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Only two bilingual classrooms remain at the heavily Latino school in Pajaro Valley

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

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WATSONVILLE -- The decision to end bilingual education in California public schools caught Calabasas Elementary School off guard, but it has tried hard to adapt.

Many teachers at the year-round school, where well over half the students had been taught predominantly in Spanish, never believed voters would pass Proposition 227, the 1998 measure requiring that students learning English be taught in English.

Suddenly, the school found itself without enough English textbooks. Some teachers had never taught in English before. Others were skeptical about the switch to English-only classes.

Nevertheless, the new law has forced sweeping changes at Calabasas, where Latino children make up 88 percent of the enrollment. Before the vote, 19 of the school's 33 classrooms were bilingual. Today, only two bilingual classes remain. That makes Calabasas an exception to the rule in the Pajaro Valley Unified School District, which continues to embrace bilingual education despite Proposition 227.

It is too early to tell whether the switch will mean significant improvement for the large number of poor children at Calabasas, but there have been some encouraging signs.

Although test scores remain alarmingly low, some grades have shown modest gains, and several teachers who switched to English classes report that their students are making progress.

"They are actually beginning to speak English with each other," said first-grade teacher Yasmin Longoria.

Fewer than 40 parents requested that their children remain in bilingual classes, an option Proposition 227 allows.

More typical was parent Ezequiel Castillo, who opted for English-only classes for his sons.

“My children wanted a change,” said Castillo. He said the boys didn’t want to speak Spanish at school because other students made fun of them.

The change has not been easy.

Although the law calls for “structured English immersion,” no one is sure exactly what that means. Mostly, it has meant that the teachers teach in English and do whatever they think works best.

In one kindergarten classroom, veteran teacher Mary Dixon doesn’t know Spanish but classroom aide Marisa Manriquez translates when children don’t understand.

Across campus, rookie teacher Valerie Girsh is on her own. She doesn’t know Spanish, either, and there’s no classroom aide. She has 13 first-graders -- the migrant students have left for the season. Girsh pushes them to speak in English but some of them have yet to learn the alphabet.

Second-grade teacher Cheryl Coutant has only five students who can read in English. The second-grade textbooks sit on the shelves because they are too difficult. On a visit to the school library, many of the students pick out books in Spanish.

“I feel strongly about them absorbing as much English as possible,” said Coutant, who makes up her own flash cards to help students recognize words.

Another problem is that grades are down even though some teachers say students are doing better.

Principal Warren Thornhill said it’s because Spanish-speaking students who were receiving A’s in bilingual classes are getting C’s in English-only classes. Teachers say that has demoralized some youngsters.

“You want kids to feel successful,” said Thornhill.

Luis David Castillo, a fifth-grader, is an average student but he sees himself making progress.

“I’m improving a lot in reading,” said Luis, who hopes to be the first in his family to graduate from high school.

Meanwhile, Spanish-speaking parents have difficulty communicating with teachers. They said they often don’t realize homework has been assigned. Some have asked for Spanish translation.

Although the shift to English has been difficult, parents were ready for a change. They were not satisfied with the school’s bilingual program because some students did poorly in Spanish as well as English.

“The teachers weren’t fluent in Spanish and the children weren’t learning,” said Palmira Gallo, a teacher who works with migrant students.

Students didn’t get enough instruction in English, partly because there was no formal curriculum. And there was little incentive to speak English because almost all the students spoke Spanish.

Given the chaos of the first year of Proposition 227, teachers said they were not surprised that test scores have remained below average.

The state’s tough, new accountability system, known as the Academic Performance Index, ranked Calabasas near the bottom. The school scored a 2 on a scale of 10, compared to others with similar demographics. If Calabasas doesn’t improve in three years, the consequences could be severe because legislators have established a tough, new accountability system. The principal could be removed, teachers reassigned or the school closed.

Although poverty is a factor in low test scores -- eight out of 10 students at Calabasas qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch -- state legislators expect most California schools to do better.

“Those children are challenging but they can learn,” said Assemblywoman Kerry Mazzone, who has sponsored several bills to assist students learning English. “We can’t make excuses. That’s the most racist thing we can do.”

Some teachers delayed switching to English until mid-year. Others waited for the arrival of English-language texts. As a result, some students had only three months of English instruction before undergoing the state’s standardized testing last spring.

In some grades, scores were unchanged. In others, though, there were gains for students learning English.

Fourth-graders scored at the 11th percentile in reading, after scoring at the 7th percentile as third-graders. Third-graders scored at the 29th percentile in math, up from the 16th percentile the year before.

The 50th percentile is considered average.

The scores concern Thornhill, who came to Calabasas as a sixth-grade teacher in 1974 and became principal six years ago.

PTA president Amber Isidro said teachers and parents need to demand more of students.

“The kids aren’t learning what they should learn in the grade they are in,” she said. “Some kids are lollygagging around. They need to be pushed harder.” One night in November, about 60 concerned parents showed up at a meeting to brainstorm problems and solutions. Some suggested teachers be stricter about homework. Some asked for more after-school tutoring, which wasn’t available this past fall because of a bureaucratic glitch.

“One hour in the afternoon two days a week isn’t enough,” said Rosie Hashimoto, a mother of three. “We need more time and more volunteers. So many parents work and kids don’t go home and do their homework.”

Michelle Platero took a more drastic step -- pulling her son out of Calabasas. He is now a sixth-grader at Bradley Elementary, where, she said, teachers are more demanding.

Since neither English instruction nor bilingual classes have gotten the results he would like at Calabasas, Thornhill is pinning his hopes on a San Jose consultant, Uvaldo Palomares.

Palomares, who once was a migrant student and is fluent in Spanish, has concerns about the school’s year-round schedule, which means one-fourth of the students and teachers are off-campus at any given time, and about the large number of migrant students -- 30 percent of the school population.

Palomares said the problem is threefold -- students don’t understand what’s expected of them, parents haven’t been involved in their children’s schooling, and teaching has lacked continuity and consistency. Furthermore, he said, not enough energy has gone into gearing up for the state tests, and making students and parents realize how important they are.

Still, he said he is optimistic because he has found the Calabasas teachers to be bright and capable.
