

# English Language Learners in Illinois— What Worked and What Didn't

By Dr. Roger Prorise



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## **Executive Summary**

Bilingual education should be optional, not mandatory. There are states, such as Illinois, that mandate bilingual education.

This paper describes the programs and practices used in Illinois' Diamond Lake School District 76, which achieved remarkable gains in English reading and math test scores by implementing its own alternative "Sheltered English" program that teaches English language learner students primarily in English. While the district is small, its population is diverse, and there are many reasons to believe its successes can be replicated in other, larger school districts.

Good teachers in classrooms are essential for a successful school experience for English language learners. Due to the documented shortage of good bilingual teachers in Illinois, a mandated bilingual education policy places English language learners in classrooms that are not adequately staffed.

Good teachers need an effective curriculum to help English language learners achieve and succeed in school. There is a documented shortage of instructional material available in languages other than English, including Spanish, compounding the problems of mandating bilingual education.

Details follow.

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## Introduction

### Diamond Lake School District 76

Diamond Lake School District 76 is a small, diverse public suburban elementary school district of 1,300 students from Mundelein, Vernon Hills, and Long Grove, Illinois. It feeds into two high schools, one of which is among the best high schools in the country. District 76 has a 50% Latino population and a 40% low-income population. 90% of the Latino population is low-income. The housing for many families of English language learners (ELLs) consists of small, single family houses with multiple families living in a single home. The families of English language learners in District 76 are primarily low-income, and approximately 40% are illegal.

The low-income characteristic impacts strategy in that the school cannot assume that the home environment is a nurturing and language rich environment. The likelihood of both parents working at low-wage jobs is prevalent and lowers the level of parent supervision of children. Something as basic as parents reading to their children is an uncommon practice in low-income families. The low-income element does not impact classroom strategy but it does impact school strategy.

For the past four years, District 76 has used an alternative research-based program called “Sheltered English,” which teaches ELL students primarily in English with Spanish language support only when needed. The choice of instructional programs is wide open to English language learners in District 76. Yet this was in violation of the state of Illinois’ bilingual education mandate. However, the achievement gains made by the ELL student population from District 76 are significant:

	2004	2005	2006	2007
Reading – ELL Meeting or Exceeding Standards	33%	68%	76%	71%
Math – ELL Meeting or Exceeding Standards	49%	32%	65%	79%

*Source: Northern Illinois University, Illinois Interactive School Report Card – Illinois Standard Achievement Test (ISAT).*

During the same timeframe, 2004-2007, the low-income population increased by 16%. The ELL population is heavily low-income.



1<sup>st</sup> grade students celebrated 100 days of school.

District 76 also has a dual language program. It's an optional program; parents can enroll their child in it. The purpose of the dual language program is clear – students become bilingual and biliterate. In the dual language program, 50% of the students are English speaking and 50% are Spanish speaking. 50% of the instruction is in English and 50% in Spanish. This may be the most successful program for English language learners. One of the reasons for its success is that it has a higher level of parent involvement.

In an anonymous parent survey in 2006 and 2008, parents gave a 95% approval rating in all key areas of an effective school, including instructional programs.

## A Culture of Continuous Improvement

There was a change of school culture in District 76. A culture of complacency became a culture of continuous improvement. The school leaders at the district and school levels have to want to improve and be better schools tomorrow than today. A culture of continuous improvement comes from within individual school and district leaders. A culture of continuous improvement brings to mind progress, constructive change, and growth. It's not brought about from government mandate or through reading educational research.

The commitment to continuous improvement naturally leads to the issue of measurement. The question – how do you know if you've improved? – is critical. There has to be agreement by the district stakeholders on the essential measures to be used to determine progress. I suggest adopting measures that are common and widely accepted by the public. District 76 used the state tests, ISAT (Illinois Standards Achievement Test), placement and performance in high school, MAP (Measure of Academic Progress, an individual student growth test), and an anonymous bi-annual parent survey.

I think it's particularly important that the board of education and superintendent encourage, recognize, and reward school improvement and progress. A commitment to school improvement and progress fights off complacency.

As the superintendent, I expect the principal to recommend ideas for school improvement. I don't expect all ideas to work. But, I do expect school improvement ideas and initiatives. I expect some ideas to work and some not. The only sin is in not having any school improvement ideas or initiatives – good or bad.

*The shortage of good bilingual teachers is enough of a reason to move quickly away from mandated bilingual education.*

When a new initiative is implemented, there should be a long-term commitment to the initiative. It may take several years before you can see results.

Constructive change – not change for the sake of change – is essential. I’ve witnessed a superintendent and board of education change things, it seemed to me, because their gut told them that things needed to be changed. The resulting changes were for the worse, not the better. A superintendent and board of education can do a lot of good, but can also do a lot of damage. The essential district measurement sources speak to the two conditions.

A “we’re doing the best we can given our population” culture in any school setting brings to mind complacency, excuses, and, as described by President Bush, the bigotry of low expectations.

Outlined in this monograph is the description of the academic progress of all students in District 76, particularly the English language learners. Something that should not be overlooked is the necessity for adequate school funding. If a district does not have the funding to pay for additional student support programs, the school and district improvement plan may have to be adjusted.

### **What is success – evidence of progress**

- Improved student achievement as measured by ISAT.
- High School placement.
- Parent survey.

## **What Worked? How Do You Know?**

### **Good Teachers Work**

Good teachers take precedent over instruction in native language.

Marginal and mediocre teachers don’t work, not to mention incompetent or unsatisfactory ones. Time and again, research points out the significance of good teachers. (The latest research in 2006, *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth*, edited by Diane August and Timothy Shanahan.)

The shortage of good bilingual teachers is enough of a reason to move quickly away from a policy that mandates bilingual education. The language in Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is sufficient to address the educational needs of English language learners – “Local entities shall have the flexibility to choose the method of instruction to teach limited-English proficient children.”

How do you get more good teachers in classrooms of ELL students?

- Hire good teachers, don't compromise in search of bilingual teachers.
- Develop existing teachers.
- Dismiss incompetent teachers.

**Hire good teachers:** In my experience, there is, and always has been, a sufficient number of good candidates for every regular English speaking elementary and middle school teacher vacancy. Administration has the luxury of selecting from a strong base of candidates.

Increase the pool – a good teacher is a good teacher – basic principles of excellent teaching apply across settings be it a regular education classroom or one for ELL students.

**Develop or grow your own:** Teacher development must be a priority for the teacher and the school district. Teachers must assume responsibility for their professional development. School districts must provide resources, support, and focus for the professional development of teachers. Teacher aides should be groomed to be teachers. They represent a good pool of teacher candidates.

*Do not tolerate incompetence and do not settle for mediocrity.*

**Dismiss incompetent teachers:** Do not tolerate incompetence and do not settle for mediocrity. Administrators

should do their jobs and not hide behind the “tenure and too much in legal fees” excuse. Teachers who are incompetent should be dismissed. It's a lot of work and a very uncomfortable process, but well worth the effort. The teacher evaluation process should allow for the dismissal of unsatisfactory teachers.

## A Clear Goal Works

In District 76, the goal for English language learners is literacy and proficiency in English. The students' home should be responsible for maintaining the native language and culture. I value the acquisition of multiple languages. However, learning English must be the priority. There is no question that being bilingual or trilingual is a plus, a real asset.

Support programs with an increase of instructional time work – emphasis on *more time*. For example, to increase the literacy level of students, the classroom teacher must devote from 120-150 minutes a day on literacy instruction. A reading teacher would teach reading to small groups of students an additional 30 minutes a day. When students are taken from the classroom teacher to be with the reading teacher, they must miss something other than literacy instruction. Struggling students should be in a guided reading group with the classroom teacher and the reading teacher.

*Learning English must be a priority.*

## Good Curriculum Works

State standards in Illinois are rigorous. There are two district mandates for curriculum development. The curriculum had to be aligned with state standards; and since District 76 fed into one of the best high schools in the country (according to a *Newsweek* list), the curriculum had to prepare students to succeed in high school. As a district goal, eighth grade graduates had to place in regular freshman English or higher and Algebra I or higher. The attainment of this goal placed students in the college track in high school.

## Class Size Works

The research (Tennessee Project STAR report) states that class size ranging from 13 to 17 students per class has a positive effect on student achievement. In District 76, the guiding principle for class size is to come as close to 17 as possible.

What are the benefits of small class size and what stands in the way? A credible national study stated that class size of 13 to 17 had a positive impact on student achievement.

There are two real challenges that could interfere with obtaining class sizes of 13 to 17. The first challenge is classroom space; small class sizes require more classrooms. The second and equally as challenging is the budget; can you pay for additional teachers?

But, just because you have the money in the budget and the needed classroom space, does not mean you should have small class sizes. As a superintendent, when thinking about class size, a few thoughts come to mind:



*Middle school students painting furniture as a part of a school service project for needy families.*

- Very reasonable and constructive teachers and parents want small class sizes.
- Teachers are more able to individualize instruction for students when class sizes are in the mid-teens compared to mid-twenties.
- Student behavior is better. When there are fewer students, supervision is closer and students know it.

## A Safe and Nurturing Environment Works

Rules and consequences must be clear, reasonable, and constructive.

A healthy learning environment includes high expectations with wonderful support along with very little tolerance for gang activity. A safe and orderly environment is the priority. Learning doesn't take place in an unsafe and disorderly environment.

A clear and serious consequence needs to be in place for major offenses. Drugs, weapons, and gang activity lead to expulsion and placement in alternative schools. An advisor program for gang-identified students is being implemented as an ongoing support program

for students. The advisor program will help students identify areas of strength and interests and help students dream dreams.

Recess and lunch provide ELL students with informal opportunities to be exposed to the English language. There is little if any pressure on children to speak fluently when they are at recess with their classmates. When they are playing, they find ways to communicate. There will be mistakes and laughing but also learning. It is a marvelous time to practice language. The same is true of the lunch table. Naturally and logically, the more exposure to a language, the greater the likelihood of language acquisition.

## Parent Involvement Works

Parent involvement means far more than being active in a Parent-Teacher Organization. Parent involvement is defined by participation in their child's education, which extends outside of school and the school day. This kind of parent involvement is more critical than during the school day.

Increasing involvement of parents of ELL students can be encouraged in numerous ways:

- Parents of ELL students have to feel welcomed in school. There has to be the sense that staff, beginning with the principal, want them involved in school.
- Recognition that language can be a barrier for parents. It would be helpful to have someone who speaks the other language readily available to assist when needed.
- The requirement of a passport to re-enter the U.S., effective for the 2006-2007 school year, improved student attendance in January 2007. Fewer Mexican families took prolonged vacations during the two-week winter break.
- Translate school documents. This is obviously less of a priority for school populations where many parents can't read.
- Have ELL parents serve as teacher/school aides or clerks, and provide a small per-hour salary (i.e. \$10.00). This is an avenue to grow your own teachers, which in my opinion is better than recruiting teachers from foreign countries.
- A consequence of illegal immigration – kids are born here but the parents are here illegally. A common occurrence in public schools is the dilemma of parents being illegal immigrants while their kids are legal residents since they were born in the U.S. This is a dangerous dilemma for families and communities. When children become older, i.e. high school age, many use this condition as a means of manipulating their parents. The child could insist on something or completely disregard parental direction on a matter without fear of consequence. The grown child could threaten to turn the parents over to the police if parents don't acquiesce to their children's wishes. In these circumstances, children have too much power.
- Provide childcare and food.

What do ELL parents want for their kids? The same thing as the other parents. They love their kids and they want what's best for them. Culturally, they are more trusting and dependent on the school than the other parents. ELL parents are more likely to tolerate

poor teaching. They're not familiar and comfortable enough with the school system to know how to complain.

ELL parents do want good teachers and good schools. Many ELL parents do not have much formal education, so high school graduation and post-secondary education cannot be assumed to be of value.

There is a cultural difference with most of the English language learners. Therefore, some things can't be assumed to be understood. For example, the importance of reading to their children has to be emphasized and modeled for the parents.

## High Expectations Work

However, it is not enough to set high expectations. Schools can't simply wish for all students to meet or exceed state standards in reading or for all students to be in algebra by eighth grade. What is just as important as setting high standards is having a system in place that will help and support students who don't meet the standards.

Every school should have a plan that includes specific practical steps that will lead to underperforming students meeting state standards in reading and math – in other words, to get the students where we want them to be. It needs to address each of the points raised above. As the plan is implemented, it must then be supported and evaluated continuously.

### **What leads to higher student achievement of English language learners?**

- Good teachers
- Good curriculum
- Higher standards
- Support programs
- Class size – come as close to 17 as possible
- Teach in English with native language support
- Dual language program
- Adequate funding

## **What Didn't Work? How Do You Know?**

### Bilingual Education Didn't Work

Bilingual education did not work in District 76, even though there was a genuine and full commitment to bilingual education from 1998-2003. It did not work for at least three good reasons:

- A shortage of good bilingual classroom teachers – documented annually by the Illinois State Board of Education.

- A shortage of good bilingual reading teachers.
- A lack of good bilingual instructional curriculum material.

As superintendent of schools, I believe good teachers are essential to high student achievement. In fact, improving the achievement of English language learners is unlikely, if not impossible, without good teachers.

The Illinois State Board of Education mandates bilingual education and then annually recognizes that local school districts will be unable to sufficiently staff this mandated program.

School districts in Illinois visit Spain, Mexico, and Puerto Rico to recruit bilingual teachers. In the late 1990s, District 76 recruited two teachers from Spain for its then bilingual education program. These teachers needed and were given an abnormally high level of support, and after one year were dismissed because they did not meet district standards.



*Students sing in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade choir.*

The fact that school districts make recruitment trips to foreign countries for bilingual education teachers is evidence of the shortage of bilingual teachers.

Mandated bilingual education forces school districts to lower standards for hiring and retaining teachers. There are fewer candidates to choose from for bilingual programs which is not the case for English speaking programs. School districts intent on complying with a bilingual

education mandate are regularly forced to choose between hiring a marginal bilingual candidate or not filling the vacancy. The candidate pool is very small, thus the trips to Spain and Mexico.

My experience is that such bilingual education teachers were not as good as regular monolingual classroom teachers. Under the circumstances, school districts hire the best available bilingual candidate. I, along with other school administrators, have been in situations where the top candidate for a bilingual teaching position was the only candidate. Even though there may have been some questions around his/her performance, there was no other viable candidate for the job.

Children born in poverty with limited English proficiency will probably need more than a good classroom teacher to succeed in school. It is probable that they will also need extra help or support with literacy because their home environment is likely to be language deficient rather than language rich.

Therefore, the importance of good teachers is not restricted to the classroom. Good teachers are needed for additional reading instruction. The shortage of good bilingual teachers extends to all curricular areas.



*1<sup>st</sup> grade students check out books at the school library.*

This compounds the problem of the shortage of good bilingual teachers. In bilingual education, the classroom teacher must be bilingual to provide instruction in the native language in all content areas, and the remedial reading teacher must be bilingual in order to provide consistent literacy instruction in the native language.

Not only is there a shortage of good bilingual classroom teachers, but also good bilingual reading teachers.

The classroom teacher in the elementary grades must teach literacy for a minimum of two hours daily. The students below state standards should receive an additional 30 minutes of literacy instruction daily.

Curriculum in District 76 is aligned with state standards. ISAT, a rigorous set of tests aligned with the state standards, is given to all students including English language learners. The Illinois Measure of Annual Growth in English (IMAGE), an easier test, was given to English language learners until 2008 when the U.S. Department of Education would no longer accept IMAGE.

IMAGE, the state test for ELL students, was not designed to be an achievement test, but rather an assessment of English literacy. The Illinois State Board of Education attempted to have IMAGE pass as an achievement test with the U.S. Department of Education as a part of No Child Left Behind compliance, but failed. The test for English language learners (IMAGE) was never aligned with state standards, driving the federal Department of Education to not accept the IMAGE test. ELLs currently take a different test, the Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT).

This regrettable situation serves to underscore how expectations are lower for English language learners in Illinois, compared with English speaking students. Given the likelihood that ELLs would not pass the more rigorous ISAT set of tests, the important challenge is what should and could be done to enable them to pass.

*Instructional material available  
for English language learners  
is also inferior.*

In addition to an inferior state assessment, instructional material available through publishers for English language learners is also inferior. There is an abundance of material available in English. While there is instructional material available in Spanish, there is

far more available in English. Furthermore, there is nothing readily available in other languages such as Russian, Chinese, Polish, etc.

And that makes economic sense. Publishers publish material that will create profit which is partially determined by volume of sale.

From 2004-2007, ELL ISAT reading scores improved by over 100 percent and math scores by 60 percent (30 percent meeting standards in reading and math to 70 percent). This outcome is due to a myriad of factors, including good teachers, more instructional time, curriculum, class size, and teaching in English with Spanish support.

There is no parent involvement or pressure from parents for their children to succeed in bilingual classes. I've been the Superintendent of Diamond Lake School District 76 for ten years and I have yet to receive a complaint about classroom instruction from a Latino parent. This can be for a variety of reasons; parents of poor children are less involved in their children's education and less demanding of school staff academically. The same is not true of English speaking parents in my district. Some significant changes were brought about as a result of pressure from English speaking parents.

Research tells us that the average socio-economic status of a class impacts the level of student achievement. A class with low socio-economic status will perform at a low level (*Vulnerable Children*, J. Douglas Willms). This principle held true in District 76. ELL students in bilingual education classes that consisted of 100% poor Latino students performed at a lower level than ELL students in dual language classes that consisted of 50% poor Latino students and 50% middle- and upper-middle-class English speaking families.

## The Case for Change

Why should Illinois change its policy on mandated bilingual education? If the outcomes were satisfactory, there would be little reason for change. If not, change is in order.

*If the outcomes were satisfactory, there would be little reason for change.*

District 76 lost its state bilingual funding due to non-compliance with the Illinois School Code. However, after a thorough and comprehensive campaign, the Illinois State Board of Education conceded, and awarded District 76 its bilingual grant.

As a superintendent, I had to devote a great deal of time and energy to persuade the Illinois State Board of Education to reinstate \$165,000 in state and federal funding for programs for English language learners.

The campaign to reinstate the district's funding for English language learners involved:

- Gathering the support of almost 40 local school districts in northern Illinois.
- Convincing parents to contact state legislators and express support for District 76's position.
- Working with newspaper reporters at the *Chicago Tribune* and small local papers to inform the public of the state's illogical position.
- Persuading state legislators to ask the Illinois State Board of Education to reinstate District 76's funding for English language learners.
- Meeting with representatives from the Illinois State Board of Education to present a case supporting District 76 and requesting the reinstatement of funding.
- Working with legislators to change the Illinois School Code to make bilingual education optional, not mandatory.
- The Illinois Association of School Boards adopted a resolution stating that bilingual education should be optional, not mandatory.

## Conclusion

"Where inability to speak and understand the English language excludes minority children from participation in the educational program offered by a school district, the district must take affirmative steps to rectify the language deficiency in order to open its instructional programs to these students," stated the U.S. Supreme Court in its *Lau v. Nichols* decision in 1974.

English language learners have been successful in school using alternative instructional programs, such as the sheltered English program model. Research supports using instructional programs other than bilingual education.

*Bilingual education should be optional, not mandatory.*

There are many examples of bilingual education not working in school districts. The record of achievement by English language learners in Diamond Lake School District 76 demonstrates how giving individual school districts the flexibility to implement their own, research-based programs, such as sheltered English, can provide substantial educational benefits to students and families in those schools. Bilingual education should be optional, not mandatory.

Mandated bilingual education unfairly segregates English language learners. In a predominately English-speaking school, this segregation leads to a disconnect with school for English language learners. A basic need for all students is to experience a connection with school; a sense of belonging. Mandated bilingual education in a predominantly English-speaking school destroys community and a connection with school for English language learners.

The state of Illinois is very diverse, as are most states. As stated in the No Child Left Behind Act, each local school district should have the authority to use instructional programs that meet the needs of the students in their district without losing government funding.

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