ENGLISH LEARNERS: STRUGGLING CT SCHOOLS IGNORE A PROVEN PATH

Jacqueline Rabe Thomas
Three stories: May 22, May 30, June 12, 2017

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When it came time for Aracelis Hidalgo to enroll her two sons in school, it became clear that her local public school in Bridgeport would not be embracing Spanish – the only language she and her children understood.

Instead, her sons were put into English-only classes and given some extra tutoring. School announcements were sent home in English, and no translators were available to help her communicate with teachers.

“It shouldn’t be this way,” Hidalgo said through a translator. Her Spanish-speaking daughter, who will start school in the fall, sat on her lap. “I wish the schools would have both languages.”

The family’s experience is common. English-only classes with added supports is the primary approach in Connecticut public schools to helping students learn English – and it is producing dismal outcomes.

In Bridgeport, only 47 percent of the English learners receiving language supports showed any overall progress on English proficiency tests during the 2013-14 school year, the last year for which the state tracked data. In Hartford, which enrolls more English learners than any other Connecticut district, 46 percent showed any progress.

Over the last two school years, only one-third of English learners met the state’s target for improvement on another key measure – the standardized English assessment test all students take. The State Department of Education says English learners should improve their performance on that test by at least 3 percent each year.

For Connecticut – where one of every 10 public school students speaks Spanish as his or her primary language – academic achievement gaps between Hispanic students and their white classmates are among the largest in the nation. For those still considered English learners in eighth grade, the gap between them and their classmates in the ability to understand and use English is the worst in the country.

“It is our English learners who have lagged in all of our achievement over the last six years in education in Connecticut,” state education commissioner Dianna Wentzell said during an interview. “And that is not acceptable to us.”

Yet Connecticut has largely failed to embrace the one model for English learners that research consistently shows works best by far.

What works?

At Rigler Elementary School in Portland, Ore., Risa Muñoz’s fifth-graders are expected to speak in English for the first half
of the day and in Spanish for the second half of the day.

On a recent afternoon shortly after returning from recess – where students get to pick which language they use – Muñoz was asking students in Spanish during a history lesson on World World II to come up with a list of rules to determine what portions of an article were factual and which were propaganda.

“I know,” responded a student in English, eagerly shooting his hand in the air.

Muñoz gave the student a puzzled look but didn’t call on him. “Lo sé,” he quickly said. “Si,” she responded, and listened to him answer her question in Spanish.

Schools where classes are taught in both English and another language are common throughout Portland. Those who speak limited or no English attend class with native English speakers whose parents are eager for them to reap the social and economic advantages of learning another language.

The approach is called “dual-language.”

In Connecticut, students are more likely to be put in traditional classrooms and be given supports ranging from 30 minutes of weekly tutoring to help from a teacher’s aide in the classroom, who may or may not speak the student’s native language. About a quarter of the state’s English learners are in bilingual programs of varying quality where instruction is supposed to begin in a student’s native language and transition to mostly English within the school year. With few exceptions, the longest a student can stay in such a program is 30 months, and thousands leave each year without achieving proficiency.

In Portland, one out of every five kindergarten students was enrolled in a dual-language program. Among the youngsters who showed up for school speaking limited or no English this school year, 42 percent were enrolled in one of the district’s 15 dual-language programs for kindergarteners.

Portland’s goal is to continue expanding dual-language programs until three-quarters of English learners are splitting their days between instruction in their native language and English. Young programs will add additional grades as students who started in kindergarten move up, and district officials hope to open new programs in three schools over the next two school years, bringing the program to 18 of the district’s 57 elementary schools.

Students stay in the program through high school. Over the last nine school years, the number of students enrolled in one of the district’s dual-language programs – now offered in Spanish, Mandarin, Japanese, Russian and Vietnamese – has jumped from 2,540 to 5,020, about 10 percent of the district’s 50,000 students.

“We have been able to expand opportunity by expanding programs,” Debbie Armendariz, Portland’s senior director of dual language, said during an interview. “We have been communicating to parents in our entire community what this program means for English-language learners – which is that this is their only path toward academic success. That is not true for our native English speakers.”

In Connecticut, fewer than 2,000 of the state’s 539,000 students are enrolled in dual-language programs, including just 4 percent of the state’s English learners, a rate that hasn’t budged over the last decade. Some last only through second grade, while others run through elementary school.

Muñoz, who previously worked in a school district where she taught Spanish-speaking students in English, has seen the impact of dual language during her three years at Rigler. “I see a difference in confidence, in pride about their culture and their language, and I think it’s a great way to build biliteracy,” Muñoz said. “It really is a key piece in closing our achievement gaps for our culturally and linguistically diverse students.”

Muñoz said the dual-language approach bolsters proficiency in both a student’s native language and the one he or she is trying to learn. “When we think about our native-Spanish speakers, if we are able to build their language skills, we really see those skills transfer over to English. If they have a strong foundation, they are able to succeed in both languages,” she said.

Research done on the district’s approach by outside experts amplifies her points. Research published in April in the American Educational Research Journal and in September in Foreign Language Annals tracked students in kindergarten through eighth grade who won dual-language seats through Portland’s school choice lottery. The researchers found that English reading skills improved much faster for English learners in the dual-language programs than for those who had to attend English-only classes with other supports.
By Grade 5, Portland’s English learners in dual-language programs were seven months ahead of peers in academic achievement, and by Grade 8 they were a full grade level ahead. There was no significant difference in performance in math or science, but dual-language students were 14 percent less likely to still be considered English learners by Grade 6.

“You couldn’t ask for better outcomes for these English learners,” said Robert Slater, one of the co-authors of the research.

Native-English speakers who participated in a dual-language program performed about the same academically as their peers in traditional programs. But they also learned a second language, and Portland has a long waiting list of students whose parents are eager for them to become bilingual.

Slater’s study, funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s research arm, is highly regarded among experts because it looked at students assigned to programs randomly through the lottery.

Elizabeth Howard, an associate professor of bilingual education at the University of Connecticut’s Neag School of Education, characterized the gains English learners made in the Portland study as “huge.” Howard has synthesized the mountains of research on various approaches to closing achievement gaps for English learners and says there is no question that dual language, when carried out with fidelity, is the best approach.

“Numerous small scale and major studies prove and reprove the effectiveness of dual language,” she said during an interview. “Dual-language schooling closes the academic achievement gap… This is the only program for English learners that fully closes that gap.”

A review by the U.S. Department of Education and American Institutes for Research found “a growing body of research also suggests that the approach provides more opportunities for ELs to reach higher levels of academic achievement as well as more positive motivation and a sense of identity.”

Virginia P. Collier and Wayne P. Thomas, researchers and professors emeritus from George Mason University who spent the last three decades studying programs for English learners in dozens of school districts throughout the U.S., are more pointed in their assessment of dual-language programs.

“This is not just a research report, this is a wake-up call,” the duo began a 2004 article in the National Association of Bilingual Education Journal of Research and Practice. Summarizing their research in five school districts, they wrote, “We have been truly amazed at the elevated student outcomes resulting from participation in dual-language programs.”

“Dual-language schooling closes the academic achievement gap… This is the only program for English learners that fully closes that gap,” their research concludes.

In Houston, a 2009 study of native Spanish-speakers found that by eighth grade, they were reading in the 75th percentile in English, on average, an accomplishment Collier and Thomas characterized as “dramatically high.” In math, students in dual-language programs had similar outcomes.

“These analyses of [standardized test] results demonstrate that Hispanic students are staying on or close to grade level in both languages, and if continuing instruction is provided in both Spanish and English, the large majority will graduate proficiently bilingual,” they wrote, adding these students also have much lower dropout rates and higher attendance rates.

Their research in North Carolina from 2009 found that students in dual language programs “are often at least one grade level ahead” of the English learners who did not attend a dual-immersion program. It also has significantly narrowed gaps in achievement.
Bilingual brains: The benefits

Parlez-vous français? ¿Habla Español? Sprechen Sie Deutsch?

For those who do, neuroscience says bilingualism provides benefits both in the classroom and throughout life.

The left and right hemispheres of a bilingual brain showing activity in the frontal lobes. Green highlights regions showing high activity during bilingual language switching. Red-yellow shows regions where bilingual older adults have higher activity than monolinguals.

Research shows bilingualism affects mostly the frontal lobe of the brain, which houses its executive function — managing inputs, focusing on what is relevant and ignoring distractions. What that means is those who are bilingual are apt to be better at problem solving, multi-tasking, and focusing and filtering relevant information.

Naja Ferjan Ramirez, a research scientist at the University of Washington’s Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences, sums up what’s going on up there as “gymnastics for the brain’s air traffic control. You have to constantly inhibit one language to turn on the other language,” she explained during an interview.

Ellen Bialystok, a professor of psychology and chair of the Lifespan Cognitive Development Lab at Canada’s York University, said, “We know from enormous amounts of research that developing the executive function in children is the most important thing they do, by far.”

“When a student’s brain has trouble prioritizing inputs, it leads to problems with behavior and attention,” she said. “It’s why they can’t sit still. It’s something they need and must develop to learn.”

Being able to understand two languages doesn’t necessarily solve a child’s issues, but it does improve them, says Bialystok. “The more bilingual children were, the better they were at intentional control,” she said, summing up a recent study she completed. “They are doing better than they would be doing if not for bilingualism.”

Though one can always learn a second language, research is mixed on how long the “critical period” for learning a second language lasts, ranging from 5 to 15 years of age. “The brain is really the most prepared to learn language at birth, and then slowly, over time, this ability to learn two languages at the same time, it fades. It fades really early on,” said Naja Ferjan Ramírez, whose research shows that infants as young as 11 months are able to process whatever languages they are exposed to.

Bilingualism also has benefits as people age. Research has shown that bilinguals were able to respond more quickly to demanding circumstances and that it helps delay age-related losses in certain executive processes. It also delays the onset of Alzheimer’s, research shows.

Who can learn another language?

In both Portland and Connecticut, however, which students get to enroll in a dual-language program – and have the best chance to learn another language – is based on luck. In Portland, dozens of kindergarten students who speak limited or no English, lose the lottery to get into a language immersion program each year.

And in Bridgeport, just 217 of the district’s nearly 3,000 students who struggle with English are enrolled in dual-language programs. Fran Rabinowitz, who was the leader of Bridgeport Public Schools from 2013 to 2016, said during a recent interview that she tried to expand dual language programs in the district and was somewhat successful. But, she added, “I am not sure everyone buys into that approach.”

Coming next week: In Connecticut there are shortcomings aplenty in bilingual education, yet dual-language instruction has made little headway, and some programs actually have been shut down.
ENGLISH LEARNERS:
A JUMBLE OF STRATEGIES PRODUCES DISTRESSING RESULTS

Jacqueline Rabe Thomas
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Enrique Sepúlveda had an unsettling experience while enrolling his daughter in school in Hartford, an urban district that has more students struggling to learn English than any other in Connecticut.

“She speaks Spanish? Does that mean she needs services” he recalls the administrator asking in alarm after he and his wife said they spoke Spanish at home.

“No. She is bilingual. That’s a good thing,” he responded.

Sepúlveda, an associate professor of education at the University of Saint Joseph, has found through his research that students who feel their culture is embraced at school are more likely to be better learners.

“Our state’s thinking is ‘forget your native language and learn English – yesterday,” he said during an interview. “That ideology is not what’s best for the kids.”

His family’s experience reflects a number of weaknesses in the approach the state and school districts across Connecticut have taken to educating the rapidly increasing number of English learners.

Only a relative handful of the state’s English learners benefit from the teaching method known as dual-language, in which foreign-language speakers attend classes with English-speakers and instruction is split between two languages. Research shows this model best fosters English proficiency and academic achievement for English learners and makes native-English speakers who choose to take part bilingual.

Though state law requires the state education department to “assist and encourage local and regional boards of education” to implement dual-language instruction, it does not require it, and the department has taken a hands-off attitude, allowing local districts to go their own way.

The state education department hasn’t determined what approaches have been most effective in teaching English learners in Connecticut, even though state law says the State Board of Education “shall annually evaluate programs” in districts that enroll high numbers of these students. Instead, the department for years relied on short self-evaluations filled out by school districts.

The type and quality of programs and supports for English learners in the state varies widely. Some school districts put students in English-only classrooms and provide them a language tutor for 20 minutes a week. Other students start the school year in their native language and are expected by state law to transition to English for “more than half of the instructional time” by the end of the year.

This jumble of approaches has produced distressing outcomes on nearly every benchmark – including academic achievement gaps between English learners and their peers that are among the worst in the nation.

For those still considered English learners in eighth grade, the gap between them and their classmates in the ability to understand and use English is the worst in the country.
The state has set an expectation that English learners should improve their scores on standardized English and math tests by about 3 percent each year. However, between the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school year, just one-third met that target for English and 37 percent for math.

The state’s education commissioner says those results won’t do. “It is our English learners who have lagged in all of our achievement over the last six years in education in Connecticut,” commissioner Dianna Wentzell said during an interview. “And that is not acceptable to us.”

**A growing problem**

The number of students who have shown up at Connecticut’s public schools needing to learn English has spiked – from 22,881 students 15 years ago to 36,788 this school year. That translates into one in 27 students during the 2002-03 school year compared with one in 15 today.

Among all states, Connecticut has experienced the 13th-fastest increase in the percentage of students who are English learners and the 23rd-fastest growth in the actual number of English learners, federal data show.

Just over half of the state’s English learners are in the state’s 10 lowest-performing school districts, even though they enroll only 22 percent of the state’s public school students. Nearly 80 percent attend the bottom 30 districts, though just 40 percent of public school students do.

Those 30 lowest-performing districts also tend to be those where resources are stretched.

At Hartford’s Maria Sánchez Elementary School, a school whose namesake advocated for bilingual education, the majority of students struggle with English, and the school has shed its tutors, reading specialist and other supports because of budget cuts.

Richard McHugh teaches third grade at the school, where boarded-up houses are the view from his classroom and police sirens often interrupt instruction.

“The biggest challenge in the classroom, for me and for many of the teachers at this school, is really dealing with language,” McHugh said during a recent interview. Though 40 percent of the school’s students are classified as English learners, he said, for another 20 percent, “The only English they get is at school for the most part.”

“I will receive students in the third grade who will have just come from another country. I have to start from scratch with them, starting with no English, starting with sight words, vowel sounds,” he said. “So when I have a 40-minute guided reading block at the end of the day, I might teach four different grade-level groups, but it might be a kindergarten group, a first-grade group, a second-grade group and a third-grade-level group.”

The outcomes for English learners at his school are not promising – only 23 percent of those who have attended the school for at least three school years improved their standardized English test scores by at least 3 percent between the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school year.

During a months-long trial last year in a lawsuit that explored whether the state is spending enough to educate students in its most impoverished districts, several educators shared stories about the education being provided to their foreign-speaking students.

One New London teacher testified she didn’t have textbooks. A teacher from Windham said students often were identified as special education students just to get them the extra supports federal law requires. An East Hartford teacher testified that she lost her subscription to language-support computer programs because of funding cuts.
Some frustrated parents and advocates have filed complaints about English-learner programs with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, which reviews district compliance with federal laws and investigates complaints in an effort to protect the rights of minorities and other vulnerable students. Facing federal investigations or review, Hartford, Stamford and New London school officials over the last five years have promised major changes. (See here, here and here.) An investigation into New Britain Public Schools remains open.

Struggling Bridgeport

Bridgeport schools have the state’s third-highest number of English learners and illustrate some of the shortcomings of the state’s bilingual programs.

Spanish-speaking parents there told The Mirror their children’s bilingual classes were taught by teachers who spoke very limited or no Spanish. Ten of the district’s 35 bilingual classroom teachers received waivers from some of the state requirements for bilingual teachers this school year, though there is no way for the public to know whether a waiver was given for a language deficit or one of the many other requirements for teacher certification.

Jackie Cruz, whose youngest daughter was in a Bridgeport elementary school bilingual program, said the teacher struggled with Spanish.

“She is a great teacher, but that’s not a Spanish-speaking class,” said Cruz through a translator, who added that her daughter often did the translating for the class.

The parents also said the type of programs or services their children receive was never discussed with them, despite a state law requiring districts with more than 20 English learners to do so.

“We have a lot of barriers because of language,” parent Evgenia Monterroso said through a translator. “We can’t communicate with our children’s teachers. I feel we don’t have information because of our language barrier.”

With the help of the Yale Law School’s Civil Rights Project, the Center for Children’s Advocacy and Make the Road Connecticut, Monterroso and a group of parents have formed a coalition to document Bridgeport’s problems, educate parents and seek improvements.

A 56-page report the group released last month, said that, “Clearly, a significant portion of Bridgeport parents, whose children are English language learners, feel estranged from the Bridgeport Public Schools.”

Fran Rabinowitz, who was the leader of Bridgeport Public Schools from 2013 to 2016, made no excuses during a recent interview. “I am just going to be totally honest with you. It is our responsibility to have someone at each school who speaks that parent’s language,” she said, noting that it might not be possible for some little-spoken languages.

Rabinowitz was able to expand dual-language instruction at one Bridgeport school and start it at another, but said there were many obstacles, including difficulty finding qualified bilingual teachers and getting existing staff to buy into it.
Rabinowitz and many others, however, do not see cost as one of the barriers. “I don’t remember an increased cost at all,” she said.

**Evaluation lacking**

Depending on whom you talk to – and which district you look at – the quality of bilingual programs in the state varies widely. One thing is certain, however. The State Department of Education has done only very limited in-depth evaluations of district programs and has not compared struggling programs with successful ones.

In 1999 the state legislature passed a law requiring the state to evaluate English-learner programs annually. However, the education department relied for oversight on brief, general surveys that individual districts fill out. The surveys vary widely in their rigor. That left many skeptical.

“State laws and policies, they are all lovely,” said Anysia Mayer, a former assistant professor at the University of Connecticut’s Neag School of Education who studied the state’s approach to educating English learners for years. “If there is no one actually watching to see if anyone actually does it well, then some don’t… And there is no way for anybody to know.”

“There is very little state oversight. The state department has had one person overseeing English language instruction,” said Steven Adamowski, who has headed schools in Hartford, Windham, New London and now Norwalk.

In 2015, legislative researchers, noting the requirement for an annual report, asked the education department for more analysis and evaluation of the quality and success of local programs.

That lone education department employee devoted to English-learner programs replied in a long email. A state-level analysis, going deeper than the local reports, had never been expected, she said – and if one were done, it would include some bad news.

“To provide a detailed report of how each district is doing and whether or not their programs are effective . . . with a clear explanation of the differences of each program throughout the state would be IMPOSSIBLE,” Marie Salazar Gloski wrote. “It would be very challenging and would take months to do it properly… To be fair, I would have to visit schools and with all of that, if I were to be transparent and fair, I would have to report that there are several schools that are NOT providing solid education well researched bilingual education for these students.”

Also in 2015, after gathering testimony describing bilingual programs in the state as everything from the “gold standard” to a “dumping ground,” a legislative task force found them “in need of immediate attention.”

“The gaps in our understanding of these issues and how to deal with them was all so glaring,” said then-House Speaker J. Brendan Sharkey, when releasing the task force report.

The legislature then passed another law requiring the state to gather standardized achievement test scores for English learners and use them to “monitor their academic progress and the quality of bilingual education programs.”

**What has worked best in Connecticut?**

The education department finally produced an annual report in February of this year, but the five-page report lumped together students who were being taught using completely different methods — making it impossible to distinguish which was producing better results.

Also, the analysis of year-to-year improvement on English and math achievement tests did not take into account students who had improved enough to no longer be considered English learners. The department only tracked results for students who were labeled English learners in both years, saying they wanted to focus on students who were struggling the most rather than those who had succeeded in exiting bilingual programs.

“We want to put the spotlight on those who are currently ELs,” said Ajit Gopalakrishnan, the bureau chief of the State Department of Education Performance Office. “The intent is to keep the focus on the current ELs and to make reasonable expectations for them.”

As a result, the department reported to legislators that it saw no statewide difference in results achieved by different approaches to English learners. Asked whether the education department had any research showing which English-learner programs were more effective in Connecticut, the department said it did not.
"That is not an analysis that we have done," Gopalakrishnan said.

The Mirror asked for a breakout of outcomes by the four main types of education offered to English learners – dual language, transitional bilingual, no services, or other supports such as tutoring.

But the lack of data on students who were no longer considered English learners still stymied any effort to accurately assess progress. The data showed fewer students meeting growth targets in dual-language programs.

In the dual-language model, classes are taught in both English and another language at different times in the school day, and both English learners and native-English speaking students typically attend together. The programs may last through high school.

In Connecticut, English learners are more likely to be put in traditional classrooms and be given supports ranging from 30 minutes of weekly tutoring to help from a teacher’s aide in the classroom, who may or may not speak the student’s native language.

A quarter of the state’s English learners are in transitional bilingual programs of varying quality, where instruction is supposed to begin in a student’s native language and transition to mostly English within the school year. With few exceptions, the longest a student can stay in such a program is 30 months, and thousands leave each year without achieving proficiency.

Researchers have found that English learners receiving dual-language instruction perform much better than their peers, both in English proficiency and academic achievement. Native-English speakers in dual-language programs perform about the same academically as their peers in traditional classrooms, but they also learn a second language.

"The quality of the program is going to make the biggest difference for the kids… So it’s more important to have an effective program than a particular philosophy."

But a review of programs for English learners in Connecticut’s most impoverished districts by the University of Connecticut’s Center for Education Policy Analysis, found that "most Connecticut school districts are not looking towards research identified best practices to guide their EL programming."

Wentzell, the state’s education chief, said during an interview that research is great, but it’s not the whole story. “So there are really good-quality bilingual programs, and then there are programs that are not as good. The same is true with English as a second language. So the quality of the program is going to make the biggest difference for the kids,” said Wentzell, who speaks some French and Russian. “So it’s more important to have an effective program than a particular philosophy."

The department also has declined to push local districts to adopt any particular approach, though the department does visit two districts each year to review the English learner programs being offered.

“We will not be directing people toward specific models, but what we will be doing is requiring evidence-based models,” said Wentzell. “While there is more evidence behind some models than others for turnaround, what matters more is the plan that you will be able to do and that people really will buy into and commit their energy and resources and belief in.”

That neutral approach has been reflected in the state’s work with local districts. In New Britain, the state helped fund a turnaround plan that shut down one of the district’s dual language schools and went to an English-only approach. But in Bridgeport, the state funded the expansion of the dual-language program.

Under court order to desegregate schools in Hartford, the state has rejected calls from advocates to open a dual-language regional magnet school to attract suburban, white families eager to have their children become bilingual. Alternatively, when Adamowski was appointed as a state “special master” to intervene in the failing Windham school system, he shut down what he said was a struggling bilingual program and left untouched the district’s dual-language program.
Essentially, the state has left it to local district leaders to figure out what approach to use. That hands-off approach and the lack of research have frustrated many, however.

“I don’t know if they know what the best approach is. I don’t feel that there is a serious commitment in Connecticut to English learners or bilingual education,” said state Rep. Juan Candelaria, a Democrat from New Haven and the former leader of the legislature’s Black and Latino Caucus.

“We have this segment being overlooked. You can give a thousand reasons why, but it’s still wrong,” said Candelaria, who was an English learner himself when he moved to Connecticut from Puerto Rico at age 8.

But things may change eventually. In its plan to implement the recently overhauled federal education laws, the education department promises to monitor English learners’ progress in speaking, reading and understanding English starting in 2019-20. If schools in the state’s bottom 10 districts make insufficient progress, the plan promises an “in-depth program review” by the state that will recommend changes beginning with the 2020-21 school year. Districts then will have six school years to improve, or the state can force the school to close or change management.

Dual-language programs decline

In the absence of a commitment to overcome obstacles as they arise, several dual-language programs have closed in Connecticut. Connecticut now has fewer than 10 dual-language programs. Many end in second or third grade even though research shows that the big gains do not show up until a student has been in the program for several years, typically in middle school.

Of the state’s 36,788 English learners, 1,383 are in programs that districts consider dual language. Over the last five years, enrollment in dual-language programs has hovered around 4 percent, data show.

The remaining students were in transitional bilingual programs (24 percent), received other supports such as tutoring (69 %), or had parents who declined services (4 %). Hartford shut down its eight dual-language programs 10 years ago.

Mayer, who has since left UConn, said of that decision, “Nobody tested those kids to see if it was working. It was just the perception that it wasn’t. … There were a lot of assumptions of what was and wasn’t working to help English learners.”

Years before those programs closed, however, the state education department did a lengthy study and found promising growth for students in the district’s dual-language programs. So now Hartford uses a plethora of approaches to serve English learners.

“The only research that is really strong is that dual language is a more effective model,” Monica Quinones, Hartford Public Schools director of English Language Learner Services, said during an interview. “Why don’t we do it here? Our system is not set up that way.” And the constant churn of superintendents in Hartford has made it difficult for things to change.

“Whereas, [the last superintendent] was interested in the feasibility and maybe would have continued thinking about it, new leadership comes on board and that might not be their focus right away,” said Mary-Beth Russo, the district’s English-learner coach. “When they realize what is needed, they are moving on to another position.”

Cam Staples, who served as the House chairman of the legislature’s Education Committee during the last major overhaul of state laws surrounding English learners in 1999, said during a recent interview that he regrets not having put forward bolder legislation mandating bilingual instruction for all students from the time they start school.

“This is unfiltered, having been out of politics now for a while, but I remember thinking at the time, if we could just pass something – one thing– I wish I could have mandated foreign-language instruction from kindergarten on,” said Staples.

“If there is one thing we could do to promote educational achievement for all children, I think promoting bilingualism is something as a state we should do more of. It was a real frustration of mine and others – language acquisition is not a real priority in our schools. It strikes me as a missed opportunity.”

Coming next week: Local educators say they prefer the dual language model but there are too many barriers to making it happen. We look at how other places have overcome them. Read the first story in this series here.
ENGLISH LEARNERS: OTHER PLACES ARE SHOWING WHAT WORKS

Jacqueline Rabe Thomas
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June 12, 2017

Donación Garcia wanted what was best for his daughter Gabriella, so he enrolled her in an English-only classroom and declined his district’s offer to also provide instruction in Spanish, a language his family often uses at home.

“We thought she needed English,” said Garcia, whose daughter is now a high school freshman in Portland, Oregon.

His intuitive and widely shared belief that English immersion is the best way to learn the language is one of many obstacles to adopting the one approach that decades of research shows actually is the most effective way to help students learn English and catch up academically with peers.

Called dual-language, it puts English learners and native-English speakers together in the same classroom and offers instruction in each group’s language for part of the school day. The program can last through high school.

Mistaken perceptions that hamper the growth of dual-language programs include the belief that they cost more, or that there aren’t enough English speakers willing to attend classes with English learners.

There also are some genuine difficulties, including problems finding qualified bilingual staff and the fact that the model requires continuity and does not work as well when student turnover is high. In some schools, students speak too many different languages to make embracing the dual-language model practical.

But school districts across the country that have committed to reaping the benefits of dual-language instruction have found ways to make big gains in the face of obstacles, both perceived and real.

The stakes are high. Connecticut, where one of every 10 public school students speaks Spanish as his or her primary language, academic achievement gaps between Hispanic students and their white classmates are among the largest in the nation.

Plenty of families want to participate

One thing is certain, many English- and foreign-speaking families are eager to put their children in dual-language programs, partly because becoming bilingual makes their children more competitive in the job market or, in the case of foreign speakers, because it embraces their culture and makes them feel more included at school.

Juan Moñtanez moved to the South End of Hartford from Puerto Rico at age 5. In school he initially was taught in Spanish and English, but the transition to a school day entirely in English was quick. Call it the sink-or-swim approach.

“It was, ‘I am teaching you in both languages for now, but as soon as you get a grasp of English, we are dropping Spanish’… It was difficult. I struggled. I still struggle with both languages,” said Moñtanez, now 33, who can speak both languages but says it is a challenge to write in either because his grammar and spelling lag. “I never really mastered either language on that front.”

That’s because proficiency in conversational English takes three to five years, but academic language proficiency requires four to seven years, studies show.
Moñtanez and his wife, who also speaks Spanish, now have two children approaching school age. They have chosen a preschool that uses both languages, despite its being in a less convenient location. “Even if it was 10 miles away, I would have dropped them off, because I want them to learn Spanish,” said Moñtanez.

His children’s bilingual instruction will end when they enroll in public school, however. Hartford shut down its eight dual-language programs 10 years ago, and short-term bilingual instruction is offered only in some schools.

“I pray my children become bilingual. We try to speak both languages but everything around us is in English” said Moñtanez. “I just see the benefits in the future… But at the same time it’s cultural. I want to make sure they relate to our culture. I don’t want them to lose that.”

It’s not just Spanish-speaking parents who want their children to be bilingual.

The Portland, Ore., school district – which encompasses impoverished urban neighborhoods as well as affluent city neighborhoods and suburbs – has rapidly expanded the dual-language approach to help close yawning achievement gaps between its English learners and their classmates. The district has a full-time staff person who recruits foreign speakers to enroll in dual-language programs, though she says it doesn’t take much convincing once she explains the program. Last school year, the families of hundreds of both English- and foreign-speaking kindergarten-bound students entered a lottery for seats in a dual-language program.

So many better-off parents flocked to Portland’s programs that the district had to make changes to give English learners priority in enrollment.

“When we put in a dual-language immersion program, it can serve as a catalyst for gentrification,” said Michael Bacon, assistant director of dual-language programs in Portland. “We get calls from families all the time – in fact, there are three or four emails in my inbox right now – from families who are saying, ‘We are moving to Portland, and I want my child to have access to Spanish or Japanese immersion.’

“That’s a great thing. We want those people who are eager to be a part of this opportunity for their kid – but it’s not our priority,” he said. “The historically underserved population is.”

In Windham, a district that has the highest rate of English learners in Connecticut, there are also those who would love to have their children become bilingual. There is a long waiting list to get into the district’s lone dual-language program, and efforts to expand it have so far been unsuccessful.

“Being multilingual is where the world is going. It’s the future,” said Murphy Sewall, a retired University of Connecticut business professor and now the vice chair of the Windham Board of Education. “I wish I learned Spanish. It’s an invaluable asset.”

In Connecticut, 7,389 job postings – 2 percent of all posted jobs in 2016 – targeted bilingual workers, according to data culled from a database of 40,000 job sources by the New American Economy, a coalition of business and municipal leaders who support immigration reform. The number of bilingual jobs posted more than doubled between 2010 and 2016. And the listings were for both low- and high-end jobs. Of the jobs posted, 39 percent required a college degree.

The ‘dual language miracle’...

When it comes to places where the dual-language model has been embraced, Utah stands out. Utah is a conservative state and not one where advocates for bilingual education expected to find a partner.

“Utah has really become the dual-language miracle,” said Elizabeth Howard, associate professor of bilingual education at UConn’s Neag School of Education, who has synthesized the research on various approaches to teaching English learners. “The level of buy-in there is really a miraculous story.”

“No other state has expressed such unwavering political support,” Susan Eaton, a research director of Harvard Law School’s Institute for Race and Justice, writes in a review of Utah’s “bilingual boon.”

A third of Utah’s dual-language programs are aimed at helping English learners, and the rest help English speakers learn another language. The third targeted at those struggling with English still means Utah has a higher rate of English learners in dual-language programs than any other state, says Gregg Roberts, who oversees the state’s bilingual programs.
This school year, 32,000 English learners and native-English speakers are enrolled in 163 dual-language programs in Utah – one in 10 elementary students. In 2009, just 1,400 students statewide were in 25 dual-language programs. Next school year, another 35 programs are opening to keep up with demand.

In Connecticut – which has about the same number of public school students as Utah and the same proportion of English learners – just under 7 percent – fewer than 1,400 students are in dual-language programs.

So how did this rapid expansion happen in Utah? Leadership from the top, in the person of former Republican Gov. Jon Huntsman, who is fluent in Chinese and a former businessman and ambassador to Singapore and China.

“He was driving the bus,” said Roberts. “We know now that our students are no longer competing for jobs with students from Connecticut, Texas, Arizona … To be competitive, we must have multilingual schools.”

While it was sold as an economic development approach, it helped that a large proportion of Utah’s population is Mormon, a religion whose adherents travel on proselytizing missions. It’s while crisscrossing the world that Utah residents gain a broadened world view and empathy for people from different cultures, Eaton writes.

In Connecticut, a call for changes

Numerous educators in Connecticut say they prefer the dual-language approach, but agree that implementing it requires strong state and local leadership. That can be a problem for the state’s lowest-achieving school districts, where superintendents tend to turn over regularly. And the state education department says it has no intention of encouraging one model over another and will be leaving the choice up to local educators.

“Something might have a terrific track record somewhere else, but if it’s not embraced locally, and the people who have to implement it don’t believe in it or don’t understand it, or aren’t supported appropriately, then it might not work,” said Connecticut State Education Commissioner Dianna Wentzell.

Searching for solutions

Portland disagrees with Connecticut’s laissez-faire approach, said Debbie Armendariz, senior director of dual language. “Don’t try new stuff out on kids when we have a whole body of research that tells you how to get success,” she said. “And that’s why we have had success; we just aligned our programs to what the research said.”

Some Connecticut school district officials say the state should do more to encourage and help implement bilingual instruction, in line with state law. “We are a bilingual-mandated state, so our first push and approach should always be to use the native language to accelerate English learners academically,” said Mary-Beth Russo, Hartford’s English-learner coach.

The state should change some of its practices, she said, to recognize the research showing it takes years before the dual-language approach produces academic rewards in student outcomes. That’s because students need to be strong in their native language in order to improve their English.

“…We never test in that second language. So if we decide to grow that native language, where’s the support from the state saying, ‘Now you are really doing a great job with your students?’” said Russo. “You tend to focus on what they test, and that is why we walked away from dual language, because we don’t see the gains until they are in sixth or seventh grade. And so leadership came in and said, ‘But your third graders aren’t doing very well in English.’ Well, that’s because we aren’t just focusing on English. So the state needs to change their approach.”

The biggest obstacle

The toughest challenge in expanding bilingual instruction is a shortage of qualified teachers. It has been an issue nationwide for more than a decade. In Connecticut, the state has identified a shortage of bilingual teachers every year since 2004.

In 1999-2000, there were 563 teachers working in bilingual classrooms in Connecticut. This school year, there are just 227 – a 60 percent drop despite an influx of nearly 17,000 additional English learners. Last school year, one-third of the openings for bilingual teachers were left empty because no one qualified applied.

The problem will only get worse unless something changes. The education department reported in 2015 that nearly half of all current bilingual teachers will be eligible to retire over the next five years. Meanwhile, the state’s teacher colleges typically graduate only about 30 qualified people each year. The state has cut or eliminated funding for programs that
provide alternative, quicker routes to bilingual certification. The lone remaining program providing a non-traditional route to bilingual certification has produced eight teachers since 2011.

Wentzell said the teacher shortage could be ameliorated if district leaders checked the credentials of their existing staff. She said half of those certified to teach bilingual classes are not actually working in a bilingual classroom.

“Teachers sometimes make individual, personal choices not to use certain certificates that they have,” she said. “If you have a bilingual-certified teacher who is not working in that capacity, sometimes that could just be a conversation, and they don’t know that there is that opportunity, and they may need some support to change what they are doing.”

Teddy Lopez is one of those teachers who is qualified to teach in a bilingual classroom, but his school in Norwalk does not offer dual-language education or any other bilingual program, even though Spanish is the dominant language of 245 students – one-third of those at Ponus Ridge Middle School.

Instead, he teaches in an English-immersion classroom to help students who speak various foreign languages understand enough English to join a mainstream classroom.

Norwalk did come up with a solution to double the number of dual-language participants at another school, Silvermine Elementary. The school pairs bilingual and English-speaking teachers to work with the same group of students. In the morning, half the students are taught in Spanish while in the next classroom students are being taught in English. After lunch, the students switch classrooms — and teachers.

Wentzell said districts also should consider providing incentives for becoming a bilingual teacher. “I do think individual districts should explore ways to fill their hard-to-fill positions through providing incentives, obviously within the bounds of their individual collective-bargaining agreements, because sometimes you can’t do that, and sometimes you can,” she said.

Such incentives are unusual in union contracts, however, according to data compiled by ConnCAN, a New-Haven based advocacy group. According to the group’s teacher contract database, 25 school districts – 14 percent of the state’s districts – offer additional hiring incentives for teachers who can fill high-need, hard-to-staff positions. Those incentives range from one-time hiring bonuses to higher starting salaries.

Partial forgiveness of student loans – typically a couple of thousand dollars but up to $17,500 – is the only effective financial incentive the federal government provides for those who go into hard-to-fill teaching positions. The state offers a low-interest home loan program for teachers that favors hard-to-find specialties and impoverished districts, but its attractiveness has been diminished because low mortgage rates are now available to everyone.

**Demanding more credentials**

Others blame the big decline in bilingual teachers on a state law that requires them to have two certificates — one in bilingual education and one in either elementary education or a secondary school subject area. “In Connecticut, we are cutting the program off at its knees,” said UConn’s Howard, who notes the second certification tacks on about 30 credit hours.

It also adds expense. “It’s a good thing in that it would be scary if I was teaching bilingual chemistry,” said Monica Quiñones, director of English Language Learner Services for Hartford. But, she added, “Would I go back and pay an extra $16,000 more? Probably not in this economy.”

“It’s a nice idea, but I think it is a pretty impractical expectation,” said Fran Rabinowitz, who was the leader of Bridgeport Public Schools from 2013 to 2016 and supports expanding dual-language programs. “I hope that changes. This is something that the state needs to look at.”

One solution would be to change the state law that requires dual certification. Another, said Howard, is to scale back some of the courses unrelated to the bilingual track. “If we reshuffle their courses, then they can leave with both,” says Howard.

Wentzell said Howard’s idea might not be widely shared in academia, however. “Frequently it is not higher ed’s position that we should reduce the requirements, since the requirements are all classes they take at their places,” she said.

Another needed change, said Helen Koulidobrova, who specializes in linguistics at Central Connecticut State University, is eliminating a loophole that allows a district to hire a tutor instead of a certified bilingual teacher.
“The state department of education ought to be incentivizing people to go into this field. Maybe this is their way of saying, ‘No, we are just not that interested in this,’” said Koulidobrova. “If you can’t find people going into these programs, figure out why and fix it. Stop allowing loopholes.”

All these staffing difficulties make it harder for districts, like New Haven, that want to expand dual language. Statewide, dozens of bilingual classes are taught by people who do not meet the certification requirements.

Jumping the teacher-shortage hurdle

Portland, faced with its own shortage of bilingual teachers, has looked for ways to create more of them. For years as Portland expanded dual-language programs, the district would scramble to find teachers, and 12 to 15 positions would go unfilled.

This year was different. The district now has a bench of bilingual substitutes to draw from, thanks in part to a new partnership with Portland State University.

Instead of waiting for teaching candidates to come to them, the district began recruiting bilingual people with a bachelor’s degree to go back to school for a master’s degree to become a teacher. Recruits included people already employed by the school or the college in non-teaching jobs.

“We knew we had a lot of people sitting in our buildings who speak another language – the secretaries, the paras – and are not able to become certified because of cultural, financial or scheduling barriers,” said Portland’s Bacon. “This is our way to grow our own.”

The district pays for college application costs, testing to prove proficiency in another language, a citizenship test all teachers take, and licensure fees, all of which can add up to hundreds of dollars.

Once candidates are in the master’s program at Portland State, they can apply to teach in the classroom full-time, which typically means a significant bump in pay. These teachers-in-training are teamed up with mentors. Several students in the program said they had never gone back to school because they just couldn’t juggle everything. “I like all the support this program gives,” said Li-Ching Chiu, who is studying to become a dual-language teacher for Chinese.

“It’s a real challenge for any teacher to just go and afford to get certified,” said Howard Yank, a senior instructor at the university who is helping oversee the program. “It’s one of the real equity barriers… This program remedies those institutional barriers.”

Portland is counting on this new pipeline. Just over 40 students are currently in the program. This school year, 42 percent of the district’s kindergarten English learners were in dual-language programs, and district leaders would like to see that increase to 75 percent.

It’s too soon to tell what impact this reimagined route to getting bilingual teachers into the classroom will have on student outcomes, but Yank of Portland State said outside researchers already are asking to study it.

More money?

Utah’s experience shows that strong dual-language programs do not need to add tremendous costs.

To entice districts to set up dual-language programs, Huntsman pushed the legislature to provide schools an extra $10,000, on average, to cover expenses for teacher recruitment and supplies. That equated to about $100 for each student. The legislation passed on a unanimous vote.

Many districts signed on, and the state now spends $3.5 million annually on programs where students spend half their day being taught in English and the other half in either Chinese, French, German, Portuguese or Spanish.

“It doesn’t take a lot of money to do this program. That’s the interesting thing,” said Roberts, whose state spends less per-student than nearly every state in the U.S. “If Utah can afford to do this, then any state in the union should be able to. It just takes the political will to make it happen.”

The extra costs of dual-language programs in Portland are nominal. The district has to buy books, supplies and hire teachers regardless of the type of program. Researchers who studied the district found that dual-language operating costs
were $11,812 per student, on average, or $137 more than for other students. Teachers were of the same quality.

“If anyone is thinking, ‘Oh, that’s just the Portland bubble out there – no, it’s really not,” said Bacon. He pointed to Delaware and New York City, which also have expanded dual-language programs.

“It’s happening right in your own back yard, Connecticut,” he said.

Not everyone has signed on

There has been some pushback to these programs in both Portland and Utah.

In Utah, some parents refused to put their children in dual-language programs for ideological reasons, and many teachers saw immersion as a threat to their employment, said Jamie Leite and Racquel Cook, who wrote about Utah in the 2015 book, “Building Bilingual Education Systems.”

Education officials countered with a campaign to win public support and to assure teachers no one would be fired to open new dual-language programs. “Public opinion continues to slowly change as a result of the continued efforts of supportive school administrators, teachers, and parents who raise awareness of the program, its goals and its results,” Leite and Cook wrote.

In Portland, there is growing concern that while much energy is going into dual-language programs, other high-need students are being left behind. “I think dual language is a lifesaver for our English learners,” said Nicole Iroz-Elardo, a parent of a student with special education needs. “What about everyone else?… Everything is not as perfect as it may seem here. Resources are so strapped here in Portland Public Schools.”

“I think dual language is a lifesaver for our English learners. What about everyone else?… Resources are so strapped here in Portland Public Schools.

Selling it

Despite the research, many individuals and policymakers have seen bilingual education as a question of social integration and national identity as much as language development.

Voters in Arizona, California and Massachusettes in the late 1990s and early 2000s banned bilingual instruction in schools, though some loopholes allowed a few dual-language programs to operate. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who immigrated from Austria, told Hispanic immigrants in 2007 to follow his lead. “You’ve got to turn off the Spanish television set… It’s that simple. You’ve got to learn English.”

That sentiment is shared in Connecticut.

“We do a disservice to immigrants when we make it too easy to speak their native language. It delays their integration into American society and therefore their and their children’s ability to succeed in the U.S.,” David F. Parry, of Windham, commented in an op-ed last week on the research cited in the first article of this series.

New Britain shut down its two-school, dual-language program in 2012. Opinions differ on why. New district leaders weren’t believers in the dual-language model and favored English immersion. Bilingual advocates say far too many English learners were put in the program with too few English speakers, making it ineffective.

“It became a school where students were sent who weren’t making it,” said Merrill Gay, whose English-speaking son was in the program. “I pulled my student out. It was a horrible decision to make. It was gut-wrenching to pull him out.”

New Britain is now a convert to English immersion. “Imagine you were learning how to golf, but refused to swing the club. You would probably remain a very poor golfer. Unfortunately, this is analogous to the experience of many English learners,” teacher training materials said when the district rolled out its new approach.

On a recent afternoon, Jessica Otero was teaching first-grade English learners in one of New Britain’s English immersion classrooms. Students are expected to speak in full sentences and any errors are corrected on the spot.

“Today, we will write complete sentences in the past tense about Dr. Suess,” she told her class, and pointed to the Grammar Wall nearby describing the parts of speech.
“Who is the who? What is the pronoun that can take the place of Dr. Suess,” she asked her students. Some hands shot up.

It’s too early to judge the success of the program.

Aram Ayalon, who was on the local school board and the lone vote against moving to the English-only approach, said he hopes the board reconsiders. “I hope they see the light,” he said.

California reversed course last fall and threw out its English-only policy.

For non-believers, Portland has hired a full-time person to pitch the program to the parents of English learners like Garcia, the father who put his daughter in an English-only classroom.

“They say, ‘We already speak Spanish at home, why do my kids need to learn Spanish at school? They will never learn English if they are in that program’ That is just not true.” said Yolanda Morales, the district’s liason with parents. “A lot of people, they don’t really know about the benefits of the program.”

Garcia quickly realized his daughter was better off in a dual-language program and put her in the lottery for a seat in the program. She and his two other children went on to win seats in bilingual programs.

“I see my kids reading and writing in Spanish and English. It is amazing,” he said. “I think it is really important to be bilingual. It means more opportunity for them when they grow older.”

Opinions differ on whether bilingual education is the right approach. Tomorrow we’ll publish an interview with Connecticut’s commissioner of education.
Dianna Wentzell, Connecticut’s education commissioner, speaks four languages — English, French, Russian and Spanish — and oversaw English learner programs in a number of Connecticut school districts before coming to the state Department of Education.

She was never in an English-learning program herself, but her decades of experience as an administrator, curriculum director and teacher have helped shape her feelings about what needs to be done to close Connecticut’s yawning achievement gap between English learners and their peers.

The Mirror sat down recently with Wentzell to speak about the state’s approach.

How do you think the state is doing right now with English learners?

“... It is our English learners who have lagged in all of our achievement over the last six years in education in Connecticut. And that is not acceptable to us, and we have a lot of urgency around that, and that is an area that we want to make sure is prioritized. We recognize that resources are limited, but we need to make sure that we are making smart decisions for the kids who need us the most.

“The number of high school diplomas acquired has increased, but even when you look at that, the advance for English Learners has been the smallest of all the groups that we study. And that’s life-changing whether you can get that diploma or not.”

(*Background on achievement of English learners: The state has set an expectation that English learners should improve their scores on standardized English and math tests by about 3 percent each year, growth targets that are aimed at having students proficient in the subjects in five years. However, between the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school year, just one-third met that target for English and 37 percent for math.)

Could you elaborate on how the state plans to support this population?

“Our role is to provide guidance to local districts for how they can spend federal money to support our kids. [In the state
plan* to implement federal law], there is more accountability to demonstrate that what is being done at the local level is having a positive effect and is helping English learners learn English and keep up or catch up academically. So districts receiving money from us will have to have more robust plans than they have had in the past, and also we will be looking at whether the plans are effective... We will be putting our energies and efforts with our districts that need the most support. That also happens to be the districts that have the highest number and percentage of English learners."

("Background on the state’s plan: The education department promises to monitor English learners’ progress in speaking, reading and understanding English starting in 2019-20. If schools in the state’s bottom 10 districts make insufficient progress, the plan promises an “in-depth program review” by the state that will recommend changes beginning with the 2020-21 school year. Districts then will have six school years to improve, or the state can force the school to close or change management.")

Research shows that a promising practice is the dual-language model where students – both English- and primarily foreign-speaking students – split the day or school year attending classes taught in two different languages. Will the state be guiding districts to use that approach?

“We will not be directing people toward specific models, but what we will be doing is requiring evidence-based models… So we do have dual-language schools, and we do endorse that model – if it’s the model that is selected by the [school or district’s] turnaround committee and there is buy-in at the local level, and they are ready to do it well.

“One of the things that we have really learned with our turnaround efforts it that, while there is more evidence behind some models than others for turnaround, what matters more is the plan that people really will buy into and commit their energy and resources and belief in. Because if the community isn’t behind the plan – even if it has great data from somewhere else, and we’ve seen that going back decades, there can be all this incredible evidence behind an approach – but if the people that have to implement it don’t believe in it, then it is not likely to work.”

… One of the issues is that something might have a terrific track record somewhere else, but it’s not embraced locally, and the people who have to implement it don’t believe in it or don’t understand it or aren’t supported appropriately, then it might not work. So dual language is definitely a great approach if the community chooses it and can support it. If you are going to be able through either using existing resources in the school or district or by using the additional resources from the state or federal government, if you are going to be able to implement with fidelity a dual-language model, and your community supports it and wants it, then it is very likely to be successful."

“If people are going to commit to a new way, they have to believe that it is better, because it’s going to require learning new skills and doing things differently than they may be comfortable with. That’s a lot of why turnaround is a contextual issue. You know, you really have to develop a plan that is going to work for the school community.

“But there are certain “non-negotiable” things. It is non-negotiable that English learners need to be served well. You need to have data to see if they are served well.

The primary language of one in six students in our public schools is a foreign language, which is about 80,000 students each year. Half of these students struggle with our language and are considered English learners. Given that the number of English learner students continues to rise year after year, and there is no indication that will slow anytime soon, how are our teacher-preparation colleges doing in preparing the pipeline of future teachers to work with these students?

“Every single teacher in Connecticut needs to be a competent teacher of English learners. I am really proud that our education preparation institutions are doing a much better job with this. They are adjusting quickly to the changing demographics in Connecticut, and I am impressed with what goes on in teacher prep now. I wish I had that in my teacher preparation, because that was not the case when I was there. The teacher preps are doing much more than they used to. There is this understanding that teachers will have English learners in their classrooms; and so they have to be good at helping them, and just the understanding of the laws and the rights of kids.”

On bilingual education – teaching students in their native language for part of the school day – one thing that I have heard is that it is extremely difficult to become certified to teach in those programs and it can be more expensive than other programs because of all the additional courses someone must complete. Some districts have prioritized getting bilingual educators and have helped pay for them to take the courses so they can offer bilingual instruction, but others say they don’t have the money. What’s your take?
"Well, some of that is a choice not to. We encourage districts to analyze their shortage areas – and bilingual is a very persistent shortage area throughout the state – and encourage them to use [state] money provided through the Alliance District Grants to build the talent in your district.

**Districts have struggled for years to find enough teachers able to teach in bilingual classrooms, even as state law requires districts to offer bilingual programs in schools that have at least 20 students who speak the same language. Are we ever going to get to a place where that’s not the case in Connecticut?**

"That’s a great question. Bilingual has been a persistent shortage area… More than twice as many people are bilingual certified in Connecticut than are choosing to work under their bilingual certification. So we also have to accept that teachers sometimes make individual personal choices not to use certain certificates that they have. I have four certificates. Obviously I can’t use four certificates at once. You make a choice about what you are serving under."

"Each district needs to think about their talent and do a talent audit. You know, I have been in districts that do this where with your computer system you run your staff lists. So if a person has been an English teacher at the high school for the entire time you have been an administrator, you may not know that they also hold X, Y, and Z certificates."

"I would continue to encourage them to analyze their talent pools. If you have a bilingual-certified teacher who is not working in that capacity, sometimes that could just be a conversation, and they don’t know that there is that opportunity and they may need some support to change what they are doing."

"I do think individual districts should explore ways to fill their hard-to-fill positions through providing incentives, obviously within the bounds of their individual collective-bargaining agreements, because sometimes you can’t do that and sometimes you can. It’s unusual to have any kind of provision [in a union contract] to do that, but that’s individual to each collective-bargaining agreement."

Some members of the legislature’s Black and Latino Caucus have expressed frustration with what they feel is the state’s lack of attention to improving the education for English learners. Especially, that the state hasn’t put its energy behind the law that requires native-language instruction be used in schools with more than 20 students who speak the same language. What are your feelings on how bilingual education is being carried out in Connecticut’s school districts?

"I think what matters the most about whether it’s a bilingual program or English as a Second Language program is the quality of program. So, there are really good quality bilingual programs, and then there are programs that are not as good. The same is true with English as a Second Language. So the quality of the program is going to make the biggest difference for the kids."

"There are some language groups where there won’t be 20 students with the same language in a school. So even though there might be a bilingual program offered, the bilingual program is not in several of the students' language."

… And there are some schools with 20 Karen-speaking children, and there are no Karen-bilingual teachers – so it’s sort of a false choice right now because there are zero teachers for that in the state. So those kids are going to end up with ESL.

The native language of nearly 80 percent of the state’s English learners is Spanish, and in many of the state’s 10 lowest-performing districts it’s an even higher rate. Many of schools have far surpassed the 20-student threshold. How is bilingual instruction going for them?

"We don’t have enough teachers, even if they were all working under their bilingual certificate, to staff all the bilingual classrooms. Then a school district is by law — and I support this — able to staff that bilingual program with someone who is a teacher of a second language but who might not necessarily be bilingual and might not also have the content area for the class. So, I do worry… To have someone who is not bilingual and who is not a content area specialist is not an ideal learning situation. They might actually be better off in a [mainstream] class with support."

**How often is this happening?**

"It’s not the norm, but it happens because we can’t staff all our bilingual classrooms. It requires a signoff from me, so it doesn’t happen all that often. It’s more of an outlier."
“I think what’s probably more likely to happen when a school district can’t find a bilingual teacher is that the family and the student don’t have a choice. They are offered only English as a second language – which is fine as long as it is high-quality. I think that’s the most important thing. We need to focus on high quality in all of our programs.”

**Do you have a preferred approach to teaching English learners that you think is the best?**

“Well it depends if we are talking about the real world or the world of infinite resources. In a world of infinite resources I think family choice is the most important thing, because all of these different models can work very effectively and what the family wants for their child is going to be the best option. So in a world where we could provide everything, that would be my response.

“In the world we are in, I like the sheltered instruction model. Sheltered instruction is something that can be done in any school, and it really requires understanding English learners well, understanding how to present content to English learners in a sheltered manner that might include some bilingual instruction if that is possible. But usually these are multiple-language learner classrooms… But the idea of the sheltered piece is that information is presented in research-based ways that have been designed to meet English learner needs.

“It is a model particularly targeted at English learners. So the goal is not for anyone else to learn another language or for things to be consistently in another language — its not like dual language where everyone is consistently learning another language — which is great because we are a multi-lingual state with two dominant languages. So it would be great if we could all do that, but the sustainability is not there right now in terms of our capacity in our talent pool in our state to do that.”

“A district just needs to study its context, its population, its data and then its talent pool and think which model is likely to be the most successful in our context and how do we help make parents make the right choices or the best choices for their kids.

“… The decision about the best placement should be made with data on that language assessment, because sometimes if students have already acquired quite a bit of English already, ESL might be best. So what’s best really depends a lot on the kids.”

**What is your response to those who feel that foreign languages are looked at as a deficit in school and that the approach is to get students to learn English quickly so they can leave their native language behind. Would you like to see dual-language programs expand?**

“I don’t think that is a fair characterization. I think that makes a reference to a very early 20th Century movement, and we are not in that place at all; and, you know, I think that now, very much, educators encourage children and families to embrace their first language and to continue with it.

As a practical matter, dual language is very difficult and resource-intensive and hard to implement. So I think the concern has to always be with making sure kids can get as much out of their public education as quickly as possible. So it’s more important to have an effective program than a particular philosophy. But definitely we support, encourage, and all of our educational partners embrace that being bilingual and bi-literate is a huge asset for any child.”

**Do you speak any foreign languages?**

“I majored in a world language and I happen to choose to spend summers in an immersion program. And my family spoke a lot of French in my house when I was young; but I also took French, Spanish and took Russian in college. I still speak those languages, but not as well as I used to.

“I really feel like the more linguistically diverse and linguistically rich a child’s life is, the more likely they are going to be able to tap into that as adults as well .. Seeing it as a positive is important for a lot of children’s lives.”

**Are there any solutions for getting the pipeline of teachers to teach bilingual courses?**

“One thing we started doing last year, and we think might help and think it is important, we recognize credentials from
Puerto Rico and other territories now. That was an important step for us because previously we did not recognize credentials from Puerto Rico.

“Puerto Rico is having some economic difficulties now and there are some teachers there that want to find work elsewhere, and we want to be on the receiving end. … I don’t know if that has really netted us any additional teachers yet, but we are hopeful that it will.”

“Also, you know we really need to work on our existing teacher population to cross-endorse in English as a Second Language.

Currently, to become a bilingual teacher, someone has to not only take enough classes to become certified in their content area, but also has to take about 30 extra college credits, and pay tuition for them, to be qualified for bilingual instruction. Is that something that could change? What about scaling back some of the other courses someone must take in college so they don’t need to take so many more courses than other teachers?

“Frequently it is not higher ed’s position that we should reduce the requirements, since the requirements are all classes they take at their places… That is something that we are working on collaboratively with our higher ed partners.

“We are taking a really close look at our higher education certification regulations. Currently our certification regulation book is like 140 pages. You know we are taking a look at where the most impactful changes could occur and trying to get all the different stakeholders on board for that.”

Anything else readers should know about this subject?

I am going to put another plug in for the proposal we have made – the Seal of Bi-literacy. (Affixing a note to a diploma or transcript that a student is bilingual.) The seal of bi-literacy is important not in just a symbolic way. It is important that it underscores that we value the language assets that students have.

“They see that we value it as a state, and it will be an asset for them in their adult lives. We think it goes a long way to an asset-based approach for looking at language.

“In the United States, we are very behind. In many other parts of the world students are taught other languages from the young ages. In other parts of the world it’s normal to be multi-lingual. And we haven’t really kept up in that area.”

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