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Schools Implement Voter Initiative -- With Widely Varied Results

This article is the first in a series about bilingual education.

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A year and a half ago, voters turned most of California's education establishment upside down by approving Proposition 227.

The initiative declared bilingual education a failure and called for the state's 1.4 million immigrant children to be taught almost entirely in English.

But in Santa Cruz County -- where one out of four students isn't fluent in English -- bilingual education is far from dead. Most of these students are still being taught in a combination of Spanish and English, bucking what is supposed to be a new statewide system.

Like a handful of other districts in the state, the Pajaro Valley Unified School District has largely stuck with bilingual education. At almost all of its schools in Watsonville, which is 60 percent Latino, Spanish-speaking students are still taught primarily in Spanish.

Watsonville parents and educators tend to support the bilingual approach and have made use of a loophole that allows schools to opt out of Proposition 227's provisions.

In northern Santa Cruz County, most of the schools have made the transition away from bilingual education, but the educators involved have found the change frustrating.

A two-month study by the Sentinel found that many teachers countywide consider the new demands demoralizing and question whether students will actually benefit from English-only instruction.

Proposition 227 was written and promoted by Silicon Valley millionaire Ron Unz, who has run unsuccessfully for governor and the U.S. Senate.

Reflecting a view common among educators, Don Iglesias, assistant superintendent of Santa Cruz City Schools, said, "Ron Unz ought to do what he does best, which is run for office and stay out of our hair."

With the new system in place just 18 months, it's too soon to tell who is right.

Statewide, test scores have improved a bit for the youngest students learning English, but a sizable gap remains between those who understand English and those who don't. Analysts disagree whether the gains are significant or simply represent increasing familiarity with the state's standardized tests.

However, tending to support Unz's position, test scores have jumped dramatically at a number of schools that switched to English-only instruction and also changed to traditional, phonics-based reading programs. Those pockets of improvement are in Santa Barbara, Sacramento and northern Monterey County.

Locally, scores improved the most in the Live Oak district, which eliminated bilingual classes. There was more improvement at the Watsonville schools that added English classes than at schools with mostly bilingual students, but scores in Watsonville remained near the bottom of the state's rankings.

Scores were mixed -- some up, some down -- in Soquel and Santa Cruz, where only a handful of bilingual classes remain.

Countywide, scores of "English learners" remain well below average overall. Second graders, for example, scored at the 14th percentile in reading in the most recent testing and at the 30th percentile in math. The 50th percentile is considered average.

Although many teachers question the propriety of judging schools based on standardized test scores, Gov. Gray Davis has made testing a key component of his campaign to reform California schools.

The state's new Academic Performance Index, released last month, provided the first clear ranking of California schools based on performance and created a method for comparing schools with other schools serving similar student bodies.

Watsonville-area schools fared poorly, but educators there say that's because of a poor, migratory student body, not because of bilingual instruction.

Though the statistics are less than conclusive, parents in the north county tend to welcome the changes brought by Proposition 227, believing their children need to learn English quickly to get ahead.

"It's better for kids to learn more English," said Luis Pedraza, whose two sons are in all-English classes at Green Acres Elementary School in Live Oak.

Because Proposition 227 was intended to bring about revolutionary changes, throwing off decades of California teaching tradition, the new system is under scrutiny by state lawmakers and university officials.

California legislators have commissioned a five-year evaluation and have passed a bundle of bills to address perceived flaws in the initiative. Researchers supported by the University of California and the California State University systems, are studying high-achieving schools to find out their recipe for post-227 success.

Unz blamed bilingual education for low achievement among students who don't speak English. He figured that one year of English instruction should be enough to give children "a good working knowledge" of the language.

Unz spent \$1.3 million on the Proposition 227 campaign -- half of it from his own pocket -- while teacher unions opposed to the initiative collected \$4.7 million. The unions also helped persuade most school boards, including those in Pajaro Valley, Santa Cruz, Live Oak, and Soquel, to come out against the initiative.

Many teachers were appalled by the idea of dumping bilingual education, which had been California policy for 20 years. They said one year of English wasn't enough to prepare students for regular classrooms. They said research showed it takes five to seven years to learn a second language.

Some experts such as Stephen Krashen, a professor of education at the University of Southern California, say that students who can speak English and read Spanish should be able to read in English without much formal instruction.

But practice doesn't always reflect theory. Educators agree that in Santa Cruz County, as in other areas, some immigrant students have been hampered by untrained teachers and a watered-down curriculum.

Taught to read in Spanish, they seemed to do well. When they started reading in English, however, they fell behind. At most schools, less than 10 percent became fluent in English by fifth or sixth grade. Often they gave up in frustration.

Live Oak school administrator Robert Morgan admitted there were problems with the old system.

"If bilingual education is done correctly, it's great, but so much of it wasn't done correctly," he said.

Voters Opt for English

With overcrowded schools helping to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment, voters decided it was time for a change when Proposition 227 hit the ballot.

The year the initiative took effect, the number of students in bilingual classes statewide shrank from 30 percent to 12 percent.

In Santa Cruz County, however, the change was less dramatic. Before the initiative, 60 percent of Santa Cruz County students were in bilingual education. After, the figure dropped to 39 percent. The county is home to 10,660 students learning English -- 97 percent of them speak Spanish.

The scenario is different in Santa Cruz County for two reasons. First, bilingual education had particularly strong support locally and, secondly, many families here took advantage of a loophole in the law.

School districts in Berkeley and Hayward failed in a legal challenge that would have allowed entire districts to disregard Proposition 227. But the proposition does allow parents to opt out of English-only classes for their children by visiting the school and signing a waiver. If parents of at least 20 students in a single grade at one school request waivers, the school is obligated to offer a bilingual class.

"Some think bilingual education was outlawed, but the proposition didn't do that," said Jeffrey Kitchen of the state Education Department. "It just said the majority of instruction needs to be in English and parents can get waivers."

Waivers are not supposed to be approved unless the children are at least 10 years old or have "special needs," but Proposition 227 advocates say many school districts have ignored those limitations.

Statewide, large districts put much more energy into notifying parents of their options than did small districts. The Pajaro Valley district, the largest in Santa Cruz County, did considerable outreach.

Unpopular with teachers Justin Burrows, a bilingual teacher in Live Oak, was angered by Proposition 227.

"The truth has been completely buried," he said, saying the real issues behind the initiative were racism and immigrant-bashing.

Not many local teachers have anything good to say about Proposition 227.

One of the few educators to see benefits is Jamie Marks, who opposed the initiative when she was on the Pajaro Valley school board. Speaking from her new perspective as a teacher in training, she said she finds it has helped schools connect with parents and impress on students that they need to work hard to succeed.

But most teachers surveyed by the Sentinel said they expect the changes to have a negative impact on students. They said they are disheartened by the loss of a system that valued the students' culture and fear that Spanish-speaking children will never master anything more than "playground English."

In Santa Cruz-area schools, Proposition 227 had more of an impact than it did in the Pajaro Valley. But that wasn't necessarily because educators, or parents, wanted the change.

At Del Mar Elementary in Live Oak, for instance, Principal Sesario Escoto said there would be no room for Anglo students if parents of 20 Spanish-speaking kindergartners obtained waivers for a bilingual class. The bilingual students would be segregated from the others.

At most Santa Cruz-area schools, smaller numbers of Spanish-speaking students meant it was harder to obtain the signatures of 20 parents needed to create a bilingual class.

The Live Oak district had 377 students learning English last year but they were sprinkled among three elementary schools and a middle school. At Green Acres Elementary, where Justin Burrows teaches, most grades had fewer than 20 students learning English. That meant bilingual classes wouldn't be offered unless Anglo parents wanted them, too.

In the end, only three schools in northern Santa Cruz County had enough parental support to offer bilingual classes -- Santa Cruz High, Bay View Elementary in Santa Cruz, and Santa Cruz Gardens Elementary in Soquel.

At Bay View, Anglo parents joined with Spanish-speaking parents to request bilingual instruction.

"I wanted a broad mix of kids," explained Bay View parent Stephanie Martin, "and the bilingual teachers had the style of teaching I wanted."

Another factor the three schools have in common -- principals who speak Spanish.

Difficult to analyze

With the state providing little analysis of the impact of Proposition 227, experts on both sides of the debate have jumped in to fill the vacuum.

Kenji Hakuta, a Stanford University education professor who supports bilingual education, argues that schools with bilingual programs gained as much ground in the standardized tests as those with English classes.

On the other hand, Jorge Amselle of the pro-English READ Institute contends schools that invested time in planning an English-only program got the best results.

What hampers the analysis is that the state data lumps together all students learning English, whether they are in bilingual classes or English-only classes. It's impossible to see which students are making more progress.

That's especially problematic in the Pajaro Valley district, which had both bilingual and English classes last year. However, the district won't compare how students in the two programs are doing until they reach fifth grade. That's when bilingual students are expected to be fluent in English.

"Why does the district not want to find out which works?" Unz asked. "If there are dismal results, maybe there is a connection."

But others argue that it is way too soon to draw clear conclusions.

Said Escoto, the Del Mar principal: "We won't know for three or four years."
