



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

PUBLIC AFFAIRS

**Statement of
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U.S. Secretary of Education**

Helping All Children Learn English April 27, 1998

As we look to the future of American education, one of the most important new developments is the growing number of immigrant children that we must educate. According to the latest census data, nearly 20 percent of all children in our nation's schools—one out of five—are immigrants or the American-born children of immigrants.

A new study of immigrant children¹ states that 13.7 million children under 18 are either immigrants or the American-born offspring of immigrants, and that they are the fastest growing part of our student population. These children come from over 150 nations with the largest number coming from Mexico, the Philippines, Cuba, and Vietnam.

Some Americans say that these children are a liability, but I welcome these children, just as the Statue of Liberty or the Golden Gate Bridge has welcomed them for years. They are a great source of strength and hope for the future of America, and we want them to be full participants in the American experience as children and as adults.

These young people, just like generations of immigrants who have come before them, can grow up to be patriotic Americans who will add their voices to our democracy if we educate them to the best of our ability and treat them as we would like to be treated. Indeed, the largest survey ever conducted of immigrant children found that these young people had higher grades and a lower school drop-out rate than other children and overwhelmingly preferred to speak English by the time they were teenagers.²

These young people represent the hopes of immigrant parents who have come to America because they believe in the American dream. They have stood in long visa lines, uprooted their families, left relatives behind, changed careers, often accepted menial jobs and in many cases now work two jobs for one great purpose—to give their children a better life in America. Surely we can meet these people half-way by giving their children the best education possible so that they can make their contribution to the American mainstream.

Teaching these young people English is one of the great tasks of nation-building and it falls to our public schools to accomplish. This is not the first time that the task of educating millions of new immigrants to become good citizens has been given to our nation's public schools. At the turn of the century our nation's public schools successfully taught millions of new immigrants English and educated them about our democracy.

Today, we face the same challenge. There are school districts in almost every part of our country—from Boston to Seattle to Miami—where children speak more than 40 languages. I believe that our nation's public schools can successfully educate these young people if we give them the same opportunities that other students need in order to succeed: higher standards, safe schools, smaller classes, well-prepared teachers, technology in the classroom, after-school activities, and schools that are accountable for results.

President Clinton has made education his number one domestic priority to achieve one end—to prepare all of America's children—native-born and immigrant—for the 21st century. President Clinton has also increased funding for those programs—Title I, immigrant and bilingual education, migrant education, adult education—that directly serve a disproportionate number of immigrant children and their families.

Today, however, there are growing questions about the best way to teach these young people English. In California, these concerns about how to teach English center around Proposition 227, the Unz Initiative, which would effectively eliminate bilingual education and require that all children learn English in one year.

I recognize that the decision to vote for or against the Unz Initiative this coming June is ultimately a decision for the voters of California. I know that there are many well-intentioned and concerned citizens on both sides of this issue and that the people of California are taking this issue seriously.

New immigrants have a passion to learn English and they want the best for their children. We must focus on what is best for the children and in this increasingly diverse society we must make sure that all of America's children are given the best education possible. Our common goal in teaching children English should be to support those approaches that ensure that Limited-English-Proficient (LEP) children are both speaking English and making academic progress.

Proposition 227, however, is not the way to go. In my opinion, adoption of the Unz Amendment will lead to fewer children learning English and many children falling further behind in their studies. There are five significant reasons why I believe that the Unz Amendment is counter-productive to a quality education for all of our children.

First, the one year time limit and one-size-fits-all approach to learning English flies in the face of years of research that tells us that children learn in different ways and at different speeds. A recent National Research Council report³ released last month states that, "hurrying young non-English speaking children into reading in English without ensuring adequate preparation is counter-productive." The report recommends that children with no English proficiency are best taught to read English by first being taught reading in their native language, if teachers and instructional materials in their native language are available.

Thus, while an English-only approach may be effective for some limited-English-proficient children, it is likely to be ineffective for others. I do not oppose special English instructional programs. In fact, about 25 percent of our current federal bilingual funds support this type of instructional approach. What I question is the arbitrary one-year time limit and the demand that only this approach is the right approach to help young people learn English.

The approach taken by Proposition 227 simply ignores the individual needs of each child and certainly is an educational straitjacket for teachers and parents. Good teaching starts with a child's needs and moves the child along in a timely and responsible manner.

By analogy, if we adopted the approach suggested by the Unz Initiative to help children learn to read, it would be a disaster. Some children are already good readers when they come to kindergarten and others learn by the end of the first or second grades. Other children need extra help even in third grade and beyond.

Second, the Unz Amendment limits the discretion of teachers to choose the approach that is best suited for the children they teach. Some children may learn best in an English-only class, others may learn faster in a bilingual class or through some other proven approach, but with the Unz approach, teachers are given no option to use their professional judgement.

Third, Proposition 227 would subject teachers, school board members, and educational administrators to personal liability in litigation by parents if they fail to comply with its requirements. I find this aspect of Proposition 227 both punitive and threatening. This is not the way to build parent-teacher cooperation—a key to student success.

Fourth, the Unz Initiative is a direct attack on local control of education. I am surprised that so many outspoken advocates of local control have chosen not to take issue with this fundamental flaw in the Unz Initiative. The Unz Initiative would not be a helping hand for language instruction, but rather the heavy hand of overregulation. Local flexibility to choose the approaches that work best for their students should not be constrained by a mandate for one approach over the other. I believe that every school district should choose the approach that works best for them based on sound research.

Fifth, the Unz Initiative will in all likelihood result in problems under federal civil rights laws. In the seminal case of *Lau v. Nichols*, the Supreme Court interpreted Title VI of the Civil Rights Act to require school districts to take steps to ensure that national origin minority students with limited English proficiency can effectively participate in the regular educational program.

Similarly, the Equal Educational Opportunity Act requires public educational agencies to overcome language barriers that impede student participation in their instructional programs. Limiting special language development instruction to one year and preventing a school from providing bilingual instruction to students, despite the judgment of teachers and the school principal that children in that school need bilingual instruction to progress, are likely to result in violations under these laws.

I join all Californians who are unhappy with the status-quo and I understand the frustration that is encouraging many voters to think about voting for the Unz Initiative. But the approach of the Unz Initiative is just plain wrong. Proposition 227 may satisfy people's sense of frustration but ultimately it is counter-productive to our common goal of making sure children learn English while making academic progress in other subjects as well.

I believe that there is a reasonable and positive alternative to the current status-quo and the proposed Unz alternative.

I propose setting a three-year goal to make sure that a child is learning English. Individual differences and circumstances may cause some children to take longer, but a goal of learning English within three years is reasonable. This goal is similar to our goal of making sure that every child learns to read independently by the end of third grade or earlier. We know that goals and standards improve academic performance: when we set goals, we find, to a greater degree than we thought possible, that students can meet them.

A goal is not a mandate or a command. And a goal is certainly not a one year educational straitjacket that limits the ability of teachers to do what is best for each child. Some children may learn English in one year or two and others may need three years or even more. The focus should be on the individual needs of each child and not on some artificial and arbitrary time frame.

Goals should be combined with flexibility and accountability. I believe in giving local school districts latitude to design their own programs contingent on their being accountable for the results. Parents have a right to expect progress. Children should be tested periodically for English proficiency and when a child is falling behind, extra efforts including after-school classes as well as summer school should certainly be considered.

If a school district chooses an approach to teaching English that simply does not achieve positive results for a large number of children, then the school district must have the good sense to fix the problem or use another approach that research shows will work. The focus of every program—be it English-as-a-Second Language, dual language immersion, bilingual education, or English immersion—must be on strengthening quality, regardless of the approach.

I believe that the key to strengthening quality is well-trained teachers and we must do a much better job of meeting the demand for more well-prepared teachers. The demand for bilingual teachers, for example, currently exceeds the supply and that is particularly true in California where the number of LEP children has nearly doubled to 1.3 million in less than a decade. The California State Board of Education estimates that there is a shortage of 21,000 bilingual teachers in that state.

This, I suspect, is one of the root causes and real reasons why some parents have become frustrated. The Administration has asked for a doubling of federal funds, from \$25 million to \$50 million, to meet the increasing demand for fully certified bilingual teachers and English-as-second-language teachers.

I have no doubt that this nation has the capacity to include our many new immigrants and their children in the American experience. We must do everything possible to make sure that all of these children learn English as quickly as possible and get the quality education that they deserve.

Finally, I think American educators need to redouble their efforts to make sure that all of our children are fluent in two languages. I just returned from Chile where I joined President Clinton at the second Summit of the Americas. Improving education was a central part of the dialogue at this summit. I was struck by the fact that several nations begin teaching their children two languages starting in the first grade.

Anyone who has traveled to Europe knows that young people all over Europe are fluent in two and often three languages. I see no reason why our children should not be their equals. Some children already come to school with the ability to speak two languages. We should build on this linguistic base and recognize that our nation will be the better for it in the new global environment.

Think of the many advantages—economic, cultural and political—that a fluency in two languages can give to the American people. America's message of democracy, human rights and economic freedom would surely reach a wider audience. This is why I encourage and support any school district that sets the goal of making sure that every one of their high school graduates will speak two languages fluently by the time they graduate.

We can do no less for today's immigrants than we did for earlier generations of immigrants who turned to our nation's public schools to teach them English and the basics of our democracy. In conclusion, I urge all Americans to welcome America's new citizens and to help them to become part of the American dream.

Endnotes

¹ Rumbaut, Rubén G., Visiting Scholar, The Russell Sage Foundation and Professor of Sociology, Michigan State University, *Transformations: The Post-Immigrant Generation in an Age of Diversity*, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 18, and 19.

³ National Research Council, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, p. 324.