

Educating English language learners in U.S. schools: Agenda for a new millennium

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Introduction. The special “bilingual” programs that are being provided in U.S. schools for immigrant, migrant, and refugee children remain far from meeting the equal education goal for these students and actually run counter to the original intent of the Bilingual Education Act, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968. Radical changes in education policy and dramatic improvements in teaching strategies are urgently needed. I offer concrete suggestions for legislative changes at the state and federal level, and on necessary improvements in teaching strategies and curriculum. My recommendations are based on research conducted by colleagues during the past thirty years and on my experience of twenty-five years in the field as a classroom teacher, program administrator, and consultant to U.S. school districts.

Scope of the Problem. Passage of Proposition 227 by the voters of California in June 1998, the “English for the Children” initiative, has focused national attention on the plight of limited-English proficient (LEP) children who have been given years of native language instruction with the purpose of improving their learning of English and their mastery of academic content. The increasingly apparent problem is that the more special instruction in the primary language and the longer the delay in using English for classroom work, the less English language is learned, with no measurable gains in academic achievement in the school subjects reported for these students. It is not a lack of special help, but that the help is mostly of the wrong kind. Proposition 227 was ill-received by the education establishment and wrongly characterized as an anti-immigrant measure. Although I do not support every detail of the new law, I do believe a drastic action of this sort was the only remedy to remove the dead hand of bureaucratic mandates on California school districts, state edicts that rarely allowed deviation from the established native-language instruction model.

Close to four million children in mainland U.S. schools do not have a sufficient command of the English language to do ordinary classroom work in English. Since the late 1960s, this group of students has constituted the fastest

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