Bilingual Education in Texas: Exploring Best Practices

Final Report

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Executive Summary

In the state of Texas, the number of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students is increasing rapidly, as is the number of bilingual students. Over the past ten years, the LEP population has consistently outgrown the total population in Texas schools. If demographic trends continue, this population will be the majority of students in three decades. Given that Texas provides additional monetary support for each student in bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, the total cost of education is expected to rise dramatically as the LEP population increases.

Most of the LEP students in Texas are enrolled in elementary grades. However, all schools are required to provide services if the campus has at least one LEP student enrolled, regardless of the language or age of the student.

Demographic trends over the last decade have shown that there has been a significant growth in the LEP student population in non-border school districts and the concern regarding bilingual education is now largely considered a statewide issue. The number of counties with at least 5 percent LEP students increased from 117 counties in 1996-97 to 160 counties in 2006-07.

The Texas Legislature recently instructed the Texas Education Agency to collect and report information on the specific instructional methods used in bilingual and ESL programs. Existing literature suggests some instructional methods are more effective than others. Some particularly effective strategies, according to the literature, include:

- Use of native language
- A cooperative learning model
- Culturally responsive instruction
- Extensive oral interaction

We used a confidential survey to identify school and program characteristics that contribute to school success. The survey was distributed to principals who forwarded it to teachers with LEP students. The survey was sent to all elementary and middle school campuses with at least 30 LEP students. We received 624 responses from teachers representing 266 campuses and 140 school districts.

Our study linked the survey responses to AEIS data on school performance. Specifically we used the following four indicators to evaluate educational practices:

- Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) –Passing Rates
- Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) –Average Scores

- Value-Added
- English Language Learners Progress Measure

We interpret the first three indicators as measures of content learning. The last indicator is a measure of English language acquisition.

Based on our research a few clear conclusions can be made regarding current teaching strategies and program application with regards to bilingual/ESL education in the state of Texas:

- Our analysis did not identify any school-level difference in student performance between bilingual and ESL teachers.
- We found no systematic relationship between bilingual/ESL funding per pupil and student performance at the school level.
- Consistent instruction in one language appears most effective for content learning. Instructional levels that are greater than 90 percent English or greater than 90 percent in the students' native language are equally effective for all three content learning indicators. Mixed instructional time is systematically less effective than exclusive instructional time in a single language for the TAKS passing, TAKS scores, and value added analyses.
- While teachers indicated their use of common instructional strategies, most of these strategies did not have a significant influence on student performance at the school level. This may reflect the pervasive nature of these strategies rather than their impact on students.
- Instructional methods identified as particularly effective by the existing bilingual education literature are nearly as common in low performing schools as they are in high performing schools in Texas.
- While our survey used the state's definition for these programs, some teachers appeared to be confused about how their programs matched the state's definitions. Given that new legislation will require school districts to report how many students are enrolled in specific bilingual and ESL programs, the state will probably also encounter this confusion. Data collected during the first year of this mandate should be closely reviewed given that teachers and school districts might have trouble categorizing how many of their LEP students are served through the different programs.

Given the limited timeframe of our analysis and the complexity of bilingual education in a state the size of Texas, this study highlights only a few of the many areas of future research that would enhance the overall knowledge of effective bilingual programs.