

# English Language Learners in Illinois— It's Still Not Working

Anne Swanson, Ph.D.



*June 2009*

## **Executive Summary**

Illinois' Woodland Community Consolidated School District 50, located 40 miles north of Chicago, in Lake County, educates nearly 7,000 students in grades K-8. The district has a diverse population of students that is approximately 60% white, 18% Hispanic, 11% Asian and 7% Black. Its strong faculty consistently produces strong academic results.

But under Illinois' statewide bilingual education requirement, the district is required to place Hispanic Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in classrooms that are 100% Hispanic, 100% Spanish speaking, and nearly 100% low income. These classrooms, taught nearly entirely in Spanish to comply with state law, have a shortage of adequately-credentialed bilingual teachers. Other LEP students are placed together in English as a Second Language programs taught in English. There are over 30 different home languages spoken among the families of Woodland students.

As a result, despite every effort by district leaders to integrate the bilingual classrooms into the fabric of the schools, the consequence is that Hispanic students are not achieving at levels commensurate with their peers. This paper, by Woodland's Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction and Accountability, discusses these results and analyzes the trends and circumstances behind them. Its findings point to the conclusion that the state's current bilingual education mandate is harmful, and that the use of native language instruction should be permissive, and not mandatory.

Details follow.



## Preface

School Boards have a pivotal responsibility within public education, and their local decisionmaking authority is essential to their ability to carry out their duties. As local control over important school policy decisions has lost ground in recent years, in Illinois and elsewhere, to growing and often intrusive state and federal requirements, accountability for delivering the best possible education has also been compromised.

School Boards are charged by their communities with governing their district effectively. This responsibility includes passing board policies that reflect the directions, priorities and desired outcomes for the district. Toward these ends, each Board employs and evaluates its superintendent, holding them accountable for district performance and compliance with policy.

The Illinois Association of School Boards (IASB) is a voluntary organization of local boards of education dedicated to strengthening the public schools through local citizen control.

Current state requirements mandate that school districts implement transitional bilingual education that emphasizes native language instruction. In 2008, IASB adopted the following resolution:

*The Illinois Association of School Boards shall request the Illinois State Legislature to pass legislation to amend the current Illinois School Code to make Transitional Bilingual Education optional and not mandatory.*

Woodland Community Consolidated School District 50, as the largest elementary district in Lake County and one of the largest in Illinois, serves as diverse a student population as any in the state. This paper explains why local district officials believe that current state policies are preventing them from providing their children with the best possible education, by restricting the educational options they can offer Spanish-speaking students. We hope that its readers will gain an appreciation for the value of maintaining strong local control over school policies, and for how schools can best serve the needs of their Limited English Proficient students.

Ben Schwarm  
Associate Executive Director  
Illinois Association of School Boards



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## Introduction

Illinois’ current requirement that school districts use native language instruction to teach Limited English Proficient (LEP) students is proving harmful to the educational opportunities of many of these children. It flies in the face of the flexibility offered by federal law in Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and is contrary to much of the current research on the subject.

More importantly, it isn’t working. LEP students are not achieving at the levels expected in Illinois. This lack of achievement, in and of itself, should open the door to a discussion about allowing districts to try program models and instructional models that may produce better results within their own districts.

Woodland Community Consolidated School District (CCSD) 50 serves the communities of Gurnee, Grayslake, Gages Lake, Libertyville and Waukegan, Illinois. The district educates nearly 7,000 students in grades kindergarten through 8. Approximately 60% of the students are White Non-Hispanic, 7% Black Non-Hispanic, 18% Hispanic, 11% Asian, 0.2 % Native American and 3.8% Multi-racial/Ethnic. Approximately 8% of the students are LEP and 20% are low income. The low-income students are disproportionately Hispanic.

The district has four grade-level centers. There are no neighborhood schools. One of the benefits of the grade-level centers is that each classroom is an ethnic and economic mirror of the district as a whole. The communities served by the district range from low-income apartments and mobile homes to multi-million-dollar mini-estates, yet, the district does not have neighborhood schools of “haves” and “have-nots.” Although the community is primarily White Non-Hispanic, English-speaking and middle-class, there is one glaring exception to the diversity reflected in the general education classrooms. That exception is the bilingual classrooms. Woodland’s bilingual classrooms are 100% Hispanic and overwhelmingly low income. The social isolation that exists between the bilingual classes and the racially and economically diverse monolingual classes cannot be overstated.

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In Woodland, LEP students who speak a language other than Spanish are integrated into classrooms taught in English all day and then leave for a portion of the day to go to English as a Second Language (ESL) as a service they receive to strengthen their English-language skills. These classes meet daily with a highly-qualified ESL teacher, and are taught in English. In many cases, there are other students in the classroom who speak both English and the same native language as the LEP student.

There are over 31 different home languages spoken among the families of Woodland students. The top eight (from highest to lowest) are Spanish, Tagalog, Arabic, Polish, Urdu, Gujarathi, Korean and Hindi. There are 16 times more Spanish speakers (464) than the next most common language, Tagalog (26).

During ESL classes, children whose native language is not English learn to read, listen, speak and write in English. English is explicitly taught from the most fundamental level (letter recognition, sound-letter correspondence, phonics, sight words) to more advanced levels of pronunciation, grammar and usage. In addition, students learn high-frequency words used in everyday English and academic language used across all subject areas in school.

These students are in English-only classrooms for the entire day. They are made to feel welcome at all times. They are integrated. ESL teachers have materials throughout the classroom that focus on all of the countries and cultures represented by students. In the lower grades (K-2), they get about 30 minutes of ESL a day. In grades 3-8, they get between 50 and 90 minutes. The length of their ESL class reflects the length of the corresponding language arts class their peers who are fluent in English receive.

The focus of instruction, however, remains English acquisition. ESL teachers share with classroom teachers the ever-changing level of English of each child so that adjustments may be made in the English-only classrooms to the types of work a child is capable of completing.

For example, during a geography lesson, a child who has been in the United States for only a very short time, may be reasonably expected to point to continents and oceans on a globe when he or she hears the English word for that continent or ocean. A child with more English skills may be reasonably expected to match the written name of the continent or ocean with those areas on the globe. Finally, as a child gains fluency, he or she may be expected to complete the same or very similar geography activity as his or her peers. So LEP students who are not Spanish-speaking are exposed to English throughout the day. They are welcome to have native language conversations with peers during class, recess, lunch, etc. but the language of instruction is English.

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In a bilingual classroom, students are taught mostly in Spanish. The exposure to English is a fraction of the exposure received by non-Spanish speaking LEP students. For example, an ESL student would receive math instruction in English and receive support from the ESL teacher in terms of learning math vocabulary. The bilingual

classroom would receive math instruction in Spanish. Generally, an Illinois bilingual classroom has 25-75% of the day spent in Spanish instruction.

## **Achievement of Limited English Proficient Students in Illinois**

The 2008 Illinois State Report Card indicates that LEP students had the lowest reading achievement and the second lowest mathematics achievement among all subgroups tested in Illinois. The report card divides students into six ethnic subgroups for purposes of disaggregating their test scores (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native Islander and Multi-racial/Ethnic). In addition, there are three subgroups that cross all ethnicities: LEP Students, Students with Disabilities and Economically Disadvantaged Students.

The Illinois target for 2008 was 62.5% of students in each subgroup meeting or exceeding standards on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). Across the state, 82.9% of students did perform at or above grade level on the reading test. But only 41.5% of LEP students met or exceeded reading standards. Not only did LEP students have lower reading scores than all of the other subgroups of students, but among all LEP students, Spanish speakers had the lowest reading achievement scores.

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Despite the fact that LEP students fell substantially short of achieving the 2008 target of 62.5% of students meeting or exceeding reading standards, and despite the fact that Hispanic children have the lowest reading scores of all ethnicities, Illinois continues to impose a very rigid requirement; that LEP students in districts that have a specific threshold of students from a single language group receive bilingual education in that language. In most cases, this applies only to Spanish-speaking students.

## **Program Models for LEP Students in Illinois**

The long-standing debate over how best to teach LEP students is a highly polarized set of arguments that range from support for full English immersion with little or no native language instruction to limited English instruction with large portions of the day taught in the native language. Between these two extremes lie multiple program models. Many of these are based on sound, research-based designs. But many of the programs studied present contradictory results and most have dubious applicability to school districts with varying demographics, financial resources, teacher quality and community expectations.

In Illinois, districts that receive funds for LEP students must submit an annual report to account for expenditures of those funds and to ensure that the program delivery is in compliance with Illinois laws. The document is called the “Bilingual Education Program

Delivery Report.” Within the report, districts may choose from among a number of approved program models, including:

- Transitional Bilingual Education (Full-time program)
- Transitional Bilingual Education (Part-time program)
- Dual Language/Two-Way Immersion
- ESL Instruction
- Newcomer
- Developmental Bilingual Education

The choices appear to offer a great deal of flexibility for districts. In addition, districts appear to have choices in terms of the instructional delivery model:

- Self-contained
- Departmentalized
- Pull-Out
- Push-In
- Team Teaching/Co-Teaching

All of these choices, however, are couched in fairly restrictive language. The requirements of a “Transitional Bilingual Education (Full-time program)” follow:

- A) *Instruction in subjects which are either required by law (see 23 Ill. Adm. Code 1) or by the student’s school district, to be given in the student’s home language and in English; core subjects such as math, science and social studies must be offered in the student’s home language;*
- B) *Instruction in the language arts in the student’s home language and in English as a second language; and*
- C) *Instruction in the history and culture of the country, territory, or geographic area which is the native land of the students or of their parents and in the history and culture of the United States.*

The “Transitional Bilingual Education (Part-time program)” has similar restrictions:

*A part-time program shall consist of components of a full-time program that are selected for a particular student based upon an assessment of the student’s educational needs. Each student’s part-time program shall provide daily instruction in English and in the student’s native language as determined by the student’s needs.*

The native language requirements are explicit and are enforced by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) through the awarding or withholding of funds. Woodland CCSD currently receives all of its funding. However, that funding covers less than 30% of the budget for LEP programs.

Woodland District agrees with the position of Dr. Eugene E. Garcia, a 40-plus year expert in the field of bilingual and bicultural education currently at Arizona State University.

After decades of observing, studying, teaching and writing about the topic of bilingual education, Garcia writes:

Ultimately, staff should reject program and model labels and instead answer the following questions:

1. What are the native-language and English-language characteristics of the students, families, and communities we serve?
2. What model of instruction is desired?  
How do we choose to use the native language and English as mediums of instruction?  
How do we choose to handle the instruction in the native language and English?
3. What is the nature of staff and resources necessary to implement the desired instruction? (Garcia, 2005)

Woodland CCSD 50 maintains that LEP students who receive ESL-only services are better served than Hispanic LEP students who are in bilingual programs. The district's choice would be to provide identical services to all LEP students regardless of ethnicity or native language. That option is currently prohibited.

As pointed out by Dr. Garcia, communities vary, quality of staff varies and resources vary from one district to another. What works in one district, may or may not work in another. Woodland District, however, sees far greater success with the children receiving ESL services and no native language instruction. The district would like to adjust its services for Spanish-speaking students to improve the lagging achievement of those children.

## **Woodland CCSD 50: Three reasons to offer districts choices**

Woodland CCSD 50 has three primary reasons for desiring greater flexibility in the use of native language instruction for Hispanic students.

### **Economic and ethnic segregation of Hispanic students**

In a school that was predominately Hispanic and low-income, the bilingual classes would not stand out as segregated entities. Rather, the bilingual classes would look very much like every other class. The difference would lie in the language of instruction. This situation is often the case in the Chicago Public Schools.

In the Woodland district, however, the bilingual requirements create ethnically and economically segregated classrooms.

The district has been deliberate in integrating the bilingual classrooms into the fabric of the school. Bilingual teachers plan instruction with monolingual English classroom teachers. The monolingual classrooms and the bilingual classrooms are co-located.

Physical education classes have both bilingual and monolingual classes. The playground and the cafeteria, in theory, offer opportunities for interaction. The district also has an active Bilingual Parent Advisory Council that meets quarterly. Bilingual parents attend student-teacher-parent conferences in very high numbers. Translation services are provided to all parents who need or request them during teacher conferences. District publications and forms are all available in English and Spanish. The fact remains, however, that the bilingual classes are the only ethnically, linguistically and economically segregated classes in the district.

**Table 1. LEP Program Models, Woodland CCSD Schools**

Woodland Schools	Grades	Enrollment	Program models for LEP students	LEP Staff
Woodland Primary	K	650	Kindergarten is half-day except for LEP students. LEP students have half-day English-only and half-day ESL or bilingual (Spanish)	3 ESL teachers 2 bilingual teachers 1 bilingual Teacher Assistant (TA)
Woodland Elementary	1-3	2300	Pull-out ESL Sheltered Language Arts (LA) (grade 3) Developmental bilingual	6 ESL teachers 6 bilingual teachers 3 bilingual TA
Woodland Intermediate	4-5	1700	Sheltered LA Developmental bilingual	3 ESL teachers 1 bilingual teacher 1 bilingual TA
Woodland Middle	6-8	2400	Sheltered LA Developmental bilingual	1 ESL teacher 1 bilingual teacher 1 bilingual TA

The declining LEP staff levels in higher grades are evidence of students transitioning out of services.

In addition to the segregation of the bilingual classes, children in the bilingual classrooms have none of the vocabulary exposure or English learning that is incidental, or informal, in all the other classrooms. Unlike their peers who are LEP but receive no native language instruction and exposed to peer modeling of English throughout the day, Hispanic students do not receive this modeling of fluent English, and as a result their chance for peer learning is undermined because they attend bilingual classes. This loss of modeling is compounded by the fact that many of the teachers of bilingual classes speak heavily accented English. In Woodland, the lack of exposure to native English speaking and vocabulary takes its toll among Hispanic students in two areas: lower reading scores and increased time needed to exit LEP services.

**Lower Achievement among Hispanic LEP relative to White and Asian LEP students**

The achievement of White Non-Hispanic and Asian LEP students outstrips that of their Hispanic LEP peers. White and Asian LEP students do not receive any native language instruction. Hispanic LEP students are required to receive native language instruction. The table that follows contains three years of data demonstrating the achievement gap between LEP students receiving native language instruction (Hispanic students) and LEP students receiving no native language instruction (Asian and White students).

In 2008, the United States Department of Education required Illinois to discontinue the Illinois Measure of Annual Growth in English (IMAGE) test as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) instrument for LEP students. Beginning in 2008, all students, regardless of LEP status, took the ISAT. This accounts for the large decline in the reading scores of LEP students both within Woodland and across the state of Illinois. Therefore, the data in the table is not intended to show any longitudinal comparisons. Rather, the data show that regardless of the assessment (IMAGE or ISAT) or the year (2006, 2007, 2008), or the subject (reading or mathematics), those LEP students receiving no native language instruction outperformed their LEP peers receiving native language instruction.

**Table 2. Percent of LEP students meeting or exceeding standards in reading and mathematics, disaggregated by native language instruction, Grades 3-8.**

Native language component of LEP services	Reading IMAGE 2006	Mathematics IMAGE 2006	Reading IMAGE 2007	Mathematics IMAGE 2007	Reading ISAT 2008	Mathematics ISAT 2008
White Non-Hispanic and Asian LEP students  (Native language component: ABSENT)	85	80	87	79	35	78
Hispanic LEP students  (Native language component: PRESENT)	69	68	71	61	22	60
All Woodland Students					83	91

Often, differences in socio-economic status (as opposed to LEP models of instruction) are identified as the root cause in the difference in achievement between Asian and White LEP students and that of Hispanic LEP students. It is true, that a far greater percentage of Hispanic LEP students (71% across the district, higher in the lower grades) live in poverty than do Asian and White LEP students (39% collectively). However, the remedy to this issue does not appear to be segregation. Assuming an all English-speaking group of students, it seems impossible to imagine a district isolating all of the low-income children into economically segregated classrooms as a remedy to that poverty. It is especially difficult to imagine doing that in a district rich with the resources of a middle-class community. Yet, that is what districts risk doing in meeting the requirements of native language instruction.

### **Teacher credentials of ESL teachers vs. bilingual teachers**

Bilingual education teachers in Illinois may receive a provisional certificate (Type 29), if they hold a bachelor's degree, majoring in any field, and are able to pass a language test. If their degree is from a foreign university, they must pass an English language test. If the university is an English-speaking one, then the language test must be for the language needed in the bilingual program (typically Spanish). A provisional certificate is valid for six years (three years plus a three year extension if the teacher is enrolled in graduate school).

ESL teachers must have full certification in elementary or secondary education, with an endorsement to teach ESL. The endorsement requires a specific series of graduate courses,

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including pedagogical training in English acquisition, linguistics and cultural awareness. Despite these requirements, there is no identified shortage of ESL teachers in Illinois. In fact, in Woodland CCSD, there are many fine classroom teachers with ESL endorsements who fulfilled the requirement to better prepare them for meeting the needs of students in their structured English immersion classrooms.

The Illinois State Board of Education continues to identify bilingual teachers as a shortage area. In addition, Illinois continues to mandate native language instruction.

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This combination of mandates often compels districts to hire bilingual teachers whose credentials and background may include any or all of the following:

- Provisional certification that meets minimal Illinois requirements but does not meet the federal requirements of “highly qualified” teachers
- Heavily accented English that does not serve as an appropriate model for English pronunciation and usage
- Minimal or no pedagogical training or experience in teaching reading, language acquisition and linguistics, or education generally
- Lack of familiarity with public education in the United States

## Conclusion

Despite the availability of various instructional programs for LEP students, and despite the varying needs and resources of school districts, Illinois continues to mandate bilingual education for LEP students whose numbers reached the very arbitrary threshold of 20 students with the same native language in the same school. The threshold of 20 does not take into account whether a school has 300 or 3000 students or how these students may be distributed across grade levels within the school.

Hispanic students comprise the vast majority of LEP students and, as a consequence, bear the brunt of the programmatic decisions schools make. The consequence to date is that Hispanic children are not achieving at levels commensurate with their peers. Furthermore, in Woodland, within the ranks of LEP students the achievement of Hispanic students being taught the full day in Spanish is not commensurate with other LEP students who receive ESL services, but no native language instruction.

*The current state requirement that Woodland provide native language instruction to Hispanic LEP students creates classrooms that are 100% Hispanic, 100% Spanish speaking and nearly 100% low-income in an otherwise diverse district that has a wide representation of ethnicities and languages, is only 8% LEP and 20% low-income.*

The current state requirement that Woodland provide native language instruction to Hispanic LEP students creates classrooms that are 100% Hispanic, 100% Spanish speaking and nearly 100% low-income in an otherwise diverse district that has a wide representation of ethnicities and languages, is only 8% LEP and 20% low-income.

Finally, Woodland CCSD is able to attract and retain a very fine faculty. The majority of the teachers are tenured and possess advanced degrees. Although Woodland is aggressive in its efforts to find equally well-credentialed bilingual teachers, there is a shortage of bilingual teachers across Illinois. Districts are generally required to hire bilingual teachers with provisional certificates, not recognized as “highly qualified” by federal standards.

Given that an achievement gap exists within the subgroup of LEP students in Woodland District and across Illinois, that *de facto* segregation occurs in some districts, and that there is a shortage of “highly qualified” bilingual teachers, Illinois should grant districts greater flexibility in the extent to which native language instruction must be used in classrooms. Use of native language instruction should be permissive and not mandatory.

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## About the Author

*Dr. Anne Swanson taught science in North Carolina, Virginia, Illinois, and the Department of Defense Dependent Schools in South Korea and Germany. She joined Woodland CCSD 50 in Illinois in 1999 and is the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction and Accountability.*

*Dr. Swanson earned a B.A. in biological sciences from Mount Holyoke College and a Master’s degree in secondary science education from Columbia University Teachers College. She completed her Ph.D. in educational leadership at Loyola University Chicago in 2004. Dr. Swanson’s research focused on the preparation of Illinois elementary school principals to implement the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.*

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1600 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 900  
Arlington, VA 22209  
Tel: 703.522.5828 Fax: 703.522.5837  
[www.lexingtoninstitute.org](http://www.lexingtoninstitute.org)  
[mail@lexingtoninstitute.org](mailto:mail@lexingtoninstitute.org)