



Learning a new language

Minnesota legislation reflects education model that views English learners' native tongue as asset rather than barrier to achievement

by Minnesota Sen. Patricia Torres Ray (sen.patricia.torres.ray@senate.mn)

As my older son was finishing his senior year in high school, we looked at his yearbook and I noticed a significant number of girls who were pictured in the book with their babies. All except one were Latina students.

These young mothers were among the lucky 34 percent of Latino students who managed to stay in school long enough to graduate that year in Minneapolis. Sadly, so many other girls were not in the yearbook photos because they had dropped out of school, and many are English Language Learners — people who are learning English in addition to their own native language.

Educating our ELL students is an urgent matter. According to the Minnesota Department of Education, there were 65,689 such students in Minnesota for the 2012-13 school year, with Spanish-speaking students making up the largest segment (39 percent) of the group. And the Minnesota State Demographic Center projects the numbers of Latino, black and Asian Minnesotans to more than double over the next 30 years.

The challenge for our state is that the growing number of ELL students is accompanied by alarming academic statistics. For the past 10 years in Minnesota, these students have consistently graduated from high school at significantly lower rates than non-ELL students, with only 51 percent of ELLs graduating in 2012.

In addition, reading, math and science test scores for ELL students have been dramatically lower than the scores of Minnesota students as a whole.

The needs and challenges confronting our ELL students are not just an urban issue — rural and suburban communities are impacted, too. In the rural town of Worthington, the Latino student population accounts for almost half of all students. In suburban Bloomington, more than one of every five elementary students are ELLs.

According to a recent story on Minnesota Public Radio: “In recent years, the Twin Cities’ suburbs and communities in rural Minnesota have seen much of the growth in the number of students who are new to the language. The Willmar district started its newcomer class a few years ago, doubling its size in the last decade.”

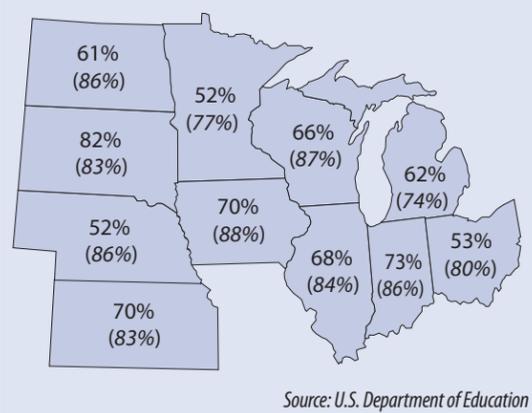
Seeking strategies for improvement

I represent a city (Minneapolis) with the largest number of ELL students in my state, and in 2006, I became the first Latina immigrant elected to the Minnesota Senate. One of my top responsibilities today as the chair of the Education Policy Committee is to seek more-effective strategies to improve academic outcomes for these students.

At the heart of a bill (SF 2611) proposed this year is the research-supported tenet that our bilingual children’s native, non-English languages are phenomenal assets — not deficits — which we must build upon to expand their education.

One model that could guide state policy is provided by the Internationals Network for Public Schools. According to a study by the City University of New York, Spanish-speaking students attending schools in that network graduate at a far higher rate than Hispanic students in the general citywide population — 87 percent vs. 59.9 percent of all New York City’s Hispanic

High school graduation rates for Limited English Proficient students in Midwest, 2010-11 (rate for all students)



students (many of whom were never ELLs).

According to Kathy Christie, vice president for education management with the Education Commission of the States, “The network schools follow a number of principles for the effective education of English-language learners:

- create educational programs that emphasize high expectations, coupled with effective support systems;
- view students’ native languages and cultures as resources to the student, classroom, community and society;
- support the further development of students’ native languages both inside and outside of the classroom;
- design a professional development program for all faculty members that specifically addresses the needs of ELL students;
- integrate professional development into the fabric of the school week to enable teachers to reflect and plan collaboratively on how to include English-language learners;
- involve families as educational partners; and
- incorporate language development into all content areas.”

Many of the best practices and the principles underlying the Internationals Network for Public Schools are also employed by the St. Paul school district. That district was listed by the U.S. Department of Education as having made among the best gains of the Great City Schools districts in closing the achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL students.

In 1999, the St. Paul district moved away from the “pull-out” model for ELL services (where students are pulled out of classes and the focus is solely on students’ English language proficiency) and implemented a Language Academy model.

Under this model, students interact with both native English-speaking peers and fellow English learners. Students develop English proficiency through studying content areas. They are taught by both a licensed ESL (English as a second language) teacher and a licensed content-area teacher. Through the program, students are fully integrated into the school community.

A great deal of research shows the value of the

home language as an educative tool. A Columbia University study found that the erasure of the home language through English-only school practices reinforces the deficit view that families and their children need to be linguistically “fixed” or “repaired” before they can succeed academically in the United States.

Bill tailored to meet diverse needs

SF 2611, the bill we introduced in Minnesota, recognizes native- and English-language development as well as the academic needs of diverse English learners, from young children to adults. The bill:

- encourages school districts to teach reading and writing in students’ native language and English at the same time;
- requires all teacher candidates to have preparation to effectively teach ELLs in their classroom;
- adds emphasis on ELL instruction strategies and on academic success and literacy to staff development activities, plans and outcomes;
- adds academic literacy and achievement of content area for ELLs to the teacher-evaluation law; and
- requires parent-involvement program goals and plans to include native- and English-language development and ensure a culturally competent and multilingual approach in outreach and interaction with parents.

The effort to review the way we educate our English Language Learners has garnered bipartisan support. For this I am hopeful and grateful, but the challenges ahead are significant.

In the past 10 years, the high school graduation rate for Latinos in Minnesota has increased by almost 30 percent. This is not nearly good enough, however: In 2012, only 53 percent of our Latino children graduated from high school. This trend extends to our Hmong, Somali and other ELL children too.

It is imperative that together we say that while our progress in closing the opportunity gap is moving in the right direction, our pace is not fast enough. We must tap into every resource we have to move faster. The native languages that our English learners bring to schools are major assets to preserve and value their heritages, and to help these students achieve academic success. ★

Minnesota Sen. Patricia Torres Ray, a Democrat from Minneapolis, was first elected in 2006.

Submissions welcome

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