Testimony about Bilingual education in Connecticut- New Britain Experience

Violet Jiménez Sims
violetsims@yahoo.com

I am a parent of two New Britain (NB) public school students, former ESL/Spanish teacher at NBHS, and graduate of UConn's 6th Year Program in Bilingual/Multicultural Ed with concentration in TESOL. Two years ago I presented testimony concerning issues with ELL education in our state in front of the English Language Learner Task force. Things have only gotten worse since then, but I'm hopeful that this time, people's voices are heard and some action is taken. We're at a point where hope might be all we've got.

Since the CSDE has abandoned its responsibility of overseeing implementation of bilingual education in our state, the effects have been devastating, particularly in lower-income communities with large ELL populations. I don't want to believe that this is purposeful discrimination, but it's hard not to think so when a disadvantaged sector of our population's rights are being ignored and violated.

There are many research-based methods through which bilingual education can be delivered that create bilingual/bi-literate/bicultural individuals rather than monolinguals who forget their first language. Research shows that properly structured bilingual programs with varying degrees of native language instruction and dual language 50/50 models are best in achieving the goal of true bilingualism (see sources below).

A bit of history: New Britain once boasted model bilingual education, often observed to be emulated by other districts. They offered bilingual programs in Polish and Spanish, where students learned core subjects with native language support, as well as received direct English language instruction in vocabulary and grammar (ESL courses). They also ran a successful dual-language Spanish/English program at Diloreto Magnet School (Diloreto) where native English and native Spanish speakers supported each other in learning language and culture, and both groups would eventually become bi-literate. Note that the dual language methodology is used world-wide with overwhelming benefits.

I watched the bilingual program, specifically at the high school, dwindle over the past 7 years as bilingual Spanish and Polish teachers either retired or were non-renewed, and were never replaced. ESL courses continued, but native language support was minimized, and now only exists in a few Spanish bilingual math courses (which not all qualifying students are enrolled in). On paper, however, a comprehensive bilingual program exists, providing misleading information when low standardized test data is analyzed.

The dual-language program at Diloreto was sabotaged around 2008 when the bilingual program at several elementary schools was eliminated in an effort to save money and, without a vote from the BOE or parental/community involvement, the

students from those programs were pushed into Diloreto. This completely changed the dynamic of a voluntary, successful, competitive program. Upon its predictable "failure"; the program was eliminated rather than repaired.

Both of my daughters were becoming bi-literate in the dual language program before it was dismantled in 2012 when a new superintendent took over in New Britain. This was one of his first actions before also eliminating bilingual education throughout the district, and replacing them with English Language Development (ELD) – a grammar-based English only approach. The elimination of bilingual education has not been a subtle move as the word "bilingual" has been clearly eliminated from everyone's title who dealt with the department previously known as "Bilingual and ESL", and now known as "English Language Development". Although the district leaders claim that this is a research-based methodology, the reality is that there is no empirical research supporting it, and what is being considered "research" is data (essentially, a sales pitch) created by the ELD program's creator, Kevin Clark. However, what independent empirical research does show is that in other places using ELD little to no progress in core subjects (see references) has been made, and in some cases students performed more poorly after the implementation of ELD. In Texas, the district that the NB superintendent came from, the program as abandoned immediately upon his leaving also due to unfavorable results in the long term.

As a teacher in NB I was obligated to teach ELD, and got the impression that strategies were being made up as we went along. Teachers attended training about once a month, and any questions not pertaining to the immediate topic were quickly dismissed with the excuse that we'd learn about it next time, and had too much to cover at the moment. However, there was always plenty of time (since I am very inquisitive I got to hear about it often) to lecture anyone who questioned any of the methods, whether they applied to our population, or voice negative experiences we had in the classroom. Most people learned quickly to be quiet, listen, and "get on the bus" as the consultants referred to the process of being on board with their ideas.

I had parents at conference question how students who are spending most of their day learning English grammar were getting core subjects and electives, to which I was unsure of how to respond. I also had some confused parents whose children had been placed in mainstream classes years before, and had previously passed the LAS Links Test (used to meet state requirements for exiting ELL students); to which I had to explain that the ELD entrance test is neither aligned with nor takes into consideration LAS Links. Did I mention LAS Links is what is administered to meet state reporting guidelines?

My own children's education has been disrupted, many more students in the district are suffering through a faulty methodology, teachers are stressed but fear speaking out, and my own career trajectory has changed since I left the district that's in my own community and that I taught at for 7 years rather than contribute to the mis-education of a population that I care deeply about.

I urge the legislators to be the voice of the people who elected them, and demand clearly defined bilingual education with adequate native language support at all grade levels, and for all children. Specify that English language immersion programs are NOT bilingual education, as CT is not an English-only state. Currently, only some affluent communities and highly funded magnet schools teach a second language in the early grades, but all children deserve to be competitive in the 21st century. Also, as more schools open throughout the state, a focus should be on creating dual language programs (50/50 model). We should be expanding this sector, rather than closing or drastically altering the few we have. The rest of the world acknowledges the advantages of dual language education, why should CT willingly fall behind?

Reference

Baker, C. (2006). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism* (4th Ed.). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Bin Mohamed Ali, H. (2009). Making the Transition from Non-Native Speaker to Near-Native Speaker Teachers of English: Facing Globalization Challenges. *Online Submission*, Retrieved from ERIC database.

Curtain, H. & Dahlberg, C.A. (2004). *Languages and children: Making the match* (3rd Ed.). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

Gass, S.M., & Selinker, L. (2008). *Second language acquisition* (3rd Ed.). New York: Routledge.

The Education of English Language Learners in Arizona: A History of Underachievement

http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=16601

Arizona's English immersion program could be unlawful

http://azcapitoltimes.com/news/2011/02/23/arizona%E2%80%99s-english-immersion-program-could-be-unlawful/

Implementing Structured English Immersion (SEI) in Arizona: Benefits, Costs, Challenges, and Opportunities

http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/language-minority-students/implementing-structured-english-immersion-sei-in-arizona-benefits-costs-challenges-and-opportunities/?searchterm=ELL