

Advocates: Rethink English immersion law

By MATT MURPHY
STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

Armed with fresh findings by the Department of Justice that fault Massachusetts for failing to adequately train teachers to instruct students with limited English skills, supporters of bilingual education on Tuesday called for increased flexibility for school districts to meet the needs of non-native English speakers.

"Limited English proficient students are languishing in the classroom and it's affecting the well-being of an entire population of students," said Rep. Jeffrey Sanchez, a Boston Democrat and the author of a bill (H 1065) that would reintroduce bilingual education to Massachusetts classrooms for the first time in 10 years.

Sen. Sal DiDomenico filed an identical bill (S 197) in the Senate this session. Both bills were the subject of a hearing Tuesday before the Committee on Education, co-chaired by Sen. Sonia Chang-Diaz and Rep. Alice Peisch.

The Justice Department issued a report in July blaming a lack of teacher training on the state's decision not to make specialized training mandatory, and on outdated training policies that left certified teachers unprepared to properly instruct English-language learners.

As of May 2011, more than 45,000 teachers in over 70 percent of the state's school districts lacked the training required to properly instruct students with limited English skills, according to the federal government's review.

Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester requested and received permission last week from the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to pursue an update to the state's teacher training and certification policies, and plan to present recommendations in February.

"It's only when the DOJ steps in, the Department of Education acts on one of our concerns," Sanchez said, lamenting a widening achievement gap for students with limited English skills.

Sanchez said the lack of progress over the past decade to close that gap proved that the state's shift in 2002 away from bilingual education to English

immersion programs showed that the current law is a "failure."

The English learner student population has grown by 51 percent to more than 67,000 students over the past decade, according to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. English language learners, according to proponents of the bill, are nine times more likely to drop out of high school, and are frequently placed into special education programs at an increased cost to the state.

In 2002, voters approved a statewide ballot initiative abolishing bilingual education in favor of a system known as sheltered English immersion. Instead of non-English speakers receiving classroom instruction in subjects like math, history and science in their native language until they become fluent in English, students are taught almost entirely in English with the curriculum designed for students learning the language.

"The sheltered English immersion program does not work," said Alejandra St. Guillen, executive director of Oiste. "Districts should be given the opportunity to teach the students in the ways that best meets their needs."

St. Guillen described what she considered the "hesitancy" of lawmakers to change the law out of concern for respecting the will of the voters established nearly a decade ago at the polls. "This is an example of where politics gets in the way of good policy and it's clear the initiative implemented ten years ago is not working."

The bill (H 1065) filed by Sanchez would further regulate the training and certification of teachers, and allow school districts to craft education programs for English language learners to best meet the needs of their student populations. Options would include English immersion, modified bilingual-world education, transitional bilingual education, or two-way bilingual education, where English speakers are exposed to a second language and vice-versa.

Schools would also be required to report frequently on their progress to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and demonstrate how parents were being incorporated into the development of learning programs for ELL students.

Early education key to workforce

By YOLETTE IBOKETTE
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

It was a chilling coincidence to say the least. On the front page of the Boston Sunday Globe's September 25th issue was an article about former Black inmates' attempts to enter the workforce. Right beside it was another article about the latest MCAS scores showing the achievement gap growing for low income as well as Black and Latino students. The most alarming finding: almost 40 percent of third graders scored below proficient in reading on last spring's MCAS. This is especially troubling because a recent Annie E. Casey Foundation report found that students who don't read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers. Yet this outcome can be prevented according to a long-time education activist.



Margaret Blood, Founder and President of Strategies for Children, an independent policy and advocacy organization for Massachusetts children and the Director of the statewide Early Education for All Campaign, says that educators and policy makers must acknowledge that the path to literacy begins at birth. In a letter to the editor of the Bay State Banner last month, Blood writes, "We must act on the fact that the achievement gap is apparent long before children enter school." Her recommendation: "Invest in high-quality early education, one of the few educational strategies with a demonstrated positive effect on early literacy as well as future academic achievement and social-emotional development."

Founded in 2001, the organization, which Blood considers to be a lobbying voice for children, has lobbied policy makers and members of the Massachusetts Legislature to support quality, early education programs for all children. These programs have short and long-term benefits. Research shows that they produce higher-achieving students and more successful adults; reduce special education placement, grade repetition and criminal activity; and limit the use of social services. In the long term, our state gets a highly-skilled workforce which is essential in this post-industrial, high-tech service economy. However, while 80 percent of families surveyed want a pre-kindergarten program for their children, they do face some challenges in getting this vital service.

Massachusetts' early education programs are the most expensive in the country. In addition, most programs lack the resources to guarantee quality teaching. Blood, a pioneer in the field of early education, notes, "We have to support these programs by providing quality professional development to workers. There is no substitute for awesome teaching." Further, employees in this field—mostly women—are paid low salaries which result in high turnover. Additionally, these workers don't have the resources to get a college degree. In fact, only 30 percent of teachers have a Bachelor's degree. This prompted Strategies for Children to convince the Legislature, with the assistance of former State Representative Marie St. Fleur, to fund a scholarship program—the first in the United States—for these workers. As proof of the demand for this funding, the \$1 million was gone in two months.

In addition to well-educated and caring teachers, other characteristics of quality programs include developmentally-appropriate curriculum and learning activities as well as quality standards. Ironically, as important as it is for students to read proficiently by the end of third grade, schools don't currently assess students in reading until third grade, when it is usually too late to support those who are struggling. Kelly Kulsrud, Director of Reading Proficiency at Strategies for Children, guides the organization's statewide campaign to ensure that children in this state become proficient readers by the end of third grade. One of the research-based areas that she cites as critical to school success is an assessment to determine school readiness. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education appears to be moving in the direction of determining a definition for school readiness. It just announced this past week that it is developing plans to assess kindergarten readiness when these students enter school. That's music to Blood's ears. She says, "Every child is entitled to quality early education." Yvette Ibokette is originally from Port-au-Prince. She is veteran Massachusetts educator and long-time contributor to the Reporter.



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