and tested on in English.

I visited approximately 75 classrooms in Massachusetts, in addition to 20 or more I had previously visited in California. In both places, the only children truly receiving TBE-learning to read and write in their native tongue, then transitioning to English upon achieving full literacy-were Spanish speakers.

The reason is because trying to teach a Chinese child to read and write in Cantonese, for example, could take 18 years. Further complicating the matter is the fact that there is no one Chinese spoken language. Some Chinese students speak Mandarin, some Cantonese, and others a different dialect. How can a teacher teach students to read and write in a language she cannot even speak to all of them? In fact, Chinese bilingual programs are taught completely in English. When, as we saw last spring, Chinese or Indian students testify before the state legislature that "bilingual education helped me," remember that although called bilingual education, these students were taught completely in English. It is interesting to note that the students testified in English. The Spanish speaking students who received TBE testified in Spanish with a translator.

Almost half of the so-called bilingual education programs in Massachusetts are in fact structured immersion, or even regular classroom instruction with the pull-out. One of the reasons why bilingual education is not even more of a disaster is because almost half the LEP students in Massachusetts are being taught completely in English. We found that the most successful program at teaching children a second language was a self-contained classroom where students are taught in English at a level they can understand, then rapidly moved out into a regular classroom environment.

That is the type of education non-Spanish speakers are getting, but few people are aware of it when they testify to the success of bilingual education. They are actually getting the best second language learning program: all English instruction at a pace they can understand. Only Spanish speakers are getting native tongue instruction, and even they are not all getting Spanish instruction. In my classroom visits, I observed that many Spanish bilingual students are being taught entirely in English. It is thanks to the good sense of many bilingual education teachers who are dedicated to their students learning English that the law is not being implemented as intended.

Unfortunately, many Spanish speaking bilingual teachers have been schooled in the theory underlying TBE and they believe it. These programs that strictly adhere to the theory that achieving full literacy in the native tongue is critical to cognitive development show the most negative effects on bilingual students.

The book also looks at several other issues, like how students enter and exit the program. The general procedure for selecting a student for bilingual education has three steps. First, school districts in Massachusetts do a home language survey, and find out if anyone in the home speaks a language other than English. Next, the student takes an oral proficiency test that is difficult even for English speakers. Studies show that about half of English monolingual children will fail them. If the child passes the oral test, he or she must then take a standardized achievement test. Failure of the standardized achievement test lands the student in bilingual education.

The standardized achievement test is also used to determine when students are ready to exit bilingual education. The problem with these tests is that they are designed for a certain number of students to fail. If the criterion for leaving a program is that a child scores at the 35th percentile, then by definition 35 percent will be left behind.

What do parents think about all this? When you ask parents if they want their child to be taught in their native tongue, approximately half of Hispanic parents and about a third of Asian parents say yes. But if you then ask whether they want to reduce the amount of time spent on any core subject in order to have their child taught in the native tongue, it drops to about 11 percent of Hispanic parents and an even smaller percentage of Asian parents. Whenever you see a survey that purports to show that Hispanic parents want their children taught in their native tongue, the follow-up question should be, "Did you ask them whether they would still want native tongue instruction if it meant any reduction in time devoted to other subjects taught during the school day?" If not, the survey results are not valid. My conclusion is that

if parents want their children to be taught in their native tongue, they want it after school as an add-on, not something that takes time out from the regular school day.

We make several recommendations in the book to improve bilingual education in Massachusetts, but time permits me to discuss just one. School districts should be freed from the legal obligation to provide native tongue instruction. Right now, if you have 20 students of a single language group in a school district, not in a grade level, but an entire district, you have to provide a self-contained classroom with native tongue instruction. If 20 students are spread among all grade levels, it could mean two kids in a classroom. This is obviously preposterous and consequently the law is being violated all over Massachusetts. It should at least be changed to not less than 18 LEP students of a single language minority group in a grade level if they are to be taught in their native tongue. However, the best program is not one in which students are taught in their native tongue, but in a program in which students are taught in English in a self-contained classroom. It would be preferable to have a variety of language groups within that classroom in order to provide an incentive for the students to talk to each other in the language they are learning, namely English.

Charles Glenn: I have bad news and good news to report about Christine's book. The bad news is that the book does not provide any evidence about the actual effects of the bilingual education law in Massachusetts, which has been in effect for 25 years. The reason, as I know from my experience working for the state, is that the program was set up not to be accountable. For example, those managing it for the state very carefully insured that children would not be tested and there would not be monitoring of academic outcomes.

After 25 years, we honestly do not know how effective the program has been. Nor is there solid evidence about how much it costs, though Christine and Keith make some guesses at it. The accounting is set up so there is literally no way to know whether the program has cost more or less than regular education. That evidence is simply not available.

The good news is that the authors' review of the research is an extremely good, brief account of the evidence. The evidence basically says that after hundreds of research studies and millions of dollars spent on evaluation, we still do not know very much about how effective the different methods of teaching language minority children are.

There certainly is no solid evidence that it is necessary to teach children first in their native language. If that were the case, millions of immigrant children in this and other countries would never have succeeded as well as so many of them have.

I draw a couple of conclusions from the available evidence. Teaching children in their native language is not necessary for the effective education of language minority children. On the other hand, when done well, it can be an enriching form of education. It is intrinsically better to know several language than to know only one. That is particularly the case for middle class children who are likely to be able to spare the additional time and effort during the course of their schooling to acquire proficiency in a second language. Teaching our children more than one language is a good thing. In most countries, parents take great care to insure that their children receive instruction in a second language. Five of my own children have been attending a bilingual school in Boston because we think it is wonderful for them to acquire some proficiency in Spanish. But it is a matter of choice, not an effective method of remediation for children experiencing serious academic difficulties.

I have just written a book that looks at how 12 different countries educate immigrant children. There are higher levels of immigration in Australia, Canada, and a number of western European countries than there are in the United States. Our immigration situation is by no means unique, but none of these other countries use the approach we have chosen in the United States.

Generally, the norm in other countries is to provide an effective, short-term reception program of the kind Christine described in the book. The language of the school is effectively taught and children are introduced to the expectations of their new society and in its educational system.

Programs are usually provided after school on a voluntary basis to enable children to maintain their native language, because that is regarded as a legitimate educational goal. These systems do not devalue a student's native language. They view its maintenance as a supplemental aspect of education which they will support with public funding, but not as a substitute for learning to function effectively in the language and culture of the school. This allows children to be fully integrated in the educational system, and eventually in the social, economic, and political system of the country to which children have come.

Jorge Amselle: I take bilingual education personally. Spanish was my first language and as I was flipping through some family albums recently, I ran into an old report card from kindergarten, only to discover that I was in a bilingual program. The program I was in was structured immersion, in which the teachers

knew Spanish, but instruction was English-intensive. By the time I started first grade it was all English and I do not even remember going to bilingual education.

However, the bilingual education experience of many Spanish-speaking children in particular today is far different from mine. In some programs, 80 percent of the school day is conducted in Spanish. The 20 percent left for English includes areas like recess, lunch, music, and gym. It is no surprise that these children are not learning English.

A group of parents in New York is suing the state because of bilingual education. To read the affidavits is shocking. One mother testified to being told that, after three years in the bilingual program, her son spoke neither English nor Spanish. She told the school that she wanted her son in regular English classes. They replied that if he was doing that badly, he belonged in special education. Unfortunately, that happens to many children. The amazing part of her story is that her son spoke English when he started the program. After three years he apparently forgot.

One grandmother testified that after she met one of her grandson's bilingual education teachers, it became clear to her why he could not read Spanish or English: the teacher could not speak English. She was also told her grandson was in bilingual education simply because he had a Spanish surname. Upon entering the program, he was an English, monolingual student.

It was not just family members who testified in this case. One assistant principal at a heavily bilingual high school testified that once a child was in a bilingual program, he was never mainstreamed into English speaking classes, even if the students or their parents asked to be withdrawn from bilingual education. This is not an immigrant issue. Sixty percent of the students in this country who are in some kind of bilingual program were born here.

At the Ninth Street School in downtown Los Angeles, parents were so upset about the refusal of their school to provide English classes that they actually broke the law and boycotted the school for almost two weeks before the Principal finally relented. The Mayor of Los Angeles had to get personally involved to force this to happen. Even the State Board of Education in California is backing away from forcing school districts to use bilingual education. At least one school district now has an English immersion program. The Los Angeles Unified School District, which accounts for about one quarter of the nation's bilingual education students, is pushing their schools to transfer students to English more quickly. Even the California Teachers Association newsletter said in June, 1995 that an over-emphasis on children's native language had, "crippled the Spanish speaking child's educational development."

But supporters of the status quo in bilingual education are still out there. Professor Virginia Collier of George Mason University is working on a study she claims will prove that bilingual education works, even though she has not yet issued the study for peer review. At a recent conference, she said, "We must encourage language minority parents to speak the first language at home, not to speak English. The worst advice teachers can give parents is to speak only English at home." She is also quoted as saying, "To deny a child the only means of communicating with his parents or to denigrate an adolescent for expressing her emotions through first language is tantamount to physical violence toward that student."

As Professor Rossell and Dr. Baker have shown, a vast majority of the research in favor of bilingual education is desperately flawed. In 1992, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) did a review of two major U.S. Department of Education studies of bilingual education. They found the studies so methodologically flawed as to render them virtually useless. Despite this, the National Association for Bilingual Education still claims the NAS study validated bilingual education.

I would like to thank Professor Rossell and Dr. Baker. They have done a great service to all those who seek to improve the quality of education for language minority children.