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Improving the Literacy Skills of Children and Young Adults

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Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee. I want to thank the subcommittee for this invitation to testify on this very important issue of literacy for children and young adults. I want to especially thank Congressman Rubén Hinojosa for this opportunity to come before you and speak to the issue of literacy development for Bilingual Learners (BL).

As we strive to achieve equity in the education of all students, the need for well-informed educators is more critical than ever. Schools across the country are facing growing enrollment of BL students and many schools lack the necessary preparation for effectively educating this group. Historically, an academic achievement gap has persisted between native English speakers and BL students resulting in a persistent dropout rate in many cases greater than fifty percent (50%) for this population. Positive change requires a comprehensive understanding of the issues affecting this population.

There is over 40 years of research in second language acquisition in this country that affirms the effectiveness of utilizing a child's native language to learn academic concepts while learning the English language. My testimony today is based on this research as well as over 16 years of my own research and study of this subject, together with practical experiences in the development and implementation of successful programs and practices. **I have seen first-hand how quality bilingual education programs provide long-term achievement of BL students and help close the academic gap based on standardized assessments as compared to native English speakers.**

BL students are achieving in schools across the country when provided an appropriate education through a sound quality bilingual program. The list below shares examples of BL students' long-term academic success through quality bilingual programs:

- The *Pharr-San Juan Alamo ISD* located in South Texas has been successfully

educating BL students over 10 years implementing successful dual language programs at the elementary and secondary level to over 10,000 BL students & non-BL students. At this district, an unprecedented 1,000 LEP students participate in a dual language education program at the middle and high school level boasting a zero dropout rate among this group.

- The *Dallas ISD* located in North Texas is implementing successful dual language programs at the elementary level (143 schools) to more than 30,000 BL students (PreK-3rd) and 3rd grade results (2009) showed an amazing 92.4% passed the state reading exam.
- The *Fort Worth ISD* in North Texas is also implementing successful dual language programs at the elementary level (49 schools) to more than 10,000 BL students and is currently at the 2nd grade level.
- The *Spring Branch ISD* located in Houston, Texas is also implementing successful dual language programs at the elementary level (21 schools) to more than 4,000 BL students and is currently at the 2nd grade level.

These are many more examples in Texas - programs I have personally worked with and studied- and hundreds more success stories across the country. In Texas alone, over 75 school districts are today implementing a form of dual language and more effectively serving BL students and non- BL students. It is projected that there are approximately 1,000 dual language programs nationwide.

Research steadily demonstrates that literacy development in a child's first language facilitates literacy development in the second language. There is overwhelming research that tells us that BL students are more academically successful in our schools if they receive formal schooling in their native language, while they learn English (Cummins, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 1998). As clearly described in gap closure program effectiveness studies by Thomas & Collier's (2002), only enrichment forms of bilingual education, that provide instruction in both the native language and English throughout elementary, close the *English* academic achievement gap between BLs and native English speakers as they continue their schooling (see figure 1, page 5).

The education of BL students is a K-12 issue and therefore must be viewed and addressed as a part of K-12 education. Still, a K-5 elementary education is the foundation for a successful secondary education. The permanent solution to high schools in academic trouble with this population is rooted in their elementary schools. It makes sense that the learning of "on-grade level" content, knowledge and skills in a K-12 education largely depends on the clear "understanding" of classroom instruction. Academic gaps occur when children do not learn "on-grade level" certain concepts or skills (academic literacy) well or at all. If an English dominant child falls behind academically for whatever reason, the child speaks English well but is not "academically on-grade level in English."

These two points apply to BL students as well. It is critical that BL students learn "on-grade level" academic knowledge and skills, which includes literacy, at the elementary and secondary levels in order to receive an equal and successful academic and linguistic education eventually becoming "English proficient" and academically on grade level.

So how do we ensure that LEP students receive “on-grade level” (literacy) education and learn English at the same time?

The five (5) major points that follow, based on my experience, **if supported in policy and carried out in practice on a national scale**, would have a significant impact on the academic and literacy attainment of BL students at both the elementary, middle and high school level, based on standardized **English assessments**.

Point #1: Understand that knowledge and skills are transferable from one language to another

First, we must recognize that content, knowledge, and skills are not specific to any language and therefore are “transferable” from one language to another. In other words, the skill of writing, reading and addition is learned only once and once learned will transfer to a second language. For example five times five is twenty-five in the USA, and in China, and in Mexico, and everywhere else in the world. The key is to ensure that these skills are learned “on-grade level” as the BL child progresses in school while continuously developing the second language, English. If a child learns new knowledge and skills, etc. in a language he/she fully understands, the probability of learning this greatly increases. This is central to understanding literacy development for LEP students.

Point #2: Change Limited English Proficient (LEP) Label to *Bilingual Learner (BL)*

Over the last 40 years, non-English speaking students have commonly been labeled as *Limited English Proficient (LEP)*, *English Language Learners (ELLs)*, *Language Minority Students (LMS)*, *English Learners*, and other terms that do not respect these students as academic learners, but rather emphasize a *limitation* and English as the sole purpose of their education. The continued use of these inaccurate terms, not only stigmatizes these students, but also perpetuates an erroneous emphasis on English as the sole purpose for schooling. A more fitting term better suited to describe the academic and linguistic behaviors of these students in *any* instructional model is *Bilingual Learner*. After all, appropriately educated, *bilingual learners* are at *all times* engaged in and/or learning in both their native language and English regardless of instructional program.

Point #3: Schooling through Dual Language Programs

Dual language programs represent an increasingly effective strategy for educating bilingual learners. In 2001, Texas passed a state law encouraging school districts to develop and implement dual language programs for BLs and native English speakers. In 2007, the state developed clear guidelines for development, implementation and evaluation of dual language programs. Today, there are over 700 dual language schools in Texas. Dual language is increasingly the go-to program for literacy development of BLs in most southern states serving the highest and concentrated numbers of BLs.

Dual language programs are designed to educate students through two languages; English and the native language. In dual language programs, students develop literacy and learn

academic content (math, science, social studies) in two languages throughout their elementary years and the goal is to produce a full biliterate child by the end of 5th grade. Dual language is a quality program for all students. For BLs, it is the ONLY bilingual education model that fully closes the academic achievement gap between native English speakers and BLs. For native English speakers, it provides tremendous opportunities for bilingualism and biliteracy. Research evidence demonstrates that for all participating students, dual language yields “cognitive advantages” and higher academic achievement. Inherent in dual language programs is an *enriched, challenging, and engaging* instructional paradigm (gifted and talented (GT) type of learning environment) which benefits all learners

Types of Dual Language Programs:

There are two fundamental types of dual language education programs:

- **Two-Way:** both language groups in the classroom learn together through two languages (BLs & non-BLs)
- **One-Way:** one language group (BLs only) learn together through two languages (this is the recommended program for BLs)

One-Way Dual Language is increasingly being adopted by school districts and schools as THE bilingual education program serving BLs, thereby achieving stronger long-term academic literacy in English, closing the academic gap, and lowering the dropout rate.

Dallas ISD is a good example of how a literacy initiative for BLs must include dual language as the instructional model. In 2006 the district adopted One-Way Dual Language as the *required* bilingual program serving all Spanish speaking BLs (largest group) district-wide. This decision was based their research and visiting other successful districts, as well as the need to do something different for this group. For over 30 years, their BL population continued to perform poorly at the high school level. Although the district used many strategies to address this, years later they came to the realization that it was not the high school program that was broken for these students, but the elementary program. They brought in experts and connected the K-12 dots. A successful middle and high school student is largely based on the child’s elementary educational foundation. If students leave elementary school below grade level, they are bound to achieve poorly in high school. The district realized that the emphasis had been on English language development for BLs at the expense of academic literacy. BLs at high school level spoke English well, but could not function academically on grade level in English. The academic literacy gap began in elementary and widened in middle and high school as the curriculum became more demanding and abstract. Today, after 3 1/2 years of dual language implementation, preliminary results are extremely positive. This spring 2009, the district recorded the highest literacy and math achievement for over 5000 BLs based on state assessments.

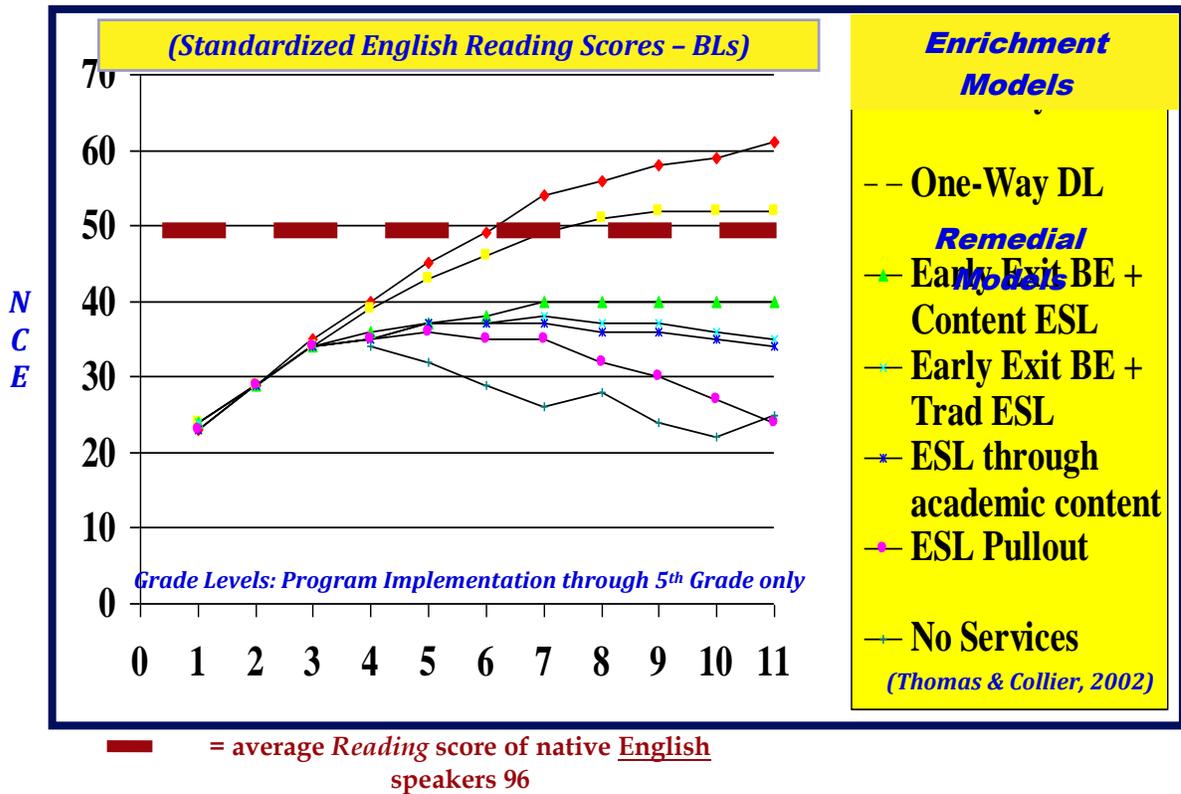
Dual Language High School Programs

Literacy development and second language development at the middle and high school level (6th -12th) for BLs can also be improved by providing opportunities for BLs to

learn in their native language. Recent arrivals that come well educated from their home country can *continue* learning academic content (e. g. math, science) while they learn English. This simultaneous goal improves overall literacy and can be accomplished through some coursework utilizing the native language for content-area instruction if available.

Figure 1: Long-Term Academic **English** Literacy Development of BLs Served through Different Types of Bilingual & ESL Programs

National Data - Remedial v. Enrichment Models Long-Term Academic Achievement



Data consisted of 210,000 BLs (96% Spanish) from 23 school districts and 15 states

- In remedial programs, BLs do not close the literacy gap after reclassification. For most students, only dual language programs fully close the academic literacy gap between BLs and native English speakers
- For BLs schooled in the U. S. at the K-5 level, *dual language models* are the most successful (*based on standardized tests across all subject areas*)
- When students are schooled bilingually (first and second language), rather than focus on English, there is greater academic achievement.

- As depicted in figure above, ESL and Transitional (Early-Exit) bilingual education (TBE) programs are NOT successful literacy models for BLs

Point #4: Bilingual Learner Literacy Assessments

Successful literacy development requires appropriate literacy assessments. For BLs, lack of native language literacy assessments is in conflict with best practices for BLs. Even when there is understanding of and commitment to native language literacy through dual language, states and districts are faced with lack of congruency regarding literacy assessments. There are overwhelming costs to develop native language tests, at a minimum, at the elementary level.

Literacy assessments in languages other than English may be an area of consideration as the federal role is re-designed related to literacy assessments. For instance, the U. S. DOE could fund literacy assessments, in as many languages as the department deems appropriate, to support strong literacy attainment of BLs.

This would provide incentives for states to move toward more native language literacy, as well as promote bilingualism and biliteracy opportunities for *all students*, a vision for America by President Obama. Literacy assessments in languages other than English will also assist states to more accurately measure the true academic skills of BLs rather than have these skills obscured by the language of the tests.

Point #5: Support BLs through Teacher Education Programs

Providing a quality education for all students, including BLs, is the responsibility of ALL educators these children come in contact with. It is therefore imperative that ALL educators be well informed on the best practices for educating this population. To this end, all teacher education programs should provide pre-service teachers coursework on second language acquisition (SLA) methodology and an understanding of bilingual/dual language education.

Teacher education programs would also benefit from incentives to recruit and educate more bilingual and ESL certified teachers. Increasing numbers of BLs across the country require that this area be addressed. Lack of bilingual education teachers is harmful to the successful literacy development of BLs since they will be served through English-only programs (ESL). This continues to perpetuate poor literacy achievement of BLs and inadvertently the cycle of poverty.

Another strategy to support the literacy development of BLs is to increase university-based teacher education programs collaboration with public schools, particularly high-need school districts serving concentrated numbers of BLs. As an example, the Teacher Education Program at the University of Texas Pan American in South Texas has established strong ties with local school districts that have resulted in the collaborative development and implementation of successful dual programs serving BLs.

Thank you.