

MORE INFORMATION

National Council of La Raza
Hispanic advocacy group
www.nclr.org

National Bilingual Education
Association
www.nabe.org

American Council on the
Teaching of Foreign
Languages
www.actfl.org

PUBLICATIONS OF INTEREST TO PARENTS

Educating Language-Minority Students, by Michael S. Mills
125 pages. Trade paperback.
\$17.95 (members, \$13.95)

Teaching for Diversity, Second Edition, by Ricardo L Garcia
151 pages. Trade paperback.
\$19.95 (members, \$14.95)

To order, phone
1-800-766-1156

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Parents and other concerned community members are invited to join as PDK associates, a new membership category designed to serve noneducators. For more information, contact the Membership Department at 1-800-766-1156.

Is Being Bilingual Okay?

Language is a powerful communication tool. Two or three such tools, it might be argued, are better than one. We often tout the virtues of knowing more than one language in the United States, but the idea seldom gets more than lip service from policy makers. Indeed, Americans seem to use bilingualism as often to burn cultural bridges as to build them.

In December a 16-year-old Kansas City, Kansas, high-schooler, Zach Rubio, was suspended for speaking Spanish in school. Many school officials want immigrant students like Zach to speak only English so that they can be integrated into regular studies as quickly as possible. Others fear that students speaking in a language their teachers don't understand may be being disrespectful or planning mischief. Zach's school rescinded the suspension but not before a furor erupted, demonstrating the larger cultural debate over the language, or languages, that Americans should speak.



After a 1974 Supreme Court decision in *Lau v. Nichols*, the "Lau Guidelines" required bilingual instruction or obligated school districts to demonstrate that their programs for non-English speakers were as effective as the bilingual programs described in the guidelines. The guidelines have been superceded in legal cases by reference to the Equal Educational Opportunity Act of 1974, which simply requires schools to overcome language barriers.

The English-only movement arose in the 1980s as a backlash against bilingual education. Activists sought to protect English, even urging a constitutional amendment to make English America's official language, something that hasn't happened. However, some 21 states do enforce their own official-English laws.

What Parents Can Do

How does all this square with the drive to teach foreign language, particularly in elementary school? (See an article on elementary foreign language in *Topics & Trends*, September 2005, at www.pdkintl.org.) It's difficult to advocate teaching a foreign language, such as Spanish, to non-native speakers while diminishing the same language as spoken by native speakers. A few schools have been farsighted enough to realize that bilingual education can work hand in hand with teaching a foreign language. By creatively pairing native Spanish-speaking students, for example, with classmates who are interested in learning Spanish as a foreign language, some schools reap new benefits. Both groups become bilingual, share cultures, and build bonds of friendship. Forward-thinking parents can be the catalysts (and the volunteers) who help educators recognize the need to create such programs.

Bilingual Versus English-Only

Bilingual education came into its own in the 1960s, spurred by waves of immigrants: Cubans after the 1959 Cuban revolution, for example, and later Vietnamese and Hmong after the Vietnam War. The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 was added to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1964 and was reauthorized in the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994 and in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 also has been influential in ensuring equal opportunities to learn for non-English-speaking students.



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