



UNZ-DER THE RADAR: THE QUIET, FINAL BLOW TO ENGLISH-FIRST LANGUAGE POLICIES



Even as anti-immigrant sentiment has taken center stage under President Donald Trump, policy in three key states has shifted away from English immersion and toward bilingual and dual language approaches that maintain students' native languages or use them in instruction.

In the past three years, the anti-bilingual education laws collectively known as the “Unz initiatives” have all been replaced or substantially watered down. Bankrolled by California millionaire Ron Unz during the period from 1998-2002, the ballot initiatives curtailed efforts to emphasize multilingualism by setting English-language immersion as the default approach in schools. The initiatives required English learners to spend a single year in English-only immersion classes, at which point they were expected to speak, read and write in English well enough to move to mainstream classes. The first initiative was California's Proposition 227, which passed in 1998. Arizona's Proposition 203 followed in 2000. Two years later, Massachusetts voters approved Question 2. (Colorado's Amendment 31 failed that same year.) The initiatives had a substantial reach, given that California alone was, at the time, home to 40 percent of the nation's English learners.

But problems began to emerge almost immediately. In a study published in 2000, NEPC Fellow Patricia Gándara, a professor at UCLA, found that the California initiative led to inconsistency, with different teachers applying different interpretations of the law. In 2000 she said:

With everyone interpreting [Proposition 227] in every way that they do, ... I fear we are exacerbating a problem we knew was a very big problem before—and that

is kids can't count on having the same kind of instruction from one year to the next.

In Arizona, [researchers](#) found that increases in English learners' test scores corresponded with a period of post-initiative flexibility, while decreases were associated with strict enforcement of Proposition 203 mandates. And in Massachusetts, [a study of Question 2](#) found no impact on English learners' Grade 3 reading achievement.

Meanwhile, back in California, one of the largest Unz initiative studies, [a five-year evaluation of Prop. 227](#) published in 2006, found limited evidence that the policy had impacted student achievement either positively or negatively, in part due to issues of the quality and consistency of the available data. It did, however, find that the percentage of students receiving bilingual instruction fell precipitously, from 30 percent to 8 percent. Also influential was a [2015 study](#) that compared long-term outcomes for San Francisco students enrolled in English immersion versus programs that used and maintained native languages. The study found that, while students in English immersion programs initially earned higher test scores in English language arts, those in multilingual programs not only caught up but, by middle school, attained better results. The impact was especially pronounced for Hispanic students, who comprise the majority of the nation's English learners.

Yet, despite these less-than-promising research results, the original initiatives remained in place.

That is, until 2016. That's when California voters passed [Proposition 58](#), which effectively repealed that state's Unz initiative: No longer is English immersion the default educational practice, with parents required to sign waivers if they wish their children to participate in bilingual education or dual language immersion. As of July 2017, school districts can create their own programs.

A year after California voters neutered the state's English immersion initiative, Massachusetts lawmakers followed suit with the [LOOK Act](#), an acronym for "language opportunity for our kids." As in California, Massachusetts districts can now select their own method of instructing English learners. Further signaling a more asset-based approach, LOOK also established a Seal of Biliteracy that recognizes high school students who can speak, write and read in two or more languages. Such seals, which started in California, have [swept the nation in recent years](#), and now exist in almost every state.

Even Arizona is now taking a step back. Two months ago, the House and Senate [unanimously](#) passed Senate Bill 1014, which cut in half the mandated four hours of each school day that these students were required to spend immersed in learning English. Educators had expressed concerns that the four-hour blocks left little time for students to learn core subjects other than English. In addition, English learners were separated from fluent speakers during that time, limiting their opportunities for interaction with native speakers. The new law also instructs Arizona's Board of Education to adopt research-based alternatives for instructing English learners.

For the two decades of students whose schooling in these states was mightily shaped by the Unz initiatives, these changes may come as little consolation. Further, the success of

any approach—bilingual or not—will depend on the quality of policy implementation and investment. But this does appear to be an instance of policymakers and voters listening to research, looking at policy as implemented, and responding with new legislation.

NEPC Resources on Language Policy

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