

[Back to regular view](#) [Print this page](#)

[suntimes.com](#) [Member of Sun-Times Media](#)

Site All Papers Web

Search by

YAHOO!

[BECOME A MEMBER!](#)

[What's this?](#)

Become a member of our community!

[Sign In](#)

[Register](#)

What will be impact of Spanish-only preschool classes on young Latinos?

[Comments](#)

July 5, 2010

Hold your breath for Latino members of the Illinois high school class of 2026. Who knows what recent changes in how they are to be taught will do for them.

Or to them.

New rules requiring pre-school English Language Learners (ELLs) to be educated according to the same standards as for kindergarten through 12th grade ELLs were adopted last month by the Illinois State Board of Education. The rules, which are expected to sail through the final legislative process in time for the 2010-2011 school year, will make Illinois the most prescriptive state in the union for identifying and educating English Language Learners.

This will affect hundreds of thousands of ELL students -- the fastest-growing segment of the study body in Illinois.

The overwhelming majority of these students come from Spanish-speaking households, and if they have 20 or more peers in the same grade level, they're entitled to a classroom with a Spanish-speaking teacher. Children whose native languages are not Spanish also must have 20 or more grade-level peers to qualify for language-specific instruction and, therefore, are rarely isolated in non-English-speaking classrooms the way Spanish-speaking kids are.

The thought of 3-, 4- and 5-year-old Hispanic kids getting stuck in Spanish-language classrooms so they can be taught beginning literacy skills in their parents' native language before being taught the basic tenets of English makes me want to poke my eyeballs out. Despite widely accepted research that says teaching literacy skills to a child in his or her native language leads to better English-acquisition, I -- like Arizona, California and Massachusetts, who've turned away from this educational philosophy -- am skeptical.

Why? Mostly because I know that what works modestly in the lab does not always transfer to the classroom -- especially when there already are too few qualified teachers for the many non-English-speaking students.

Plus, in my short time as a bilingual teacher, I witnessed horrors such as underqualified teachers who never felt the need to address their students in English. And teenage U.S.-born students still confined to Spanish-only classrooms because the "transitional bilingual" program had never made them truly bilingual or transitioned them to mainstream English-speaking classrooms.

Because I've had such experiences, I turned to two less-emotional experts to soothe my fears that Illinois' educational system is about to disintegrate for children who happen not to speak English by the age of 3.

"This goes back to the bilingual education laws put on the books back in the '70's, before 'preschool for all' was popularized," said Reyna Hernandez, a policy analyst at the Latino Policy Forum. "This isn't really a new idea. The state was looking at where there needed to be cleanup in the legal language that had artificially limited rules to K through 12."

She also stressed that "starting in 2014, these rules will mean students will be taught by teachers that are certified in language acquisition" and she said this is "one of the greatest points."

Nancy Wagner, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction at Arlington Heights' multinationally diverse School District 59, says there are always risk and costs -- in this case to teachers who must get additional education and to school districts that must pay for that upgraded expertise -- but this definitely is a step up.

"The laws regarding preschool used to not have anything regarding English instruction; teachers weren't specially trained and could basically screen all the kids, identify them as ELLs and teach them in whatever language they wanted," she said. "There are many factors to take into consideration when you're talking about such young children, but no program wants its bilingual students to be the lowest tracked program. The goal of the program HAS to be English language proficiency."

Gosh, I hope so. Better-trained preschool teachers who can effectively address the special needs of English language learners sure can't hurt.

Still, the proof will be in the pudding, so keep your fingers crossed for Latino members of the Illinois high school class of 2026.

[Second language learners recall native language when reading](#)

From Science Codex

[Second language learners recall native language when reading](#)

From Science Codex

The views expressed in these blog posts are those of the author and not of the Chicago Sun-Times.

mikesghost wrote:

If she is right an the majority of those teachers fail to teach these kids English, by high school, then the La Raza types will have reason to rejoice. With the Illegal Mexican resident uphill birth rate only getting bigger and with no reason or way to for them learn English, (and to become mainstream), this will become a truly divided nation or if La Raza gets their way a Spanish speaking nation.

7/6/2010 9:32 AM CDT on suntimes.com

[Report Abuse](#)

sophieann wrote:

I agree with the previous assessment in regards to Ms.Cepeda's article. Her ability as a serious reporter is compromised by an strictly emotional reaction to the subject matter. I suggest that Ms. Cepeda engage in a bit of research. There are plenty of case studies in professional journals that deal with the extensive benefits of bilingual structuring in early education. The reality is that we must do our best to ensure that these children are successful students.

7/5/2010 8:22 PM CDT on suntimes.com

Report Abuse

jlt wrote:

Esther, your article does nothing to help people understand the differences between bilingual education programs in Chicago. You only ranted about how it makes you feel. Figuratively speaking, you stated that "kids" learning in their native language makes you want to "poke your eyeballs out." Feel free to do so. You might also pull your hair out as well when you learn that I just graduated the first class of 2010 at my school. All 29 students completed their middle school years learning math and social studies in Spanish. These same students received Spanish instructions as early as pre-school and throughout their primary education. Your article is an emotional reaction to a very important topic. Clearly, you wrote from your personal experiences and biases. When you're serious, I invite you to speak with me, my colleagues and former students to better understand the true impact. Look at that, you don't even have to wait for 2026. They might even help you with your personal problem you labeled "skepticism." This is my emotional reaction to your rant and complaint.

7/5/2010 2:26 PM CDT on suntimes.com

Report Abuse