



Testimony of  
**Stephen McKeever, First Vice President**  
AFT Connecticut, AFL-CIO

Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission  
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### ***BILINGUAL EDUCATION***

Good afternoon Chairman Cruz and members of the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission. My name is Steve McKeever and I am the First Vice President of AFT Connecticut, a diverse state federation of local unions representing more than 14,000 teachers and paraprofessionals in Connecticut's public schools. Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts on behalf of our members today.

AFT Connecticut applauds the Commission's effort to address the important issue of bilingual education and supports its legislative agenda to establish a bureau of English Language Learners within the State Department of Education and to expand the state requirement to provide bilingual instruction from thirty months, to five to seven years.

Bilingual education 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 allows 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 English to ensure equal access to instruction in the mainstream classroom.

Some make the mistake to assume that once a student can converse in English, he or she will naturally perform well academically in English. But in fact, interpersonal communications skills and cognitive learning skills are two very different things. That is why bilingual instruction must be extended beyond 30 months. Exiting because time is up, rather than when readiness is achieved, does not assure the ability to learn in English.

Too often, being bilingual is seen as a liability, rather than an asset. Instead of embracing the potential of emerging bilingual students, they have, in many cases, been inappropriately identified as students with disabilities or students in need of special education. The thirty-month limit on bilingual education contributes to these unwarranted designations. Without native language literacy development we cannot tell if the issue is English language knowledge or a cognitive disability.

Supporting native language literacy through extended bilingual education will produce the critical thinkers needed for the future of our state. AFT Connecticut stands with you in your effort to extend the statutory minimum.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.