

Challenges Facing Illinois' Bilingual Preschool Mandate

By Don Soifer



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Executive Summary

Starting in July 2014, Illinois will require bilingual preschool education in all public schools where preschool is offered. This new mandate, through regulations adopted by the Illinois State Board of Education in 2009 following approval by lawmakers, will make Illinois the first state offering statewide bilingual preschool, and has been widely touted by advocates as a model worthy of replicating in other states.

But as the new requirements are on the verge of becoming reality in schools around the state, several major obstacles remain to successful implementation. In fact, they stand to indicate that the expensive mandate, however well-intended, lacks satisfactory educational and practical foundations, doing little to actually advance the interests of those it is intended to directly serve.

Three major concerns, and others raised in this report, should be addressed by policymakers concerning the Illinois policy model:

- Illinois currently suffers from an acute shortage of educators with the required qualifications to implement the program, a situation which threatens the initiative's likelihood of succeeding in meeting its goals.
- Strong evidence supports the benefits of high-quality early childhood education for poor and at-risk families, but it is also far from clear that this bilingual preschool approach is the best strategy to develop students' preparedness to learn and build English-language skills. In fact, its overall effects may actually hinder student progress substantially by shutting out other, evidence-based strategies – and at a high cost to taxpayers.
- Research has demonstrated that younger children experience critical cognitive windows that present valuable opportunities for language learning. Education programs that deliberately delay English learning in favor of other priorities increase risks of compromising their ability to acquire fluent English early in their schooling.

Details follow.

Introduction

All Illinois public schools that serve English learner populations under the state's Preschool for All program have until July 1, 2014 to meet new requirements passed in 2010. Schools must uniformly identify children who are English learners using a home language survey, and for schools where 20 or more children with the same, non-English native language are served, preschool programs must offer a transitional bilingual education program which includes instruction in both languages. Teachers assigned to provide bilingual instruction are required to have a state English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement or approval in addition to their Early Childhood Certification.

The new policies accompany ambitious expectations from supporters. An April 2012 study by the New America Foundation's Maggie Severns declared Illinois' policy to be a "model" for other states on the "cutting edge" of early childhood education efforts for English Language Learners (ELLs).¹ This sentiment has been echoed by numerous advocates, including Illinois State Board of Education officials.

All preschool programs that serve children ages 3-5 and that are administered by a public school district must be brought into compliance. Six months before the deadline, the Chicago Public Schools and many school districts surrounding it were advertising job vacancies for teachers meeting these requirements.

The mandate, to assume a cost-benefit perspective, is likely to distract resources and attention from other pressing, well-documented commitments in response to the specific educational needs of the student population, for instance:

- A study by Stanford University researcher Anne Fernald published in *Developmental Sciences* this year pointed out a language gap facing children from poor households (like those across Chicago) observable as young as eighteen months old.²
- Studies have documented that infants' speed of word recognition and vocabulary in English or Spanish at 25 months predicted their linguistic and cognitive skills at eight years of age.³
- Robert Pianta, Dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, found that in observations of 700 preschool classrooms across 11 states, teachers in less than 15 percent of the classes demonstrated 'effective teacher-student interactions.'⁴

Meanwhile, states struggling to educate the growing newcomer population will look to the experience in Illinois for policy lessons.

1 Severns, Maggie. "Starting Early with English Language Learners – First Lessons from Illinois," New America Foundation, April 2012, pp. 1-2.

2 Rich, Motoko. "Language-Gap Study Bolsters a Push for Pre-K," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2013.

3 Golinkoff, Roberta Michnick and others. "Twenty-Five Years Using the Intermodal Preferential Looking Paradigm to Study Language Acquisition: What Have We Learned," *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 2013, 8:316.

4 Rich, "Language-Gap Study." *op. cit.*

How Children Learn Language and Why It Matters for Illinois

Illinois is one of few states to mandate that K-12 students receive bilingual education – delivering instruction in a non-English home language primarily while gradually introducing the English learners to English as a language of instruction. Recent trends in many states have set the practice aside in favor of structured and enriched English-focused instruction for ELL students. In 2009, Illinois extended the K-12 bilingual mandate to pre-K students (3 and 4 year olds) that are identified as ELL and are enrolled in public school pre-school programs under the 1986 Preschool for All program.

Policymakers should address three major concerns before embarking on a policy modeled on Illinois. First, substantial research suggests that pre-K students are particularly adept at gaining language fluency in immersive environments since there is a critical language acquisition window in childhood development. Second, Illinois suffers from a severe shortage of personnel to implement the program as designed and risks shortchanging other important education priorities or employing unqualified teachers and staff in a haste to meet the state mandate. Finally, the evidence is far from convincing that bilingual education is effective in promoting English and may actually restrict student progress substantially – at a high cost to taxpayers.

Much research supports the understanding that the vocabulary of the adults with whom young children spend their waking hours best predicts their own vocabulary well into their education. This has held true in English and Spanish for preschool children who are English learners.⁵

“Basically all educators and scholars agree that to succeed in U.S. schools and participate in civic life in the United States, children need to develop strong English proficiency and literacy skills,” notes the Migration Policy Institute.⁶

Research has demonstrated that younger children have an enhanced ability to learn new languages, creating a valuable cognitive window of opportunity for teaching English skills to non-English speakers. One prominent study published in the July 2009 issue of *Science* utilized brain imaging of neural connections and signatures during language learning to draw conclusions about “sensitive periods” during which children are more receptive to language learning.⁷

Education programs that deliberately delay English learning in favor of other priorities increase risks of missing these cognitive windows of opportunity for language learning, and may compromise their ability to acquire fluent English before falling substantially behind their peers.

5 Leacox, Lindsey and Jackson, Carla Wood (October 2012). “Spanish Vocabulary-Bridging Technology-Enhanced Instruction for Young English Language Learners’ Word Learning” *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*.

6 Espinosa, Linda M. (November 2013). “Early Education for Dual Language Learners,” Migration Policy Institute, p. 13.

7 Meltzoff, Andrew N. and others (2009). “Foundations for a New Science of Learning.” *Science* p. pp. 325, 284 (2009).

Research Unclear on Specific Benefits

When the regulations were initially proposed, state board officials pulled them from the agenda at the last minute.⁸ Public comments raised in response to the proposed rules expressed concern that these extensive commitments would pose a significant barrier.

The principal at Champaign's Early Childhood Center noted after they were passed, "the new laws will involve more steps for teachers and in schools that are unsupported by additional funding."⁹

High-quality early childhood education is broadly demonstrated to produce educational benefits through helping bridge gaps for those children who would otherwise begin kindergarten less prepared to learn. English learners in Illinois as a population are generally good candidates to benefit from these advantages.

Young English learners are less likely than native English speakers to attend high-quality early childhood education programs, as noted by Linda Espinosa in a 2013 publication of the Migration Policy Institute.¹⁰ In fact, children from Spanish-speaking households enter kindergarten with literacy skills almost 0.8 of a standard deviation below the average for children from English-speaking households.¹¹

But the educational benefits for children in early childhood programs that are not demonstrated to be high-quality are unclear. While access to high-quality programs is often very limited, it is not at all certain how many classrooms in this program will meet this standard in ways that will particularly benefit English learners. In fact, it is not clear if Illinois is prepared to measure the quality of these programs in ways that will demonstrate these educational benefits.

As Espinosa noted, "none of the commonly used measures of early childhood education classroom quality capture the specific instructional scaffolds and supports described... that have shown to be important to language development and academic achievement for dual language learners."¹²

8 Buller, Rachel. "Bilingual Teachers in Demand Under New State Law," CU-Citizen Access, undated accessed December 2, 2013.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Espinosa, "Early Education for Dual Language Learners." *op. cit.*, p. 2.

11 *Ibid.*, page 6.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Implementation Concerns

Other factors in establishing and implementing the new programs in schools across the state will also hold significant bearing on its likelihood for success.

In September 2013, the Illinois State Board of Education released its revised Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards, to which schools must coordinate instruction. The new document updates the 2002 standards, and aligns with the newly adopted Common Core State Standards for kindergarten. The new standards were piloted and field tested in schools during the first half of 2013, and were modified and adapted to incorporate feedback received during that process.¹³

The extent to which these new standards are implemented smoothly and with fidelity in programs will play a large role in the early success of the program. Classrooms and centers which had already achieved success with the prior standards can certainly make this implementation go more smoothly. In anticipation of larger-than-normal turnover in teaching positions, enactment of the new standards will likely be a significant factor in the first year.

“At every level - local, state and federal - rigorous quality improvement efforts should be identified, tested and vigorously implemented.”

Migration Policy Institute

Another important factor in the program’s success is attendance and addressing chronic absenteeism. Nearly half of three-year-olds and more than a third of four-year-olds in the Chicago Public Schools missed at least 15 days during the previous school year, according to a study by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.¹⁴

Sickness was the most frequently cited reason for absence (57 percent), followed by logistical reasons (18 percent) that include transportation to school. African-American and Latino students were significantly more likely than white students to miss school for both of these reasons. Best-practice strategies for increasing attendance in urban education rely highly on building communications and relationships with families, an initiative which will take on added importance toward the success of the pre-K bilingual program.

¹³ Illinois State Board of Education, *Illinois Early Learning and Developmental Standards, Preschool – Revised September 2013*.

¹⁴ Harris, Rebecca (September 3, 2013). “Preschoolers Miss School, Miss Out on Learning,” *Catalyst Chicago*.

Teacher Quality Matters

The quality of early childhood instructors is certainly an essential contributor to the quality of the program in which they teach. But research on early childhood education does not provide a clear association between a teacher's college education, their college major, and either classroom quality or the educational benefits students receive.

Even when teachers earn a bachelor's degree with a concentration on early childhood education, there is little established reason for confidence that this alone will produce a high-quality classroom. One prominent study drawing on extensive data from the National Center for Early Development and Learning's in-depth analysis of six states with well-established state-funded pre-K programs found no consistent link between education credentialing and "classroom quality or other academic gains for children."¹⁵

Greater gains in student achievement for preschoolers are associated with higher levels of instructional support, but these opportunities have been rare in preschool classrooms generally, and especially so given the increased challenges frequently confronting English learners.

"Making effective use of these strategies requires careful planning, especially when teachers are learning to address the needs of young dual language learners," noted an article in *Young Children* from 2011.¹⁶

Only 22 percent of California's early childhood classrooms were found to be "at least good or better" in a RAND analysis, and only 12 percent of Latino children, and 11 percent of those from economically disadvantaged households, were fortunate enough to be enrolled in these classrooms.¹⁷

Only 0.4 percent of certified early childhood teachers held a bilingual or ESL endorsement in 2009.

15 Early, Diane M. and others, (2006). "Are Teachers' Education, Major, and Credentials Related to Classroom Quality and Children's Academic Gains in PreKindergarten?" *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 21.

16 Gillanders, Cristina and Castro, Dina C. (January 2011). "Storybook Reading for Young Dual Language Learners," *Young Children*.

17 Karoly, Lynn A. and others (2008). "Prepared to Learn: The Nature and Quality of Early Care and Education for Preschool-Age Children in California." RAND Corporation, figures S. 4 and S. 6.

Qualified Teachers in Short Supply

Whatever the educational benefits of the new bilingual preschool program might be, its success must ultimately depend on the number, and quality, of qualified teachers running it.

It is likely that many districts dealing with such shortages will petition for state waivers, or reallocate teachers with daily rotations between classrooms to meet requirements. "Quite honestly, it is a challenge to, I mean we've had a different ESL teacher for the last four years, someone new each year," noted the principal of Champaign's Early Childhood Center.¹⁸

Shortages in qualified bilingual teachers are nothing new to Illinois school districts with large, and growing, populations of English learners. An article in *Teacher Education Quarterly* from 2007 observed, "the perennial shortage in Chicago and in Illinois of certified bilingual/ESL teachers," and noted that the problem was exacerbated by the fact that, "the number of Latino students in the Chicago Public Schools is growing rapidly, but the number of Latino teachers, though a developing presence, does not keep pace."¹⁹

Data from 2009 showed that only 0.4 percent of the certified early childhood teachers held a bilingual or ESL endorsement.²⁰ By 2013, it was reported that 1,525 teachers had attained both early childhood and bilingual/ESL certification. But this number includes teachers who are no longer in the active teaching force as well as many who are not teaching in those school districts where they will be needed under the new requirement.²¹

While it is recognized that "the distribution of English learners is not always where the teachers are," in the words of one Illinois State Board of Education official, the extent of the problem is uncertain. One 2012 study noted that in Illinois zipcodes where at least 20 percent of the population is Latino, just one teacher holding both required certifications was reported available for every 50 preschool-aged English learners.²²

English learner populations have continued to increase in Illinois communities far beyond Chicago. Champaign and Macoupin counties, and others in central Illinois, have experienced substantial growth in English learner students,²³ changing demographics which will likely pose challenges in hiring bilingual preschool teachers under the new mandate.

18 Buller, "Bilingual Teachers in Demand." *op cit*.

19 Sakesh, Karen and Chou, Victoria (Fall, 2007). "Increasing the Supply of Latino Bilingual Teachers for the Chicago Public Schools," *Teacher Education Quarterly*, p. 42.

20 Hernandez, Reyna, lead writer (March 2009). "Transforming Early Learning: Educational Equity for Young Latinos." Latino Policy Forum.

21 Harris, Rebecca (June 17, 2013). "Bilingual Teachers in Short Supply for Preschools," Catalyst Chicago. Retrieved from <http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/news/2013/06/17/21193/bilingual-teachers-in-short-supply-preschools>.

22 *Ibid*.

23 Puente, Sylvia. "Jump Start Illinois: Perspectives on Helping Kids Succeed in School and in Life." *State Journal-Register*. August 24, 2013.

The additional step of attaining a state English as a Second Language endorsement entails a major commitment of both time and expense. Requirements, in addition to a valid Illinois teaching certificate, include:

- ESL clinical experience equal to 100 clock hours or three months teaching experience with ESL students.
- Credits totaling 18 semester hours distributed among the following course areas:
 - Linguistics
 - Theoretical Foundations of Teaching ESL
 - Assessment of the Bilingual Student
 - Methods and Materials for Teaching ESL
 - Cross-Cultural Studies for Teaching Limited-English-Proficient Students²⁴

A study by the Latino Policy Forum observed that many teachers believe “they are already proficient linguistically and culturally, and obtaining the additional certification is time-consuming and a financial burden,” and that nearly 45 percent of administrators saw little need for the mandate.²⁵

“The distribution of English learners is not always where the teachers are.”

The associated costs, or a sizeable portion of the expense, would likely need to be provided by the public preschool programs.²⁶ Even though some funding is available from federal, state and local sources that could offset portions of these expenses, and at a time where state school’s funding actually declined last year and education budgets are stretched thin, the costs of compliance and associated budget pressures will be considered significant.

Illinois’ state spending per student fell \$202, or 8.6 percent, between fiscal year 2008 and FY 2014, on an inflation-adjusted basis.²⁷

In light of the heightened educational needs frequently found among Illinois’ English learners, and the additional challenges with creating high-quality early childhood classrooms to serve them, it is important that teaching candidates themselves have access to high-quality training. Earlier this year, an evaluation study by the National Council on Teacher Quality rated only 7 out of 67 Illinois elementary and secondary teacher preparation programs “honor role status,” with three or more out of a possible four stars. The same analysis issued a “Consumer Alert” designation for four programs,

24 Illinois State Board of Education. *Educator Licensure Requirements*. Retrieved from http://www.isbe.net/licensure/html/esl_endorsement.htm

25 Joplin, Ashleigh M. (March 14, 2013). “Illinois Efforts to Close Language Gap in Preschools May Not Be Enough for Some.” Medill Reports.

26 Tormey, Kathryn (November 2010). “Illinois Becomes First State to Require English Learners Services in Preschool,” *Stateline Midwest*, p. 7.

27 Leachman, Michael and Mai, Chris (September 12, 2013). “Most States Funding Less Than Before the Recession.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. p. 3.

including The University of Illinois at Chicago and other teacher training programs in which the Chicago Public Schools “aggressively campaigned” to get teachers to enroll to earn certification for graduating unprepared teachers, earned two stars or less.^{28, 29}

While this research did not address early childhood certification programs directly, it does document concerns likely to impact candidates seeking to teach in the new bilingual preschool programs.

Illinois’ Poor Track Record with Bilingual Education in K-12 Schools

Severns acknowledges the shortage in qualified, high-quality bilingual education teachers in Illinois, observing that many applicants for these jobs are not fluent in both languages. According to Barbara Bowman, former chief of Chicago Public Schools early childhood development, “They’re verbal but they aren’t literate.”³⁰

Dr. Roger Prorise, former Superintendent of the Diamond Lake school district, a Chicago suburb, has described his challenges hiring K-12 bilingual education teachers. Prorise often found only one application per teacher opening – forcing the district to hire unqualified or poor fitting candidates or risk falling into non-compliance with the K-12 bilingual mandate.³¹ School districts, pressed to hire teachers literate in reading and writing in both English and Spanish, went on international recruitment trips to Spain, Mexico and Puerto Rico. Two teachers from Spain hired by Diamond Lake in the late 1990s were dismissed within the first year for not meeting district standards.³²

Under the new rules for bilingual preschools, classes with 19 or fewer English learners of the same language are permitted to use Sheltered English Immersion or English as a Second Language approaches, but at 20 children or more, only Dual Language/Two Way Immersion, Transitional Bilingual Education, or Developmental Bilingual instructional approaches are allowed.³³

If the lack of qualified teachers and materials is any guide, Severns suggest that the Illinois pre-K bilingual program is either “a model or a cautionary tale.”

“One of the biggest points of contention in Illinois is whether the state has created regulations that are so high-reaching that they are unachievable for the average pre-K provider,” notes her 2012 New America Foundation report.³⁴

28 Harris, “Bilingual Teachers in Short Supply for Preschools.” *op cit.*

29 National Council on Teacher Quality (2013). *Teacher Prep Review: a Review of the Nation’s Teacher Preparation Programs.*

30 *Ibid*, p. 15.

31 Prorise, Roger. (September 2008) “English Language Learners in Illinois – What Worked and What Didn’t,” Lexington Institute, p. 8.

32 Prorise, Roger. “English Language Learners in Illinois,” *op. cit.* p. 9.

33 Illinois State Board of Education, “Serving English Language Learners in Preschool Programs in Illinois Public School Districts: Frequently Asked Questions,” September 26, 2011, p. 4.

34 Severns, Maggie. “Starting Early with English Language Learners,” *op. cit.*, p. 15.

A problematic assumption found in various articles supporting the new mandate asserts that bilingual programs are more effective than alternatives including structured English immersion, pull-out English as a Second Language or Sheltered English. Severns specifically states that bilingual education with an emphasis on the home language is “supported by current research.”³⁵ She and other researchers rely heavily on the work of three scholars: Professors Jim Cummins, Virginia Collier, and Wayne Thomas. Researchers including Keith Baker and Christine Rossell of Boston University cast serious doubt on Cummins, Collier and Thomas’ work. Rossell offered a substantial critique of the 2002 Collier-Thomas study, which was frequently cited by advocates of the new bilingual preschool requirements, identifying design flaws and issues with data.³⁶

More recent work done on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education suggests emphasizing instruction in students’ non-English, native language is not more effective than immersion alternatives, and maybe significantly less effective. A 2007 study led by Russell Gersten reviewed the available literature and emphasized “the importance of intensive, interactive English language development instruction for all English learners. This instruction needs to focus on developing academic language.”³⁷ The Gersten study was followed by a 2010 study that examined random assignment of students into transitional bilingual education and structured English immersion. The 2010 Slavin, Madden and Calderon study concluded “that Spanish-dominant students learn to read in English (as well as Spanish) equally well in transitional bilingual education and structured English immersion.”³⁸ Others like Rossell and Baker have found immersion-based methods to be significantly more effective.³⁹

Dueling academic studies aside, Illinois’ K-12 bilingual program has not been effective in preparing ELL students for school success. Chicago Public Schools, where transitional bilingual education has been implemented extensively, have struggled to keep English learners on pace with their peers once they exit a bilingual program. In 2006, 71 percent of English learners transitioned into mainstream classrooms failed to meet reading standards two years later, compared to 53 percent for the rest of the state.⁴⁰

35 Severns, Maggie. “Starting Early with English Language Learners,” *op. cit.*, p. 5.

36 Rossell, Christine (July 2008). *Disordered Data and Murky Models*. Lexington Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.bu.edu/polisci/files/2009/09/Disordered-Data-and-Murky-Models.pdf>

37 Gersten, Russell, and others (July 2007). “Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades.” Institute for Education Sciences. p. 3.

38 Slavins, Robert E. and others (January 2010). *Reading and Language Outcomes of a Five-Year Randomized Evaluation of Transitional Bilingual Education*. Johns Hopkins University and Success for All Foundation. Retrieved from: http://www.edweek.org/media/bilingual_pdf.pdf

39 Faltis, Kelly (Spring 2011). *Bilingual, ESL and English Immersion: Educational Models for Limited English Proficient Students in Texas*. Pepperdine Policy Review. Retrieved from: <http://publicpolicy.pepperdine.edu/policy-review/2011v4/content/bilingual-esl-english-immersion.pdf>

40 Soifer, Don (November 18, 2008). “English Learners and Chicago’s Future: What is Working and What Changes are Needed?” Lexington Institute. Retrieved from: <http://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/-english-learners-and-chicagos-future-what-is-working-and-what-changes-are-needed>

Conclusion

Bilingual education is not new in Illinois, which already has regulations mandating bilingual education for elementary and secondary education. Currently, many indications appear to demonstrate a strong likelihood that chronic problems in the K-12 bilingual program stand to be repeated in the new early childhood bilingual requirement.

As schools scramble to comply with the new mandate, it is critical that the quality of early childhood education programs receive top priority. But it is not clear that schools are in a position to deliver that quality, especially in the current climate of tight budgets and limited resources. Nowhere is this more important than in the hiring of qualified teachers who can consistently provide higher levels of instructional support on which high-quality early childhood education relies.

“At every level – local, state and federal, rigorous quality improvement efforts should be identified, tested and vigorously implemented,” asserts a 2013 Migration Policy Institute paper specifically addressing the needs of children who are English learners.⁴¹

For teachers already working in programs subject to the new mandate that have enrolled in professional education to become qualified, the quality of the higher education institutions serving them is also highly important. A 2013 evaluation study by the National Council on Teacher Quality issued low ratings for many of the Illinois teacher preparation programs providing courses toward the new bilingual early childhood certification.

Young English learners are less likely than native English speakers to attend high-quality early childhood education programs.

English learner students enrolled in public early childhood education programs in Illinois have much to gain from high-quality programs. Such programs could provide strong educational benefits to bridge gaps in kindergarten readiness. But it is unclear how the new mandates will help provide more high-quality early childhood seats, and current trends indicate they may distract from other critical education priorities facing the at-risk student populations to which most Illinois English learners belong.

For such students, there is no more crucial educational need than the development of strong English proficiency and literacy skills, as the Migration Policy Institute and other advocates have noted. But it is difficult to see how these new mandates will advance that essential goal.

41 Espinosa, Linda. “Early Education for Dual Language Learners,” *op. cit.*, p. 19.

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