In the United States, bilingual controversies are the stepchild of immigration policy. For instance, if we had the same immigration policy as Japan (we're NOT advocating this...) we would have approximately the same problem with bilingualism they have: none. Hence our interest in the issue, reported on here in an article reprinted with permission from the October 1991 issue of The American Legion Magazine *© 1991. Robert McGarvey is a free-lance journalist based in Los Angeles.*

Double Talk:
The Bilingual Education Controversy

By Robert McGarvey

Protesters demonstrate regularly at Glenwood Elementary School. It is a school not much different from hundreds of others in the Los Angeles Unified School District, except perhaps the students at Glenwood, drawn from the bedraggled Sun Valley neighborhood, are a bit poorer than others.

The protesters, like Glenwood's students, are predominantly Hispanic. Some carry placards proclaiming that Glenwood is "racist" or "KKK." The magnet of their ire is Glenwood's Sally Peterson, a kindergarten teacher who vocally opposes bilingual education.

Peterson, founder of the lobbying group, Learning English Advocates Drive (LEAD), said her detractors are "racists who are turning their backs on the children. Bilingual education is a total disservice to the kids."

Welcome to the ongoing debate over how to teach immigrant children who speak a language other than English. "Bilingual education has become a very controversial issue," said Rosalie Pedalino Porter, former head of bilingual education for the Newton, Mass., public schools and author of *Forked Tongue,*[1] an overview of the nation's 20-year history of bilingual education. "American educators should not be calling each other `racist,' but that's exactly what we've come to."

That opinion is especially troubling at a time when America's schools have been flooded by 2 million children with limited English proficiency. In a number of states, including Florida, New York and Texas, nearly 25 percent of the student population are non-native non-English speakers. More than 150 languages — from Haitian Creole through Khmer — are now the primary languages spoken by children who arrived on U.S. soil during the 1980s, a decade that saw a record-breaking number of immigrants — 9 million compared to 8.8 million in the historic 1901-1910 decade. Furthermore, according to the U.S. Department of Education, Spanish-speaking homes alone account for 10 percent of the nation's students, and by 2000, that's projected to increase to 12 percent.

Aggravating the problem's severity is that today's education strategies aren't working, at least not for Hispanics. Their dropout rate is a staggering 36 percent, compared to 15 percent for blacks, and 13 percent for whites. In another measure, while 24 percent of the overall American population ages 25 to 34 have graduated from college, the Hispanic rate is just 12 percent.

In earlier decades, Germans, Poles, Chinese and others arrived on U.S. shores not being able to speak a word of English and received little if any assistance from schools in acclimating to a new language. Those were the years when "immersion" — thrusting a child into an English-speaking classroom — was the guiding doctrine.

"`Traditional bilingual education teaches the kids a little Spanish, less English, and a lot of nothing. It's a total disservice to them.' — Sally Peterson of LEAD"

Porter, herself an immigrant from Italy who couldn't speak English when she arrived in America, vividly recalls her tearful childhood introduction to Newark, N.J., English-only classes during the late 1930s. "No help whatever was provided. It was painful," she said. "I had to learn English fast."

Why are today's newcomers treated differently? No educator believes that immersing a non-English-speaking child in an English-only classroom without some form of help is either humane or effective. Amelia McKenna, an assistant superintendent in the Los Angeles Unified School District, explained: "We don't know what the dropout rate was in immer-sion's heyday, but it was probably high. But it wasn't noticeable then because the economy absorbed unskilled labor," she told the *New York Times*. "We're not going to be educating these children for the 21st century if we just continue what we have been doing in the past."

It wasn't until 1968 that Congress, during an era of intense minority activism, opened a funding spigot, the Bilingual Education Act, to make money available to school districts which asked for help in educating English-deficient pupils. Then, in 1974, the U.S.

Supreme Court stiffened the ante in its landmark *Lau* ruling, which decided that non-English-speaking children were effectively barred from equal access to educational facilities and, therefore, ruled the court, schools were obliged to offer "special assistance." Neither the 1968 law nor *Lau* specified the form remedies might take, and educators at the time saw merit in several options. Two such remedies were "structured immersion," in which students are put in English-only classes but trained teachers give individualized help, and "early-exit" crash courses in English, in which other teaching is put on hold until the child gains fluency in English.

"`Politicians are mandating an educational solution. Government does not tell educators how to teach math. Why is this situation different?' — Rosalie Pedalino Porter"

But the Carter administration's Department of Education soon endorsed a third method: Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE), which provides English-language instruction while coursework proceeds in the student's native language.

Congress, in turn, supported TBE in its 1974 and subsequent renewals of the act. But that is the rub, said Porter. "Politicians are mandating an educational solution. Government does not tell educators how to teach math. Why is this situation different?"

Transitional Bilingual Education is where the battle lines are drawn, but just what is it? In TBE, a non-English speaking student (Spanish-speaking pupils account for more than two-thirds of the children in bilingual classes) receives an hour or two of English as a foreign language and the rest of the day is filled with geography, history, math and other subjects taught in the child's native language. Students who do not swiftly acquire English may remain in this segregated regimen for six, nine, even 12 years. In New Jersey, Porter pointed out, a student could win a high school diploma by passing an achievement test in any of 12 languages, from Spanish to Arabic; English fluency is not required for graduation.

Bilingual education advocates offer three reasons for their support. The first, said Steven Carbo, an attorney with the Washington, D.C.-based Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund, is that TBE offers heightened opportunity for parental involvement in a child's schooling. "The success of any educational program in part is contingent on parental involvement," Carbo said. "When a child comes from a limited-English background, TBE provides a greater opportunity for the family to be involved." In other words, if Johnny takes a math problem to dad and the question is framed in a language both understand, the father can help. If, however, the question is in English and dad isn't fluent, he's lost before the child finishes asking the question.

Enhanced self-esteem is a second reason, said Denise De LaRosa, education policy analyst for the National Council of La Raza, a Washington D.C. Hispanic-American advocacy group. "When a teacher addresses a child in his or her own language, that child will feel more accepted," she said. "Many non-Anglos have been made to feel lesser and this is a key factor in why we haven't assimilated as quickly as possible."

Bilingual education also reduces the number of school dropouts, according to De LaRosa. "If we devote full time to English teaching, neglecting other courses, the child will fall further and further behind." If math, history and other subjects are put on the backburner until Johnny gains English fluency, he may be embarrassingly old before he can effectively approach regular subjects. "It's no fun for a 10-year-old to be doing first-grade math," De LaRosa said. "Being held back causes students to drop out. With bilingual education, the child can keep up with his coursework while acquiring English. What could be wrong with that?"

Plenty could be wrong with it, said LEAD's Peterson. "If we want these kids to break out of the poverty cycle, we better teach them English right away. Transitional bilingual education teaches the kids a little Spanish, less English, and a lot of nothing. It's a total disservice to them."

"How could it be otherwise," asked Washington D.C.-based consultant Gary Imhof, editor of *Learning In Two Languages.* "When the bulk of the day is spent learning in another language, typically Spanish, that child is not going to learn English."

"`What's saddest is that the children have become pawns. A long time ago we all should have stopped calling each other names and should have become committed to search for the ... programs that will help these children succeed in our society.' — Rosalie Porter"

Rosalie Porter said, "In 1968 we began TBE as an experiment because we wanted to see if it would do the kids some good. After 20 years, we know it's neither the best nor the only way to assist these children. There are caring alternatives — programs that get the students speaking English in a hurry."

Nor are non-English speaking Americans united in support of TBE. Philip Vargas, president of the consulting company Human Research & Development, is a product of a Spanish-speaking home: "English is the language of America and the basic tool for survival and success in our society," Vargas said. "[TBE is] a means whereby we Hispanics maintain our own subordination and retard our ability to take advantage of the many opportunities available."

One undisputed fact is that TBE has not been proved to be beneficial. Hispanic dropout rates remain high: in Boston, after 20 years of TBE, the dropout rate is essentially unchanged. TBE supporters concede that "an awkward tension blankets the lack of empirical demonstration of the success of bilingual education programs," noted Kenji Hakuta, an education psychologist at the University of California. Hopes for proof were recently dashed when a four-year-study found no meaningful difference in academic performance by students enrolled in TBE or other styles of bilingual education classes.

Then why are so many still deeply committed to TBE? "I call it `bilingualgate,'" Peterson said. "It's little more than a hiring program for Spanish-speaking teachers. The program actually punishes success because those teaching jobs would be threatened if the children learned English."

The advocates disagree. "Many people are frustrated because they wanted a quick fix. There isn't one," said De LaRosa. "Properly supported, TBE will work and it will give us students fluent in two languages."

Will the debate ever be resolved? Lately, there is encouraging news. In its 1988 revision of the Bilingual Education Act, Congress increased funding for new approaches to educating English-deficient students. Before, just 4 percent of allotted monies could be used in those ways, but now up to 25 percent of the federal funding is available for non-TBE methods.

"This is good news," said Porter. "What's saddest is that the children have become pawns. A long time ago we all should have stopped calling each other names and should have become committed to search for the best, most effective programs — the programs that will help these children succeed in our society. Let's acknowledge that's what we all want. Fortunately, with Congress increasing flexibility, it's now up to us in education to be doing the testing, seeing what works in practice, in the classroom. That is the way out of the debate — the only way." ■

[1] *Forked Tongue: The Politics of Bilingual Education* by Rosalie Pedalino Porter was reviewed by Kathryn Bricker in the Winter 1990-91 issue of *The Social Contract*.