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English-only immersion debated for schools

Politicians, families, educators seeking common ground

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In November 2000, Arizona voters approved the most restrictive English-only education law in the country and prohibited textbooks, materials, bulletin boards, or teaching in any language but English.

Two years later, voters reinforced their message by electing a state schools chief who promised tougher enforcement of the new law.

The law nearly eliminated bilingual education programs that had been widely used in Arizona schools, classes with specially trained teachers that combined instruction in Spanish and English.

To help schools comply with the new law, the state developed a model English-only immersion program.

Under the model, English-learners would be placed in English immersion classes of five to 15 students with a specially trained teacher and a teaching assistant. State planners said most students would learn enough English in one year to keep up with their peers in regular classes by their second year.

To be prepared for English-learners moving into regular classes, the state requires all teachers to complete a 15-hour workshop in English-only teaching methods by August. And under the model, schools would track students who tested out of the English-learner programs and provide tutoring and other help for those who fell behind.

After six years, few schools have been able to establish that model. Schools say they can't afford the cost. The state can't afford to offer technical guidance or much oversight. And many teachers remain lukewarm on the entire idea.

So instead of a uniform approach, the state's English-only immersion programs are different from classroom to classroom and district to district.

In January 2000, before the vote on English-only schools, a federal court had already decided Arizona was not spending enough on English-learner programs. That court battle has continued for six years, through the vote, through a couple of studies and through a contentious Legislature.

So far, under orders from a frustrated federal judge, the state is approaching \$1.5 million in daily fines while the governor and lawmakers continue to fight over what the state needs to spend to make English-learner programs work.

The daily fines began Jan. 25 at \$500,000, increased Friday to \$1 million and will hit \$1.5 million in March while politicians try to fix the problem. If the Legislature adjourns without a solution, the fines will reach \$2 million a day.

There is one thing, however, the different parties appear to agree on: Arizona needs to create an English-only education system that works.

Each side has its own twist on a plan, but the basic outline is the same. The state needs to create a variety of English immersion programs and send technical teams to schools to launch them.

Then, it needs to track students' progress and make changes to any program not helping English-learners keep up with their peers.

Beyond the basic plan, here is the status of English-learner issues today through the eyes of key players.

State: Politics and money

The battle among the court, Arizona legislators and Gov. Janet Napolitano is about how much extra money schools need to teach English-learners and how it should be distributed. Beneath the surface it is also about clashing political ideologies, illegal immigration and a November election.

For example, Republican lawmakers, who run both the state Senate and House, want the funding plan to include tax breaks for businesses that help pay for English-learners to transfer from public to private schools. Napolitano has twice vetoed that idea. The House did eventually approve a funding bill for English-language learning, backed by Republican leaders, that did not include corporate tax credits for private schools.

Republican lawmakers also want schools to use federal money earmarked for children living in poverty before they ask the state for more to teach English-learners. The governor has rejected that idea, too, saying the state is responsible for funding the programs.

Lawmakers and Napolitano are aware of growing concerns among state voters that illegal immigration is out of control and responsible for filling classrooms with kids who can't speak English.

In December, Arizona schools chief Tom Horne, citing Pew Research Center statistics, asked the federal government to reimburse the state \$750 million a year for the cost of educating 125,000 children who are in the state illegally. But a Pew analyst said half of those children were born here and are U.S. citizens.

To Horne, that was splitting hairs. "It's the federal government's fault the undocumented parents crossed over, and had they not done so, we would not be presented with these students," he said.

State Senate President Ken Bennett, a Prescott Republican, said he has an obligation to voters to turn the current "mish-mash" of programs into a structured system that will teach English in a year or two. That was the promise that sold the ballot initiative six years ago.

Becky Hill is education adviser to Napolitano. She said the governor is most interested in tracking progress of students in any new program and making changes if the program isn't working.

"The governor wants schools to use what programs are within the letter of the law and that work," Hill said. "Then replicate them."

Rep. Linda Lopez, a Tucson Democrat, said the state should turn to the schools for

direction. Schools have monolingual kids arriving throughout the year and at all grade levels. Some children speak survival English; others can't read in their own languages. Each school may need a variety of programs to help all the kids.

"People want to paint English-language-learner kids with the same brush," Lopez said. "You can't do that."

Republican lawmakers wanted the Arizona Department of Education, run by Horne, to develop the wider variety of model programs. They did not want the 11-member State Board of Education, with its growing number of Napolitano appointees, to take the lead. Now, they've agreed to a task force but continue to wrangle about who appoints members of the task force.

Schools: Different directions

Many schools don't have the money to follow the state's model program. Some aren't sure they would want to even if they could.

And the idea of separating English-learners all day from the rest of the students seems for many schools too close to discrimination. Many schools prefer to keep language-learners in regular classes with a specially trained teacher or pull them out for shorter periods of language classes.

"It's not a good practice to segregate like that," said Mona Arredondo, Tolleson Elementary District's language learning coordinator. "I understand the state's point, but it's hard for students to learn that way."

Tolleson blends all levels of English-learners into regular classes convinced that students just learning English need to listen to and talk to children who are better English speakers. Teachers often pair fluent English speakers with students who are struggling and encourage them to work together to solve problems and create projects.

All of Sunnyslope High School's 150 English-learners are in the state's model program.

In their first year, the north Phoenix school puts them with a highly trained teacher and teacher's aide in a small classroom of fewer than a dozen children, all at the same level of English fluency. In their second year, most are ready to attend a reading class where they spend their time in groups of eight learning English from a computer program and a teacher. Those who need it receive extended one-on-one tutoring.

Principal John Croteau said most of his English-learners not only graduate, they go to college, even if they must stay in high school an extra year.

The advantage at Sunnyslope is money. Like other schools, Sunnyslope gets about \$350 in state money for each English-learner. The district also receives \$98 in federal money for such learners.

But in the early 1980s, Glendale Union High School District settled two civil rights complaints over English-learner programs by agreeing to levy an extra property tax. That tax now nets the district about \$3 million a year, or an extra \$2,338 for each of the district's 1,283 English-learners.

Irene Frklich has directed Mesa Public Schools' English-learner program for 20 years and is a longtime supporter of English-only immersion classrooms. What shocks her about the state's model is the suggestion that English-learners could be

put into regular classrooms with teachers who have little training beyond a 15-hour workshop.

Mesa is the largest school district in the state and requires that teachers for the English-learner program have a special degree or "endorsement." Teachers earn an endorsement by taking certain college courses that prepare them to teach children a new language while teaching history and science. Today, the district has 600 specially trained teachers. Frklich expects an additional 100 next school year.

Frklich calls the state's requirement of a 15-hour workshop to prepare teachers a shortcut, a waste of time and money.

"What do you learn in two days?" Frklich asked. "Would you send your child who needed special education to a special-education teacher with two days' training?"

Teachers: Language struggles

Restricted by law and limited by a lack of money, Arizona teachers work within English-only parameters. Many have doubts and wish for other options, but in the meantime, they use a variety of techniques to reach English-learners.

Deer Valley Unified District teacher Donna Newport, 42, teaches second grade at north Phoenix's Constitution Elementary. Three of her students don't understand English at all, two more understand at an intermediate level, and three students can read English but not comprehend what they read. The remaining 15 students grew up speaking English.

At her school, English-learners leave her class for up to 90 minutes each day to attend a smaller class where the teacher will speak a little Spanish.

Over the past few weeks, her children have been learning about weather, and using pictures, sounds and actions to create thunder and rain, and trips outside to look at and label clouds.

Even under the English-only rules, Newport said, "I truly believe I'm providing them with the best second-grade education." But she is worried.

When she taught this weather unit to students who grew up speaking English, it took about two to three weeks. In a class where eight of 23 students are struggling to understand English, it will take five.

In a recent geometry class at Tolleson's Arizona Desert Elementary, Eva Gómez sat in front of a graph and asked her fifth-grade students to describe a line on the graph that goes on forever. The class threw hands in the air, slowly spread them apart and made the sound, "Hummm," in unison, as their imaginary lines went on to infinity. When Gómez called on Philip to demonstrate a point on a graph, he punched the air with his finger and clucked with his tongue to show her his imaginary point.

"I'm trying to put a lot of movement into it so they can feel it, hear it, visualize it," Gómez said about her math lesson. With no teaching assistant, she works separately with students who are lagging behind, while she gives those ahead of the lesson independent work.

"It's hard," she said, "but it's not impossible."

Families: Trying to fit in

Back in the fall of 2000 when Arizona voters passed the English-only proposition, many Hispanic parents voted for English-only. For them, learning English was one of the most important things their children could do. Those in favor of the proposition saw it as way to speed the learning.

At the same time, many of Arizona's English-learners come from poor families. For most, Spanish is their first language and remains so at home. Many parents do not have the financial means nor the English skills to help their children learn, be it with computers or books or talking through a homework assignment.

Jorge Solis, newly arrived from Mexico, stood five minutes outside the door of his seventh-grade classroom, too frightened to open the door to his first class in a new country. His mother's words spun through his head: "You have to learn English to be successful." They gave him the courage to finally open the door, he said, and it was his classmates who helped him learn English.

Today, he is a senior at Sunnyslope and ready to graduate in May. But Spanish is still spoken at home, and his mother now admonishes him to be proud of his Mexican heritage.

"I say to my son, at my house only speak Spanish," Maria Solis said in slow but solid English. "And when I go to learn English and when I understand English, I will speak English with you."

Vanessa Abarca, 19, is a sophomore at Glendale Community College and a fourth-generation Glendale resident. But her first language is Spanish, as is her 8-year-old brother's. Everyone in her house speaks Spanish. It's an important way the younger generations stay close to her grandparents.

Before kindergarten, Abarca knew a little English from her aunts and cartoons. Her Glendale elementary school wanted to put her into a bilingual class, but her mother objected. Her mother said she'd take care of Spanish, English was the school's responsibility. Abarca is grateful to her mom and promotes the "sink or swim" English immersion method for all language learners.

Abarca said she understands that many Latino kids, including English-learners, lag behind their peers and drop out. But she hesitates to blame that on language.

"It could be a lot of things," Abarca said. "Problems they're having at home or the income of the family."

Glendale mother Norma Alvarez calls all the debate about how best to educate English learners "an insult."

"I guess we're dumb and we don't learn fast," said Alvarez, an administrator for Glendale.

Alvarez, who spent 2000 campaigning for English-only classrooms, said there should be no distinction between children who know English and those who don't. There never was when she grew up in Glendale.

"You're putting more money into it because you believe this little kid can't learn like others," Alvarez said. "If you treat him differently from everyone else, he'll always feel different."

Former state legislator and lobbyist Alfredo Gutierrez is now a radio talk-show host and businessman. He grew up in the small mining town of Miami with teachers who taped his lips shut if he spoke Spanish.

"Some of us succeeded, but we're the small minority," he said. "We all remember the kids we left behind."

When Gutierrez recalls the faces of those children who weren't as lucky, the debate is no longer about one side vs. another. Many children thrive in an English-only environment, but others fade.

"We want to make sure our kids make it, and immersion is good for a lot of kids," Gutierrez said. "But you can't impose it on every youngster. Some kids need a longer bridge."

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