

The Decline of Bilingual Education: How To Reverse a Troubling Trend?¹

**By James Crawford
(Revised, August 2007)**

For decades bilingual education has faced political adversity to varying degrees. Having survived several waves of English-only activism since the late 1970s, these programs seem unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Research has increasingly demonstrated their superiority to all-English approaches for educating English language learners (ELLs), as documented by meta-analyses of the literature (see [Krashen and McField, 2005](#), for a recent review).

Nevertheless, the continued availability of bilingual education for significant numbers of English language learners (ELLs) is now in doubt. This is true in part because of the anti-bilingual backlash, which most recently took the form of English-only school initiatives adopted by voters in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts. In recent years, however, a new and more formidable threat has emerged: the trend toward “holding schools accountable” through high-stakes testing, primarily in English, as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Despite provisions requiring instructional programs to reflect “scientifically based research,” the law provides indirect but powerful incentives to ignore this principle when it comes to ELLs. That is, it encourages schools to abandon native-language instruction in favor of all-English approaches.

The anti-bilingual backlash has clearly taken a toll. Between 1992 and 2002, as the number of ELLs in grades K-12 grew by 72 percent nationwide, their enrollment in bilingual programs declined from 37 percent to 17 percent (Zehler et al., 2003). As a result of California’s Proposition 227 (1998) and Arizona’s Proposition 203 (2000), approximately 334,000 ELLs were reassigned to all-English or primarily English programs by school year 2001-02.² Yet the two states account for only a third of the 10-year nationwide decline. Nearly one million more ELLs would have been enrolled in bilingual classrooms if the 1991-92 proportion had prevailed. Indirectly, of course, political fallout from the English-only initiatives has fostered anti-bilingual policies in other states, whose impact is difficult to quantify.

Effects of the “accountability” movement began to be felt in the late 1990s, albeit unevenly because of variations in state policy. Then came No Child Left Behind,

¹ A version of this paper appeared in the [International Multilingual Research Journal](#), 1(1), Summer 2007.

² Just prior to passage of these measures, 29.1 percent of ELLs in California and 31.2 percent of ELLs in Arizona were enrolled in fully bilingual classrooms (California Department of Education, 1998; Keegan, 2000). By 2001-02, the figures were 9.7 percent and (approximately) 9 percent, respectively (California Department of Education, 2002; Kossan, 2003). The Massachusetts initiative did not pass until the fall of 2002 and thus had no effect on bilingual enrollments during these years.

beginning with the 2002-03 school year. The sweeping federal mandate requires almost every American school to meet targets of “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) not only for students overall but for as many as eight “subgroups,” including ELLs. The organized anti-bilingual campaign ran out of steam about that time – no English-only initiative measures have reached the ballot since 2002 – yet bilingual enrollments have continued to drop.

Although reliable national data are unavailable, the trend in California is instructive, as shown in the table below. Proposition 227 took effect in 1998-99, restricting schools’ ability to provide bilingual instruction, although a court decision allowed parents to continue choosing this option for their children where schools continued to offer it. The percentage of ELLs in bilingual classrooms plummeted immediately, from 29.1% to 11.7% in the first year, then remained relatively stable until 2001-02. Since then there has been a steady decline, as California schools have shifted increasingly to all-English programs. Other things being equal, this seems to have resulted largely from the pressure to increase ELL scores on English-language achievement tests.³

Bilingual Education Enrollments in California, 1998-2007

School Year	Bilingual Enrollment†	% of all ELLs	Total ELL Enrollment
1997-98*	409,879	29.1%	1,406,166
1998-99	169,440	11.7%	1,442,692
1999-00	169,929	11.5%	1,480,527
2000-01	167,163	11.1%	1,511,299
2001-02	151,836	9.7%	1,559,244
2002-03	141,428	8.8%	1,599,542
2003-04	126,546	7.9%	1,598,535
2004-05	111,920	7.0%	1,591,525
2005-06	95,155	6.1%	1,571,463
2006-07	85,735	5.5%	1,559,234

Source: California Department of Education (1998-2007)

*Year before Proposition 227 took effect.

†Programs in which both the native language and English are used for academic instruction, along with English language development.

Los Angeles Unified, the state’s largest school district and an erstwhile leader in bilingual education, now assigns most ELLs to classrooms that use Open Court, a phonics-intensive reading program designed for native speakers of English. As a result, the percentage of ELLs enrolled in bilingual education in Los Angeles declined from 34.5% in 1997-98 to just 3.7% in 2005-06 (California Department of Education, 1998, 2007).⁴

³ The California State Board of Education prohibits schools from using native-language assessments of ELLs for AYP purposes, although that option is allowed for up to three years under No Child Left Behind.

⁴ That year about 44% received some form of “native-language support” in classrooms taught primarily in English.

The publisher of Open Court, CTB McGraw-Hill, also happens to be the publisher of two high-stakes assessments, the California Achievement Test (CAT/6)⁵ and the California English Language Development Test (CELDT).

High-stakes testing in English has become a more insidious and, arguably, more substantial menace to bilingual education than the frontal assault of measures like Proposition 227. For one thing, it fails to rally the same intensity of opposition among educators or among language-minority communities. Many politicians, including conservatives – George W. Bush is a good example – hesitate to alienate Hispanics, a fast-growing bloc of voters, by endorsing English-only legislation. They feel no such compunction in endorsing accountability mandates, however draconian, aimed at “failing schools.”

In addition, Hispanic organizations such as the National Council of La Raza (Lazarin, 2006) and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (Zamora, 2007), have offered strong support for the test-and-punish regime of No Child Left Behind, arguing that it brings long-needed “attention” to the needs of ELLs. They have sought to portray high-stakes testing as a civil-rights remedy for “achievement gaps” between ELLs and native-English speakers. While acknowledging the general absence of valid and reliable academic assessments for ELLs, such supporters tend to view this as a temporary technical problem rather than a structural disincentive to native-language instruction. They seem to be unconcerned that, as the AYP bar continues to rise (toward the statutory goal of “full proficiency” for all students by 2014), most if not all schools with significant ELL enrollments will end up in “corrective action” status. Bilingual programs that are doing well by other measures could be dismantled as a result (Crawford, 2004).

Thus, absent major changes in federal and state accountability mandates, the recent decline in bilingual enrollments may be only the beginning of a long-term trend. What political strategies are available to reverse it?

One approach has been to stress the benefits of bilingualism in general and of two-way – a.k.a. dual language – programs in particular, a model that includes English-speaking students acquiring a minority language alongside minority students acquiring English. As some advocates have argued, the growth of such programs could be a political shot in the arm for bilingual education. First, it expands the constituency for bilingual education to members of the dominant language group, whose influence with school officials tends to outweigh that of minority parents. Second, it helps to change the perception that bilingual education only benefits ethnic communities.

Yet this hope, articulated by bilingual educators for at least 20 years (see, e.g., Crawford, 1987), has been largely in vain. Although English-speaking parents of children in two-

⁵ The Educational Testing Service, one of CTB McGraw-Hill’s partners in developing the CAT/6, a norm-referenced assessment, is also the developer of the California Standards Test, a criterion-referenced assessment. Both tests are used for “holding schools accountable” under state and federal mandates.

way bilingual education participated actively in campaigns against English-only initiatives, they were generally ignored by news media, policymakers, and voters, at least until after the measures passed.⁶ (Only in Colorado was there an obvious impact, thanks to a \$3 million campaign contribution by one such parent.) Overall, this constituency seems to have made little difference in restraining the anti-bilingual backlash.

Two-way programs are likely to continue growing in popularity, as increasing numbers of English speakers seek the benefits of proficient bilingualism for their children. The number of such programs, however, remains modest. Despite substantial growth over the past decade, at last count there were just 338 nationwide (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2006).⁷ Although exact enrollment figures are unavailable, it appears that less than 2% of ELLs nationwide are enrolled in two-way bilingual education.

A more promising strategy, in my view, would be to rally parents against the excesses of high-stakes testing and punitive accountability schemes – excesses that affect large numbers of students, not just ELLs. For ELLs in particular, the unfairness of testing children in a language they have yet to master, then punishing schools on the basis of these invalid and unreliable assessments, is a common-sense principle that can be easily explained. As the Government Accountability Office (2006) concluded, in a classic of understatement: “Using assessment results that are not a good measure of student knowledge is likely to lead to poor measures of state and district progress, thereby undermining [the No Child Left Behind Act’s] purpose to hold schools accountable for student progress.”

Certainly, better assessments for ELLs would be beneficial. Additional resources for research in this area should be supported. Thus far federal funding has been limited, despite additional testing demands that have been imposed on states and school districts.

Yet advocates for bilingual education must avoid the trap of concentrating their efforts on perfecting a misguided accountability system. No Child Left Behind espouses the cruel fiction that ELLs can meet the same levels of proficiency as their English-speaking peers *before acquiring English*, a standard of progress that dooms all ELL programs, bilingual and otherwise, to failure. The law stresses *outputs* (i.e., standardized test scores) alone while ignoring *inputs* such as effective program designs, qualified teachers, professional development, appropriate materials, and other resources.

Is there a better way to “hold schools accountable,” to ensure they are making their best efforts for ELLs? Indeed, there is. *Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981), a federal appeals court ruling, established a three-prong test to gauge whether school districts are taking

⁶ The Massachusetts legislature overrode a veto by Governor Mitt Romney to create a special exemption for two-way programs (Saltzman, 2003).

⁷ In many cases these two-way programs were not school-wide but were confined to only a few grades. On the other hand, the directory understates the actual numbers by excluding programs made up primarily of children from the same ethnic background – thus failing to count many two-way schools in South Florida and along the Mexican border.

“affirmative steps to overcome language barriers,” as required by the Supreme Court’s decision in *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) and by the Equal Educational Opportunity Act of 1974:

- Programs must be based on an educational theory recognized as sound by experts.
- Resources, personnel, and practices must be reasonably calculated to implement the program effectively.
- Programs must be evaluated and restructured, if necessary, to ensure that language barriers are being overcome.

In other words, *Castañeda* incorporates both outputs and inputs. As a true civil-rights approach, it could be adapted as a more appropriate, and more realistic, way of ensuring that schools are meeting their obligations.

This is a defensive strategy, to be sure. To reverse the decline of bilingual education, it must be combined with consistent efforts to educate the public about the pedagogical and societal benefits of developing students’ native-language skills. While such advocacy is necessary, however, it is insufficient in today’s political climate. There’s no escaping the reality that, as long as high-stakes testing continues to drive American education policy, the trend toward all-English programs will continue to accelerate.

References

California Department of Education. 1998-2007. Annual Language Census.

Castañeda v. Pickard. 1981. 648 F.2d. 989 (5th Cir.).

Center for Applied Linguistics. 2006. *Directory of two-way bilingual immersion programs in the U.S.* Washington, DC: Author. Available online: <http://www.cal.org/twi/directory/index.html>.

Crawford, J. 1987. Bilingual education: Language, learning, and politics. *Education Week*, Apr. 1, pp. 19-50.

Crawford, J. 2004. No Child Left Behind: Misguided approach to school accountability for English language learners. Presentation to the Center for Education Policy, Sept. 14. Available online: <http://users.rcn.com/crawj/langpol/misguided.pdf>.

Government Accountability Office. 2006. *No Child Left Behind Act: Assistance from Education could help states better measure progress of students with limited English proficiency*. GAO-06-815, July 26. Washington, DC: Author. Available online: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06815.pdf>.

Keegan, L.G. 2000. *English acquisition services: A summary of bilingual education programs and English as a second language programs for school year 1998-99*. Phoenix: Arizona Department of Education.

Kossan, P. 2003. Schools chief getting tough on English fluency. *Arizona Republic*, March 28.

Krashen, S., & McField, G. 2005. What works? Reviewing the latest evidence on bilingual education. *Language Learner*, 1(2): 7-10, 34, Nov./Dec. Available online: <http://users.rcn.com/crawj/langpol/Krashen-McField.pdf>.

Lau v. Nichols. 1974. 414 U.S. 563.

Lazarín, M. 2006. *Improving assessment and accountability for English language learners in the No Child Left Behind Act*. Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza.

Saltzman, J. 2003. Reinstating '2-way' bilingual ed is hailed. *Boston Globe*, Jul. 20.

Zamora, P. 2007. Impact of NCLB on English language learners. Testimony before the US House Committee on Education and Labor, Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education, Mar. 23.

Zehler, A.M., Fleishman, H.L., Hopstock, P.J., Stephenson, T.G., Pendzik, M.L., & Sapru, S. 2003. *Descriptive study of services to LEP students and to LEP students with disabilities; Policy report: Summary of findings related to LEP and SpEd-LEP students*. Arlington, VA: Development Associates. Available online: http://www.devassoc.com/pdfs/lep_policy_report.pdf.