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Connecticut's Students Learning English Perform Poorly Compared To Nation

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When Brian Gonzalez, an eighth-grader at Windham Middle School, arrived last year from Puerto Rico, he knew very little English.

He was pulled out of the classroom for one period a day, he says, to work with a teacher who helped him learn English and to understand his assignments, but it wasn't enough.

When the fall arrived, Brian's English language skills were weak enough that he was placed in a class for "new arrivals" with a bilingual teacher who provided more assistance with his developing English and with understanding his work.

"It was great," Brian said through a translator. But a few months into the semester, Gonzalez's English was rated good enough for him to be transferred into a mainstream, ordinary classroom for some subjects where, he says now, he is once again floundering.

With the help of a translator, Brian explained that often "the teachers talk too fast," and he doesn't understand the work assigned to him. If he doesn't know what's assigned, he can't do the work and gets a zero, he said.

Providing students who don't speak English with enough support in their native language so that they don't lose academic ground, but with enough exposure to English so that they learn it quickly, can be a delicate balancing act.

Advocates for those students who are called English Language Learners say that Connecticut doesn't have that balance right and point to the students' abysmal performance on a 2013 national test as evidence. Among students learning English nationwide, Connecticut's English Language Learners had the lowest average scale score in the country on the eighth-grade math test and the smallest percentage of students — only 7 percent — who achieved at or above the "basic" level on the test.

In addition, the achievement gap between Connecticut's students learning English and those who are native speakers on the eighth-grade math test was the widest in the nation. The average national gap was a 41-point difference in test scores; Connecticut's gap was 64 points.

On the reading test for eighth-graders, the achievement gap was the second-largest, behind Massachusetts by a fraction of a point.

Also, Connecticut's four-year high school graduation rate for students learning English is significantly lower than for native English speakers. In 2013, it was 63.8 percent for English language learners, compared with 86.6 percent for everyone else.

Advocates Want Improvements

With those statistics in mind and with the percentage of English Language Learners in Connecticut public schools climbing — up nearly 50 percent from 2002 to the last school year — advocates for bilingual education have set out to make some improvements in the upcoming legislative session.

"The appalling data on [English Language Learners] outcomes speaks for itself and disproportionately affects Latino students," said Rick Cruz, chairman of the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission. "While the state's K-12 enrollment is declining, the number of ELL students is increasing and now accounts for 6 percent of the K-12 population. Our leaders must grasp that the state's future workforce has different educational needs than what has been provided in the past."

The commission is making recommendations that include new legislation to increase the maximum number of months for bilingual instruction from 30 — the current limit — to 60.

They also want to see the elimination of a 20-student minimum requirement — that's 20 students who are learning English and share the same native language — before a school must provide bilingual instruction and before a district can receive state funding for that instruction. They further want to eliminate a one-year delay before districts receive state funding once they have met the 20-student threshold.

In addition, the commission wants to see an increase in funding for bilingual education. The state spends \$1.9 million on bilingual education, which commission members say is not adequate. They also want to see students allowed to take standardized tests in their native language.

Werner Oyanadel, executive director for the commission, said, "We don't want to be the last state in the country with this achievement gap. By putting the efforts back into these reforms, we will be able to make some strides."

Dianna Roberge-Wentzell, chief academic officer at the state Department of Education, said: "We are certainly concerned with the gap for English Language Learners. ... We are concerned with all of our gaps and equity issues."

If a student's ability in English isn't sufficient after the 30 months, a state education official said that districts must provide transitional services that could include English as a second language, tutoring or other programs taught in English. In addition, the state official said that federal funding is available for certain services for schools with fewer than 20 students who are learning English. Also, the official said that struggling districts can obtain additional funds for bilingual education through the state's Alliance District and Commissioner's Network programs.

Desire To Do Away With Limits

Many educators are adamant about the need to strengthen bilingual programs for students learning English and would like to do away with any limit on the time that students are allowed to stay in a bilingual classroom.

"Some students are ready after 30 months, but most are not," said Angela Fragosa, who provides bilingual support for students at Hanover Elementary School in Meriden. "It would be nice to be able to say to that child, 'You need another year in this program. We are going to continue working with you until you are ready to exit.' We need as educators to be able to make those decisions ... without a state requirement."

Such educators point to research that shows that although an English-language learning student might acquire conversational fluency within a couple of years, it usually takes five to seven years to acquire the deeper understanding of the language needed for challenging academic work.

"They may have the social English they need to get by," said Ann Anderberg, an associate professor and specialist in bilingual and bicultural education at Eastern Connecticut State University. "But more time is needed to bring it to a level where they can use English in a very demanding academic atmosphere."

She said that in the first few years, students "learn a lot of interpersonal communication" and may "look and sound like their peers, but if they don't get the right instruction for the last three to five years of development, they will always struggle with reading, with comprehension, with getting the nuances, with expository writing, with a higher level of comprehension."

These educators question transitional programs that focus solely on teaching children English and getting them mainstreamed as quickly as possible.

Besides pointing to research that shows that students will do better in English if they have a firm understanding of their own language, the educators say it is shortsighted not to strengthen a student's performance in both languages.

"I would think, ideally, we would all want to have the opportunity to pursue more than one language," said Anderberg. "It's a benefit culturally, socially ..." and can be a resource for "civic and economic vibrancy" in Connecticut.

'It's Not The Same World'

Although critics might talk about grandparents who arrived in the U.S. and were plunked down into an ordinary classroom and learned English with no extra help, Xae Reyes, a UConn professor of education and Latino Studies, points out that often the jobs available in the mid-20th century were factory jobs that did not require a nuanced understanding of English.

Now, Reyes said, it's "much more complex. It's not the same world. ... A person has to be able to carry their weight and have conversations and be able to promote their ideas."

It's also important, Reyes said, that both languages are seen in a positive light. If a native language is devalued, "you are creating a divide in the home."

"For kids not to be able to speak to parents and grandparents: You are creating a divide at home," Reyes said. She said children can develop a "dismissive attitude" about their native language and culture.

"I've seen kids say: 'Don't speak to me in Spanish.' It's like an embarrassment to them," Reyes said. "They have been made to feel it's a negative. Kids [may] see you as someone who has less value because you don't speak English."

In Windham, Josue Lopez, who taught Brian Gonzalez in the "new arrivals" class, said he is a "really, really bright kid," but Lopez said that he was "extremely worried" about Brian and other students who might not be ready for the mainstream.

In a statement, Patricia Garcia, Windham's new superintendent of schools, said she is "working closely with my staff to find effective solutions to support our [English Language Learning] population. Windham does have some areas of weakness that we must address. Under the district's new leadership ... we are making this a priority.

"The community has voiced concerns about [English Language Learners] services in Windham Schools and we are already implementing changes in response," Garcia said.

Karen Lapuk, who is the district's new director of bilingual programs, said that Brian has only been out of the "new arrivals" class for a short time and she thinks that he will soon become more comfortable in the mainstream classes.

Lapuk said, "There is definitely that fine line between comfort and stability in your own language and taking the risk to improve and to try new things."

The Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission is holding a forum at the state Capitol on Jan. 13 on the status of education for students learning English. More information is available here:

http://www.cga.ct.gov/lprac/docs/2014/LPRAC_FlyerELLBilingualForum.pdf

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