

# The New Abolitionists

## *Ending bilingual education program reaps identifiable improvements quickly*

by John J. Miller

BETHLEHEM, Pa. —

**S**chool Superintendent Thomas Doluisio was puzzled. His Bethlehem, Pa., district had an elaborate program of Spanish-language classes for its large population of Spanish-speaking children. Proponents of bilingual education said this would help Hispanic children adjust when they moved on to English-only classes—which they were supposed to do after three years. But it wasn't working. Hispanic students lagged behind their peers in test scores, reading levels and graduation rates.

"Our college-track courses were lilywhite," Mr. Doluisio says. "Our remedial classes were filled with Puerto Rican kids. And the ability to speak English explained most of the difference."

What went wrong?

Mr. Doluisio found out in a 1992 meeting with his district's elementary-school principals. The short answer: seven years.

---

*John Miller is vice president of the Center for Equal Opportunity and a Bradley fellow at the Heritage Foundation. This article is reprinted by permission from the April 10, 1996 issue of The Wall Street Journal.*

That's how long it was taking a typical student in the bilingual program to move into regular classes taught in English. Bethlehem had effectively established an English-second policy, thanks to educators who considered native-language training of primary importance.

"I was flabbergasted," Mr. Doluisio says. More than that, he was angry. And then he got busy.

### A Stunning Transformation

Within a year, Mr. Doluisio led a stunning transformation of Bethlehem's language policy. His district became one of a handful in the country to reverse course on bilingual education. Bethlehem's Spanish-speaking students are now immersed in English-speaking classrooms. The school district switched policies only after a bitter struggle that had divided the community. But thanks to Mr. Doluisio's leadership, the benefits of English immersion are starting to show, and the naysayers are starting to change their minds. Bethlehem provides a stirring example of how other school districts can challenge the bilingual education orthodoxy — and win.

The Bethlehem Area School District, serving 13,000 children, is Pennsylvania's fifth-largest. About 10% of its students cannot

speak English well, and of these, 86% speak Spanish in their homes. Most of these children are Puerto Rican, but immigrants from Central and South America make up a growing part of the Spanish-speaking population.

---

***"After learning about bilingual education's dismal exit rates, Mr. Doluisio began to investigate the program."***

---

Before the 1993-94 school year, Bethlehem essentially segregated its Spanish speaking students, busing them to two elementary schools where Spanish was the language of the classroom, the lunchroom and the playground.

After learning about bilingual education's dismal exit rates, Mr. Doluisio began to investigate the program. He quickly uncovered more outrages. "There were kindergartners — five-year-olds who were at the perfect age to start learning a new language — who did not hear a single word of English all day long," he says. "I probably should have known that this sort of thing was going on, but nobody told me. I had to discover it for myself."

Mr. Doluisio decided that Bethlehem's language policy needed a complete overhaul. He persuaded the school board to schedule a series of public meetings devoted to bilingual education — and to discuss its possible repeal. Community interest was so great that the board had to hold its gatherings in the Liberty High School auditorium, the district's largest.

***“The rancor of these meetings weighed heavily on Mr. Doluisio, especially the ugly way in which race and ethnicity had intruded.”***

The issue immediately divided along ethnic lines. Many Latino parents felt that the removal of bilingual education would jeopardize their children's education. Some of Mr. Doluisio's supporters undercut him when they stepped up to the microphone and made derogatory comments about Puerto Ricans. “These meetings were very heated,” Mr. Doluisio recalls. “I had to have cops in the back of the room to make sure that there was no trouble.” At some point, a group of Latino activists physically surrounded the school board and, led by a priest from out of town, engaged in a prayer to save Bethlehem's bilingual-education program.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education also

frowned on Mr. Doluisio's efforts. Myrna Delgado, the state's bilingual-education coordinator, urged the school board to vote against him.

**T**he rancor of these hearings weighed heavily on Mr. Doluisio, especially the ugly way in which race and ethnicity had intruded. It appeared that all the Latinos were on one side, all the Anglos on the other. “This was an extremely unpleasant time for me, and for everybody,” he says.

Midway through the controversy, however, a group of sympathetic Hispanic parents contacted him. They were professionals, led by Luis Ramos of Pennsylvania Power and Light. “We hoped to make it clear that Latinos want their children to learn English, and that the superintendent was heading in the right direction,” says Mr. Ramos, whose two children have attended Bethlehem schools. “Their support really gave me the courage to forge ahead,” says Mr. Doluisio.

In February 1993, the schools board voted to abolish bilingual education and adopted a goal that “all language minority students in the district become fluent in the English language in the shortest amount of time possible to maximize their opportunity to succeed in school.” All students would attend neighborhood schools taught in English, and students who required special help would receive instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL) several

times a week. “It was our belief that if the Chinese and Russian kids could do well in a regular classroom without bilingual education, then so could the Spanish-speakers,” says Rebecca Bartholomew, the principal of Lincoln Elementary.

Immersion in English initially met with a lot of resistance from nonbilingual teachers. They were used to dealing with children who would understand their most basic instructions. “In the first week of the new program, we had homeroom teachers who would tell their class to line up, and half the class wouldn't understand,” says Ann Goldberg, who runs the immersion program for Bethlehem.

**B**efore long, however, opinions started to shift. Hispanic parents are gradually beginning to approve of English immersion. One who likes the switch is Margarita Rivas. A native of Puerto Rico, she was concerned at first that her four children would not succeed in school if they did not hear much Spanish. But then she changed her mind. “It's very important that they know how to speak English well in this country,” she says. “Now they speak English better than Spanish, and they are helping me and my husband improve our English.”

After the immersion program had been in place for one year, Bethlehem surveyed the parents of its Spanish-speaking students. The forms went out in two languages, since many of the parents speak no English. Eighty-one percent of the respondents said that their children had “progressed well academically” in

the English-immersion setting. Only 7% said that they “did not make progress.” Eighty-two percent of the respondents rated the new program as “good” or “very good,” 12% called it “adequate” or “satisfactory,” and only 1% deemed it “poor.”

### Substantial Progress

The teachers have started to come around as well. “I was against immersion in the beginning, but I’m not nearly as critical now,” said Jean Walker, a fourth grade teacher who has taught in Bethlehem schools for 24 years. “I didn’t think I’d be able to communicate, but these kids learned English faster than I thought they would.” A survey showed that Ms. Walker is not alone — 62% of Bethlehem teachers said that students were making “substantial progress” in learning English after being in the program for one year. Only 13% said students made “little” or “no progress.” The school district will publish its first academic evaluation of the program this summer, and the results are sure to be watched closely by educators both inside and outside of Bethlehem.

**M**r. Doluisio was officially condemned at the 1994 convention of the National Association for Bilingual Education. His detractors accuse him of being driven by politics, even of riding a tide of anti-immigrant sentiment. He says his goal is to help children succeed by raising expectations for their performance.

“For years we expected our

Latino kids to learn differently. We didn’t think they could cut it in mainstream classes with the native English speakers or the kids from Asia or Poland,” says Mr. Doluisio. “The results were like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Today we’re saying that Latino kids are just as capable as any other group of students.” □