



Applied
Research
Center

Improving the Odds for Immigrant and Language-Minority Education Bilingual Certification Program, San Jose, California, 2002

Overview

In 1998, California passed Proposition 227, which increased restrictions on bilingual education and demanded a one-size-fits-all approach to instructing English learners. The passage of this bill was particularly devastating because it nurtured anti-bilingual sentiment by polarizing the bilingual education debate as either for or against English, leaving little room for children to learn English and also maintain their native language. In this context, California Tomorrow, an organization whose mission is “to create a fair and inclusive multicultural society,” began a ten-year campaign that includes a focus on “bilingualism as positive [and] home language as an essential resource.” One of the campaign’s successes has been the work done in conjunction with Californians for Justice (CFJ) in San Jose, where the East Side Unified High School District (ESUHSD) has more than 10,000 residents whose first language is not English, including more than 40% of the student population.

The Policy

On April 17, 2002, the Board of Trustees of ESUHSD voted unanimously to resolve that:

- The administration will work with other staff to develop and implement a program leading to bilingual certification.

Impact

After two years of working out the details of the new policy, the Bilingual Certification was awarded to 82 students in the East Side Unified High School District at graduation in June 2004. In addition to creating a space for students and educators to view bilingualism as an asset, campaign activists believe that the certification can enhance graduates’ educational and work opportunities. The most significant impact of the new policy may be as part of a much broader, long-term effort to reframe public perception and debate about the value of immigrant communities and cultures in U.S. society.

Key Players

Activist students played lead roles in the ESUHSD campaign, from conducting research and organizing fellow students and other supporters to strategizing about both what demands to make and how to present their issues to school authorities. Two organizations with a strong youth leadership component—California Tomorrow and Californians for Justice (CFJ)—combined efforts to conduct the campaign.

Winning the Policy

The CFJ youth in San Jose began their campaign after taking part in the National Day of Action for Racial Justice in Schools, a program organized by the Applied Research Center to bring attention to racial profiling and punishment in public schools. The

ESUHSD has nearly 25,000 students, and ten high schools have a majority of students of color. In 2001, less than 20% of Latinos met the A-G requirements (coursework required to be considered for admission to the California State University or University of California system). The first action students took was to demand that school district Superintendent Joe Coto give all students their transcripts and a report on their progress towards meeting graduation and A-G requirements. That demand was met, and the students continued their campaign. In April 2001, a retreat was held at which California Tomorrow trained San Jose students in campaign strategizing. Students formed a Campaign Committee and decided on three issues: anti-racist training for teachers; increasing the number of high school graduates and increasing college access by giving students more information; and creating a bilingual certification program for students who are fluent in both English and another language.

To move forward with their plan, the students, in conjunction with CFJ, developed and administered the “Opportunity to Learn” survey. The survey focused on teacher treatment, language issues, and graduation and college access. After students attended CFJ’s statewide conference in Long Beach, they were prepared to present their findings to the Board of Education. When they presented their demands to the Superintendent in late spring, he agreed to all of them, but the budget did not include funding for the new projects. Shortly thereafter, students organized a press conference to present their report, *Eyes on Education*, with major networks such as NBC, CBS, ABC, and Telemundo present. The Superintendent, after some hesitation, signed the students’ demands once again, in front of the media.

Challenges

As with most campaigns to win new policy, implementation is an ongoing and often difficult effort. In order to make sure the district followed through, students and California for Justice needed to continue to meet with district staff and counselors. Most of the work was done around trying to develop assessment methods for the bilingual certification program, and campaign members discovered they had underestimated the resistance they would get from the school board on the requirements for the certification. CFJ, California Tomorrow, and California Together worked to design bilingual assessments. Originally, the idea of portfolios, which are more encompassing and in-depth than testing, was proposed. However, after a year and a half in negotiations with the school board, a standardized test was the final outcome.

Replicability

This campaign is a part of a longer, state-wide plan envisioned by California Tomorrow. In San Bernardino County, for example, California Tomorrow worked with the mayor to declare the city the first official bilingual city in the nation. Additional efforts are being made at the state level through the California Master Plan for Education.