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Neither English Immersion Nor Bilingual Education Alone Will Close Achievement Gap

By Andy Hartman

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Before the dust has even settled around the Amendment 31 defeat, some legislators are talking about writing a bill that would make English immersion mandatory for limited English proficient (LEP) students. That's too bad. Because the debate about English immersion vs. bilingual education misses the point.

The real issue is not which method of instruction is better, English immersion or bilingual education, but the quality of any program designed to help LEP students succeed in the Colorado education system. Research and experience have shown that both approaches can be effective, and both can be a miserable failure.

In Colorado, Hispanic students comprise the largest, and fastest growing, group of minority students in the state. They also have the largest achievement gap relative to their white, Black, and American Indian peers. For example, 51% of Hispanic students scored at proficient or above on the 2002 3rd grade reading CSAPs. This compares with 81% of white students, 55% of Black students and 59% of American Indian students.

The numbers of LEP Hispanic students who are proficient readers in the third grade is even lower. So a reasonable person might think that a vote for or against Amendment 31 would have been a vote for or against closing the achievement gap for some of our most vulnerable students. This does not appear to be the case.

Let's look at the 3rd grade CSAP reading results again. When schools collect the test scores from the students, they also record a variety of background information about the student, teachers, and the school. One piece of that information is whether a LEP child is in a bilingual or an immersion classroom. 33% of the students in bilingual classrooms scored at or above proficient, while 34% of the students in the immersion classes scored at or above proficient.

The fact that 1% of students are doing better in the immersion classrooms is certainly not statistically significant. What is striking and of critical importance to those interested in closing the achievement gap is that, regardless of what type of instruction they receive, only a third of LEP students are meeting the standard for proficiency.

If you look at the research on educating LEP students, these results should not be a big surprise. What it indicates is that the quality of the overall educational program is much more important than the particular model one chooses. In other words, there are successful immersion programs and there are successful bilingual programs - and too many ineffective examples of both. How you implement either model - including the overall quality of the school and classroom - matters more than which model you choose.



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Dr. Kenji Hakuta, a professor of education at Stanford University, and the chair of a committee that studied these issues for the National Academy of Sciences, has been making this point based on his review of the data. For example, in a recent interview he stated, "Three-quarters of English learners attend high-poverty schools, which have the highest percentage of teachers on emergency credentials, the highest student turnover, and the most difficult circumstances generally. The students will suffer regardless of the program."

It is hard to find a political, educational, or civic leader in Colorado who is not on board the "Closing the Achievement Gap" in education bandwagon. For example, GOP Governor Bill Owens and Democrat State Attorney General Ken Salazar head up a coalition that proclaims education the "new frontier of civil rights." President George Bush and Senator Ted Kennedy talk about the bipartisan commitment to the "Leave No Child Behind" program.

If we're truly interested in closing the persistent and significant performance gap between generally poor students and their more advantaged peers, then we must be committed to improving the quality of the educational program for our LEP students. Last year, the legislature failed to enact any of the recommendations from the Closing the Achievement Gap Coalition.

It looks like the controversy over how to teach English is far from over. But if we really want to improve the quality of education for Colorado's students with limited English proficiency, we need to put politics behind us and start improving our already-existent programs. This is the real, difficult work that still lies ahead.

Andy Hartman is director of policy and research at The Bell Policy Center, a nonprofit research and advocacy organization that promotes opportunity for all Coloradans.