

Texas Must Build a Strong Bilingual Teacher Workforce

IDRA Testimony on interim charge regarding the teacher shortages in public schools, presented by Lizdela Piñón Ed.D., to the Texas House Public Education and Higher Education Committees, September 20, 2022

Chairman Murphy, Chairman Dutton and Members of the Higher Education and Public Education Committees:

My name is Dr. Lizdela Piñón, and I am an education associate at IDRA. IDRA is 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. I am a former emergent bilingual student, a former public school bilingual and ESL teacher with over 20 years' experience teaching emergent bilingual students in dual language and ESL programs, and training teachers in both Illinois and Texas. I have had the honor of co-teaching courses to student teachers at Texas Christian University in the College of Education in TESOL and professional induction for ESL and special education student teachers. And I was appointed to be part of the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) Bilingual Special Education Educator Standards Advisory Committee.

I am most honored to be the mother of four children Gabriel, Santiago, Felicita and Frida who attend Texas public schools, two of whom are current emergent bilingual students in dual language programs. These are the faces of the students who need your help.

All emergent bilingual learners deserve access to high-quality bilingual educators who are fluent in the language they speak. Research states that teacher diversity benefits all students, regardless of race or ethnicity (Nevarez, Jougantatos & Wood, 2019). However, while the majority of students in the United States – including many emergent bilingual students – are students of color, only about 20% of teachers are people of color.

Today I am here to talk to you about the *crisis* we are facing with the shortage of bilingual educators that serve over one fifth of our Texas public school student population. One in every five students who walk through the doors of a public school in our state is an emergent bilingual student. They look like my Gabriel, Felicita, Frida or Santiago.

According to the 2021 Texas Teacher Workforce Report from the University of Houston (Horn, et al., 2021):

- Texas has struggled to fill bilingual teacher positions since 1990.
- The ratio between students and full-time equivalent (FTE) bilingual/ESL teachers worsened from 43.4 students to 1 teacher in 2010-11 to 46.3 students to 1 teacher in 2019-20.
- Foreign language and bilingual/ESL are consistently among the subject areas with the highest percentage of substitute teachers.

How could we possibly let this happen to our students? With over 1 million emergent bilingual learners in Texas, bilingual teachers are more crucial to student success than ever.

As a scholar in the bilingual education field, a bilingual educator, and a parent of emergent bilingual students, I urge you to consider the following recommendations.

Remove barriers for student teachers, current teachers and retired teachers to become bilingual educators

- **Remove unnecessary technical barriers:** Aspiring bilingual educators face an extra burden of taking five exams as opposed to three to become a general classroom educator. The state needs a better way to test language skills than the Bilingual Target Language Proficiency Test (BTLPT). This assessment measures content area skills more than language. The state should reduce the number of exams for aspiring bilingual educators and ensure the ones they do take are designed to accurately measure the skills needed to successfully teach emergent bilingual students.
- **Address financial barriers:** Aspiring bilingual teachers are required to pay the cost of exams. Bilingual educators have an additional financial burden because they have to pay for five tests as opposed to the three required in other fields. Additionally, there are registration costs if you are an out-of-state educator who moves to Texas. When I moved from Illinois, I had to retake several exams and pay the fees – a cost many cannot afford. These costs can impact school districts' recruiting efforts. The state should waive the fees of bilingual teachers who are certified in other states and provide financial assistance for those who cannot afford the cost of the exams.
- **Remove restrictions for retired teachers:** Currently there are restrictions that erect barriers for retired teachers who wish to return to the classroom. The state should remove these restrictions so that excellent retired educators, who retired in good standing and are certified in bilingual education, have an easier path to return to the classroom and support the development of other bilingual educators.

Increase support for effective recruitment of excellent bilingual educators

- **Create a student-to-classroom teacher pipeline:** There is a need to create a pipeline for our bilingual learners who are interested in the education field. Students who are bilingual should be encouraged in high school programs to become bilingual teachers. The state can support this pipeline by increasing the state grant for the Grow Your Own Grant Program. With this program school districts intentionally build strong, stable, and diverse teacher pipelines from within their own communities based on school district specific teacher workforce needs. The grant is intended to address teacher shortages in hard-to-staff areas, close demographic gaps between students and teachers, and build interest in the teaching profession among high school students.
- **Collaborative partnerships between school districts and higher education:** There is a need for a stronger collaboration between school districts and colleges, especially with Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) that serve larger numbers of students who may already be bilingual. Such collaborations will encourage widespread and targeted placement of

bilingual education preservice teachers. The state should increase funding for these partnerships, including by providing financial assistance to bilingual/ESL teacher candidates and funding for resource centers for bilingual/ESL teacher candidates.

- **Varied modes of recruitment:** We must make recruiting bilingual/ESL teachers a priority by using a variety of means for recruitment, including professional organizations, regional education service centers, high school summer academies, college nights, and collaborative programs with school districts and community colleges. In addition, we must expand recruitment efforts beyond the state of Texas. The state can support these efforts by providing more specific recruitment guidance, technical support, and financial assistance to school districts, based on recruitment and retention best practices.

Help school districts to retain bilingual educators

- **Preparation of future educators:** In order to prepare preservice educators, we must provide them with the tools to be successful. Because 20% of Texas students are emergent bilingual students, it is critical for all preservice educators to have a course in which they learn about how to better teach them.

Preservice teacher programs should offer a required course (or overlay option) that will prepare all teacher candidates to work with emergent bilingual learners. For example, Texas Christian University College of Education saw the need for bilingual, ESL and special education teachers and required all preservice teacher candidates to be certified in bilingual or ESL education and special education in addition to their content certifications.

- **Increase financial incentives:** There must be an increase in financial incentives at the college level for aspiring bilingual educators and a salary increase for current and future bilingual educators. There should not be a reason for my fellow bilingual educators to need weekend jobs or tutoring jobs to be able to afford the current cost of living.

Being a bilingual educator was one of the most challenging jobs I have ever done in my life. Okay, well maybe after the job of being a mom to triplet 1 lb. babies. As a bilingual educator, I had to prepare lessons in two languages, many times without adequate books, materials and resources. I had to translate fliers and important letters because I wanted the parents of my emergent bilingual students to have the same access to material and information as all the rest of the students. I wanted to make sure they were involved in the school events and were engaged and, if the letters only went home in English, we were losing them.

The work of translating and creating curriculum materials in languages other than English that falls on the shoulders of bilingual educators repeatedly goes unrecognized and is often never compensated. This “linguistic labor” is work that many bilingual educators must take on because of the scarcity of quality learning materials for emergent bilingual learners and students enrolled in their classrooms. And we do it because we want our students and families to be successful and feel welcomed at their schools. But this is time-consuming work that our general education counterparts do not have to worry about.

A new study out of Georgia University (Amanti, 2019) shows that half the challenge that school districts have is finding bilingual teachers but the other is addressing these “invisible burdens” that lead many to leave the profession.

Summary of Recommendations

All students deserve high-quality educators. To raise school quality, protect students’ civil rights and enhance school climates, IDRA recommends the legislature:

- Reduce the number of certification exams for bilingual educators and ensure the exams focus more on true language competency.
- Waive the state registration fees of bilingual educators who are certified in other states and provide financial support for aspiring bilingual teachers who cannot afford the cost of exams.
- Increase funding for the Grow Your Own Grant Program and other programs, including tuition exemption plans, to help paraprofessionals and bilingual students become certified teachers.
- Require that all teacher preparation programs overlay the teaching of emergent bilingual learners or require a course in ESL or bilingual content area.
- Provide technical assistance and financial support to school districts and colleges to create partnerships and programs that promote effective recruitment and retention strategies for bilingual educators.
- Increase financial support for aspiring and bilingual educators, including salary increases.

Well-qualified, excellent Texas public school educators are key to students’ academic success, emotional and physical well-being, and social development. A strong teaching workforce with bilingual educators is essential to student success and a thriving state.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. Thank you for your consideration. For more information, please contact Lizdelia Piñón, Ed.D., IDRA education associate, at lizdelia.pinon@idra.org.

Resources

- Amanti, C. (2019). The (invisible) work of dual language bilingual education teachers. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 42(4), 455-470. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2019.1687111>
- Ayala, E. (2016, September 28). Texas is desperate for bilingual teachers, so why aren’t more answering the call? *The Dallas Morning News*. <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2016/09/28/texas-is-desperate-for-bilingual-teachers-so-why-arent-more-answering-the-call/>
- Diaz, Z., & Mahadevan, L. (2011). How to Recruit and Retain Bilingual/ESL Teacher Candidates? *Academic Leadership Journal*, 9.
- Horn, C., Burnett, C., Lowery, S., & White, C. (2021). Texas Teacher Workforce Report. University of Houston College of Education. <https://www.uh.edu/education/research/institutes-centers/erc/reports-publications/ryht-report-2021.pdf>
- Howard, E., & López-Velásquez, A.M. (2019). The Challenges of Recruiting and Retaining Dual Language Teachers. In *Dual Language Education: Teaching and Leading in Two Languages*, by DeMatthews, D.E., & Izquierdo, E. (Eds.) pp. 195-207.
- Nevarez, C., Jouganas, S., & Wood, J.L. (2019). Benefits of Teacher Diversity: Leading for Transformative Change. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 4(1), 24-34.
- Piñón, L. (2022). Testimony Resources: Bilingual Teacher Shortage. IDRA. <https://padlet.com/lizdeliapinon/BilingualTeacherShortage>

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.