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English Only Format Gets Mixed Grades

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Nearly six years after Californians banned bilingual education, non-English-speaking students' scores on language tests have shown improvement, but they still lag far behind other students' on standardized tests.

Because of the mixed results from English-immersion programs implemented after passage of Proposition 227, educators in the LAUSD and other school districts in California are grappling with how to educate students best who are learning English as a second language.

And some experts question whether immersion programs have proven themselves any more effective than bilingual programs.

Students in a lesser-known language program, called dual immersion, are outperforming both bilingual and immersion students, so some Los Angeles Unified School District leaders are touting the program -- which pairs English and non-English speakers -- as the wave of the future.

How to educate these students remains one of the most politically charged issues in education. And with a recent LAUSD study showing that teachers are still confused and underutilizing techniques to help English learners, some say more training and research are needed.

"There may be improvement against itself, but the pace of the improvement is still pathetically slow," LAUSD school board member David Tokofsky said. "Whether or not that leads you to a conclusion of whether the programs have to be more rigorous or more bilingual depends on what hat you're wearing."

Finding and replicating the best teaching techniques for the district's 350,000 English-language learners is one of the most formidable and urgent challenges facing the Los Angeles Unified School District.

'Make it an advantage' Construction-paper monkeys swing from the makeshift rain forest that decorates the ceiling of room 34 of Fair Avenue Elementary in North Hollywood, a lush setting where Hank Amigo's third-graders work hard to learn in English -- a language most of them don't speak at home.

They start school 25 minutes early, and work straight through recess. A lesson about the British Isles is taught in song, and a skit about the signing

of the Declaration of Independence helps them learn about the nation's history.

It is this type of commitment and energy that's needed to help the youngsters achieve and progress under LAUSD's structured English-immersion program.

"I'm trying to take a disadvantage and make it an advantage," Amigo said.

More than 90 percent of LAUSD students are in these immersion classes, where nearly all instruction is provided in English, regardless of the child's native language. The remainder have received waivers to remain in bilingual education, where they receive English instruction for about an hour a day, but spend the remainder learning in their native language.

At Fair Avenue Elementary, Amigo teaches mainly in English, although he is also fluent in Spanish. The students are anxious to learn -- and it's not always easy -- so he uses songs, skits and visuals to help get ideas across.

"You have to constantly bombard them," Amigo explains.

Across the courtyard in room 55, other third-graders are studying under LAUSD's new phonics program, Open Court, while others play language-intensive computer games.

"All my kids here are learning English," teacher Maria Guzman said.

And LAUSD students do seem to be making gains. About 42 percent of the district's English learners scored in the top two levels of this year's California fluency exam -- just shy of the state average.

When the test debuted three years ago, only 16 percent of LAUSD students were considered proficient.

Guzman remembers the overnight change caused by the passage of Proposition 227. With the elimination of Spanish-language instruction, bilingual teachers like herself turned to their administrators and more experienced colleagues for alternative instruction methods.

Without support, she says, "I would have just drowned and (the students) would have too."

A language lost? Teacher Aida Caltenco knows the bilingual system from the other side. She was in ninth grade when her family emigrated from Mexico to Washington, D.C., where the former honors student was immediately placed in remedial English classes.

"I was missing my chemistry, my biology, my math," Caltenco recalled.

She opted to attend regular classes with the help of tutors, but frustration prompted her to abandon her dream of being a veterinarian to become a teacher who could help immigrants learn English.

One of her first teaching assignments was a bilingual class, where Caltenco taught students in their native Spanish. But the relentless push to get them to speak only English after a few years was also frustrating.

"There was no goal of maintaining their first language," said Caltenco, 28. "By third or fourth grade, parents could not communicate with their kids because they had lost their language."

Caltenco said her next assignment was even worse. It was after the passage of Proposition 227, and her Spanish-speaking students just stared at her while she spoke to them in English.

"I could see the frustration of my kids because all the materials were in English. They became really good at copying from each other."

Caltenco knew there had to be a better way.

Combined forces Gayle Nadler, 35, was bused during the 1970s from her Canoga Park home to a magnet school near the University of Southern California, where most of her classmates spoke Spanish. Nadler didn't have a chance to learn the language, let alone chat with her classmates.

"We were always in separate groups -- separate reading groups, separate math groups. It was frustrating."

Wanting a better alternative for her own daughter, Nadler opened the Multicultural Learning Center in Canoga Park three years ago as a dual-immersion charter school within LAUSD.

Each class combines native English speakers with native Spanish speakers. Initially, students spend 90 percent of their day learning in Spanish, but by fifth grade, instruction is half in English and half in Spanish. Caltenco is among the teachers.

The goal is to help all 220 students -- regardless of whether English or Spanish is their native tongue -- become bilingual.

Proponents say it helps students learn English more quickly while allowing them to retain their native language.

On the most recent California English Language Development Test, nearly 70 percent of English-language learners in a dual program progressed at least one fluency level, compared with just 49 percent of English-immersion and 50 percent of bilingual students.

"I think (dual-immersion programs) provide an excellent education for both groups of children," said Stephen Krashen, professor emeritus of education at the University of Southern California.

Jasmin Martinez started kindergarten in an English-immersion class -- a miserable experience for the youngster, whose Mexican immigrant parents spoke Spanish at home.

She moved to the dual-immersion charter school as a first-grader, and has gradually learned to speak English -- while also mastering the concepts taught in her other classes

"I think it's cool because we can speak two languages at the same time," said Jasmin, now 9, who is nearly fluent in English and hopes to someday tackle French.

But because of a shortage of highly qualified bilingual teachers and the complexity of the program, fewer than 1 percent of LAUSD elementary students learning English are in dual-language classes.

Statewide, there are about 155 dual-language programs, including about a dozen in LAUSD, where officials say they plan to boost the programs in coming years.

Scrutiny needed Jill Kerper Mora, associate professor of teacher education at San Diego State University, said educators and policy-makers need to scrutinize the information collected since the passage of Proposition 227 to best determine how to educate the state's diverse population -- and how to educate those who will do the teaching.

"Now we have a picture of the learning curve and now we need to look at the real policy implications. In an ideal world, parents would have the right to decide and communities would have the right to decide what languages of instruction would be used and how."

In the Los Angeles Unified School District, the answer may lie in creating more dual-language programs. When the programs are well designed and feature highly bilingual teachers, the results can be astounding, educators said.

"Something magical happens in that situation where they learn from each other," said Rita Caldera, LAUSD director of language acquisition.

Cahuenga Elementary in Los Angeles, where students speak primarily Spanish and Korean, offers dual-language, English-immersion and bilingual programs. Test results show that students in the dual-language program outperform those in the other programs.

Principal Lloyd Houske said he's not surprised that LAUSD is moving toward dual-language programs.

"The test results are so high and they're all looking for the answer," he said. "We've always had the answer."