

LAUSD and English Learner Policies: Unlocking Opportunities for More Equitable Education

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The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) faces a number of challenges in educating its English learner students, but it also faces some unique opportunities. One fourth (25 percent) of its students are classified as English learners (EL) in 2016-17, although this seriously underestimates the actual number of students who continue to require support in becoming academically proficient in English, as at least 65 percent of students are the children of immigrants (kidsdata.org) and therefore usually speak another language at home. Until now, the district has been seriously hampered in meeting these students' needs by a misguided law that made it difficult if not impossible to educate students in their primary language. That law (Proposition 227) has now been effectively overturned and the district is free to utilize the full range of program options to educate English learners. Of course, this will require many more bilingual teachers.

The district also faces a challenge with respect to concentrated poverty and disadvantage among its English learner students. Two thirds of LAUSD students qualified for free/reduced price lunch in 2015 (kidsdata.org). And, LAUSD suffers from extreme segregation of its students, especially those who are poor and do not yet speak English well. For example, in 2013 the typical EL student was in a high poverty school and exposed to only 3 percent non-Hispanic White students (Ayscue, 2016). EL students in the district are extremely segregated and the courts and the Congress have made it increasingly difficult to desegregate schools. A recent Supreme Court decision (*PICS*, 2007) declared it illegal to consider race in attempting to racially desegregate schools! Add to this, the city of Los Angeles suffers from an acute housing crisis, with skyrocketing rents and fewer and fewer places for low-income families to live so that overcrowding in neighborhoods as well as schools is an increasing problem for many low income families.

However, LAUSD also has some extraordinary resources. It has a rich diversity of cultures and languages. Although 74 percent of its EL students speak Spanish as their primary language, Korean, Tagalog and Armenian, among others, have a visible presence in the City's schools. LAUSD also has an unknown, but substantial numbers of teachers, counselors and administrators who are or have been credentialed bilingual teachers, and another percentage

of individuals, including paraprofessionals, who could be credentialed bilingual teachers if given the opportunity and support. LAUSD also produces hundreds of new high school graduates with the Seal of Biliteracy every year. These new graduates are prime candidates to become bilingual teachers.

Los Angeles' rich cultural and linguistic diversity can be translated into new advantages for both English learners and native English speakers and into desegregation efforts that can enrich our schools and neighborhoods. In addition, building on the attractiveness of dual language schools may help Los Angeles confront some of the problems of gentrification of immigrant neighborhoods.

A Vision for the Future

Both developmental bilingual education (which develops biliteracy for EL students) and two-way dual language programs (developing biliteracy for *both* ELs and native English speakers) have been shown conclusively to yield better outcomes in English proficiency and English language arts than English only programs for ELs (Umansky & Reardon, 2014; Valentino & Reardon, 2015; Steele et al, in press). Moreover, dual language programs also come the closest to closing achievement gaps (Genesee et al, 2006). And, of course, these programs produce bilingual and biliterate individuals with a host of advantages for all participants, including cognitive, social and economic, to name a few. For example, Latino students who are biliterate are significantly more likely to go to college, and to four year colleges than those Latino students who lose their Spanish language skills (Santibañez & Zárate, 2014).

While developmental bilingual education programs can produce superior outcomes for students with a primary language other than English, two-way dual language programs can also produce more integrated classrooms, bringing ELs and native English speakers together in one place. Nonetheless, desegregating schools inevitably means transporting some students from one place to another. We have seen that strong dual language programs attract middle class and English speaking parents who are willing to do this and who might not otherwise be candidates for desegregation efforts. However, many low-income parents are not able to transport their children to schools outside the neighborhood, providing them with fewer choices and ultimately limiting the numbers of two-way programs that can be mounted.

Although gentrification of inner city neighborhoods normally causes displacement of lower income families and exacerbates the housing crisis, the siting of strong dual language programs in such areas can help to address this problem and desegregate both neighborhoods and

schools. The key is cooperation of city planners in regulating gentrification in such a way that allows development of more expensive housing while also maintaining *a guarantee* for longer term residents (2 years or more in residence) that they can remain in their same homes without a rent increase or fear of a tear down, and maintain their children in the local school. New residents can also feel confident about enrolling their children in strong local schools with dual language programs. It is worth mentioning that many analysts (e.g., Briggs, 2006) have concluded that in order to achieve real equity in schooling outcomes, housing policies must be shaped to support education policies as housing segregation is directly linked to school segregation and quality.

The demand for dual language programs is far greater than their supply. And, one reason for this is the limited number of highly trained teachers to staff the programs. However, as noted, LAUSD has the potential to attract and train many more of these teachers.

But specific policies would need to be put in place. LCFF funds that are generated by English learners can be directed toward building the corps of bilingual teachers. Some examples are:

- (1) fund the coursework and training of aspiring bilingual teachers (e.g., paraprofessionals) already working in the schools;
- (2) provide financial incentives for already credentialed bilingual teachers to update their skills and re-enter bilingual classrooms
- (3) Build high school to college pathway programs for potential bilingual teachers, such as pre-teaching high school magnet programs that are linked to local colleges. These can also include paid internships at the high school and college levels.
- (4) In addition to regulating gentrification (and the consequent overcrowding), visionary housing policy can also include a housing guarantee for teachers. In the Los Angeles housing climate, few incentives could be greater for a potential bilingual teacher than a guarantee of good housing near where one worked. And few policies would contribute more to the well-being of the City than securing strong teachers for the public schools.

In sum, bilingual and dual language programs not only hold the promise of more effective instruction for English learners, and the myriad advantages of bilingualism and biliteracy for all students, they also can be tools to help desegregate schools and neighborhoods. The two major impediments to realizing this promise are (1) inadequate numbers of well-prepared bilingual teachers and (2) housing policy to support education policy. However, neither of these impediments is beyond our ability to address, and suggestions are provided for how we might go about doing this.

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