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An overview of the United States Educational System and Language Education across the Nation

Milagros Lanauze, Education Research Analyst, Office of Bilingual Education, United States Department of Education

The agreement between the United States Department of Education and the Spain Ministry of Education and Culture to promote the teaching of Spanish in the United States and of English in Spain promises to be an exciting collaboration. As an individual who works at the Federal level of the United States education system, I consider the characteristics of the United States education system and the implementation of bilingual education and foreign language programs to be important background information to carrying out activities under the agreement. Although curricular issues, teachers, methodology, students and resources are key components of this bi-national collaboration, these components do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, they are affected by the characteristics of the educational systems, the policies that operate at Federal, state and local levels, and the specific social contexts in which they may be implemented.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview for our Spanish colleagues of the educational system in the United States, as well as a specific overview of bilingual education and foreign language education. The focus will be on elementary and secondary education. The paper points out some critical challenges for both types of programs, and closes with proposed strategies to enhance and improve both the quality and standing of bilingual and foreign language education.

The Education System of the United States

The United States education system is one which is decentralized. Because the United States Constitution does not specifically mention education as a federal responsibility, the Federal government has limited authority over states and districts in matters of education. In fact, education policy and governance is primarily the responsibility of states and local governments.

The Federal agency in charge of education is the United States Department of Education. The Department is responsible for

collecting and disseminating education statistics and research data;

playing a leadership role by influencing public opinion and cooperating with state governments;

ensuring equal educational opportunity for all students by enforcing civil rights;

providing grants to states and districts to implement specific programs; and

providing financial assistance to students to help them pay for post-secondary education.

States have control over education policy, and may withhold or grant control to school districts. States have control, among other matters, over selecting curriculum, textbook adoption, teacher training and certification, setting the school calendar, and setting educational standards.

School districts have control generally over matters over which the state has given them control. Some such matters usually include hiring personnel, setting school hours, setting teacher salaries, and determining teaching methodologies. Regardless of this general description, it is important to note that virtually every state and district differs in matters of policy and practice.

Decentralization is also reflected in the school finance structure of the United States. The federal government provides about 7% of total school funding in the country. States and districts contribute the remainder about equally.

School structure and organization is also quite varied. Most elementary schools include grades kindergarten through 6 (ages 5-12). Secondary schooling includes junior high school or middle school, generally grades 7-8 (ages 12-14); and high school, grades 9-12 (ages 14-18).

The student population in the United States is quite diverse, in many ways. Public school systems serve White, African-American, Hispanic, Asian, and Indian or Native American students; students who live in poverty and students who do not; immigrant and native born students; students who speak English and those who do not; students who are migratory; students who are homeless; delinquent students; and students with disabilities.

Schools are also diverse in terms of geography. While most students attend schools in urban locations, there are many schools located in suburban and rural areas. Geographic location creates an additional set of challenges for schools. Urban schools tend to serve large numbers of students. Rural schools tend to have less resources, be isolated, and serve small numbers of students.

The American education system is undergoing some significant changes at the moment. Standards based educational reform is the driving force in American education today. This reform was prompted at the national level through the Improving America's Schools Act *of 1994, (which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act). The grants provided to states and school districts through this act represent the largest Federal investment in elementary and secondary education in the United States.*

Language Education in the United States

Traditionally, foreign language and bilingual education in the United States have remained separate and distinct programs, serving different groups of students.

Bilingual Education

In the United States, bilingual education refers to programs to help limited English proficient (LEP) students learn English. Limited English proficient students are those who were not born in the United States or whose native language is not English, and who cannot participate successfully in a regular classroom because they have difficulty speaking, understanding, reading, and writing English. Some Indian or Native American students may also be considered to be limited English proficient, because

they come from a community where a language other than English has had a significant impact in the English language development of individuals in that community.

The origin of bilingual education as it exists today is as a social program for educating immigrant, largely underprivileged students. The term "bilingual education" is often used as a generic label for alternative language programs for limited English proficient students, and in the broadest sense, it includes both English as a second language (ESL) programs and programs which use both the native language and English for instruction. In practice, there are various program models to serve students who do not speak English.

The most common programs that use two languages are:

Transitional bilingual education-in which instruction is provided in two languages, in both literacy and academic subjects, and in which instruction progressively changes from the native language to English. These programs are also known as early exit programs, because the goal is to transition students into all English instruction as soon as possible.

Developmental Bilingual Education- in which instruction is provided in two languages, in both literacy and academic subjects, and in which the goal is to develop the first language and to maintain instruction in two languages as long as possible . For that reason, these programs are also known as late exit programs.

Two-way immersion programs- in which English and the target language are used to teach native speakers of both English and the target language. Through instruction in both languages and in academic content, both groups of students become fully bilingual.

The most common programs that use only English for instruction are:

Structured immersion English as a Second language programs- in which all instruction is provided in English and focused on helping students learn English

Content English as a Second Language , or Sheltered Instruction- in which English is used to provide instruction in academic subjects.

The students who receive special services to learn English are many and they are also very diverse. During the 1996-97, there were 3,452,073 limited English proficient students in United States schools. Approximately 75% of them have Spanish as their first language. The other 25% speak at least 150 other languages as their first language. There are no specific legal mandates guiding instruction for limited English proficient students in the United States, other than these students must receive special services to address their special linguistic needs. Schools serving Indian or Native American students who are identified as limited English proficient must also provide them with special services to address their language needs. Each school district has the authority to determine what program they will implement for these students, and how it will be implemented. Certification requirements for teachers who serve limited English proficient students are set at the state level.

The major challenges for bilingual education in the United States can probably be characterized as practical and political. Finding qualified teachers is a major practical challenge. A shortage of 50,000 teachers to serve in special programs for limited English proficient students is estimated. Most institutions of higher do not meet the demand of districts that serve these students.

The growth and diversity of the limited English proficient student population also presents a critical challenge. In the last 10 years this population has not only grown at the national level, but it has also grown in areas that previously had few, if any, such students. While states such as California, Texas and New York still have the largest limited English proficient student populations, states such as

Arkansas, and North Carolina are experiencing large increases in the percentage of limited English proficient students. Since 1991, Arkansas, Kentucky and Missouri have experienced increases of over 100% in the number of limited English proficient students. Such states and districts have no infrastructures in place to serve limited English proficient students appropriately. For example, there are no procedures in place for identifying limited English proficient students, or providing services to them. These states and districts also lack the expertise to make decisions and design programs for limited English proficient students. More significantly, they also lack the qualified personnel to appropriately serve this group of students.

Changes in diversity also represent a challenge. Whereas the limited English proficient population tended to be mostly Hispanic twenty years ago, it is now extremely diverse in many ways. While Hispanic students still comprise the majority of limited English proficient students, there is growing proportion of non-Hispanic limited English proficient students. The non-Hispanic limited English proficient students speak over 150 languages other than English, come from all over the world, and from different cultures and circumstances. States and districts have still much work to do in reviewing their policies and procedures for serving limited English proficient students. Many state laws establishing requirements for programs for these students were passed fifteen to twenty years ago, when the limited English proficient student population was relatively homogeneous.

The standards-based reform movement has also posed a challenge to bilingual education in the United States. Although the sweeping educational reform efforts fostered by the Federal government are supposed to include all students, there is evidence that limited English proficient students are not being fully included in those efforts. This is particularly problematic in the area of accountability systems, which are the mechanism by which schools show that they are educating all students. Many local educational agencies and schools are taking the approach of reforming education "for the regular kids" first, and then eventually including the "special populations". This also means that bilingual education continues to be a program outside the "regular" education program, rather than an integral part of the educational system. This has been a historical problem for bilingual education, and there is much work to be done yet to ensure programs for limited English proficient students are aligned are aligned with the main educational program.

One final, but still critical challenge to bilingual education, is the fact that most limited English proficient students live in poverty and attend schools located in high poverty areas. This means that, in addition to the needs these students bring to school due to their language background, these students also have an additional set of needs related to their poverty status. In the United States, school and student poverty has been found to be associated with low levels of parent education and literacy, presence of a disability, and difficulties in involving parents in their children's schooling. This also means that limited English proficient students attend schools that have fewer resources and less experienced teachers than other schools where there is less poverty.

From a political perspective, bilingual education faces major challenges as well. Most recently, and perhaps the most critical challenge, is the question of whether bilingual education programs work. There have been various movements at the national, state and local levels to eliminate education using two languages to instruct limited English proficient students. There is widespread belief that these programs do not work. Two critical issues contribute to that perception. One is the general lack of understanding that full proficiency in a language, especially the level of English proficiency required to successfully participate in United States schooling, requires high levels of speaking, understanding, reading and writing in that language. Critics of bilingual education often point to young children who have been exposed to English and seem to speak it well.

Another issue that affects the perception about bilingual programs is the apparent success of English-only programs. However, there are very few pure ESL programs in the United States. In fact, most programs for limited English proficient students represent a mix of models. Many include some sort of native language support, even if in an informal capacity; this is especially so for beginning English

language learners. Bilingual programs include instruction in English; that is why they are called bilingual.

The public's understanding of the second language acquisition research complicates the perception about how bilingual programs should work; they do not all research ever done on second language acquisition is applicable to limited English proficient students in the United States. The limited English proficient student population in the United States tends to come from poor families which often have limited literacy and skills in their native language, and live as minorities speaking a minority language. These specific characteristics may affect the applicability of some research. For example, the Canadian immersion studies started in the 1960's, which immersed English speaking students in French instruction, were done with children from middle class families whose parents were literate in their first language and provided high quality native language experiences at home.

The fact that bilingual education is a program for immigrants and minorities is also a political challenge. Although the educational research community largely agrees on the effectiveness of bilingual education, the fact that it is a program for minorities automatically leads some to believe that it is not necessarily one that works. It also means that bilingual education does not have a strong political base, as it tends to get support from communities that do not have a lot of political power.

Foreign Language Programs

Foreign language education in the United States presents both contrasts and similarities to bilingual education in the United States. In contrast to bilingual education, foreign language education in the United States has been a program for the Anglo majority. It has also tended to exist in schools and districts in communities of middle and high socioeconomic status. Many limited English proficient students are barred from foreign language programs because they "have" to take ESL classes; they speak a target language as a first language, and it is assumed they don not need further instruction in it; or because the language offerings are too elemental for their level of proficiency .

Most foreign language programs exist as elective subjects in secondary schools. The fact that they are elective means that not all students are required to learn a second language in school. The numbers of universities and colleges requiring applicants to have studied a second language as a requirement for admission has been decreasing steadily, and as a result learning a foreign language has not been a priority for secondary students. Although there have been some elementary foreign language programs in the United States, many immersion programs, they have been limited in size and scope. In general, foreign language education in the United States has not been very successful in either elementary or secondary grades, because it seldom produces individuals who are proficient in the target language. Most students, even after studying a language for several years, cannot hold a conversation in that language, much less read and write it well.

However, the similarities between foreign language and bilingual education programs are interesting. Like bilingual programs, foreign language programs tend to exist outside the "main" educational program in schools, rather than being linked with the general educational curriculum. Their existence as a separate component makes them vulnerable to elimination in this age of shrinking educational budgets in the United States. In schools strapped for resources, foreign language programs are among the first to go, along with music and arts programs. This contributes to keeping foreign language programs for students who have the privilege of attending richer schools.

Program quality is also an important issue in foreign language programs in the United States. Most foreign language programs do not expect their students to be completely fluent and proficient in the target language. Although it is changing somewhat, many foreign language programs still rely on memorizing dialogue and paper drills to teach a new language.

Foreign language programs also face political challenges. Many people in power in the United States believe that there is little need to learn a second language. This perception is probably influenced by their own dreary experiences in language classrooms. Most foreign language programs in elementary and secondary schools, and even in college, are still oriented towards mechanics, drills and repetition, and are not connected with real life experiences. Due to their own experience, people tend not to favor these programs for their own children.

Although the challenges facing bilingual and foreign language programs in the United States are daunting, the future is promising. The continued expansion of the global economy has been a catalyst in some areas to improve language education. The school district of Miami-Dade, Florida, has set a goal that all students will learn a second language. This decision came after the results of a local Chamber of Commerce survey found that most businesses in the county needed bilingual workers. The school district of Ysleta in El Paso, Texas, which is near the frontier with Mexico, has set a similar goal. The same has happened in the school district of Dalton, Georgia, the self-proclaimed carpet capital of the world, which employs people from different parts of the world.

Another source of promise for making language programs better and more relevant is the development over time of additional pedagogical approaches for teaching languages. The development of such strategies as cooperative learning, team teaching, content based language instruction, and active learning can be used to address some of the challenges presented earlier and to enhance the quality and experiences of individuals learning second language.

Strategies

I propose two strategies to enhance and improve both the quality and standing of bilingual and foreign language education in the United States. The first is continued expansion of two-way bilingual programs, and the second is a focus on program effectiveness

Two-way bilingual programs, in which both majority and minority students are taught the majority and minority languages, are a viable strategy for several reasons. First, these programs are designed to develop fluency in two languages for both sets of students, and thus give both groups what they need in terms of language instruction in each language. Through development of two languages, these programs provide access to all cognitive and economic benefits of bilingualism to both minority and majority students.

These programs also provide a solution to the problem of the disjoint between programs for limited English proficient students and foreign language programs and the "regular" education program because 1) they provide the "regular" instruction for all students, and 2) they make both languages relevant by using them both for instruction and for social interaction. Two-way bilingual programs are also typically found in elementary schools, and would considerably expand foreign language education to younger students. The programs afford an opportunity for improving teaching and learning in general, because they require extensive training and professional development for the teachers. This additional training typically expands the teachers' repertoires of instructional strategies.

These programs are beneficial from a social perspective as well. This model is an effective way of desegregating students. Although bilingual programs are necessary educationally, they sometimes segregate students by keeping limited English proficient students separate from other students for several years. The programs are also particularly valuable because they provide equal status to the minority and majority students and languages. They afford limited English proficient students the opportunity to be the "experts" and "role models" for their majority peers. A notable feature of the programs is that they afford the parents of the limited English proficient students an opportunity to get actively involved in their children's program by serving as role models for both groups of students. As it does for students, the program also provides parents of both groups the opportunity to interact as

equals. In some cases, these programs have helped decrease conflict within communities composed of different ethnic and language groups.

Perhaps one of the most important features of the two-way bilingual programs is that they expand the political base in favor of the programs. Since the programs benefit both majority and minority students, the programs themselves, and by extension the goals of the programs, become valuable for society as a whole.

The second strategy I propose to improve the quality and standing of bilingual and foreign language education in the United States is a focus on program effectiveness. The attacks on both types of programs are not without merit, as educators and school systems have generally done a poor job in collecting data to show that the programs do work. About two years ago the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) in the United States established a national project to showcase effective bilingual programs. To date, not many programs that have sufficient, rigorous outcome data to show their programs are effective have been identified. This is not to say that few programs are effective, but rather, that effective programs do a poor job of collecting evidence that they are. The lack of data about limited English proficient students who have been determined to have gained English proficiency is acute. Most school districts stop collecting what little data they may have once students exit limited English proficient status; they cannot even tell how many formerly limited English proficient students have graduated from high school.

Foreign language programs also suffer from lack of data about their effectiveness. First of all, very few such programs are evaluated rigorously. In addition, most people in the United States who have ever studied a second language are prompt to admit that they do not remember anything and were never really able to speak the language. This means that not only is there little objective information that foreign language programs are successful, but furthermore, there is much anecdotal information that such programs are ineffective.

Program effectiveness data is important for several reasons. First of all, it is important pedagogically because it is a mechanism to determine whether a program is accomplishing its objectives, and because it affords the opportunity to make changes to ensure a program remains faithful to its objectives. Second, program effectiveness data can help in garnering support from the community for the program. Third, and perhaps most important, program effectiveness data is a tool for garnering political support from those who wield the power and the resources to ensure language programs not only survive, but become a priority for the nation.