

LEARNING ENGLISH IN WISCONSIN

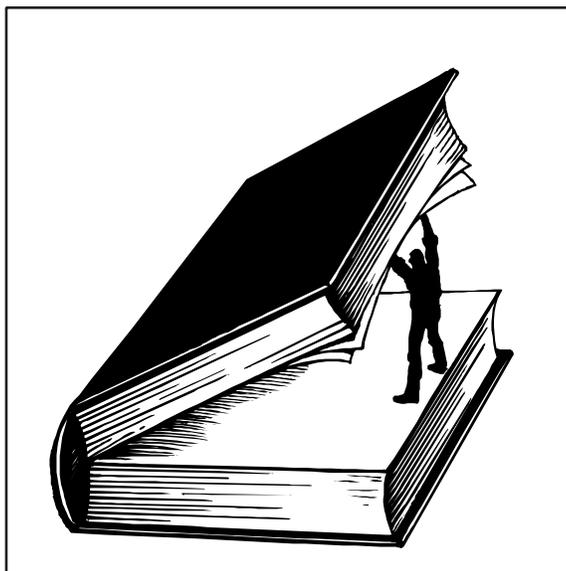
SUNNY SCHUBERT

In a remarkable article—especially since it was published in Madison’s left-leaning alternative weekly *Isthmus*—two Verona Area High School students this past fall managed to point out the flaws in Wisconsin’s traditional bilingual programs for non-English speaking students. That the students, Npib Thao, a Hmong, and Gloria Gonzales, a Latina, accomplished this task in a few hundred

words is all the more noteworthy, given that the usual “experts” in the field require thousands of words (mostly in obtuse education-speak jargon) to discuss the same issue.

In a nutshell, the students said that traditional bilingual education isolates non-English speaking students from their peers and creates a ghetto effect that may actually slow the learning of English while encouraging negative behavior such as gangs. Thao told how she was born in the United States, grew up speaking English and did fine in regular classrooms through elementary and middle school—until she was suddenly thrust into a bilingual program in high school.

While she had high praise for her bilingual teachers, Thao said she was not challenged by the academic content offered in other subjects. She



also pointed out that most of the teachers spoke Spanish—not Hmong. For non-Spanish speakers, this negated the goal of making them fluent in their first language as well as English.

And it was also a detriment to the Spanish speakers, she said. “Both Gloria and I saw students arriving from other countries who didn’t see the need to learn English because they were in

a school environment where everyone spoke Spanish. Had they been in an English-language environment they would have picked up English skills faster, because they would have gotten used to hearing it all the time. . . . Foreign language teachers always say it’s easier to learn a foreign language when you’re around people who speak it fluently. Well, why not the same for kids learning English?” she wrote.

Gonzales’ story was quite different: Born in Mexico, she moved to the United State at age 4, yet was never in a bilingual program because her English language skills were too advanced. But when she reached high school, she felt deprived of the opportunity to interact

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with other Hispanic students since most of them were in bilingual classes that segregated them from the English-speaking majority.

If the other Hispanic students were in the regular classes, I would get to know them better. At the same time, if they were surrounded by English speakers, they would learn English faster, too.

Out of the mouths of babes!

So why doesn't Wisconsin, which likes to brag so much about the high quality of its schools—and where taxpayers like to complain so much about the high cost of education—decide to end its failed flirtation with bilingual education and adopt more successful teaching strategies, such as English immersion or English as a Second Language?

To understand this issue, one must first understand the differences in nomenclature defining the various ways non-English speaking students are taught what should be our national language. (State and federal laws refer to these students as "LEPS," which stands for "limited English proficiency students," while educators prefer to call them "ELLs," for "English Language Learners".)

In English immersion, non-English speaking students generally get about a year of intensive academic study in their native tongue along with English instruction before being "mainstreamed" into the general English-speaking student body. Critics like call this method "submersion" or "sink or swim" and say it produces students who are not fluent in either English or their native tongue. Proponents note that immersion is the method most favored by the military, the business community and wealthy travelers who want to acquire a language the most quickly.

In English as a Second Language (ESL), students are taught the bulk of their academic subjects in English, while receiving intensive English instruction and special help in their native language—assuming the school has someone on staff who speaks it. While the bulk of non-English speaking students in Wisconsin are either Latino (51%) or Hmong (31%), the

Department of Public Instruction reports that at least 80 languages are spoken by one or more Wisconsin students. ESL is the model most frequently found in Europe, where most countries have a far greater immigrant population than does the United States.

Then there is bilingual education, which is mandated in all Wisconsin schools with a certain percentage of ESL students. Its purpose is distinctly different from immersion and ESL programs, which aim at producing English-proficient students as quickly as possible. Bilingual education, as its name implies, aims at producing students who are proficient in two languages: English and their native tongue. Bob Peterson, a proponent of bilingual education and a fifth-grade teacher at Milwaukee's La Escuela Fratney, notes that there are a plethora of bilingual teaching methods and programs. They include two-way programs (also called "maintenance" or "enrichment") such as those employed at La Escuela Fratney and Madison's Nostra Mundo, where mixed populations of Spanish- and English-speaking students are simultaneously taught in both languages. Other bilingual models are transitional (all subjects taught in the native tongue except English, the most predominant program) and restoration programs (typical for Native American schools where a language is in danger of dying out). Other terms used seemingly interchangeably are developmental bilingual programs, dual language programs, bilingual immersion, two-way immersion, and sheltered or structured immersion.

These definitions, however, are all quite squishy and ever-evolving. For example, after California famously adopted mandatory immersion programs instead of bilingual programs, both critics (happily) and proponents (dolefully) noted that in many school districts, only the name changed, while instructional methods remained quite the same.

And regardless of the teaching method, the goal of all programs is the same: Producing fluent English-speakers.

Those critics of bilingual education (by any name) who argue that "My grandparents

immigrated here a hundred years ago and they learned English without any help" are flat-out wrong. During the 1800s, public schools where languages other than English were spoken flourished throughout the United States, wherever a particular immigrant group set down roots. Wisconsin had German-, Polish- and Welsh-speaking schools; Michigan its Finnish- and Dutch-speaking schools. On the West Coast, there were Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese schools.

Also, as Peterson and others have noted, many first-generation immigrants never did bother to learn English. For one thing, much like the Spanish-speaking students encountered by Thao and Gonzales, they had no need for English because they were isolated in ethnic communities, surrounded by fellow immigrants who didn't speak English either. Furthermore, they didn't need to know English to get a fairly good-paying job: Bricklaying is bricklaying, whether in English or German. For the large percentage that went into farming, the cows and horses didn't care what language they spoke.

This is not true anymore. We have entered the global economy, where English is widely regarded as the language of the realm and high-tech skills are needed to enter the economic mainstream. It is in immigrants' best interest to acquire English as quickly as possible. And it is in the best interests of English-speaking Americans to help them, for the sake of national unity as well as economic expediency: The faster they learn English, the less money taxpayers will have to pay to teach them English. Immersion programs take as little as a year, while traditional bilingual programs average four to seven years.

But minus a giant shove forward by the people and their duly-elected political repre-

sentatives, the bilingual education establishment has little incentive to move quickly. While school administrators may bemoan the money spent on bilingual education that might otherwise be spent on math or science or foreign language for English-speaking students, bilingual teachers have a vested interest in maintaining large populations of limited-English-proficient students—especially since most districts pay a premium for bilingual teachers.

This was the situation in California in 1997, where after a spirited debate, voters approved an initiative mandating English immersion. The initiative forces were infused with cash by Silicon Valley entrepreneur Ron Unz and backed by famed Los Angeles educator Jaime Escalante of "Stand and Deliver" movie fame.

Escalante, for those who don't remember the film starring Edward James Olmos, came to the United States at age 32 with no English. He worked in menial jobs while learning the language and earning a teaching degree, then proceeded to teach poor, inner-city Hispanic students difficult math concepts that too many teachers had assumed they were incapable of learning.

Wrote Escalante in support of the English immersion proposition:

It seems a real tragedy that in many cases our public schools are not teaching English to 5- or 6-year-old immigrant children, who are at an age when they could so easily learn the language. . .

I also believe that the bilingual education programs found in many California schools are a very poor substitute for English language instruction. At Garfield H.S. in East LA, where I began my success-

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ful Calculus Advanced Placement program, I also worked hard to eliminate most of the school's bilingual education classes, which I felt were holding students back in their academic studies. I feel that my efforts against these misguided programs were an important contribution to the success of my Garfield students.

Although some California politicians seem to support bilingual education for various reasons, my own experiences as a teacher leads me to believe that these programs are a negative factor for most immigrant children, who instead should be taught English while they are young.

Leading the fight against the initiative were Hispanic activists bent on maintaining the Hispanic culture. But arrayed against them were an overwhelming percentage of Hispanic parents, who believed their children were not learning English fast enough. The proposition was approved by 61% of the voters, including 80% of Hispanic voters. Arizona shortly thereafter also approved an English-immersion initiative. But when similar proposals in Colorado and Massachusetts failed, the immersion movement seemed to run out of steam.

Admittedly, results from immersion instruction in California and Arizona have not been as glowing as proponents proclaim. Certain California districts did show dramatic gains in test scores among English Language Learners; however, California had simultaneously reduced class sizes across the board. Once test scores were adjusted for "test inflation," the gains were much smaller although still significant—enough to convert some bilingual teachers who had opposed the initiative. Boston University's Christine H. Rossell, evaluating the program for the Public Policy Institute of California, wrote in 2002:

Teachers in the structured immersion classrooms were universally pleased at the success of the program. Former Spanish bilingual teachers were pleased at how rapid was their students' progress in English in the sheltered English immersion and how proud their students were to be learning English.

However, says Rossell, teachers in programs that had merely changed in name from "bilingual" to "immersion" without altering teaching methods were less pleased, and "Former Chinese bilingual teachers. . . continued to do what they had always done—teach children to read and write in English in a sheltered environment."

(The number of California students enrolled in bilingual programs also dropped dramatically; however, this was more a matter of definition than an actual gain in proficiency, much as Wisconsin Works, the Badger State's bold welfare reform program, dramatically cut the number of welfare recipients without much of a simultaneous reduction in poverty.)

Results were similar in Arizona, where the State School Superintendent Tom Horne reported in 2004 that students in structured English immersion classes outperformed bilingual education students by up to four months in grades 2-4, by six months in grade 5, and by more than a year in 6th grade and above. The results held true in all areas tested: reading, language, and math. Horne told the Heartland Institute, "Hopefully there are no additional students subjected to these educationally inferior bilingual programs."

But there are in Wisconsin, where bilingual programs are considered the "best practice."

Educators point to a state statute enacted during the 1970s that requires schools to provide "bilingual" programs and services to non-English speaking students. However, at that time the word "bilingual" had not come to define the specific programs it does today.

Bilingual education does not come cheaply. The number of students classified as limited-English proficient has risen from 10,879 in the 1982-83 school year to 35,602 in 2003-04. For the next biennium, the Legislature has appropriated almost \$9.9 million to aid the 49 school districts that have enough non-English speakers to qualify for help. Those districts enroll almost 23,000 students in bilingual programs, while another 13,000-plus limited-English students are scat-

tered throughout 189 districts that don't qualify for aid. (Ironically, those students in schools that don't get aid may be learning English faster—through ESL or immersion programs prompted exclusively by a lack of resources—than students in schools that receive state aid for bilingual programs.) Districts that do get state aid will be reimbursed for about 11% of the cost of providing bilingual programs. With the exception of districts that also receive federal aid, that means local property taxpayers are stuck with 87% of the tab for bilingual education in aided districts, and 100% of the cost in non-aided districts.

These taxpayers are as entitled to get the best value for their money as non-English speaking students are to the best teaching methods.

Now is the perfect time for Wisconsin to determine which method—traditional bilingual programs or structured immersion programs—works best. As part of the federal “No Child Left Behind” education act, DPI and the

UW-Madison's Wisconsin Center for Education Research will begin evaluating—for the first time in almost 30 years!—the effectiveness of its bilingual programs. What better time to offer the immersion method to a handful of districts or schools and see whether it measures up to, or exceeds, traditional bilingual methods in helping students speedily acquire English proficiency?

Wisconsin has a chance to settle, perhaps once and for all, the debate over language acquisition methods without the messes caused by California's and Arizona's citizen initiatives. But given the fondness for the status quo exhibited by DPI officials and the education establishment, including teachers' unions, it will take legislative will to launch the experiment. Lawmakers from both parties must unite and do what's right for property taxpayers as well as the growing thousands of non-English proficient students who call Wisconsin home.