



Testimony of
Rose Reyes, Bilingual Educator

Windham Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 1577, AFL-CIO

Education Committee
February 15, 2013

HB 6384 AN ACT CONCERNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Greetings Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and honorable members of the Committee on Education. I am writing about HB 6384 Act Concerning English Language Learners which requires boards of education to develop plans and strategies to reduce the identification of English Language Learners with reading deficiencies as students requiring special education services. I support HB 6384.

Up to this year I have been a Bilingual Educator for 10 years in Windham; one year in Waterbury. At the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education, I earned a Master's degree in Bilingual instruction and curriculum. This year I have been "repurposed" to provide "Bilingual support" to grades K, 1, 2: 45 students in all.

I applaud the Committee's effort in addressing a systemic condition that possibly perpetuates the underachievement of Connecticut's Emergent Bilingual students. There are aspects I wish the Committee to consider as they assess the potential affect of this bill.

A major concern I want to raise is the point of origin of this issue. With the thirty month limit we have placed on Bilingual Education, we have in effect created a system of underachievement that lends itself to tracking of a disproportionate amount of Emergent Bilingual students in our state into Special Education.

Case in point: In my district the public school enrollment is 60% Latino; 35% of those homes are non-English speaking and over 25% of the student population can be identified as Emergent Bilingual. There has been a steady increase in this population for at least ten years. Yet, instead of embracing the potential and resource of the students, we have identified 34.2% of the Emergent Bilingual student population as students with disabilities. Yet the state had identified only 7.3% of this population in need of Special Education.

In a professional development session we discovered that in 2010 Latino students had a Relative Risk Index of 2.14 in learning disabilities and a 2.62 in Speech-Language Impairments. An RRI between 1.5 to 2 warrants concern of disproportionality. Of percentages we found that 30.6% of our Emergent Bilingual students were referred to Speech-Language and 18.4% of our Emergent Bilingual students were labeled learning disabled!

This is problematic these days with all the substantive research regarding native language literacy and second language acquisition. We have not evaluated the legitimacy of a thirty month Bilingual Education program and the lack of proper Language Transition Support. It has already been established that ESL (English as a Second Language) programming is inappropriate for early literacy of Emergent Bilingual students and immersion with the objective of facilitating critical thinking skills (remember the Unz Proposition 227 in California, 1998) simply doesn't work.

As we have recently, effectively dismantled Bilingual Education in Windham (a program that uses and develops the student's native language and culture to help the student acquire academic skills, positive self-concept skills and develop English proficiency. The model is based on research which asserts that to be successful in the mainstream, Emergent Bilingual students must continue to develop cognitive and linguistic skills in their native language, while they are learning English. This approach will allow students to successfully transfer those abilities, skills and strategies to their new language. A student is fully transitioned into the mainstream curriculum program after he/she has reached a sufficient level of proficiency in all four domains of English to ensure equal access to the instruction in the mainstream classroom.) we can only anticipate an increase in such inappropriate referrals to Special Education especially in the Speech and Language Impairments category.

This is quite possible because the bill before us focuses on the science of English reading and not the science of language acquisition for monolingual instructors. Also, there is no uniform adoption of Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol training within the state and instructors have not mastered interpreting Language Assessment System scores which is a state sanctioned and mandated assessment for English learning readiness. When a student exits from Bilingual Education (ideally after year five) they should have an instructor trained in acquisition and SIOP.

Bilingual Education should trump all English reading interventions because it is through Bilingual Education that we can build upon an Emergent Bilingual student's native language to facilitate higher order thinking more readily. Local boards of education are stymied by the thirty month limit on Bilingual Education. Exiting because of time and not readiness does not assure the ability to learn in English only. An early push with English phonics interventions will produce parrots. Without native language literacy development appropriate referrals will be problematic because we cannot tell if the issue is English language and knowledge or a cognitive ability. Here's the additional snag: when the students are denied native language literacy they will not have the foundation needed to transfer skills for English reading. Supporting native language

literacy will produce the critical thinkers needed for the future of our state. The Emergent Bilingual student will thrive and experience success. I believe an increase in time for quality Bilingual Education would reduce the representation of Emergent Bilingual students in Special Education case loads and there would be little need to “intervene”. I look forward to the day when Connecticut can offer Honors Bilingual classes.

On February 9th, in *The New York Times*, David Kirp wrote about the Union City, New Jersey school district with 75% of its student population living in non-English speaking homes and impoverished. The state threatened to take control. Now its achievement scores are close to the statewide average and its graduation rate is 89.5 which was ten percentage points higher than the national average. How was this accomplished?

- Teacher buy-in to pull through
- In house support (mentors, coaches from within system)
- Universal preschool for 3/4 year olds
- High expectations
- Rich, engaging execution of curriculum (“learning by doing”)
- Parents buy-in to pull through
- No “Pizzazz”: no charters, no TFA’s, no thematic magnets, no closings
- Students became truly bilingual being taught how to read and write in their native language even before tackling English.

I think we can circumvent the problem of over-representation by addressing the points of concern presented today and considering an investment rather than divestment in native language literacy. Thank you.