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William J. Bennett On Bilingual Education

The following are two statements made by the Secretary of Education, William J. Bennett, on bilingual education. The first was made to the Association For a Better New York. The second was testimony before the Senate on the proposed 1986 amendments to the Bilingual Education Act. In both statements his theme was the same: the method which Congress has mandated that schools use to teach bilingual education has not been successful for primarily one reason. The reason is that the method has lost sight of the proper goal for bilingual education: to help language-minority students become fluent in English. In his first speech, Secretary Bennett emphasized that there is no evidence that the prescribed method has ever succeeded in helping language-minority students become fluent. However, in his testimony before the Senate, he acknowledged that the prescribed method has succeeded, but stressed that there is no evidence that it is any more successful than other methods.

ADDRESS BY WILLIAM J. BENNETT, UNITED STATES SECRETARY OF EDUCATION, TO THE ASSOCIATION FOR A BETTER NEW YORK*

It is a pleasure to be back in New York, my hometown, and it is an honor to be invited to address so distinguished a group. My topic today is what has come to be known as bilingual education—that is, the method by which we teach English to students whose native language is not English. This topic is, I think, a particularly fitting one to discuss here in New York. For the issue of bilingual education arises only because we are a nation blessed with citizens from a multiplicity of backgrounds. And the vitality that these varied origins gives our nation is nowhere more evident than in New York City.

Our origins are diverse; yet we live together as fellow citizens, in harmony. In America, and perhaps especially in New York, we can say "E Pluribus Unum;" out of many, we respect our differences; each of us is justly proud of his own ethnic heritage; but we share this pride, in common, as Americans, as American citizens.

To be a citizen is to share in something common—in common principles, common memories, and a common language in which to discuss our common affairs. Our common language is, of course, English. And

* This speech was given in New York City on September 26, 1985. Reprinted with the permission of the United States Department of Education.
our common task is to ensure that our non-English speaking children
learn this common language.

We entrust this task, in part, to our schools. We expect them, in this
as in other respects, to prepare our youth to participate fully in the op-
portunities and challenges of American society. That is why we become
so concerned when we discover that our schools are, in various ways,
falling short of what we expect of them. We expect much of them—to
impart basic skills, to help form character, to teach citizenship. And we
expect our schools to help teach all of our students English, the common
language that will enable them to participate fully in our political, eco-
nomic, and social life.

Teaching non-English speaking children English is not a new task
for this nation. It has been performed, with fair success, in communities
across this nation since its beginning. But only in the mid-1960's did the
federal government accept responsibility for assisting in this task. The
timing was no accident. For America was then engaged in a peaceful
revolution—our civil rights revolution—in which the federal government
stepped in to make good on the great American promise of equal oppor-
tunity for all. And this promise extends with full force to those of our
children who speak no English, or little English.

Many of these children are the sons and daughters of immigrants
and refugees, who have left behind their homes and all that was familiar
to them, to come to this land of freedom and opportunity. Many of these
children grow up in circumstances that are not easy, their parents strug-
gling day to day for the sake of a brighter future for their children.
Other Americans have always, in their churches and communities, done
d their part to help give such children a chance to achieve that brighter
future. It was reasonable and proper, twenty years ago, for the federal
government to step in to play a role as well.

How has our government done by these children? The answer, I am
afraid, is not very well. But not from a lack of trying. We began with the
best of intentions. We began with two legislative landmarks, the Civil
Rights Act of 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of
1965. But in both cases, after sound beginnings, federal policies went
astray. In a now familiar pattern of events, over the next two decades
our policies gradually became confused as to purpose, and overbearing as
to means. As a result, too many children have failed to become fluent in
English, and have therefore failed to enjoy the opportunities they de-
serve. Now is the time to get our policies back on track; now is the time
do deliver on the promise of equal opportunity so solemnly pledged
twenty years ago.

That pledge is nowhere more solemnly expressed than in the 1964
Civil Rights Act: "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of
race, color or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be de-
nied the benefits of, or subjected to discrimination under, any program or
activity receiving federal financial assistance.”

The federal government set about enforcing this provision against
discrimination on the basis of national origin. And there were egregious
instances of such discrimination. In some school districts in the South-
west, for example, Mexican-American children had been consigned to
classes for the mentally retarded merely because of their limited English
ability. In 1970 HEW therefore decreed that, where minority children
were being excluded from effective participation in school, a school dis-
trict would be required to “take affirmative steps to rectify the language
deficiency in order to open its instructional program to these students.”
The purpose of such steps was clear—to teach these students English—
and schools were free to use whatever means they judged would be effec-
tive in the pursuit of this goal.

The propriety of this requirement was upheld by the Supreme Court
in 1974 in *Lau v. Nichols*, in a suit brought by the parents of non-English
speaking Chinese students in San Francisco. The Court found that the
failure of the San Francisco school system to provide English language
instruction to these students denied the students a meaningful opportu-
nity to participate in the public educational program. And the Court
noted: “no specific remedy is urged upon us. Teaching English to stu-
dents of Chinese ancestry is one choice. Giving instruction to this group
in Chinese is another. There may be others.”

Despite the *Lau* decision’s endorsement of flexibility of approach,
however, the federal government moved in another direction. In 1975
HEW began to require that educational programs for non-English speak-
ing students be conducted in large part in the student’s native language,
as virtually the only approved method of remedying discrimination.
These regulations were never formally published for public notice and
comment; indeed when HEW was sued and forced to publish them, in
August, 1980, they aroused a storm of opposition, and they were with-
drawn in February, 1981. By that time, however, they had served as the
basis for some 500 “compliance agreements” negotiated with school dis-
tricts across the nation.

Because of their intrusiveness and heavy-handedness, these regula-
tions came close to giving bilingual education a bad name. More impor-
tant, by the time they were withdrawn, in 1981, the evidence was
becoming increasingly clear that this educational method imposed from
Washington was doing very little to help students learn English.

Why did the government turn down this path? Partly because of a
foolish conviction that only Washington meant well and knew best. Lo-
cal school districts, it was thought, could not be trusted to devise the best
means, given their own circumstances, to teach their students English. But our government made this fateful turn for another reason as well. And that was that we had lost sight of the goal of learning English as key to equal educational opportunity. Instead, HEW increasingly emphasized bilingual education as a way of enhancing students’ knowledge of their native language and culture. Bilingual education was no longer seen so much as a means to ensure that students learned English, or as a transitional method until students learned English. Rather, it became an emblem of cultural pride, a means of producing a positive self-image in the student.

Let us be clear, pride in one’s heritage is natural and commendable. We in the United States cherish our diversity, and local schools should be free—and more, should be encouraged—to foster the study of the languages and heritages of their students in the courses they offer. But the responsibility of the federal government must be to help ensure that local schools succeed in teaching non-English speaking students English, so that every American enjoys access to the opportunities of American society.

The history of federal funding for bilingual education tells much the same story. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 provided federal aid for the education of children from low-income families; this could include aid to students who needed help learning English. But Congress wished to target special funds for this purpose. In 1968, therefore, Congress passed the Bilingual Education Act, authorizing federal funding of “new and imaginative” programs to meet the special educational needs of poor children who were educationally disadvantaged because of their inability to speak English. The design of such programs were left, in the words of the Senate Committee Report, “to the discretion and judgments of the local school districts to encourage both varied approaches to the problem and also special solutions for a particular problem of a given school.” It was clear that the problem was the inability of many poor children to speak English, and the solution was funding for a variety of programs to teach those students English. The exact character of those programs was left to the local school districts—the only reasonable course, given the diversity of situations in the nation’s schools and the inconclusiveness of research as to the best methods of teaching English to those who do not speak it at home.

But despite this promising beginning, the Bilingual Education Act evolved into an act whose purposes were less clear and whose programs were more restrictive. When the Act was reauthorized in 1974, Congress curbed local control over program design, and prescribed education in the student’s native language as the sole method local school districts seeking funds could use. Why this change? Not because research had
established the superiority of this method to any of the other possible educational methods, methods which placed greater emphasis on instruction in English. For there was—and is—no evidence of such superiority. The change came about because the understanding of the purpose of the program changed; it was no longer the straightforward one of making sure that students acquired proficiency in English. This purpose now existed side by side with an emphasis on the importance of “instruction given with appreciation for the cultural heritage of such children.”

The Bilingual Education Act was renewed again in 1978. Funding had by then increased twenty-fold but the research findings were sobering. A four-year study of over ten thousand Hispanic students had concluded that many students in federally funded bilingual programs already knew English, and some had simply been assigned there because of Hispanic surnames; that those students who did need to learn English had shown little improvement; and that most of the programs, despite their label of “transitional bilingual education,” did not in fact lead to a transition in English competency. The director of the study told Congress: “there is not compelling evidence . . . that Title VII bilingual education as presently implemented is the most appropriate approach for these students.” Nonetheless, Congress made only minor changes in the law.

The Bilingual Education Act was most recently reauthorized last year. Congress had before it yet more evidence that the mandated method of instruction in the native language was no more effective than alternative methods of special instruction using English; and in some cases the mandated method was demonstrably less so. Indeed the English language skills of students in bilingual education programs seemed to be no better than the skills of those who simply remained in regular classrooms where English was spoken, without any special help. In addition, Hispanic children, the largest subgroup of the eligible population, have continued to perform educationally far below the national average. The recent news of gains by Hispanic students in SAT scores is welcome indeed, and is a testimony to the impressive efforts of many Hispanic parents and children. Yet we cannot take these scores as a sign that all is well; the scores of Hispanics remain unacceptably below the national average and, more important, these scores only reflect the achievement of half of all Hispanic children. For almost half of all Hispanic high school students in the United States drop out before graduation and of these dropouts, 40 percent never reach the 10th grade. This figure is as tragically as high now as it was twenty years ago.

In response to these facts, and in response to the influx of immigrants from various parts of Asia and elsewhere, for many of whom it is practically impossible for schools to provide native language instruction,
Congress last year recognized the need for programs using alternative instructional methods. These methods include "English as a Second Language" or "structured immersion," and provide special instruction in English to students of limited English proficiency. Congress did allow, in its 1984 reauthorization, for such alternative programs; but it limited funding for those programs to four percent of the total appropriation, leaving local school districts still very much constrained. And Congress unfortunately further backed away from a clear statement of the goal of learning English, by authorizing for the first time funding for programs designed simply to maintain student competence in the native language.

This, then, is where we stand: after seventeen years of federal involvement, and after $1.7 billion of federal funding, we have no evidence that the children whom we sought to help—that the children who deserve our help—have benefitted. And we have the testimony of an original sponsor of the Bilingual Education Act, Congressman James Scheuer of New York, that the Bilingual Education Act's "original purposes were perverted and politicized"; that instead of helping students learn English, the English has been sort of thinned out and stretched out and in many cases banished into the mists and all of the courses tended to be taught in Spanish. That was not the original intent of the program.

What then are we to do? Give up on the promise of equal educational opportunity for those of our children who are not proficient in English? Our sense of what we owe our fellow Americans will not permit this. Continue down the same failed path on which we have been travelling? This is an equally bankrupt course. We ought to do more than increasingly hollow protestations of concern and solidarity.

We intend to make good on the promise of real equal educational opportunity for all Americans. We shall therefore explore with Congress the possibility of removing the four percent cap on alternative instructional methods, as well as other legislative changes; and we shall move, through regulatory and administrative changes, to allow greater flexibility for local school districts. And we shall take care, in the course of ensuring that the civil rights of minority national origin students are respected, that we do not impose a particular method of instruction. These reforms will allow local school districts to choose the sort of program, or to design the combination of programs, best suited to their particular needs, school districts serving recent immigrants who speak 70 different languages may after all need different sorts of programs from school districts whose students speak only two languages.

These reforms will allow local school districts the flexibility to adapt to local circumstances. They will also allow them to take advantage of research results which are now coming in. For example, the state of Texas is conducting an experiment in four alternative programs that em-
phasize the use of English, along with a traditional program using the native language. One alternative is called “structured immersion” in which students are taught in English, but by teachers who know the native language, and in a way that is structured to take account of the students’ initial limited English proficiency. Two years of data suggest that this method shows great promise in teaching English. And local school districts throughout the nation seem to be attracted to such alternative methods; this year about one-quarter of the applications were for such alternative programs, which unfortunately are limited to four percent of the total funds. Does it not make sense to allow local school districts to pursue the educational method they judge most promising to teach their non-English speaking students English?

Let me be clear: we do not intend to prescribe one method or another. Many school districts will undoubtedly continue to pursue programs with some instruction in the native language; in some circumstances, these can be very useful in helping students keep up with their classwork until they become fluent in English. We do not intend to prescribe one method or another. But the goal of any method should be clear: Fluency in English. As President Reagan has said, “... bilingual programs should serve as a bridge to full participation in the American mainstream. They should never segregate non-English speaking students in a way that will make it harder, not easier, for them to succeed in life.”

Our movement away from exclusive reliance on one method, and our endorsement of local flexibility, should not be mistaken for a return to the old days of sink or swim. Many children in earlier generations learned English in such circumstances; but some did not, and at times the cost was high. We intend to enforce the requirement that school districts provide equal opportunity for students deficient in English, by providing programs that address their needs; and we intend to continue funding programs that address the needs of school children who need to learn English or to improve their English. But we believe that local flexibility will serve the needs of these students far more effectively than intrusive federal regulation.

As the educational historian, Diane Ravitch, points out, “it is unprecedented for the federal government to prescribe a particular pedagogical method... Congress should prescribe the goal—in this case, English language literacy—and each district should be free to decide how to achieve that goal.”

But as this comment suggests, we need also to clarify for ourselves our national commitment to the goal. Paradoxically, we have over the last two decades become less clear about the goal—English language literacy—at the same time as we have become more intrusive as to the method.
But there ought to be no confusion or embarrassment over our goal. The rise in ethnic consciousness, the resurgence of cultural pride in recent decades is a healthy thing; the traditions we bring with us, that our forefathers brought with them to this land, are too worthwhile to be discarded. But a sense of cultural pride cannot come at the price of proficiency in English, our common language.

For one thing, there is overwhelming evidence that English language proficiency is crucial to social and economic achievement in America. This evidence includes sophisticated econometric studies showing that differences in wages between Hispanics and other Americans, once one takes account of such factors as age and the amount of formal education, are almost entirely accounted for by differences associated with English language skills. Simply put, the better your English, the more you earn.

The evidence includes the testimony of the leading businessmen who make up the Committee for Economic Development: "we believe," they say in their recent report on American education, "that all Americans must become proficient in the English language in order to work and live in the modern world." And from this they draw the following conclusion:

Although this goal should be shared by every school district in the nation, we are aware that the techniques used to accomplish English mastery will need to vary from district to district. Because there is no agreement as to the most effective method for teaching English to non-English speaking youngsters, such local variation is both necessary and desirable. We support bilingual education as long as English mastery is the end product of the program.

And, I would add, so does this Administration, and so do the American people.

The mastery of English is the key to individual opportunity in America. And teaching English to those whose native language is not English is a continuation of the struggle to provide for all Americans an equal opportunity to make of themselves what they can. But mastery of English is important for reasons that go beyond individual opportunity, crucial though that is.

We are, after all, one people, fellow citizens. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was affirmation of fellow citizenship—a fellow citizenship based on our moral equality—as well as a means to individual opportunity.

As fellow citizens, we need a common language. In the United States, that language is English. Our common history is written in English. Our common forefathers speak to us, through the ages, in English. This is not contradicted by the fact that it is an enduring glory of this nation to have welcomed with open arms immigrants from other lands,
speaking other languages; nor by the fact that it is a feature of our free society that these languages can continue to find a place here, in the United States. But beneath the wonderful mosaic of cultures here, beyond the remarkable variety of languages—we are one people.

Testimony of William J. Bennett, Secretary of Education, Before the Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities, Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, June 5, 1986

Senator Quayle and members of the Committee, I am pleased to be here today to testify on behalf of the Bilingual Education Act Amendments of 1986. I would like to begin by thanking Senator Quayle for his sponsorship of this bill: we are proud to have as a sponsor a Senator distinguished for his leadership on education issues.

The Bilingual Education Act Amendments would, as you know, lift the current 4 percent cap on federal funding for alternative bilingual education programs. This reform would allow local districts greater flexibility in choosing methods of teaching English to students of limited English proficiency. It would help the federal government better fulfill its role in ensuring equal opportunity for all Americans.

Congress passed the Bilingual Education Act in 1968, authorizing federal funding of "new and imaginative" programs to meet the special education needs of children who were educationally disadvantaged by their inability to speak English. The design of such programs was left, in the words of the Senate Committee Report, "to the discretion and judgments of the local school districts to encourage both varied approaches to the problem and also special solutions for a particular problem of a given school." It was clear that the problem was many children's inability to speak English, and the solution was funding for a variety of educational programs.

In the 1974 case Lau v. Nichols, the Supreme Court interpreted Title VI of the Civil Rights Act in a manner consistent with both the means and intent of the Bilingual Education Act. The Court ruled that the failure of the San Francisco school system to provide special instruction to children of Chinese-speaking parents denied those children a meaningful opportunity to participate in the public school system. And the Court noted: "no specific remedy is urged upon us. Teaching English to students of Chinese ancestry is one choice. Giving instruction to this group in Chinese is another. There may be others."

Nonetheless, in 1974 Congress amended the Bilingual Education Act to prescribe one, exclusive instructional method which required all projects funded to include instruction in the native language of the children served. Although no maximum or minimum amount of native in-
struction was prescribed, many school districts understood the law to limit local flexibility.

Ten years later, the Congress did authorize up to four percent of federal bilingual funds to be used in programs employing methods requiring no minimum amount of native language instruction. But even with this change, federal bilingual policy today is characterized by its exceptional prescriptiveness. In the words of education historian Diane Ravitch, "it is unprecedented for the federal government to prescribe a particular pedagogical method." As Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, has said, "the last thing anyone would defend as good education is a single method that is prescribed from on high." Such intrusiveness is particularly ill-advised when there is a lack of conclusive evidence that one method is more effective than all others.

And to this date, there is indeed no evidence of the superiority of the prescribed method, transitional bilingual education. In one of the most comprehensive reviews of research on bilingual education, Christina Bratt Paulston, Chairman of the Department of Linguistics at the University of Pittsburgh, concluded that "research on bilingual education is characterized by disparate findings and inconclusive results." Iris Rotberg of the National Science Foundation states that current research shows that "bilingual programs are neither better nor worse than other instructional methods." And this much is clear, as the National Center for Bilingual Research has noted, "[a method] which is very successful in one geographic area with one set of target students may not be at all useful in another area with a different population." After all, we should not be surprised that school districts serving recent immigrants who speak 70 different languages will need different sorts of programs from school districts whose students speak only two languages. Last year, even with the four percent cap in effect, the Department received over 100 applications for support of alternative programs.

The Bilingual Education Act Amendments would correct the federal government's heavy-handed approach toward bilingual education. The bill would provide local school districts the flexibility they need to adapt to local circumstances. It would allow them to select the pedagogic method that shows the greatest promise, for the circumstances, of helping students to become fluent in English.

I first proposed this legislative change and other, forthcoming regulatory reforms in a speech in New York last September. Support has been remarkably broad and bipartisan. Our plan has received the endorsement of the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the American Association of School Administrators, and the National Association of Secondary
School Principals. Among our media supporters, we can count both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.

We do, however, have our opponents. Frequently, their complaints involve allegations that I have answered directly and consistently from the day I first made these proposals. I would like to address these charges, very briefly, once again.

There are some who suggest that our proposal reflects a plan on the part of the Administration to decrease its commitment to bilingual education. This is untrue. In this time of tight financial restraint, we have maintained funding for bilingual education at its current level. This is in keeping with the Administration's overall effort to preserve funding for those programs that serve the most disadvantaged students.

Nor is the goal, as some have suggested, to promote one method of instruction over another. On the contrary, our goal is to eliminate the existing statutory emphasis on a single instructional method. Many school districts will undoubtedly continue to pursue programs with some instruction in the native language; in some circumstances, these can be very useful in helping students keep up with their classwork until they become fluent in English. Just last month I visited several different bilingual programs in Arizona. One, in Phoenix, was a very successful transitional bilingual program; another, equally successful, was an English as a Second Language program in Mesa that served students who spoke over a dozen different languages. We believe that both these options, and others, should be open to recipients of federal aid. But let me repeat, nothing in our proposal would in any way impede a school district from receiving funds for a program of transitional bilingual education, if that is the method the district judges best for its students.

We do believe, however, that we as a nation must be clear about the goal of bilingual education: fluency in English. In the words of President Reagan, "... bilingual programs should serve as a bridge to full participation in the American mainstream."

The federal government's increasing prescriptiveness as to the method of bilingual education has been accompanied by increasing ambiguity as to its purpose. For many, bilingual education has become a way of enhancing students' knowledge of their native language and culture. For these individuals, native language instruction holds a special attraction as the method most conducive to this companion goal.

Let us be clear, pride in one's cultural heritage is natural, and it is commendable. We in the United States cherish our diversity, and local schools should be free to foster the study of the languages and heritages of their students in the courses they offer. But the responsibility of the federal government must be to help ensure that local schools succeed in teaching non-English speaking students English. It is our children's
birthright; it is what they will need to enjoy full access to the opportuni-
ties of American society. This was the original purpose of the Bilingual
Education Act, it is a noble purpose, and it is our purpose.

Senator Quayle, this concludes my prepared testimony on the Bilin-
gual Education Act Amendments of 1986. I thank you again for your
attention and for your support. I would be happy to answer your ques-
tions, and those of the rest of the Committee.