

"Immigrant students of Hispanic descent who are bilingual and attend bilingual programs do much better academically than those who speak English only."

## BILINGUAL EDUCATION IS BENEFICIAL

Ofelia Garcia

In June 1998, California voters passed Proposition 227, a measure that ends public bilingual education programs in that state. In the following viewpoint, Ofelia Garcia contends that the implementation of Proposition 227 will prove to be a setback for California's immigrant students. Research proves that well-planned bilingual education programs that emphasize fluency in both English and Spanish enable Hispanic immigrants to excel academically. Moreover, Garcia argues, bilingual education for all students would benefit American society by enhancing communication and understanding among different ethnicities and language groups. Garcia is dean of the School of Education at the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University. She is also co-editor of *The Multilingual Apple: Languages in New York City*.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. When was the nation's first bilingual education act passed?
2. According to the author, why is it important for immigrant students to learn their first language well before learning a second language?
3. How do the changes in New York City's Latino immigrant population over the past thirty years illustrate the need for flexible bilingual education programs, in Garcia's opinion?

Reprinted from Ofelia Garcia, "California Vote Does English No Favors," *Newsday*, June 4, 1998, by permission of the author.

Civil Rights advocates warned that Proposition 209, California's 1996 ban on affirmative action programs, would have disastrous results for minorities, including closing public university doors at an alarming rate to black and Hispanic students with good potential.

And, based on recent data released by the University of California's premier campuses at Berkeley and Los Angeles, showing steep drops in admissions of black, Hispanic and Native American applicants for 1998's fall freshman class, the warning has proved to be well-founded.

And in June 1998, Californians again went to the polls, where one of the items they voted on—and passed 61 percent to 39 percent—Proposition 227, was a measure that can be expected to have similarly disastrous results for minorities. It will dismantle all bilingual public educational programs at all levels, regardless of effectiveness.

### ERODING EDUCATIONAL INCLUSIVENESS

This will not only further erode affirmative action, but also will erode the very educational foundation of inclusiveness that has strengthened the social fabric of America, especially since 1968, when the country's first bilingual education act was passed.

In fact, what has made American education distinctively strong is its inclusiveness, through which excellence is enriched by differences.

California provides an array of programs to assist students who are learning English. All schools have English as a Second Language classes, but some use English exclusively to teach while others also have bilingual instruction in which native languages are used to teach basic subjects while students learn English.

This flexibility will be expunged by Proposition 227 and replaced with a yearlong program in which all subjects will be taught in English unless a child-by-child case has been made for special treatment. In effect, all students will be obliged to learn English in one year, even though many children require much more support for learning any language, not to mention for being able to function academically in the language.

This approach, born out of dissatisfaction among a group of Latino parents with ineffective bilingual classes at a Los Angeles elementary school and quickly adopted by opportunistic but terribly misguided politicians, has nothing to do with well-established insights into human development, human intelligence, or learning theory.

Rather, it is just another political misstep on the path to educational elitism in the guise of so-called higher national standards. The danger of adopting policies designed to standardize education lies in their inability to recognize that universal prescriptions are oblivious to the needs of children as learners and persons.

#### THE BENEFITS OF BILINGUALISM

Proponents of Proposition 227 argued that bilingual education programs in California are havens for poor instruction and even poorer achievement. Yet national and international research shows that bilingualism and biliteracy have beneficial psychocognitive results.

In fact, immigrant students of Hispanic descent who are bilingual and attend bilingual programs do much better academically than those who speak English only. Taking into account a significant number of differentials, including socio-economic status, the latter group has lower performances on standardized tests, poorer school attendance and a higher drop-out rate.



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I can cite numerous studies that conclude that for children, and adults with limited schooling, the first language is an essential pedagogic tool for transmitting knowledge and information effectively. Using the first language accelerates a student's acquisition of a second language and the use of that language academically.

Just as bilingual education produces tremendous benefits for students, so too does it have a positive impact on society at large. The Yeshiva University sociolinguist Joshua Fishman and I have shown, for example, how New York City has used its multilingualism to become the global business metropolis it is today. Leaders in the European Union and other international coalitions have embraced multilingualism as one of the most important assets for success in our increasingly complex and highly challenging global economy.

#### ACADEMIC DIFFERENCES AMONG IMMIGRANTS

Proponents of Proposition 227 would rather go in a different direction than the rest of the world. They want to confine all students with language differences to an all-encompassing educational straitjacket, without regard to the academic differences of today's wave of immigrants.

For example, in New York City, Latino immigration has changed in the last 30 years.

Previously, the majority of immigrants were Puerto Rican, coming from a school system deeply influenced by that of the United States. Now, more and more immigrants are from Latin American countries with poorer educational traditions. Many of these students arrive with limited schooling and limited literacy in their native language and confront educational demands not present decades ago. They do not have sufficient first-language skills or the content knowledge necessary to develop a second language quickly and to comprehend instruction. First and foremost, they must become readers and writers; how can they do so if not taught in a language they already understand?

Proposition 227 advocates also need to understand that bilingual education is more than a language program. For a majority of schoolchildren, bilingualism and biliteracy can bring about greater understanding among ethnicities and increased knowledge of each other. In fact, bilingual education can combat inequality between different language groups.

What, then, does it say of a society that has propagated and promoted equal opportunity for its citizenry when there is a move—in the form of Proposition 227—that could lead to a complete cutoff of a significant segment of its population? Are we a nation in denial of our demographics?