

Impact of bilingual education on student achievement

Language development programs should focus on quality rather than the language in which instruction is provided

Keywords: bilingual education, language of instruction, English as a second language, structured English immersion, limited English proficient students, English language learners

ELEVATOR PITCH

More than 4.4 million students enrolled in US public schools participate in English language learner programs because of linguistic barriers to learning in regular classrooms. Whether native language instruction should be used in these programs is a contentious issue. Recent studies, using credible research designs for estimating causal impacts, find that bilingual education programs (which use some native language instruction) and English-only programs are not significantly different in their impact on standardized test performance. This finding suggests that it is time to change the focus from use of the native language to program quality.

KEY FINDINGS

Pros

- ⊕ Bilingual education may help limited English proficient students keep up in other subjects while they learn English.
- ⊕ Bilingual education helps limited English proficient students develop language skills in their native (non-English) language.
- ⊕ Skills in students' native language may facilitate their development of skills in English.
- ⊕ Bilingual education supports cultural inclusion and diversity.

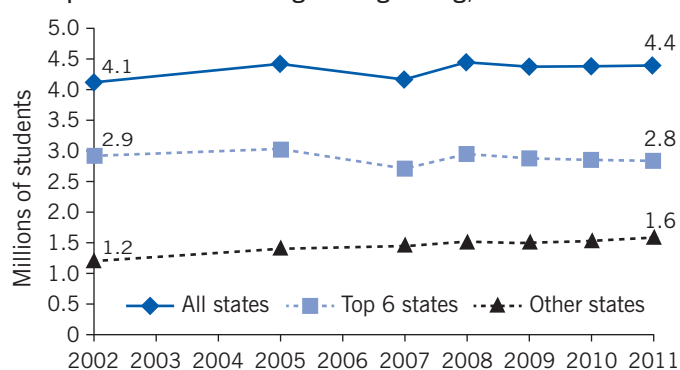
Cons

- ⊖ By reducing exposure to English, bilingual education may slow the acquisition of English language skills.
- ⊖ A shortage of certified bilingual education teachers makes it difficult to implement bilingual education programs as intended.
- ⊖ Appropriate teaching and learning materials may not be available in all native languages.
- ⊖ Bilingual education segregates limited English proficient students from other students, which may have social and academic impacts.

AUTHOR'S MAIN MESSAGE

Discussions about how to educate limited English proficient students often focus on the language of instruction. However, convincing recent evidence that bilingual education programs and English-only programs in US public schools are similarly effective in their impacts on student achievement suggests that it could be more productive to shift the focus from the language of instruction to the quality of instruction. Instruction should be of adequate intensity, provided by teachers qualified to teach limited English proficient students, and supported by appropriate teaching and learning materials, regardless of the language of instruction.

Enrollment of limited English proficient students in US public schools is large and growing, 2002–2011



Source: Author's calculations based on data from *Digest of Education Statistics, 2013*, Table 204.20. Online at: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_204.20.asp?current=yes