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The Costs of Bilingual Education

READ Newsletter, Fall 1994

The American Legislative Exchange Council recently released a report entitled "The Cost of Bilingual Education in the United States 1991-92" defining and describing funding levels for instructional programs for limited-English students. Figures on the exact costs of educating limited-English students have not been available, but the Council has made a determination based on per pupil expenditures during the SY 1991-92 from the National Education Association and data from the U.S. Department of Education on the number of limited-English students who received instruction in different program types during the same period. While this methodology may underestimate the total amount being spent nationwide, it does give a good indication of the relative distribution of resources between bilingual programs and English as a Second Language programs.

The report indicates that nationwide, over \$12 billion is being spent on the education of limited-English students, with over half, 55%, being spent on bilingual education programs, 24.5% being spent on undefined programs, and only 19.6% being spent on English as a Second Language programs. It estimated that 20% of identified limited-English students are receiving no special program of instruction at all. ESL

programs receive less than half the amount spent on bilingual programs, less than is spent on undefined programs.

Despite the prevalence and high cost of bilingual education programs, their effectiveness has yet to be demonstrated. As noted by DR. Rosalie Pedalino Porter, a READ board member, in a recent commentary on Goals 2000 and the bilingual student, intensive English programs cost far less to implement than do full bilingual programs, which in effect create segregated schools. Although research has indicated that intensive English programs are at least as effective as bilingual programs in mainstreaming students, they represent a low proportion of the type of program available.

Nationwide, the high cost of educating limited-English students is taking its toll on school budgets. Cost, of course, is not the main consideration in program design. Effectiveness is, however, and many bilingual programs need to be carefully scrutinized in this regard. As noted in the conclusion of the Legislative Council report, it is still not certain that value is being obtained for the money spent on the education of limited-English students. ■