
Editorial: Winning Without the Facts

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The Unz assault on Massachusetts

This November, in the state of Massachusetts, voters will be deciding the fate of bilingual education in the public schools.

A national advocacy organization, "English for the Children," has been established by Ron Unz in order to work to replace transitional bilingual education, a three-year program, with one year of structured English immersion. Chairman of Wall Street Analytics Inc. - a financial services software company, Unz, the outspoken leader of this anti-bilingual initiative, drafted Proposition 227 in California and Proposition 203 in Arizona, both of which effectively dismantled bilingual education in those states. What are the claims made by Unz and his followers, and what facts contradict this agenda?

In Unz's view, linguistic-minority students require only one year of structured immersion in an English-only context in order to join native speakers in mainstream classes. However, research clearly shows that it can take children from five to seven years to become fluent and literate, and thus able to handle the demands of standardized testing like the MCAS (the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System). This should come as no surprise as that's how long it took all of us in our first language experience. Effective immersion and bilingual programs take this fact into account and they work from the basic premise that if knowledge is comprehensible in the first language (e.g., the language of math), then it will be easier to understand in the second language. The catch-up process in bilingual education consequently includes grade-appropriate content in the native language while the English improves.

Countering the criticism that one year of structured immersion and subsequent mainstreaming will lead to certain failure of so many students, Unz's promotional pamphlet states, "It [the organization] will NOT throw children who can't speak English into regular classes where they would have to 'sink or swim'." So, rather than supporting bilingual education's simultaneous development of knowledge, language and literacy skills, students will remain in a segregated and mixed-age holding tank in English where

they will be served watered down curricula in other content areas. It is ironic that support for stifling any real advancement in Math, Science, Social Studies, and the Language Arts comes from a movement that's supposedly seeking to make education more rigorous.

There is no defensible theory or body of research to support the claim that students need only one year (about 180 school days) to become fully fluent, literate, and able to learn content in another language. The majority of students in California in structured immersion did not achieve even intermediate fluency after one-year. Take for example the Orange Unified School District which is so often used to support Unz's argument: after the first year, 1 percent, or six students out of 3,549, were mainstreamed; more than half of the students were not ready for his specially designed classrooms. In Canada's immersion programs (which promote long-term bilingualism), students are unable to fully function in the second language after two years.

Unz claims that the standardized test scores of over 1 million students have improved in California as a result of Proposition 227. However, as correlation doesn't necessarily speak to causality, he fails to inform the public about the likelihood of test inflation caused by teaching to the test, special test preparation, selective testing in terms of who gets to participate, class size reductions, political and financial incentives for those administrators who comply, and eliminating most school activities that are unrelated to the test. In fact, all students' scores improved, including those from bilingual programs - what little remains of them. In some cases, students in bilingual education scored higher overall. What has not significantly decreased in states that have already adopted English-only programs is the gap between the LEP students and the mainstream.

Unz insists that linguistic-minority students are trapped in bilingual programs for most, if not all, of their public school careers - programs that he emphatically argues are supported by faulty educational theories rather than empirical data. Contrary to Unz's assertion, the average stay in bilingual classrooms in Massachusetts is 2.8 years. In exceptional programs in cities like Framingham and Cambridge, the average is 2.3 years. In addition, there are more than 150 studies that show how when properly implemented, including the native tongue is beneficial for linguistic, psychological, cognitive and academic development.

Unlike Unz's one-size fits all approach, students from diverse age groups and backgrounds have different needs. When those needs are addressed, and parents are allowed to be part of the assessment process and are given an informed choice as to what is best for their children, the results are outstanding. But bilingual education's success or failure depends entirely on the people and institutions that bring it to life. Unz ignores successful examples such as Framingham's: in 2001, out of the 1,500 students that are in one of the five language programs that are offered, 92 percent of the third graders passed the MCAS in English. The teachers responsible for such success, under the Unz initiative, can be sued and banned from working for five years if they use any language other than English in the classroom.

English-only advocates claim that bilingual education causes high dropout rates, especially among Latino/a students. The reality is that only a minority of LEP students around the country are in bilingual programs. The real issue at hand is that 75 percent of all linguistic-minority students reside in low-income, urban areas that have schools that are highly segregated and in rough shape. These students so often face harsh racist and material conditions, incessant harassment, segregated school activities, limited classroom materials, ill-prepared teachers, poorly designed and unenforced policies, and indifferent leadership that dramatically disrupt their personal, cultural, and academic lives. Unz disregards these political and ethical issues and simply calls for "structured mixing", when possible, of mainstream and structured immersion students. Not only does his plan avoid confronting the discrimination that takes place in public educational institutions, but it is also unclear how such a strategy for integration is going to work in schools that are segregated because of economic/housing demographics.

Unz maintains that his legislative intent is only an extension of Latino/a parents' discontent with bilingual education. Contradicting this stance, according to NCLR: the National Council of La Raza, one of the nation's leading Latino/a advocacy groups, 80 percent of registered Latino/a voters across the country are in favor of bilingual education.

Ron Unz calls his campaign 'English for the Children', but the evidence suggests it won't achieve such benign ends. If we truly want to raise the English-speaking skills of non-native speakers, we can surely find more reliable guidance than this draconian solution championed by a monolingual, multimillionaire with no children, and with no background in education or linguistics. Pepi Leistyna is an assistant professor of applied linguistics graduate studies at UMass Boston. E-mail is Pleistyna@hotmail.com