

Education's Vested Interests Seek to Roll Back Reform of Bilingual Education

By Robert Holland and Don Soifer

One of the boldest education reforms advanced by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) can be summarized in three words: Teach them English. NCLB replaced a \$300 million federal grant program supporting bilingual education programs that trap limited-English-proficient (LEP) children in segregated classes taught exclusively for many years in the children's non-English native languages. Instead, it set up block grants for states on condition that they promptly demonstrate results teaching children English. Nationwide, voters in California, Arizona and Massachusetts and policymakers in other states have made it clear they want bilingual education scrapped in favor of structured English immersion, thereby launching a reform movement widely validated by increasing test scores.

Now this reform movement is threatened by education groups that have a vested interest in preserving bilingual education programs. The National Education Association has circulated proposed amendments to NCLB that would excuse schools from having to show achievement gains until English learners have been in school for three years. Parents would no longer be entitled to annual report cards on how their children are progressing. Incredibly, the NEA wants LEP pupils to continue to be labeled LEP or "language minority" even after they have mastered English. There would be no escaping the label or the separatism, and allowing schools to lump their test scores into one group, would severely weaken accountability.

Even the NEA's plan for designating "highly qualified teachers" is indicative of its willingness to preserve the learning gap for Hispanics and other language minorities. The amendments would require states to adopt "flexible standards for current ESL and bilingual education teachers," in comparison with all other teachers.

In addition to preserving jobs in what amounts to a bilingual education industry, the NEA's effort to undercut English immersion is in ideological alignment with radical multiculturalists who oppose assimilation and condemn America's common culture as oppressive and corrupt.

There are entrenched interests at the local and state levels that are sure to welcome the NEA's drive to roll back reform of bilingual-education reform. For instance, the Illinois Association for Multilingual Multicultural Education recently boasted of orchestrating a successful campaign to preserve \$60 million of bilingual funding in the state budget. In Chicago, where the Hispanic proportion of public-school enrollment has doubled (to 36 percent) in just two decades, many families report having to fight their local school bureaucracy to remove their children from bilingual classes taught 100 percent of the time in Spanish.

The NEA and its allies in the public education establishment are notorious for thwarting or co-opting reform. Those who want to save the sensible reform of teaching English to all children at the very earliest opportunity will have their work cut out for them.