

The Politics of Bilingual Education in Connecticut: Dual Language Programs

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Abstract: *Recently, there has been a shortage of dual language education (DLE) programs in Connecticut. There is a huge need for DLE programs due to a disproportionate enrollment of English language learners (ELL). Certain school districts in Connecticut have been more dramatically impacted, with five districts enrolling almost half of ELL students. In order for the language rights of minority students to be protected, DLE programs must be thoughtfully structured, funded, and maintained. This paper will explore the challenges of embracing and implementing a bilingual education model ranging from policy-driven mandates, deficit funding and resources, stringent teacher certification process, and inadequate learner outcomes. Furthermore, this paper will propose strategies on how to structure and maintain sustainable bilingual education programs in Connecticut.*

Keywords: *Connecticut, Connecticut Bilingual Education Act, Dual Language Education (DLE), Two-Way Immersion (TWI), English Language Learners (ELL).*

I. INTRODUCTION

The path to providing a high-quality bilingual education in the United States has been a tumultuous one. Policymakers tend to lack an understanding of the goals and structure of dual language education (DLE) programs, and thus, these programs often result in shortages in teachers and funds. Furthermore, normalizing the failure of English Language Learner (ELL) students continue to undermine efforts in advancing a bilingual education. On both a federal and state level, bilingual education programs have faced many challenges regarding their implementation since the Bilingual Education Act.

II. HISTORICALLY RELEVANT POLICIES

2.1 The Bilingual Education Act

In 1968, Congress passed the Bilingual Education Act to address the needs of students with limited proficiency in the English language (Kim, Y., Hutchison L. A., & Winsler A., 2015). The Bilingual Education Act provided federal assistance to teach English as a second language and incorporate instruction in the native language for ELLs. However, even with the passing of the Bilingual Education Act, respect for cultural and linguistic diversity was undermined many times afterward. In 1986, Larry Pratt created English First, which is a lobbying organization to push English as the official language of the United States, eliminate multilingual policies, and ultimately reject a bilingual education (García Garrido & Fernández Álvarez, 2011). Pratt's organization lost traction over the past few decades, but the need to advocate for a bilingual education ensues.

2.2 NCLB and ESSA

Bilingual education was jeopardized again in 2001 when President W. Bush passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, which shifted educational incentives to prioritize the learning of English. Under NCLB, each state had to develop accountability schedules for all students to reach proficient levels of English, mathematics, and science and imposed penalties on schools that didn't reach this goal (García Garrido & Álvarez, 2011).

In 2015, under Obama's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), schools were required to track student progress and were accountable to uphold protections for disadvantaged and high-need students. The ESSA focused on "accountability and action to effect positive change in lowest-performing schools, where groups of students are not making progress, and where graduation rates are low over extended periods" (U.S. Department

of Education, 2017). Thus, as exemplified by NCLB and ESSA, educational policies in recent years have inadvertently put pressure on DLE or bilingual programs to focus on English. Because schools are accountable to ensure students are meeting a high academic standard, bilingual programs run the risk of being deprioritized, especially in states with high needs such as Connecticut.

III. DLE PROGRAMS IN CONNECTICUT

In recent years, it has been difficult for the state of Connecticut to implement DLE programs, particularly in school districts with a large language minority population. While there is no state legislation mandating English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, Connecticut schools and districts are mandated by federal legislation (i.e., the Civil Rights Act of 1964) to provide bilingual programs and services to English learners (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2015). In Connecticut, there is a huge need for DLE programs as there is a disproportionate enrollment of English learners; in 2022, one in every 12 students was classified as an ELL student (Thomas, 2022). Certain school districts in Connecticut have been more dramatically impacted, with five districts enrolling almost half of the influx of ELL students. The school district of Bridgeport has 1,460 more ELL students than it has ten years ago; Danbury 1,447, New Haven 1,191, Norwalk 792, and Waterbury 930 (Thomas, 2022). Despite the increasing need for DLE programs, certain criteria need to be met to create a bilingual program in the state of Connecticut. For instance, there must be a minimum of twenty students in the same language group who have been identified as ELL in a single school for all of them to receive bilingual education. (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2015).

IV. IMPLEMENTATION AND MAINTENANCE STRATEGIES

4.1 Increase Qualified Teachers

To protect minority students' language rights, the state of Connecticut should focus on strategies to increase the number of bilingual teacher positions. One of the biggest challenges of embracing a bilingual education model is having enough qualified teachers to implement it. Over the last five years, the state of Connecticut certified between 13 and 27 recent college graduates or people who moved from out of state to teach bilingual education (Thomas, 2022). Teachers from other states are also deterred from moving to Connecticut to teach due to different certification requirements. Additionally, teachers must first obtain a regular teaching certification before they can take additional courses to receive a bilingual certification (Sanchez, 2015). According to Thomas (2022), as of November 2019, there have been about 60 bilingual teachers who were not employed with addresses in Connecticut. The underlying problem with the durability of bilingual programs is the insufficient number of bilingual teachers and the reluctance of schools to pour resources into hiring more personnel. The Connecticut school district should focus its recruitment efforts on targeting these unemployed bilingual teachers and increasing the number of teaching spots available.

To combat the shortage of bilingual teachers, other Connecticut school districts can emulate the pilot program set up by the Hartford Public School District that directly recruits and certifies teachers from Puerto Rico. With over 17,000 students and with more than 20% being English language learners, Hartford Public Schools needed an innovative approach to address their teacher shortage (Brenda, 2022). Hence, they enacted a pilot program that helps teachers from Puerto Rico gain bilingual teaching certification in Connecticut by working with the Department of Education's interstate agreement to accept the completion of a teaching program from another U.S. state or territory. To incentivize teachers from Puerto Rico to move, Hartford Public School District also offered relocation services, a \$5,000 signing bonus, and membership to the Connecticut Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents. Above all, offering a competitive salary to these Puerto Rican teachers has not amassed a large financial burden to the Hartford Public School District since the base salary of a public-school teacher in Puerto Rico is a mere \$1750 per month. With this pilot program, the Hartford district was able to fill many positions in its bilingual education. Other Connecticut school districts should utilize similar recruitment strategies to fill bilingual teaching gaps.

4.2 Two-Way Immersion (TWI) Approach

After appropriately staffing their bilingual programs, the Connecticut school district should also ensure that these programs are sustainable and effective in meeting learning objectives. The Center for Research on

Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) says that the “dual-language” or two-way immersion (TWI) approach is proven to be the most effective framework to exercise bilingual education (Howard & Christian, 2002). Under the TWI framework, classes are taught in both English and another language. Enrolled students include ELLs as well as native English speakers whose parents are eager for them to learn another language. The goal of TWI is to integrate native English speakers and native speakers of another language (usually Spanish) so that students can achieve literary prowess in both languages as well as gain cross-cultural understanding. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of the TWI model for both native English speakers and native Spanish speakers. Thomas & Collier (2002) found that on average, both groups of students do better or just as well on standardized English assessments as their peers in other educational programs. In addition, students under TWI develop oral and written proficiency in two languages. Governor Ned Lamont of Connecticut hopes that the TWI model gains more traction in public school systems stating, “It isn’t an either-or, it makes them better in both languages” (Thomas, 2022). Therefore, by implementing more bilingual programs following the TWI model, the language rights of minority students are acknowledged to be of equal importance as learning English.

4.3 Continuous Political Advocation

Lastly, even with the implementation of effective bilingual programs, such programs must be continuously advocated for and appropriately funded. Bilingual programs are usually the afterthought when state funds are being allocated. In 2022, Governor Ned Lamont’s proposed state budget used \$1.3 million to fund tutors, instructional materials, and professional development for teachers in Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, and Windham, leaving just \$1.9 million in state aid dedicated to bilingual programs for nearly 44,000 English learners (Thomas, 2022). When state funds deplete, the first services to go are usually bilingual programs. Thus, it is integral to continuously advocate for the funding of bilingual programs so that this issue may be top-of-mind for policymakers. Recently in March 2022, the Multistate Association for Bilingual Education-Northeast (MABE) submitted a bill to create a seed grant program to plan and implement new dual language education programs in the state of Connecticut. Although the bill did not move forward, bilingual education funding was increased for the first time in decades (MABE website; retrieved 2023). This recent bill exemplifies that DLE program advocacy is essential for these programs to obtain more funding. By persistently promoting multilingualism and equality in educational communities, policymakers are continuously and acutely reminded of the importance of DLE programs.

V. CONCLUSION

DLE programs must be thoughtfully structured, funded, and maintained to protect the language rights of minority students. The durability and success of DLE programs are dependent on having sufficient bilingual teachers, exercising bilingual education in an effective manner (i.e., the TWI approach), and continuously advocating for sufficient funds to support such programs. To ensure that bilingual programs are of high quality, there must be strong administrative and policy support for their implementation. Providing a bilingual education that is grounded in principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion should be top of mind for Connecticut policymakers. The reluctance of Connecticut policymakers to implement DLE programs ultimately stems from a lack of understanding of the program’s goals, structure, and benefits. DLE programs can not only increase academic achievement for all students, but they can also close the opportunity gap for English learners, especially in districts with the highest percentage of diverse students.

Furthermore, a multilingual education can increase cultural understanding and knowledge-sharing, and thus, has the potential to decrease the societal bias against non-English-speaking cultures. Further areas of exploration can be focused on how DLE programs can influence and reduce certain cultural biases. Ultimately, bilingual education has the potential to positively impact society by enabling individuals to be part of a global community and have a more complex understanding of the world.

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