

Ballot Initiatives Used to Reform Bilingual Education

Massachusetts and Colorado voters will decide in November

BY DON SOIFER

Theodore Roosevelt, the country's 26th President, was a firm believer in the ballot initiative as an instrument "not to destroy representative government, but to correct it whenever it becomes misrepresentative."

A century later, many school reformers have come to view the initiative as a powerful tool to bring about much-needed change, especially where other paths to change remain obstructed by legislative gridlock. Bilingual education reform offers a case in point.

In 1998, California voters began what since has become a national movement by approving Proposition 227, effectively ending bilingual education programs and replacing them with structured English immersion. The measure passed by a 2-1 margin, despite the opposition of nearly every major elected official in the state—with the noteworthy exception of Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan. Since then, California English learners have shown dramatic gains in reading, math, and English language skills.

Spurred by these positive results, bilingual education reform has spread rapidly throughout the United States. Arizona voters followed with a proposition of their own, which passed by a similarly wide margin in 2000. Last year's federal No Child Left Behind Act made unprecedented changes focused on improving English fluency, including replacing the entire funding process for bilingual education programs.

This November, voters in Massachusetts and Colorado will consider ballot initiatives based on the California and Arizona laws.

Massachusetts Question 2

The Massachusetts campaign—English for the Children of Massachusetts—is cochaired by three members of the Governor's Massachusetts Bilingual Education Advisory Council: Chelsea High School Principal Lincoln Tamayo; Dr. Rosalie Porter, former director of bilingual education programs in Newton and a prominent advocate of English immersion; and Boston University Professor Christine Rossell.

Even before Question 2 qualified for the ballot, it had triggered strong reactions by opponents urging a "no" vote and by lawmakers seeking to reverse its momentum. In August, Acting Governor Jane Swift signed into law a series of reforms that included a three-year limit on the time students can remain in bilingual programs, a requirement that English learners be taught to the same curriculum and standards as English-speaking children, and better accountability for progress toward English fluency.

Supporters of Question 2 have called the changes inadequate. Cochair Porter declared, "this last-minute desperation move to stop our campaign will fool no one."

Massachusetts has a growing population of more than 45,000 students in "transitional bilingual education." Its 31-year-old bilingual law is the nation's oldest. But bilingual students have consistently trailed their peers in mainstream English-speaking classrooms on standardized tests, often at an alarming rate.

For example, one study discovered students in a Springfield bilingual program scored lower on average on the English-reading post-test than they did on the pre-test a year earlier in two of the program's three schools. In another study, reading scores of native English speakers participating alongside English learners in a "two-way bilingual inclusionary program" declined in all four of the program's schools.

Colorado Amendment 31

In Colorado, a ballot initiative that would amend the state constitution to eliminate bilingual education in favor of English immersion will appear on the November ballot as Amendment 31. The amendment is sponsored by English for the Children of Colorado, chaired by former Denver School Board member Rita Montero.

Colorado elementary school students in bilingual education performed substantially and uniformly worse than their peers in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes on the latest Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) reading and writing test scores released in August. ESL classes are taught mostly in English and have as their primary focus to teach children English. The disparities were greatest among children in grades 3 and 4, the youngest grade levels assessed.

Opponents Gearing Up

California software entrepreneur Ron Unz, the reform pioneer who authored the California law and led winning campaigns there and in Arizona, has worked closely with state leaders in Massachusetts and Colorado.

Campaigns opposing these reforms are now underway in both states, with activities ranging from rallies and Web sites to legal challenges, which have yet to bear fruit.

"It seems they're doing everything they can to avoid the issue of whether or not bilingual education works," Unz observed.

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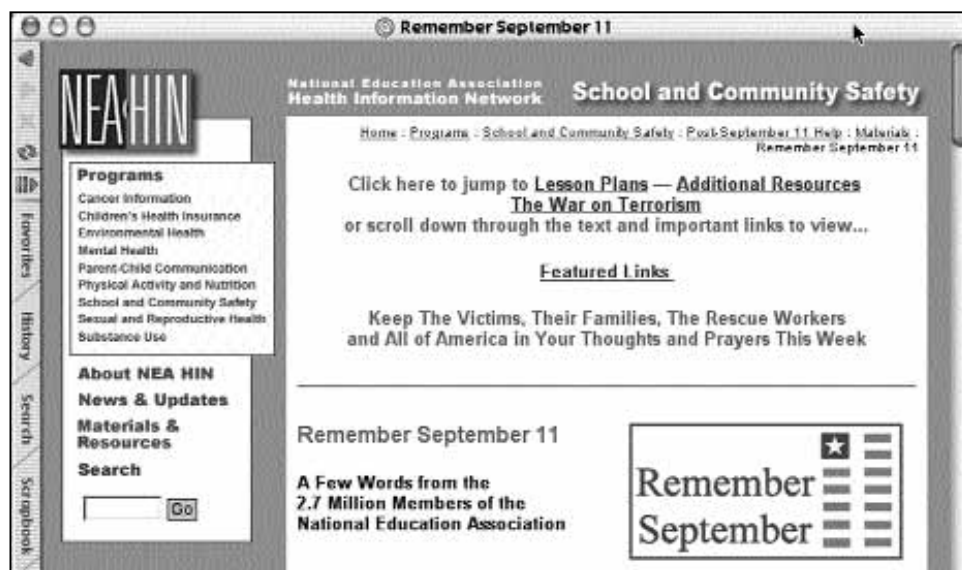
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Correction: In "Blaine Amendment Falls in Washington," in the September 2002 issue of *School Reform News*, we incorrectly reported the time period during which states entered the Union with Blaine amendments in their constitutions. The correct timeframe is from 1848 to 1899. *School Reform News* regrets the error.



NEA continued from page 1

sible for the attack, the essay urges discussion of "historical instances of American intolerance," of which the internment of "Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor and the backlash against Arab Americans during the Gulf War are obvious examples."

The essay includes many other suggestions. It tells parents and teachers to "Emphasize positive, familiar images of diverse ethnic groups" and

"Read books with your children that address prejudice, tolerance, and hate." There is no mention, however, of prejudice and intolerance against Americans or how such hatred culminated in the tragic events of September 11, 2001.

Reacting to the criticism, the NEA issued a press release on August 27, stating, "The site has been subjected to some criticism by those who have taken the material out of context. Using this national tragedy to attempt to score political points is a new low, and we urge visitors to make

their own assessments of its value. We are confident that most will find the site quite useful in helping our young people cope with the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks."

Jerald Newberry, director of the group that produced the site—the NEA's Health Information Network—went further and claimed bigotry was behind the criticism of the tolerance lessons.

"If you boil down the concerns of the opposition, what I would call the far right, ultimately what it boils down to is: 'I am not comfortable with my child being in school with someone who's different. I want to keep my child surrounded by people who are identical to me. The world is getting too diverse, and I'm scared,'" Newberry told *New York Times* journalist Kate Zernike.

Despite the controversy, the union has kept the "Tips for Parents and Schools Regarding the Anniversary of 9/11" essay posted, under the rationale it is just one of many diverse viewpoints available on the site.

Initially posted as written by Brian Lippincott of John F. Kennedy University's Graduate School of Professional Psychology, the essay was later reposted as part of an essay by the National Association of School Psychologists under the title "A National Tragedy: Promoting Tolerance and Peace in Children: Tips for Parents and Schools."

Other Criticism

Criticism of the Web site, however, is not confined to Lippincott's essay. Questions also have been raised about the academic value of many of the NEA's lesson plans.

Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, called the site a "mish-mash of pop-psychoterapeutics, feel-goodism, relativism, and overblown multiculturalism, even more noteworthy for what's not there: history, civics, patriotism, etc."

While some of the lesson plans include the reading of historical documents, an analysis of media sources, an examination of world religions, and other academic activities, more of them focus on arts and crafts, music, and the sharing of feelings. Examples are numerous:

- A lesson plan for elementary school students includes the "sending of patriotically themed

For more information...

WWW The National Education Association Web site, "Remember September 11th," is at <http://nea.hin.org/programs/schoolsafety/september11/materials/lessonhome.htm>.

Brian Lippincott's essay for the National Association of School Psychologists, "A National Tragedy: Promoting Tolerance and Peace in Children: Tips for Parents and Schools," is at www.nasponline.org/NEAT/tolerance.html.

The lesson plan for 9/11 from the Bill of Rights Institute is at www.billofrightsinstitute.org/pdf/911complete.pdf.

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation resource, "September 11: What Our Children Need to Know," is at www.edexcellence.net/Sept11/September11.pdf.

stuffed bears across the nation."

- Another plan for grades 3-12 describes how students can build a "moving memorial" by expressing themselves through physical movements that convey various emotions.
- The objective of a middle school lesson plan is "Diversity awareness and safe school initiatives through the construction of a commemorative quilt memorializing the events of September 11."
- In another lesson plan, students are given the "opportunity to discuss and have validated their feelings about the events of September 11 in a non-judgmental discussion circle" called the "circle of feelings."
- "Kindness Towers Here" gives students in all grades the opportunity to write and display stories in the shape of two towers on the wall or on a cardboard structure.

Lesson plan contributors include the American Red Cross, the Smithsonian Institution, the National Association of School Psychologists, and others. The site also contains resource links to major news sources, historical documents, and government public safety agencies. New lesson plans are added daily to the Web site. There is an on-line form for submitting new plans.

Other Sources

The NEA Web site was not the only source of materials for teachers and parents marking the anniversary of the terrorist attack.

The Bill of Rights Institute, an organization dedicated to improving civics education in schools, provided a 9/11 lesson plan. The Institute's plan focuses on the expression of civic values on 9/11 and throughout America's history.

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation has made available a resource entitled "September 11: What Our Children Need to Know," which contains 23 short essays on what children should learn from 9/11. Written by eminent educators, historians, political scientists, and policy analysts, the essays focus on history, civics, valor, and terrorism.

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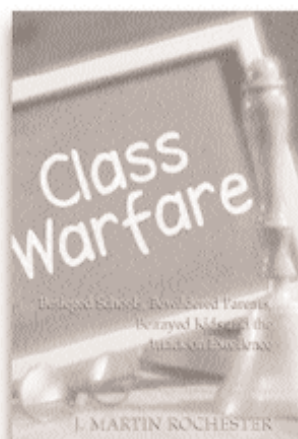


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Sol Stern vividly describes how cash-starved Catholic schools in the South Bronx and other similar areas across the country are performing small educational miracles every day with children the public schools have given up on. Drawing on personal observation and intimate conversations with parents, students and educators in New York, Milwaukee, Cleveland and other cities gripped by a school crisis, *Breaking Free* is the first book to transform school choice from an abstract policy issue into a question of basic personal freedom.

"Mr. Stern is a white Jew who passionately documents the benefits enjoyed by black and Hispanic students at Catholic and evangelical Christian schools. And he, unlike so many other intellectuals in the vouchers debate, has plenty of first-hand experience with city schools."

—THE NEW YORK TIMES

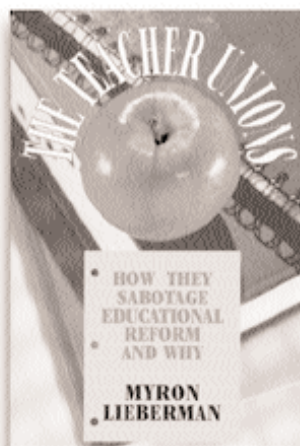


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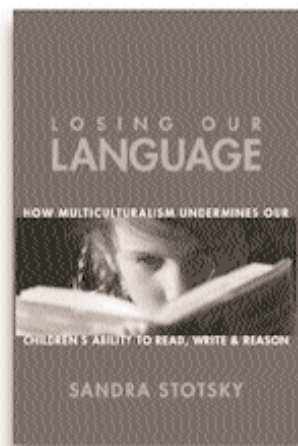


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A powerful exposé on how the NEA and AFT use their power to smother desperately needed educational innovations. Lieberman's provocative diagnosis of what ails American education is on the money. So is his prescription for change—that teachers would be better served by professional organizations that did not waste money on affluent bureaucrats; and parents and children would be better served by organizations that focused on education improvement, not social engineering.

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EDUCATIONAL REVIEW



ISBN: 1-893554-48-1
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Maverick Harvard educational researcher Sandra Stotsky shows how the incorporation of a multicultural agenda into basal readers, the primary tool for teaching reading in elementary school, has had a disastrous effect on students' reading and test scores. Instead of using classic stories like *Arabian Nights* and *Robinson Crusoe*, which enlarge imagination as well as vocabulary, these readers now give students politically and ethnically correct stories whose concepts are banal and whose language—including Swahili and other trendy dialects—is literally foreign.

"Reading *Losing Our Language* should send parents rushing to their school board with pointed questions."

—WALL STREET JOURNAL

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NCLB continued from page 1

newspaper reports from all over the country indicate only small numbers of eligible children are getting a fresh start in a new school. Reasons ranged from willful efforts of school officials to frustrate choice, to the lack of space in better public schools, to understandable confusion about parental rights or district responsibilities under the new federal law.

In Ohio—home of the Cleveland voucher program, upheld as constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in the June 27 *Zelman* decision—many parents had not been informed by their districts of their right to public school

choice under NCLB.

"Even parents who are aware of the law have, in some cases, been thwarted in their efforts to take advantage of the transfer, leaving them baffled and angry," reported the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.

Chicago's Three-Mile Limit

In Chicago, Mayor Richard M. Daley termed "ridiculous" the federal government's mandate that 125,000 children in 179 failing Chicago schools be offered transfers to other public schools. There just isn't room, Daley complained; besides, many of the recipient public schools also are "non-performing." Ultimately, the city offered just under 3,000 transfer slots spread across 90

schools, prohibiting transfers to schools more than three miles away from a failing school.

Fritz Steiger, president of Children First America, a corporate-led foundation that supports school choice, said Daley had recognized the problem with government schools but failed to "make the logical leap to the obvious solution." Catholic schools have been closing in the Chicago Archdiocese—14 in January 2002 alone. Vouchers could ensure students private as well as public school choice.

"How many of these schools would still be there to provide these students with an option for a quality education were there a voucher program in place in Chicago?" Steiger asked.

Delay in Vermont

In Vermont, the state took advantage of a loophole to delay offering choice at six public schools identified as needing improvement. Education Commissioner Ray McNulty said U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige agreed to let Vermont officials wait until mid-year for an analysis of 2001-02 test scores. That angered Libby Sternberg, executive director of Vermonters for Better Education.

"While several prominent champions of our public school system (and opponents of school choice) send or sent their own children to private schools, Vermont has slammed the door in the face of low-income parents who would merely have had the opportunity to choose another public school," Sternberg noted in a letter to McNulty. "This is shameful."

The numbers are small in Vermont, but huge in Los Angeles. There, almost 230,000 children qualify for publicly financed transfers, but fewer than 100 seats were available in better-performing schools.

Superintendent Roy Romer's comments to the *Los Angeles Times* echoed the argument of many public educators: "Just to move children from one building to another building does not guarantee that they are going to learn that much better. We can take the existing school and make it work."

A Choice—to Win the Lottery?

Baltimore school officials said they could accommodate transfers by only 194 of the 30,000 students eligible under NCLB. *Baltimore Sun* columnist Mike Bowler commented, "this isn't school choice any more than the Maryland Lottery gives players a choice of winnings."

A more genuine solution would use Title I money to transport children from Baltimore's 83 failing schools to better-performing ones in neighboring districts, he said. The NCLB urges districts to seek compacts with neighboring districts for inter-district exchanges of students, but it does not require such transfers.

Similarly, Cincinnati officials said they had space to accommodate transfers by only 198 of the 10,000 children eligible for relief under NCLB. District spokesman Janet Walsh told the *Cincinnati Enquirer* the district had made every effort to abide by the spirit and letter of the law.

"We have been encouraging choice in Cincinnati Public Schools for decades," she added. "A lot of parents have already exercised choice. The law does not ask them to leave."

Outside the big cities, issues sometimes come into a different focus. Philip Shortman, superintendent of the Hays-Lodgepole district in Montana, said he expects his elementary and middle schools to work their way off the failing list by next year. And he supports the new NCLB requirements.

"It's good," he told the *Billings Gazette*. "It's common sense. It's made school districts more accountable. It's about time. People have been too lax."

Different Standards

To be sure, some questions about the law's initial impact are legitimate.

Consider, for example, the U.S. Department of Education's enumeration state by state of the 8,600 Title I-aided schools deemed to have fallen short of state-defined "adequate yearly progress." The numbers differ wildly from one

U.S. Educators Ignoring the Lessons of History

The study of history is a powerful antidote to contemporary arrogance. It is humbling to discover how many of our glib assumptions, which seem to us novel and plausible, have been tested before, not once but many times and in innumerable guises; and discovered to be, at great human cost, wholly false.

PAUL JOHNSON

The above quotation is one of Thomas Sowell's favorites, and its point underlies a recent article on U.S. educational fads written by Sowell, the Rose and Milton Friedman Senior Fellow in Public Policy at the Hoover Institution.

Sowell points out that the U.S. educational establishment's advocacy of "discovery learning" and its objection to "teaching to the test" had their parallels in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and in China during the 1950s and 1960s, when these ideas were applied wholesale to the educational systems in the two countries.

However, the results of this change in teaching strategy were such that both countries quickly returned to the idea of "teaching to the test." By the late 1920s, "the bad educational consequences were turning the Soviet government leadership against these fads," notes Sowell. And a decade after examinations were abolished in China and social

"relevance" was given more weight, the examinations were restored because "the quality of education has declined sharply," according to the country's Ministry of Education.

"[S]chools have not paid attention to educational standards and instead overemphasized practical work; students' knowledge of theory and basic skills in their area of specialization have been disregarded," complained Deng Xiaoping, decrying "the deterioration of academic standards."

Choice, Teacher Quality, and Curriculum

In a conversation with Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs Research Director Brandon Dutcher, Sowell recently provided the following public policy prescription to rescue children from public schools that are failing to equip large numbers of students with even fundamental reading skills:

"The most immediate thing that policy-makers can do to rescue many low-income and minority students, especially, is to give their parents a choice of schools—public and private—through vouchers."

"For the public schools in general, the most important thing is to break the stranglehold of the teachers' unions and the schools of education that have filtered out intelligent people who cannot stand the drive they would have to go through to get a credential. Despite attempts to depict these credentials as evidence of being 'qualified' to teach, it is closer to being a certificate of being unqualified."

"There also needs to be an unequivocal policy that children are sent to school



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THOMAS SOWELL

to acquire academic skills, not to be propagandized with PC, put through psychological experiments, or used as guinea pigs for educational or other fads. Teachers who refuse to teach in accordance with this policy should be fired."

From "A Conversation with Thomas Sowell," *Perspective*, Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, July 2002. <http://www.ocpa.think.org/Pages/Perspective0702.htm>

Additional information on publications by Thomas Sowell is available at www.tsowell.com.

NCLB continued on next page