

English Immersion: A Convert Speaks Out

It is said that the convert is the strongest believer. I am a convert. After 30 years of support for bilingual education, I have come to believe that English immersion is better.

I came to the Oceanside, California, Unified School District five years ago as a superintendent with considerable experience as a teacher and administrator of bilingual education, including serving as the founding president of the California Association of Bilingual Educators. I have been a fervent supporter of teaching children to initially read, write, speak, and learn in their own language, with gradual transition to English over four to six years.

Over the last 10 years or so, however, I became increasingly troubled by the lack of timely movement of many bilingual students into fluent English. I noticed many students who still had only limited proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking the English language even after six or seven years in bilingual classes. In particular, I remember a young man who came to our district speaking only Tagalog (the language of the Philippines) and was placed in our bilingual program. At the end of a year, he could speak to me in Spanish—but not English.

I campaigned against California's Proposition 227, which virtually eliminated bilingual education and mandated that students be taught "English and in English." But once it passed, I made a commitment to fully implement it even though I, together with most of the district's bilingual teachers, was skeptical that English immersion would work.

My skepticism grew as teachers described the difficulties of English immersion in the first few months of the new school year. But by midyear, teachers were asking me to visit their classrooms to see for myself what was happening. Teachers at various grade levels spoke with pride—and some astonishment—at how well their students were progressing with instruction provided almost entirely in English. Second graders who were newcomers to this country not only could read in English, but were able to describe to me—in English—what they had read. Mixed classes of Spanish and English speakers seemed to be most successful, but even classes where most students spoke Spanish were showing great progress. I was hopeful, but still a little skeptical.

Remarkable Results

After the first year of English immersion, all our students in grades 2 through 11 took the state-mandated SAT-9 exam—in English. Their test

scores were dramatically different from those of the prior year, when second-grade English learners in bilingual classes scored at the 13th percentile. After a year in the immersion program, a similar group of second-grade English learners scored at the 23rd percentile. The following year, after experiencing English immersion in both first and second grades, the second graders' reading scores jumped to the 32nd percentile. In math, their scores went from the 27th percentile to the 44th percentile. Best of all, in the 2000–2001 school year we were able to declare nearly 1,000 former English learners to be "Fluent English Proficient."

Now, after three years of academic gains, I've had to admit that this is no fluke. While we need more time to analyze test data, I now believe that English immersion works well and that it helps students to learn English far more quickly and effectively than I ever thought possible.

The English immersion program

that we use doesn't just throw non-English speaking children into English-only classrooms. In our program, the first year in immersion is focused on acquiring basic English language skills. Teachers are trained to use specific teaching strategies, such as the use of manipulatives, pictures, and gestures, to help children understand concepts. As the students reach a certain level of English proficiency, they begin to apply it to academic content areas.

For some, the first few months are difficult. But within a short period of time the tears of frustration are gone. When I speak to children on the playground, their faces light up when they can understand and respond in English. Our immigrant Latino parents *want* their children to know English and feel that we are preparing their children for success.

I still believe that some bilingual programs can work. But now I know from experience that English immersion, administered with determination, commitment, and good training, is even better. There is no evidence that children lose their home language or home culture simply by being in an English immersion program at school. After all, most of these children return home to talk to their parents in Spanish or a language other than English. Rather, the English immersion approach creates a group of students who are bilingual, but who develop sufficient English skills early enough to be successful in school. □

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You've just read Kenneth Noonan's opinion on English immersion and bilingual education. What do you think? Is English immersion better? Are there other alternatives? Check out www.naesp.org/speakingout and add your voice to the debate.