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The Viability of Bilingual Education Programs in Nevada

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Abstract

Problem. Approximately 15% of emergent bilinguals (EBs; commonly referred to as English learners) in Nevada demonstrated proficiency in math and English language arts in contrast with the general student population, which achieved proficiencies of 42% and 55% in these subjects, respectively. Therefore, there is a critical need for programs that are responsive to EBs' linguistic, cultural, and academic strengths. **Purpose.** This policy paper discusses the need for alternative educational supports for EBs, the effectiveness of bilingual education models compared with prevailing English instructional models, and the possibility of bilingual programming as a viable option in Nevada. **Recommendations.** Nevada could require that strong forms of bilingual education, supported by the new funding formula, be offered to EBs. University-school partnerships could create a pipeline between enrollment in bilingual teacher education programs and staffing of bilingual programs. The state should also allow the assessment of content knowledge in English and other languages for accountability purposes to promote bilingualism/biliteracy for all students.

Introduction

Policy changes since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 resulted in the dismantling of the Bilingual Education Act, ceased federal funding allocation for bilingual education, and increased accountability through standardized English testing. Prior to and following NCLB though, there have been two competing arguments regarding the value of using students' home language during instruction. Proponents of home language use during instruction confirm that students' ability to read in their home language strongly predicts English reading performance and that bilingualism does not interfere with academic achievement in either language (Francis, Lesaux, & August, 2006; Yeung, Marsh, & Suliman, 2000). Another view is that home language instruction may interfere with or delay English language learning because students may be less exposed to English (Rossell, 2000). It is thus critical to understand the instructional programming for emergent bilinguals¹ (EBs; commonly referred to as English learners) and the outcomes these models produce for this population.

National educational policies such as NCLB and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) have intended to improve the educational outcomes of

EBs, but there is still a hyper focus on standardized testing in English, leading to reduced curriculum and poor educational experiences for EB students (Acosta et al., 2020; McCarthey, 2008). On the other hand, It is important to note that recent policy changes resulting from ESSA (2015) now include requirements that states must "identify languages other than English that are present to a significant extent in their participating student populations," indicate the languages for which annual student achievement tests are not available, and "make every effort" to develop such assessments. With these changes, state education agencies currently have the flexibility to look beyond English assessments and more holistically examine EBs' content area knowledge (across students' languages) rather than focusing on English language proficiency alone. The acknowledgment of students' home languages via this federal directive again brings into focus the importance of EBs' bilingualism and the degree to which efforts are taken to fully support and holistically showcase these students' knowledge. It also provides an opportunity to appraise current educational program models available to EBs in Nevada as well as those that have been deemed effective in improving their achievement. The purpose of this

¹We use the term *emergent bilingual* in place of the commonly used designation English learner to highlight the multiple languages that these students continuously navigate at home, school, and community levels, even when being educated in English-only settings (García et al., 2008).

policy paper is to discuss the need for alternative educational supports for EBs, to review the effectiveness of bilingual education models compared with prevailing English instructional models, and explore the possibility of bilingual programming as a viable option in Nevada to better serve EB students in preschool (PK) to secondary schooling.

Emergent Bilinguals’ Performance and the Language Programs That Serve Them

The number of EBs in PK-12 classrooms has increased by 60% in the last decade with Nevada among the top 10 states with the largest growth. Although EBs represent 10% of the school population at the national level, they represent approximately double that figure in the state of Nevada, which ranks fourth in number of K-12 EB students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Given the high numbers of EBs in Nevada, there is a critical need to address their academic achievement. Approximately 15% of EBs in Nevada demonstrated proficiency in math and English

language arts in contrast with the general student population, which achieved 42% and 55% proficiency in these subjects, respectively (Nevada Department of Education, 2020), thereby showing a greater need for programs that are responsive to EBs’ linguistic, cultural, and academic strengths.

All schools are required to provide a language education program for EBs (ESSA, 2015). Currently, most EBs in the U.S. and specifically in Nevada are taught by English-speaking teachers and are expected to receive additional support to access academic content. In these English-immersion programs whose primary goal is English acquisition, students’ home languages are not used nor further developed in an academic setting (Crawford, 2004). Alternatively, in some pockets of the country, schools are increasingly employing a bilingual education model, which incorporates the students’ home languages in the classroom.

Taken together, language education programs in the U.S. used to support EBs can be classified

Table 1. Program Models Serving Emergent Bilingual Students in the U.S.

Program	Common Model Names	Student Population	Language(s) of Instruction	Goal(s) and Length
Bilingual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dual Language Bilingual Education Two-Way Bilingual Education Dual Immersion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emergent bilinguals Bilinguals showing English proficiency English Monolinguals 	English and the Language other than English (LOTE)	Bilingualism, biliteracy, & cross-cultural understanding; Indefinite
	One-Way Bilingual Education	Emergent bilinguals who speak the same home language	English and LOTE	Bilingualism & biliteracy; Indefinite
	Transitional Bilingual Education	Emergent bilinguals who speak the same home language	English and LOTE at the beginning, with a quick progression to most or all instruction in English	English proficiency; Usually rapid exit (e.g., after 3-5 years)
Monolingual	English as a New Language (ENL): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pull-out ENL Push-in ENL Self-Contained 	Emergent bilinguals, usually who speak different home languages	English	English proficiency; Upon exiting English learner status

into two categories: monolingual and bilingual programs, each with multiple instructional models that vary on the use of English and students' home languages (see Table 1). Monolingual English programs for EBs are generally labeled English as a Second Language (ESL; newly referred to English as a New Language, or ENL), may vary in level of support from school to school, use techniques to make content accessible within (i.e., self-contained ESL or push-in ESL) or outside the classroom (i.e., pull-out ESL), and solely lead learners to English acquisition. For most EBs in the U.S. and specifically in Nevada, content and language learning occurs through these types of programs led by English-speaking teachers, and students' home languages play little to no role during instruction. Alternatively, as also shown in Table 1, there are three general types of bilingual programs implemented nationwide, which differ by students in the program, language(s) of instruction, overall goals, and length of participation.

The State of Bilingual Education in Nevada

Nevada has relatively few bilingual programs, and the Nevada Department of Education provides little guidance on how to implement bilingual programming. To our knowledge, there are only three bilingual schools in Nevada, which are located in Washoe County. Due to the large proportion of Latino students in the district, a former superintendent introduced the two-way dual language immersion program model to foster Spanish-English bilingualism and biliteracy for both monolingual English and language minority students approximately one decade ago, and three principals opted to host it in their schools. At Beck and Donner Elementary Schools, a subset of students at the school following the bilingual strand learn in the content areas using Spanish 50% of the time and English, the other 50%, at every grade level. At Mount Rose Elementary, all students regardless of language status spend a larger proportion of learning in Spanish in the earlier grades, starting with 80% in Spanish and 20% in English at kindergarten, and incrementally learn content in English at each grade level before reaching an equal distribution of both languages in the upper grades. In 2018-19, each of

these schools exceeded the district's rate at which EBs met English language proficiency (Nevada Department of Education, 2020), indicating that bilingual programs could outperform English-only programs in fostering EBs' English language development while promoting bilingualism/biliteracy for both monolingual English and language minority students in Nevada.

The Effectiveness of Bilingual Education Programs

There is overwhelming research evidence indicating that both monolingual English and EB students in bilingual programs demonstrate equal and sometimes higher levels of academic achievement on English and math assessments than their counterparts in English-only classrooms (Francis, Lesaux, & August, 2006; Genesse, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005; Han, 2012; Lindholm-Leary, 2014; Lindholm-Leary & Block, 2010; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). In a recent and the most rigorous longitudinal study yet (Steele et al., 2017), both language minority students² and monolingual English speakers in bilingual programs outperformed students in English-only classrooms on accountability tests in reading, with their performance representing approximately seven additional months of learning in grade 5 and nine additional months in grade 8. These findings show the powerful effect that bilingual instruction has on language minority speakers and monolingual English speakers. This same study also revealed that while both language minority students and monolingual English speakers developed proficiency in both languages, long-term exit rates from English learner status were improved for non-English proficient students (i.e., EBs no longer needing specialized support due to meeting proficiency English standards), and there was no detriment to performance in content areas such as mathematics and science. As such, one of the most effective bilingual models, two-way immersion, for language minority students is equally valuable for monolingual English speakers. These findings have been corroborated by other studies that revealed the fewest dropouts in two-way bilingual programs and that all students (not solely language minority students) scored higher (i.e.,

²Language minority students encompass emergent bilingual students (not yet met standard levels of English proficiency for their grade level; commonly referred to English learners) as well as more experienced bilinguals who have achieved standard levels of English proficiency but also speak a language other than English at home.

White; African American; EBs; language minority students fluent in English; students with low economic status) than students in all-English programs on end-of-grade exams in math and reading (Thomas & Collier, 2010).

Factors to Consider When Implementing Bilingual Programs

Emphasis on English as a Deterrence. Despite the potential benefits of bilingual education particularly for EB students, a number of challenges impede the implementation of these programs in schools. Historically, political rather than research-based pedagogical motives have inhibited the proliferation of bilingual education programs (Bybee, Henderson, & Hinojosa, 2014). For instance, ballot initiatives, such as Proposition 227 in California (passed in 1998 and repealed in 2016) and Proposition 203 in Arizona (passed in 2000), aiming to end decades-long bilingual programming, were backed by the idea that English immersion programs are the ideal way to ensure academic achievement and English acquisition for EBs. Some educational stakeholders, including parents of bilingual students, subscribed to this common-sensical belief that teaching two languages via bilingual education may be counterintuitive (Crawford, 2007). These arguments and language policies opposing bilingual programs were grounded in some of the earliest evaluations of bilingual programs (Baker & de Kanter, 1981; Rossell & Baker, 1996), many of which had methodological flaws that narrowly focused on discrete English learning outcomes in the short term without taking into account bilingual programs' long-term academic achievement and the school-based input processes (e.g., school leadership and faculty with a strong knowledge base about bilingual learning and instruction) that make bilingual programs successful. When English-only programs prioritize performance on English assessments, they may do so at the expense of the unique linguistic and cultural assets that EBs bring to the classroom; EBs in monolingual programs show lower academic outcomes and higher dropout rates but also lose their home language due to subtractive schooling experiences in English-only settings (Menken & Kleyn 2010). In contrast, EBs' assets may instead be used to enrich the cultural and language learning experiences of their monolingual English-speaking peers participating in the same bilingual program (Steele et al., 2017) as

well as enhance their own learning due to the interdependence between their languages (Cummins, 2017; Lindholm-Leary & Block, 2010).

Fidelity to Evidence-based Bilingual Program Design Features. Research has identified multiple factors and challenges relating to the implementation of bilingual programs (Howard et al., 2018; Lindholm-Leary, 2001). A strong program model outlining clear goals and expectations is critical for its sustenance and for ensuring students' success. Features of such a model include providing 4 to 6 years of bilingual instruction in early schooling; providing an equal distribution of language and literacy instruction across languages; and curricular materials that align with language and content expectations of a bilingual program. Professional development focusing on implementation of effective bilingual programming is also critical to ensure fidelity to program goals. For this reason, knowledge about bilingual programs and their defining features and support from school, district, and state leadership are critical for these programs' success.

Teacher Preparation and Recruitment. For those who are successful in establishing a bilingual program, often the biggest logistical challenges they face are related to finding qualified teachers and adequate resources to conduct the program. Because many adults had childhood bilingual experiences but also experienced subtractive schooling via English-only education, finding bilingual teachers with high proficiency in the target language even among minority groups is often a difficult task (Arroyo-Romano, 2016). Sometimes those who are bilingual are unfamiliar with academic language needed in the classroom and most certainly have not been trained in bilingual teaching practices (Howard et al., 2018). Some states look to recruit teachers of the target language from abroad while others build their own bilingual teacher education programs, following a "grow your own" initiative (Sutcher et al., 2016). Cohesive national and state standards for certifying bilingual teachers are lacking and undeveloped, and there is little guidance about what to look for when hiring a bilingual teacher (Boyle et al., 2015). Simultaneously, concerns exist for the dismal numbers of entry and sustenance of teachers of color in the profession, and efforts at recruitment and retention of teachers of color is a priority for the field (Brown, 2014; Haddix, 2017). Teachers who share similar back-

grounds of their students tend to comprehend their unique experiences, leverage their students' linguistic and cultural assets in the classroom, and are often described as having strong commitments to their communities and serving as agents of social change (Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015; Howard, 2010; Irizarry & Raible, 2015).

Equitable Access to Bilingual Programs. A concern exists for the ways that bilingual programs might reify the inequities the bilingual education movement aims to address. As two-way dual language programs have expanded across the country and thus enrolled English-speaking students, a “metaphorical gentrification” has occurred (Valdez et al., 2016). For instance, bilingual programs in Utah grew by 300% between 1997 to 2005, and the state is now considered a leader in the nation of bilingual education; however, a majority of their programs are one-way based on a foreign-/second-language immersion model aiming to serve proficient English speakers rather than language minority students (Valdez et al., 2014). Scholars have also noted how bilingual programs have shifted their focus disregarding EBs for whom these programs were designed to serve as a result of inequitable enrollment policies (Wall et al., 2019) and biased instructional practices (Cervantes Soon et al., 2017).

Funding. A major factor often left out of empirical research is the cost of programming for EBs. Certain states allocate funds to establish and support bilingual programs. For instance, through formula funding, Texas in 2009-2010 budgeted about \$1.2 billion for all bilingual/ESL programs, an average of \$253 per student (Faltis, 2011). In Utah, funding for bilingual programs for the 2014–15 school year was \$2.3 million, and they supplemented these funds supplemented these funds with \$500,000 from the Department of Defense (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Despite state funding allocations, it is important to also note that top-down mandates for bilingual programming may not be practical if essential resources and funding are not supplied in support of strong bilingual program models, thereby signaling the importance of coordination across state, district, and school levels

Implications for Policy and Practice

To promote the emergence and sustenance of bilingual programs, Nevada could adopt new language policy and/or provide guidance on the implementation of bilingual programs (e.g., California's En-

glish Learner Roadmap). The following serve as recommendations for state and local stakeholders.

Funding Bilingual Programs in Nevada. Many bilingual programs attribute their success to being shaped by local decision making and bottom-up, grassroots initiatives that have been supported by government or private grants (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Christian et al., 1997). The state of Nevada may consider providing grant competitions for schools to develop bilingual programs as was done by Washington's Office of Public Instruction. Similar efforts were initiated by former Nevada Assembly Majority Whip Heidi Swank through Assembly Bill 139 in 2017 but did not move forward. Although startup funds may be initially needed to develop and purchase bilingual curricula and assessments, typically there are no additional costs associated with paying bilingual teachers. Moreover, Title III funding designated for EBs may also help to defray expenses. Because Nevada made changes to their funding structure through Senate Bill 543 this past year, funds may be better allocated to meet the needs of EBs through bilingual programs.

Fostering Equity for Emergent Bilinguals. There should be careful planning to ensure that bilingual programs continuously align to their goals of educational equity for EBs. A key component of bilingual program design is determining student enrollment expectations and policies. While bilingual education originated as a movement to serve EB students, it has become of growing interest to monolingual English-speaking students and their families as well, often leading to the implementation of a two-way model. To foster equity, school leaders should ensure greater access to these programs is given to EBs. While 16 states and DC have issued guidance on the student enrollment ratio between English-speaking and partner-language speaking students for their two-way dual language programs, only three states have set specific requirements. The state of Nevada could set requirements that will accord rights to a bilingual program to EB students. In New York, students have the right to a bilingual program by (1) establishing one in the same school when there are 20 or more grade-level students that speak the same home language or (2) allowing students to transfer if the original school does not offer such a program.

Building a Bilingual Teacher Pipeline. A major component needed to develop and increase staffing in bilingual programs is the need for pre- and in-service teacher education focusing on bilingual pedagogy and language development. Fortunately, Nevada established an endorsement (NAC 391.242) for teachers to become specialized for these programs. To our knowledge, University of Nevada, Las Vegas and Nevada State College are the only higher education institutions offering coursework leading to this endorsement. However, these programs are currently under-enrolled due to the lack of PK-12 bilingual programs in Nevada. As bilingual programs expand, more interest in bilingual teacher education programs would be likely. University-school partnerships could create a pipeline between enrollment in bilingual teacher education programs and staffing of PK-12 bilingual programs.

Further into the future, the opportunity also exists for a “grow your own” initiative whereby graduates of Nevada bilingual PK-12 programs then become bilingual teachers in their own communities. These efforts in teacher education could serve to not only staff bilingual programs but also to promote a more diverse teaching corps that is representative of and well-equipped for the multilingual/multicultural PK-12 student population. The current teaching corps mostly consists of White English-speaking, middle-class females (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), and the cultural gap between an increasingly diverse student population and their teachers has grown (Boser, 2014; Villegas et al., 2012). If highly qualified bilingual teachers are difficult to find and teacher education programs are not yet established, different configurations permit the involvement of general education teachers. Ten states issue guidance on differing staffing configurations (e.g., single teachers using both languages; separate teachers teach in English and the partner language). While Nevada builds up its bilingual teaching corps, schools could determine the best teaching configuration given the number of available eligible bilingual teachers.

State and District Guidance on Effective Program Features. An important question is how to ensure bilingual programs are following evidence-based policies and practices. Certain states provide information, guidelines, and incentives about program components to help inform local decision making.

Schools can choose from an array of models allocating different amounts of time to English and the partner language (e.g., 50-50 split throughout all grades). Few states have articulated specific state models or expectations for program design, with the exception of seven states, which specify time allocations for English and the partner language. Four states suggest specific course-taking pathways for offering bilingual programs at the secondary level, which may lead to the Seal of Biliteracy. Nevada should recommend the adoption of stronger forms of bilingual programming that equally use English and the partner language throughout a student’s educational trajectory, and each district should ensure their adherence to effective program features through ongoing professional development and evaluations of their effectiveness.

Emphasizing Bilingual and Biliterate Proficiency. Despite not being required under federal law, states have adopted language proficiency standards and assessments of partner languages. These standards cover the content and language skills that teachers should be teaching in bilingual programs. Although 42 states have adopted world language proficiency standards, only five states require bilingual programs to assess partner language skills. Assessment in the partner language could ensure there is greater fidelity to defining features that render a bilingual program effective. In other words, teachers and administrators may better adhere to teaching for biliteracy because students’ performance in two languages is valued for accountability purposes. Relatedly, 41 states including Nevada already reward students through the Seal of Biliteracy for their commitment to bilingualism throughout their education and for demonstrating biliterate competency. To foster bilingualism and biliteracy for all students (language minority and monolingual English students alike), the state of Nevada should allow the assessment of content knowledge in English and other languages for accountability purposes. This change could increase the number and diversity of students who are awarded the Seal of Biliteracy and open the door for all students to become bilingual/biliterate at an early age rather than relegating second-language learning to their later schooling.

Conclusion

Bilingual education has shown to be a great equalizer that requires relatively low-cost investments

and yields long-term, sustained rewards: improving educational outcomes for both language minority and monolingual English learners, diversifying the teaching workforce, and increasingly making Nevada a globally competitive, attractive state. With

greater attention to EBs' home languages resulting from ESSA directives and recent changes in Nevada's funding structure for EBs, bilingual education is a viable educational alternative necessitating further state and local guidance on its implementation.

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