

THE BILINGUAL EDUCATION DEBATE

By Patrick Proctor, Meredith Moore & Marcela Ossa Parra



In recent years, bilingual education has created a lot of debate. In the United States, bilingual education is when students are taught reading, math, science, and other subjects in English plus another language (usually Spanish, but other languages too). Most teachers and parents agree that learning English and other subjects is very important for kids in school. Yet people disagree about whether it is important to teach in the students' native language.

Some people think that children who speak other languages at home learn better if the school teaches them in English and in their native language. A native language is the first language that a child learns. There are many homes in the United States where children learn a native language different from English. When they are ready to start school they can only speak their native language. They need to learn English at school.

Other people think that children whose native language is not English, need to focus on learning English. Schools should only teach in English, to help children learn it quickly. These people think that teaching children in their native languages takes time away from learning English.

Why Bilingual Education?

Bilingual education started as a way to respect the languages and cultures of students who came from homes where they spoke other languages (not just English). The idea was that if a student was just starting to learn English, then it would be hard for the student to learn subjects like math, science, and social studies in English. Instead, students could learn those subjects in their native

language, while they were still learning English. Over many years, bilingual education was offered to students who spoke many languages, including Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Haitian Creole, and many others. One of the major goals of some bilingual education programs was to teach kids how to communicate better with each other using two languages. Communication in two languages enables people to make new friends, study in other places, and find jobs.

How Much Time Do Children Need to Learn English?

Many people do not think that bilingual education is the best way to teach bilingual children. One big concern is that teaching two languages gets in the way of students' chances to really learn English well. Critics of bilingual education say that the best thing to do for bilingual students is to completely eliminate bilingual education programs because they take time away from learning English.

Supporters argue that learning new languages takes a long time. Students need to be in bilingual education for many years before they are able to speak, listen, read, and write in two languages. "Be patient!" say supporters. Science has shown that people who are bilingual often have better communication and thinking skills than people who speak only one language.

Yet critics say that many bilingual programs focus too much attention on teaching students' native language and not English, without telling the students' parents. They argue that what parents really want is that their children be taught English as soon as possible. Parents also want their children to learn all the subjects in English. Bilingual education takes too much time away from teaching in English.

Another argument against bilingual education is that children's brains are prepared to learn languages quickly. They will learn English well if that is the only language they hear. There have been many immigrants throughout the history of the United States who have learned English in school without bilingual education.

What Does Research Say?

Some research has been done that compares how students learn in bilingual programs compared with English-only programs. The results are sometimes hard to understand. We still do not really know which is better: bilingual education or English-only education. But, three general findings have come from all of that research.

1. Teaching students in their native language does not make it harder to learn English.
2. Students who have strong skills in their native languages often do very well in school.
3. Being able to speak, listen, read, and write in two languages is a valuable skill, for individual people and for the whole country.

Practical Concerns

Critics of bilingual education argue that these programs cost a lot more money than teaching just in English. Additionally, they think that offering these

programs may be unfair to some students. Many different native languages are spoken in American schools, so it is impossible to offer bilingual programs for all the students who have a different native language from English. Some children would have bilingual education, while others would not.

What do you think? Should bilingual students be taught in English only or should they learn in both their languages?