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Bilingualism Works — But Bilingual Education Doesn't

By Ron K. Unz

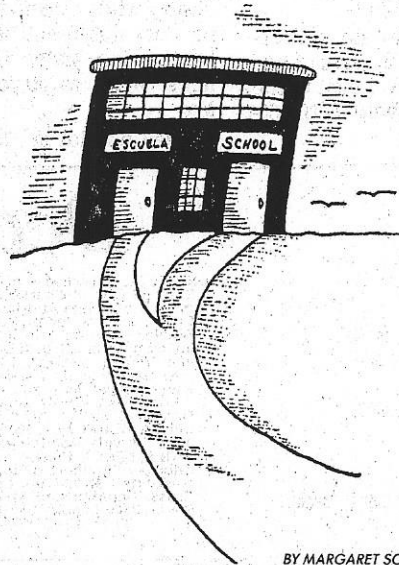
AS EACH NEW microchip and fiber-optic cable shrinks our world, more and more Americans recognize the practical importance of bilingualism. Entrepreneurs or employees fluent in Chinese, Japanese or Spanish as well as in English have a distinct edge.

While other languages are of growing world importance, English ranks in a class by itself. Although English is not and never has been America's official national language, over the past 20 years it has rapidly become the entire world's unofficial international language, utterly dominating the spheres of science, technology and international business. Fluency in Spanish may be a significant advantage, but lack of literacy in English is an almost fatal disadvantage in our global economy. For this reason, the better public and private schools in Europe, Asia and Latin America all provide English instruction as early as possible.

However, many of America's own public schools have stopped teaching English to young children from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Influenced by avant-garde pedagogy and multiculturalist ideology, educational administrators have adopted a system of bilingual education that is usually "bilingual" in name only.

Too often, young immigrant children are taught little or no English — in Los Angeles, only 30 minutes a day, according to the school district's long-standing master plan for bilingual education. This is based on the ridiculous notion that too much English too early will damage a child's self-esteem and learning ability. Hundreds of thousands of these American schoolchildren spend years being taught grammar, reading, writing and all other academic subjects in their "native" language — almost always Spanish — while receiving just tiny doses of instruction in English, taught as a foreign language.

The results of such an approach to English instruction are predictably dismal. Of the 1.3 million California schoolchildren — a quarter of our state's total public school enrollment — who begin each year without knowing English, only about 5 percent learn the language



BY MARGARET SCOTT

by year's end.

Defenders of the status quo argue away these devastating statistics by claiming that 5-year-olds normally require about seven years to learn a new language and actually have more difficulty learning second languages than teenagers or adults; these are academic dogmas with no basis in reality.

On the other hand, the dreadful flaws in the current classification methodology are kept well hidden. In California, children from immigrant or Latino backgrounds are categorized as not knowing English if they merely score below average on English tests, meaning that unknown numbers of children whose first and only language is English spend their elementary school years trapped in Spanish-only "bilingual" programs.

The real dynamic driving this bizarre system is special government funding. School districts get extra dollars for each child who doesn't know English. This generates the worst sort of perverse incentive, in which administrators are re-

warded for not teaching English to young children or pretending that the kids haven't learned the language; schools are annually penalized for each child who becomes fluent in English.

Under such a scheme, the widespread educational fiction that young children require seven years to learn English suddenly becomes understandable as an enabling myth. And although no one has been able to properly document the total amount of supplemental spending on children who are limited in English, the annual total for California certainly exceeds \$400 million and probably exceeds \$1 billion.

Polls have consistently shown 80 percent to 85 percent dislike for bilingual education among its supposed beneficiaries. Indeed, the flaws have long been well-known to the system's primary victims — Latino immigrants and their children. In recent years, parents have protested such programs, most notably the 1996 Latino boycott at Los Angeles' Ninth Street Elementary School, which directly inspired our "English for the Children" initiative campaign. Jaime Escalante, the nationally-renowned Latino calculus teacher and longtime foe of "bilingual education" has joined our initiative campaign as an honorary chairman.

Our initiative, which has now gathered some 800,000 signatures and qualified for the June 1998 ballot, would end bilingual education in California by making it truly voluntary. Parents could still have their children placed or kept in a bilingual program by seeking a waiver, and those programs that do survive our initiative by attracting genuine parental support are probably worth preserving.

This way, all of California's immigrant schoolchildren finally will be granted the right to be taught English, the universal language of advancement and opportunity. Only by ending our failed system of bilingual education can we foster the true growth of bilingualism, and the unity and prosperity of our multiethnic society.

Ron K. Unz, a Silicon Valley high-technology entrepreneur, is the chairman of the "English for the Children" Initiative Campaign.