



SB 2066 Makes a Simple Change for a Big Impact to Emergent Bilingual Students

IDRA Testimony for SB 2066, Presented by Araceli García to the Senate Education Committee, April 15, 2021

Dear Chairman Taylor and Honorable Members of the Committee:

My name is Araceli García, and I am an Education Policy Fellow at IDRA, an independent, non-partisan, education non-profit committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. We support SB 2066.

SB 2066 came out of a year-long initiative, the Texas Early Childhood English Learner Initiative, to identify better policies for young emergent bilingual students. During that process, we heard from administrators, teachers, experts and parents that Texas should use terms that recognize students' potential bilingualism instead of just their need to learn English.

Most states, including Texas, refer to students with a home language other than English as "English learners," "English language learners," or as students with "limited English proficiency." The Texas Education Agency currently uses the term "English learner." At first glance, these labels may seem neutral and plainly descriptive; however, a closer inspection reveals that these terms are deficit-based, meaning, they define students by the knowledge they lack, rather than the strengths and abilities they already bring into the classroom.

This deficit-based understanding of students' abilities contributes to school tracking that often limits their access to critical learning opportunities, such as college-level coursework (Martínez, 2018). Because emergent bilingual students are seldom viewed as college material, only one in 10 are deemed college ready at graduation (TEA, 2020).

Coined and popularized by Dr. Ofelia García in 2008, the term "emergent bilingual" focuses on students' unique potential for bilingualism and biliteracy. This terminology ensures that we take an asset-based view of students' learning capabilities as they simultaneously acquire a new language in school while building on the valuable knowledge of their home language (García, 2021).

Updating this terminology in the Texas Education Code will not lead to compliance issues with federal law. Many states already use varying terms for English learners without compliance issues, including Illinois which adopted the term "emergent bilingual" in 2018.

Moreover, in the lifetimes of some of you on this committee, young emergent bilingual students faced discrimination and even school beatings for speaking a language other than English in the classroom. Now is the time for Texas to build on the advancements made in HB 3, and continue to lead in bilingual education terminology and quality programs.

When all Texas students are served and supported by our schools, the entire state will reap the benefits. For these reasons, we ask you to adopt SB 2066 to use the term “emergent bilingual” for students learning English in addition to their home language.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. Thank you for your consideration. For more information, please contact Araceli García, IDRA Education Policy Fellow, at araceli.garcia@idra.org.

Resources

- Ascenzi-Moreno, L. (Fall 2017). From Deficit to Diversity: How Teachers of Recently Arrived Emergent Bilinguals Negotiate Ideological and Pedagogical Change. *Schools: Studies in Education*, Vol. 14, No. 2.
- Ayala, E. (2019). Bilingual educators recall when students were shamed, paddled for speaking Spanish. San Antonio Express-News. https://www.expressnews.com/news/news_columnists/elaine_ayala/article/Bilingual-educators-recall-when-students-were-13626010.php
- Garcia, A. (2021). Words Matter – The Case for Shifting to “Emergent Bilingual.” IDRA Newsletter. <https://www.idra.org/resource-center/words-matter-the-case-for-shifting-to-emergent-bilingual/>
- García, O., Kleifgen, J.A., & Falchi, L. (2008). From English Language Learners to Emergent Bilinguals. *Equity Matters: Research Review*, No. 1. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED524002.pdf>
- Martínez, R.A. (2018). Beyond the “English Learner” Label: Recognizing the Richness of Bi/Multilingual Students’ Linguistic Repertoires. *The Reading Teacher*.
- Texas Early Childhood English Learner Initiative. <https://bilingualtexas.org/>
- Texas Education Agency. (2020). 2020 Comprehensive Biennial Report on Texas Public Schools. Austin: TEA.

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation, and frameworks for action; timely policy analyses; and innovative materials and programs.