

Concern or Intolerance: What's Driving the Anti-Bilingual Campaign?*

Ron Unz is eager to portray Proposition 227, his plan to dismantle bilingual education, as a 'pro-immigrant' measure. So eager, in fact, that he recently repudiated an endorsement by Pete Wilson, suggesting that the governor's immigrant-bashing image might 'discredit' the initiative.

It's a clever strategy. Unz has avoided the explicit nativism of earlier English-only campaigns. No more attacks on bilingualism as un-American; no more ties to the immigration-restriction lobby. As a result, he has largely succeeded in immunizing 227 against the charge of ethnic bigotry.

Still, the initiative's appeal remains a puzzle. If its lead in the polls reveals widespread interest in improving the education of English learners, that would be welcome news. But if so:

- Why are Californians so ready to impose, against the overwhelming advice of those who actually work in classrooms, an untested approach for teaching English, a legal mandate that would be very difficult to fix if it fails?
- Why are Californians so enthusiastic about a top-down mandate that would sacrifice all local control and most parental choice, two of the most cherished principles in American education?
- Why are Californians so willing to believe the worst about bilingual education and bilingual educators, on the flimsiest of evidence?

To understand the causes, we need to look more closely at the symptoms.

Buying the Big Lie

'Bilingual education in California has been a serious failure,' says Governor Wilson (1998). In that verdict he is seconded by all four major candidates to succeed him,¹ along with virtually every pundit and editorial board in the state, although most of them also oppose 227. This dire assessment seems to have entered the conventional wisdom. Yet it's unsupported by solid research or reasoning.

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Ron Unz claims 'the current system' has a '95% failure rate,' based (loosely) on the proportion of English learners who are not 'redesignated' as fluent in English each year (English for the Children, 1997). That's a nonsensical standard. Jaime Escalante, the legendary math teacher who joined Unz's campaign, admits that his own son needed three years to learn English.

What truly defies rationality, however, is blaming students' 'failure' on bilingual education, a program available to less than a third of English learners in California. By Unz's logic, it would be more reasonable to blame the shortage of such classrooms.

And forget the need for experienced teachers, strong principals, adequate resources, and a challenging curriculum – all factors that are associated with success for English-speaking students. No one is clamoring to tackle these issues with a statewide ballot initiative. The critics of bilingual education seem to assume that, for the 'problem' kids, language is all that really matters.

Rejecting the Research

Bilingual education is not teaching English fast enough, the governor insists. But again, there is simply no evidence to confirm this gut feeling – and a great deal to contradict it. A major federal study (Ramírez *et al.*, 1991) found that well-designed, well-implemented bilingual programs do not slow down English learners. On the contrary, they enable children to 'catch up to their English-proficient peers,' says the study's lead author, David Ramírez of California State University, Long Beach.

Research also shows that such results take time. English learners in San Francisco needed 4.6 years of special programs, on average, to master English, according to Ramírez's latest study (1998), released this month. After that point, they equaled or surpassed the academic performance of all other groups, including native English speakers.

Unz (1997a) doesn't argue with the research, because he can't; he merely ridicules it as 'academic dogma.' But what's remarkable here is not one politician's descent into demagoguery. It's how otherwise responsible Californians have failed to challenge such tactics. Indeed, many have joined in bashing the science.

A frequent complaint is that researchers study only the 'good' programs and thus cannot demonstrate that bilingual education works in all schools. In other words, the critics demand proof that students will do well even when taught poorly, a standard of success no other pedagogy is asked to meet.

By contrast, ‘sheltered English immersion,’ the one-size-fits-all method that Proposition 227 would impose, has met with almost no public scrutiny. Unz promises it will teach all children English in 180 school days. Yet there is no evidence that this approach has ever worked before. In the 1991 Ramírez study, only 4% of students reached English fluency after a year in all-English programs; after four years, a third were still limited-English-proficient.

Arguing by Anecdote

To counter such findings, Unz points to Gloria Matta Tuchman, co-sponsor of the 227 campaign, who boasts of overnight success in the 1st grade immersion class she teaches. Yet, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, not a single one of Tuchman’s students was reclassified as fluent in English last year (Merl, 1998).

Unz also relies on anecdote to argue that Latinos don’t really want bilingual education. He cites a 1996 protest at the Ninth Street School in Los Angeles, where a group of immigrant parents pulled their children out of school, allegedly because they were denied all-English instruction.² Whether it happened this way or not – the facts are still disputed – the incident involved a minority of parents in a single school out of 8,000 schools in California. Yet massive news coverage of this single event implies a groundswell of Latino opposition to bilingual education. Meanwhile, parent protests against decisions to drop native-language programs, including a recent school boycott in Santa Barbara, have received limited attention from journalists.

To be sure, immigrants want their kids to learn English without undue delay, and some appear ready to buy 227 when it’s sold as a way to speed up the process. Yet the same polls show strong parental support for bilingual instruction: 88% in a recent survey by Spanish media in Los Angeles (Rivera, 1998).

Indeed, schools are struggling to keep up with parental demand – not for all-English instruction, but for bilingual programs. The California Department of Education receives numerous complaints each year from parents unable to get bilingual instruction for their children, says state official Norm Gold. He adds: ‘Records going back over more than a decade show that there have been no complaints alleging that parents have been unable to remove their children from bilingual instruction.’

Slandering the Teachers

One of the saddest features of this debate has been the *ad hominem* assault on bilingual educators. Unz (1997b) claims you can’t believe anything they

say because their 'real goal is to keep the hundreds of millions of dollars going into [their] program.'

Let's consider the assumption, which is rarely if ever challenged, that bilingual education is terribly expensive. California gives school districts about \$250 per limited-English student to defray the added costs of teaching them. That money is provided regardless of the type of instruction; less than 30% of it reaches bilingual classrooms. While English learners make up 25% of California students, bilingual education accounts for only one-half of one percent of state expenditures on the public schools.

Hardly a gravy train, contrary to the media stereotype. The insinuations don't stop there. Bilingual educators are portrayed as greedy and less dedicated to their students; their field is vilified as a Hispanic 'jobs program.' As it happens, a majority of California's bilingual teachers come from English-language backgrounds. You wouldn't know it from reading the newspapers.

Unspoken Assumptions

Throughout the campaign, evidence supporting the effectiveness of bilingual programs has been belittled or ignored by news media, while negative portrayals are often accepted without question. What's driving this strange debate in which normal standards of proof no longer apply?

Clearly, there are unspoken assumptions here. We debate the language of instruction because political realities forbid a comprehensive effort to improve schooling for poor children, whatever language they happen to speak. It's easier and less expensive to attack a scapegoat such as bilingual education.

We pay lip service to the value of foreign-language skills in today's global economy, while devaluing and even fearing these same skills at home. Ethnic languages can be divisive, the thinking goes. Better not encourage them with government subsidies.

We talk about raising academic standards for all, while expecting very little of language-minority students, except that they learn English. There's a suspicion these kids can't even manage that unless we suppress their native tongues.

Most Californians who are inclined to eliminate bilingual education have no mean-spirited intent. Nevertheless, they would risk the life chances of 1.5 million children on a radical, unproven alternative. They should ask themselves, sincerely, in good conscience: Would I vote yes on 227 if my own child were the guinea pig?

Notes

1. Democrats Gray Davis, Jane Harman, and Al Checchi, and Republican Dan Lungren.
2. For more details about this incident, see pp. 48–49.