



Without Increased Resources for English Learners, Texas Compromises Education for One-fifth of Students

Invited testimony of IDRA presented for the House Public Education Committee on the recommendations of the Texas Commission on Public School Finance – Morgan Craven, J.D., National Director of Policy, February 13, 2019

My name is Morgan Craven, I am the National Director of Policy for the Intercultural Development Research Association. IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization. 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.

I want to start my testimony by saying that many of the overall goals and sentiments in the commission report are excellent. The report points out that too few of our students are being prepared to “participate in the prosperity of Texas,” that it is “critical that our state begin now to make additional needed investments that strategically address key areas of weakness,” and that “what becomes of our students will dictate what becomes of our state.” We especially appreciate the title of the report: [Funding for Impact: Equitable Funding for Students Who Need it the Most](#).

It is because of these laudable goals that many of us will continue to push this committee to take concrete steps to ensure that equity is baked into every piece of school finance reform and that every child receives a high quality education. That requires evaluating every piece of this puzzle with a critical eye. With that in mind, I want to talk specifically about the changes to bilingual education that are being proposed, specifically the creation of a new dual language allotment.

The Texas Education Code requires school districts to create bilingual education programs if there are at least 20 students who are English learners in the same grade. English learners in elementary school in the district must receive bilingual education. Other grade levels must receive instruction in either English as a second language or other transitional language instruction.

As this committee is aware, the bilingual allotment was set in 1984 at 0.1, which, even at the time, was not consistent with cost estimates of what it would take to properly educate English learners in Texas. The research-based recommendation at the time was a 0.4 weight. We still have the 0.1 weight now. Studies since have shown that it is necessary to increase the bilingual weight to adequately educate English learners.

The school finance commission report does not recommend an increase of the bilingual weight. Rather it recommends the creation of a new dual language allotment, with a weight of 0.05. So, the school districts that are required by law to create bilingual education programs and have

also implemented dual language programs will receive a total 0.15 weight per student. School districts that are required to create bilingual education programs but do *not* have a dual language program – which covers about 51.3 percent of English learner students according to the commission report – will continue to get the same insufficient 0.1 weight that they have for 30 plus years.

To be clear, properly-implemented dual language programs are excellent and very effective. They have shown positive results for English learners and, in the case of two-way dual language programs, for students who are already proficient in English. We should definitely be supporting dual language and, generally, research-based programs.

However, the fact remains that, even with a 0.15 weight for half of students for dual language and a 0.1 weight for the other half without dual language, we are dramatically underfunding programs for English learners. The 0.1 weight is too low. The 0.05 dual language weight is also low – dual language programs are costly, particularly in the start-up phase, and it is not clear that the proposed \$50 million would adequately cover those costs. Currently, of the states that use weights to provide funding specifically for ELs, the average weight is 0.3. Additionally, one study found that in Texas, because of funding cuts to targeted language programs in 2011, English learners particularly young students in the poorest schools, were spending 40 percent less on bilingual education programs than they did before the 2008 recession.

If we do not increase resources for English learners, we are compromising the academic success and life opportunities for one-fifth of the entire public school student population, just as we did in the 1980s. The graduation rate for English learner students in Texas is 70 percent, compared to a statewide graduation rate of 89 percent.

Research shows that raising the bilingual education allotment to at least 0.25, as others in this body have proposed this session and in past sessions, would help schools to provide important services and supports to English learners, including stipends to recruit and retain teachers, materials and technology, and professional development.

I'll wrap up by posing a few questions for the committee to consider about how we are funding bilingual education programs:

1. Will the new dual language allotment be specifically targeted to increase success for English language learners, as is the intent of the current bilingual education allotment? Two-way dual language programs educate both English learners and students who are proficient in English, which is wonderful for all students. But, if allotment funds are used for dual language programs, can we ensure that the funds are focused on English learners, whose English language acquisition is a critical civil right, and are not essentially diluted by the students who already speak English and are in the program for an important enrichment experience?
2. In an attempt to push a statewide shift toward dual language programs, as opposed to transitional bilingual programs, are we leaving behind the many districts that have not yet implemented dual language programs by continuing to underfund the English learner students? Is this underfunding the most effective way to give students what they need to be most successful today?

The new dual language allotment is an example of how even some of the objectively positive pieces of the school finance puzzle can still result in us failing to meet the needs of large groups

of children if we don't carefully consider what an equitable system looks like for every single child.

IDRA's recommendations to the committee are to:

1. Continue to encourage the use of research-based programs that ensure the academic and life success of English learners, like dual language.
2. Be realistic about the cost – we've failed to do that since we set the bilingual weight the 1980s. We are paying for it now, and students are paying for it now. We must conduct a cost study and increase the bilingual weight to cover the true cost of the programs that schools are using now to educate English learners.
3. Limit the amount of funds that can be spent on indirect costs to 25 percent of funds.
4. Increase the basic allotment, which is good for all students; commission a true cost study for all programs; and require an equity analysis for any changes to the system.

Finally, our recommendation is to continue to listen to many different voices, particularly those of the people who are living the experiences that you are legislating, as you consider equity and the impact that every single policy and funding decision has on poor children, children of color, children in rural districts, English learners, children with disabilities and every other child in the state.

The Intercultural Development Research Association 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.