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Bilingual Mandate Challenges Chicago's Public Preschools

Christian Hernandez points to letters in English as teacher Vanessa Mendoza watches at the Peck Early Childhood Center. His class is among 60 across Chicago that already offer bilingual instruction.

John Zich for Education Week

By Mary Ann Zehr

Administrators in the Chicago public schools are seeking to strike the right balance between providing guidance and permitting flexibility as they put in place the nation's first state mandate for providing bilingual education to preschoolers.

New rules approved by the Illinois state board of education in June flesh out a January 2009 change that essentially extends the same requirements for educating English-language learners in K-12 public schools to 3- and 4-year-olds in public preschool centers. ("Illinois May Mandate ELL Rules for Preschool," April 28, 2010.)

The new rules say that if a public preschool center has at least 20 students who speak the same language, it must offer bilingual education. By July 2014, they also say, all lead preschool teachers with ELLs in their classrooms must have an endorsement in bilingual education or English as a second language. Currently, many Illinois preschools rely on teacher assistants to provide native-language support to youngsters.

The rules come at a time when states, such as California and Texas, with large numbers of children from immigrant families are focusing more on how to support the education of pre-K English-learners.

But not everyone agrees that Illinois has taken the right path in its quest to extend bilingual services to younger children.

Barbara T. Bowman, the chief early-childhood-education officer for the Chicago district and a co-founder of the *Erikson Institute*, a Chicago-based graduate school specializing in child development, opposed the rules before they were approved, arguing that some of the practices for identifying and serving English-learners in K-12 are not appropriate for preschoolers. Now, she's pushing for flexibility in implementation to ensure that ELLs don't lose opportunities to interact with native speakers of English and continue to have plenty of playtime at preschool. She believes the shortage of bilingual education teachers could lead to grouping children with the lowest English proficiency in the same classrooms, which she calls "segregation."

Preschooler Itzel Vargas practices writing her name with help from her teacher at the Peck Early Childhood Center.

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"We've got lots of teachers who can't get endorsed because they don't read and write in Spanish," she said.

Staffing Challenge

Diane H. Zendejas, the chief officer of language and cultural education for the 410,000–student Chicago school system, echoes Ms. Bowman (TM)s view that the biggest challenge in carrying out the new rules will be coming up with a sufficient number of bilingually certified teachers by 2014, especially since the city (TM)s public preschool teachers are already required to have bachelor (TM)s degrees in early–childhood education. "We know we (TM)re going to be short, " she said.

But Ms. Zendejas is in favor of the rules because she believes they will support better alignment between the kinds of instruction preschoolers receive and the teaching they get in kindergarten. Illinois is one of the few states that requires bilingual education in K–12 when schools have a critical mass of students who speak the same language. In Chicago, the only languages that meet that criteria in preschool are Spanish, Polish, and Mandarin.

Ms. Zendejas said the school system is forming a group of 20 to 30 teachers who can start working in January on the 18 credits they need for an endorsement in bilingual education; the district will pay at least half the cost.

Reyna P. Hernandez, the research and policy associate of the Latino Policy Forum, a Chicago–based nonprofit organization that provides a Latino perspective on policy issues, also supports the rules, believing they (TM)ll boost the quality of preschools.

Her organization hopes the requirement for preschool teachers of bilingual education to be certified to deliver instruction in two languages will ensure effective programs.

Preparing for Transition

Diane August, a senior research scientist at the Washington–based Center for Applied Linguistics, said it (TM)s crucial that implementation of the bilingual education mandate in Illinois be well planned. "You have to be careful to gradually transition students into English and give them the support they need, " she said, which is more complex than many educators realize.

She said a lack of support for ELLs to transition from Spanish to English in bilingual education was a factor in California voters (TM) 1998 approval of an anti–bilingual education ballot measure there.

In a recent review of research, Ms. August identified at least three studies that compared the effectiveness of particular English–only and bilingual education programs at the preschool level and found both approaches produced similarly positive outcomes in English literacy. But the bilingual programs had the added benefit of helping children maintain and improve their native language, Ms. August noted.

Ms. Bowman worries that some educators will establish bilingual education in public preschools by providing instruction only in Spanish and not begin to develop children (TM)s English skills at that age. "We want to be sure they ... start off in English as well as Spanish, " she said.

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But Ms. Zendejas said the district (TM)s handbook says students in bilingual education should receive at least one period of English–as–a–second–language instruction each day, amounting to about 20 minutes in kindergarten and more in higher grades.

What (TM)s more likely to be a problem in implementation, Ms. Zendejas said, is that preschool teachers will move back and forth between two languages, while research shows it is more effective to teach each language separately. For example, during storytime, teachers should speak either English or Spanish, she said.

Okab Hassan, the principal of the 1,600–student Peck School, an elementary school in one of Chicago (TM)s Latino neighborhoods that runs a preschool with 173 children, said the state board of education should provide models for bilingual education that spell out how much ESL and native–language support should be offered. "I want to see that it (TM)s black and white, " he said.

Ahead of the Mandate

The state board plans to clear up some of the confusion by issuing guidance for not only pre–K bilingual education but also for K–12 bilingual education, said Darren Reisberg, the deputy superintendent and general counsel for the state board. "We want to be more of a resource for school districts ... and less of a compliance hammer, " he said.

It (TM)s unclear whether the Peck Early Childhood Center will need to change to comply with the new regulations. The school houses one of 60 classrooms citywide that already had a bilingual education program in place when the school year began.

Principal Hassan says the center is in good shape in regard to teacher certification. Two of its four lead teachers already have bilingual education endorsements to teach Spanish and English.

Most of the instruction at the center, a federally funded Head Start program serving mostly Latino children, is in English. The center uses a literacy curriculum based on English storybooks, and Spanish support is supplemental.

During a recent three–hour session, children with low English proficiency received about 10 minutes each of uninterrupted Spanish instruction by rotating into a small group with the lead teacher, Vanessa Mendoza. They got another 10 minutes of Spanish the same day with a teacher assistant.

Ms. Mendoza directed children to draw pictures of their family and talked with them about the drawings. She transcribed what the youngsters said about their families "sometimes in a mix of English and Spanish. Meanwhile, an assistant worked with children in Spanish to sort uppercase and lowercase letters. Later, Ms. Medoza read a book, *Diez Perros en la Tienda*, the Spanish version of *Ten Dogs in the Window*, to the whole class.

The children also rotated through a small group taught by a teacher with an ESL endorsement, where they discussed in English if objects were "the same " or "different. "

During lunch and snack and transitions between activities, teachers moved freely between both languages. When it came to instruction, though, English carried the day in this school.

Highlights: Erikson Institute