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ESOL training cut would be felt in S. Fla.

BY NIRVI SHAH

One in every seven students in Miami-Dade and Broward public schools is learning English as a second language. Despite special training for reading teachers who work with them, these students are not very likely to read at grade level or graduate from high school.

Yet several North Florida legislators are trying for a second time to slash training requirements for reading teachers -- equivalent to 15 college credits or 300 hours -- that they say are cumbersome and unnecessary. In some counties they represent, English is a second language for less than 1 percent of public school students.

Advocates for students learning English say they will be handicapped by teachers with less training, and cuts might run afoul of a 1990 legal settlement that led to the special training in the first place.

Last year, Gov. Charlie Crist vetoed the bill at the urging of lawmakers, parents and the state Department of Education. This year, new leaders in the Education Department support the change, and a House version of a similar bill was unanimously passed by a House committee.

Miami parent Myriam Orta, a native of Peru, said her difficulties with English limited her to taking low-paying jobs when she came to the United States 22 years ago. She endured ridicule for speaking Spanish and struggled with English classes.

"I had so many barriers when I came to this country. Those barriers are still engraved in my skin," Orta said. "I saw doors close on me because I couldn't speak English. Hopefully, because my children are bilingual, they will have three or four doors open for them."

Her sons Miguel Angel and Leonarado attend Kensington Park Elementary and son Alek attends Kinloch Park Middle, all in Miami.

"I did what I could to help at home, but it was the teachers who pushed them to learn," Orta said. "What will happen to the kids taught by teachers with less training?"

For reading teachers, the specialized training is in addition to the 15 college credits they already need to teach reading. New rules allow reading teachers to use some of those courses toward certification for teaching students learning English -- called ESOL, or English for speakers of other languages -- but the bill would cut training further.

Teachers of language arts -- essentially, English for English speakers -- still need 15 credits.

"The teachers of reading to English-language learners will be less prepared than the teachers of language arts, which makes no sense," said Joanne Urrutia, who oversees bilingual education for Miami-Dade

schools. ``You do not teach reading separate from language arts."

Florida Atlantic University Professor Joan Friedenberg, who teaches teachers how to help English-language learners to read, said the proposal doesn't make sense when those students remain one of the state's worst-performing groups in school.

While some may complain the training is a burden, she notes that teachers who study at FAU and other schools can turn the lessons into credits toward a master's degree.

"Everyone seems to want the easiest way out. They don't want to spend the money or the time," she said. ``But what about the little kids?"

But lawmakers say the hundreds of hours teachers are commanded to spend in class to become certified, on their own time, is too much. The courses should be about quality, not quantity, said Senate bill co-sponsor Don Gaetz, R-Niceville.

"When teacher-training time during school time and after school is diverted to training that is not necessary . . . it creates a backlash for parents who want teachers to be trained in things that really matter," Gaetz said.

For Lyons Creek Middle School teacher Amy Kenny, the classes did matter. While time-consuming, she now feels she knows the best ways to reach her students. In one class at her Coconut Creek school, students' native languages are Arabic, Hebrew, Portuguese and Spanish.

Kenny was taught to use hand gestures, lots of audio and visual aids and to pair students who are new to the country with those who have been here for a while. Although she was apprehensive about teaching students who were learning English, now she relishes it.

'You get that `aha' moment,' Kenny said. ``You can really see the learning going on.'

Kenny recently asked her students why reading Dr. Seuss' *Green Eggs and Ham* might be enjoyable for young children who can easily finish reading it -- it uses just 50 different words.

"You feel good," said Jullyana Peres, 12, whose native language is Portuguese. ``Like you achieved something."

But new Education Department leaders say the amount of training is arbitrary. They will change the training regardless of what happens in the Legislature, said Frances Haithcock, the state's new K-12 chancellor of education.

The goal, Haithcock said, is to find what works best. "What isn't arbitrary: What is it that really will increase the capacity of reading teachers to teach [English-language learning] kids?" she said.

Worries about the results of changes to teacher training are unfounded, she added.

"I spent too much time in South Florida to not understand what these children need," said Haithcock, who worked for the Broward school district for 36 years.

But reducing the training would be illegal, say those monitoring how Florida adheres to a 1990 federal

consent decree that led to special lessons for teachers of students learning English.

"This is about children, about civil rights," said Rosa Castro Feinberg, a former Miami-Dade School Board member. She heads the Education Advisory Committee of the League of United Latin American Citizens, which fought for the settlement.

If reading teachers' training is diminished, she fears students who aren't native English speakers will be shortchanged.

"There is nothing as important to school success as the ability to read well," she said, "and nothing matters as much to instruction as the preparation of the teacher."

Crist said as much in a letter vetoing last year's bill, writing that he could not lower standards for reading teachers because it is "imperative that our students learn to read English from the highest-quality instructors so that they can succeed more readily in other subjects."

Rep. J.C. Planas, a Miami Republican and chairman of the state Hispanic Legislative Caucus, predicts a similar outcry for a veto this year.

Teachers' unions in Broward and Miami-Dade did not respond to requests for comment. The state teachers' union has no official position on the bills.

The Florida Education Association said it is talking with the state, parents and groups representing students learning English to find the best way to change teacher training, spokesman Mark Pudlow said.

But the argument that the requirement is too much for teachers simply isn't persuasive, said Tania Mena, director of bilingual programs in Broward.

"I would say maybe it's too much for the teacher," Mena said, "but we want to make sure it's not too little for the students."

Miami Herald staff writer Ani Martinez contributed to this report.

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