

Fighting a Local Bilingual Education Establishment

Charge of 'racism' used to stifle discussion

by Terry Graham

MARIN COUNTY, Calif. —

When several of us spoke before the school board of the city of San Rafael and opposed a proposed new bilingual education program in March, we faced formidable barriers. Emotionalism was chief among them. Immediately after I shared my own research about the program, an immigrant parent rose and attached the label of "Anglo racism" to me and other opponents of bilingual education.

School children today may or may not be taught to avoid calling each other names. But in school districts across the country, that old-fashioned rule of reasoned discourse often is not practiced by faculty, administrators, school board members and immigrant parents who are attempting to protect and expand various bilingual programs. Concerned citizens routinely must battle against the entrenched interests of school personnel and well-funded ethnic advocacy organizations who often are more than willing to use pejorative labels to intimidate their opposition.

After years of observing and studying bilingual education, I'm convinced that the \$10-billion-a-year

program is a flop that keeps immigrant children from learning English. The fact that many of us oppose bilingual education because of the harm we feel it delivers to immigrant children is usually lost in the rush of the emotional reaction of bilingual education's defenders.

After the March meeting, school board member Bruce Rafal sought to silence us critics by writing an article in the local newspaper which was headlined "At center of language storm, one unnerving word — racism." He said racists were fighting the proposed program. The next day, my photo appeared in the paper. Names and photos of others who had testified against the program appeared in earlier articles. All of us felt exposed to potential harassment and even violence from radical immigrant activists in our community.

Such exposure, or the possibility of such exposure, is simply more than many citizens care to risk. Not surprisingly, many concerned parents don't speak up to challenge the bilingual educational establishment in their local districts.

But our experience in Marin County — just across the Golden Gate Bridge to the north of San Francisco — teaches some lessons on how to challenge and win against these modern-day schoolyard bullies.

Advice No. 1: Counter-Attack Epithets

We not only refused to be cowed by the epithets hurled at us, we forcefully challenged anybody who would seek to win the debate through that method.

When "Anglo racism" was alleged at the board meeting, one man jumped to his feet, shouting in anger at being so labeled. Others joined in so forcefully that police were called in to monitor the rest of the meeting. In retrospect, I think this outburst was the main reason the board did not rubberstamp the administration's proposal that night. In an earlier meeting in San Jose, charges of

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racism were leveled against concerned parents who reacted in silence. Their board then approved the contested program without delay

Having lived and worked in three countries — one fascist, one socialist and one democratic — I believe Americans must recognize and effectively respond to cross-cultural communication clashes apparent in these situations. Our tradition of democracy requires that each person voice an opinion and then we vote, with the majority ruling. But many recent immigrants left tyrannies where a person seizes control through intimidation and/or violence, imposing his or her will upon the cowering masses. These same tactics often are employed here by immigrants who think they are exercising their rights to free speech, but who by their actions are threatening the very system that makes America great.

When not quickly and loudly rebuked, attempts to derail a reasoned debate through personal attacks deny us our credibility and allow the advocates to seize control of the debate as we struggle to regain our composure, or turn the other cheek.

Advice No. 2: Band Together

Although we had not been organized in our initial opposition to the new program, 10 of us had identified ourselves to each other by speaking at that March meeting. I called all of them, and seven agreed to work together.

When board member Raful in his newspaper article accused us of racism, we counter-attacked quickly. We retained an attorney and sent a letter asking Raful to apologize, resign and pay for a retraction in the newspaper or face a law suit for defamation of character. That action and Raful's wounded reaction that we were impinging on his rights of free speech garnered much publicity for our concerns about the proposed program. (To date, we have not proceeded with a suit. We have one year to file.)

The school board president laid down new rules for future debate before the board: The words "racist" and "Anglo" were off limits.

Not only were we able to retain an attorney as a group, but we spurred each other on to tasks of research and letter-writing.

Advice No. 3: Fight With Facts

When the proposed program was first announced in the local newspaper, it was clear that proponents expected their recommendations to be taken at face value and adopted without further inquiry. The "two-way immersion" program was said to be the best way to teach English to immigrant children. Such a goal has become increasingly urgent over the last decade as thousands of immigrants — legal and illegal — have suddenly poured into San Rafael. Today, some 40 percent of the children enrolling in the school district cannot speak English.

The immersion program was supposed to involve conducting mixed classes of immigrant and native-born children 90 percent in Spanish for two years and then moving toward a 50/50 mix of English and Spanish by the fifth grade. School officials insisted that immigrant children would prosper by studying in their "native language." My experience and research in language education, however, led me to severely question any program that takes six years for students to acquire English literacy.

After our sharp responses to the racism charges had stalled action on the program, our group went to work. One woman obtained a copy of a manual which the school district had claimed described the immersion program. Incredibly, the manual — curiously missing the first 19 pages — contained no information on the program's performance but did describe how to run a community advocacy campaign to gain its approval. The same woman, who had served on the school board 20 years earlier, ultimately applied the strong arm of California's Public Record Act to secure copies of a San Jose State University study that had been cited by proponents. During this process, she discovered that the San Rafael district had never actually reviewed that study. We had to legally compel the university to send us the study. An independent consultant now has reviewed the study and uncovered serious flaws in its methodology and conclusions. We are planning a press conference to reveal these findings.

I searched the Internet for articles on bilingual education and found names of national experts and parents who fought similar programs in other districts. I contacted them and began to reap powerful new evidence. In some instances, the

persons contacted referred me to even more helpful sources. I learned from one of the experts that she had been hired to evaluate San Rafael's present bilingual programs. Our superintendent refused to release the report to me, improperly claiming it was not public record. After I enlisted help from a lawyer and a reporter, he released it. The report states that 71 percent of immigrant children in classes emphasizing English were fully English proficient in three years, compared with just 37 percent of students in bilingual programs emphasizing Spanish. Our efforts pushed the results into the local newspaper with a headline, "English Slowed in Bilingual Classes." It was the first time our side has been validated in local print.

I discovered that Calistoga (about one hour north of Marin County) had earlier created a "two-way immersion" program for its students. After students tested in the bottom 20 percentile nationwide, the district admitted its immersion program was a failure and went back to the drawing board. This nearby experience was totally missing from our school board's evaluation of what to do here.

In the meantime, all this publicity from our group's efforts has drawn many letters to the newspaper, heightening awareness of the issues. The newspaper, which has continued to editorialize in favor of bilingual education, ran a front-page article about the immersion program headlined, "Bilingual plan looks doomed?" The next day the school board rejected the program. Many of our supporters attended the meeting wearing badges that read, "I oppose bilingual ed, and I am not a racist."

Tenacity, confidence, networking skills and a willingness to fight personal attacks are key to battling the bilingual establishment. Be prepared to spend your own money and time on longdistance phone calls, copying and lawyers. It's a sad fact that many advocates of native-language "bilingual" education hold paid positions with Latino advocacy groups, supported by grants from corporate, community and private foundations. Bilingual educators, perhaps the only true beneficiaries of such programs, will cash paychecks paid for by your tax dollars until we combine our forces to stop programs that, after 28 years of dismal results, have no place in public education. □

Affirmative Action Update

Writer Jim Robb's article for the Winter 1995-1996 issue of *THE SOCIAL CONTRACT* (Vol. VI, No.2) has opened significant debate on the issue of affirmative action for immigrants. To foster further articles on the topic and to encourage dialogue, *THE SOCIAL CONTRACT* is sponsoring a site on the internet.

Click on www.netcom.com/~jimrobb. You will find the executive summary of his monograph, "Affirmative Action for Immigrants?" as well as reprints of other essays, op-eds and speeches on the subject. There is a place for your comments and questions.

Immigration on the Internet

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT journal and *THE SOCIAL CONTRACT PRESS* are on the internet. Our address is www.freeway.net/soccon. Our home page gives our mission statement, information about *THE SOCIAL CONTRACT*, a list of books for sale, editorials from several immediately previous issues which highlight the contents of each, plus the internet addresses of other groups working on immigration reform, population control and national unity questions.

This home page also hosts the newsletter of the Biocentric Institute edited by William Dickinson.

Other Internet Sites to Visit

A number of groups and individuals are coming "on line." Here are the ones we are aware of:

Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) <fair@fairus.org>
 Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) <center@cis.org>
 Negative Population Growth (NPG) <negpop@soho.ios.com>
 Carrying Capacity Network (CCN) <ccn@igc.apc.org>
 Californians for Populations Stabilization (CAPS) <caps@calweb.com>
 Philip Martin publishes *Migration News* <migrant@primal.ucdavis.edu> and as well at <gopher://dual.ucdavis.edu>
 Norman Matloff (professor) has many articles and a great deal of data: <heather.cs.ucdavis.edu/pub/Immigration/Index/html>
 And, of course, *THE SOCIAL CONTRACT*'s e-mail address: <soccon@freeway.net>
 We'd like to hear from you.

The New Abolitionists

Ending bilingual education program reaps identifiable improvements quickly

by John J. Miller

BETHLEHEM, Pa. —

School Superintendent Thomas Doluisio was puzzled. His Bethlehem, Pa., district had an elaborate program of Spanish-language classes for its large population of Spanish-speaking children. Proponents of bilingual education said this would help Hispanic children adjust when they moved on to English-only classes—which they were supposed to do after three years. But it wasn't working. Hispanic students lagged behind their peers in test scores, reading levels and graduation rates.

"Our college-track courses were lilywhite," Mr. Doluisio says. "Our remedial classes were filled with Puerto Rican kids. And the ability to speak English explained most of the difference."

What went wrong?

Mr. Doluisio found out in a 1992 meeting with his district's elementary-school principals. The short answer: seven years. That's how long it was taking a typical student in the bilingual program

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to move into regular classes taught in English. Bethlehem had effectively established an English-second policy, thanks to educators who considered native-language training of primary importance.

"I was flabbergasted," Mr. Doluisio says. More than that, he was angry. And then he got busy.

A Stunning Transformation

Within a year, Mr. Doluisio led a stunning transformation of Bethlehem's language policy. His district became one of a handful in the country to reverse course on bilingual education. Bethlehem's Spanish-speaking students are now immersed in English-speaking classrooms. The school district switched policies only after a bitter struggle that had divided the community. But thanks to Mr. Doluisio's leadership, the benefits of English immersion are starting to show, and the naysayers are starting to change their minds. Bethlehem provides a stirring example of how other school districts can challenge the bilingual education orthodoxy — and win.

The Bethlehem Area School District, serving 13,000 children, is Pennsylvania's fifth-largest. About 10% of its students cannot speak English well, and of these, 86% speak Spanish in their homes. Most of these children are Puerto Rican, but immigrants

from Central and South America make up a growing part of the Spanish-speaking population.

Before the 1993-94 school year, Bethlehem essentially segregated its Spanish speaking

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students, busing them to two elementary schools where Spanish was the language of the classroom, the lunchroom and the playground.

After learning about bilingual education's dismal exit rates, Mr. Doluisio began to investigate the program. He quickly uncovered more outrages. "There were kindergartners — five-year-olds who were at the perfect age to start learning a new language — who did not hear a single word of English all day long," he says. "I probably should have known that this sort of thing was going on, but nobody told me. I had to discover it for myself."

Mr. Doluisio decided that Bethlehem's language policy needed a complete overhaul. He