



Massachusetts Association of Teachers of Speakers of Other Languages

Testimony before the Massachusetts Joint Committee on Education regarding Bill H.1065/S.197, An Act Relative to Enhancing English Opportunities For All Students in the Commonwealth.

Presented on October 4, 2011 by Helen Solórzano, Executive Director, Massachusetts Association of Teachers of Speakers of Other Languages (MATSOL)

To the Chairs and Members of this Committee,

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify before you today. For the record, I am Helen Solórzano, Executive Director of MATSOL, the Massachusetts Association of Teachers of Speakers of Other Languages. We are an organization that represents 1,000 educators and community members who work with English language learners (ELLs) in the areas of K-12, adult, and higher education. On behalf of the MATSOL Board of Directors, I wish to address the Committee regarding some of the issues ELLs and their teachers face in K-12 schools in Massachusetts and to voice our support of House Bill 1065/Senate Bill 197. MATSOL urgently requests that you support these bills and take a role in improving the education of ELLs in Massachusetts. Too much time has gone by without action.

We feel that it is important to stress the urgency with which we provide this testimony, and to point out that we have advocated with urgency for the high quality education of ELLs since Question 2 was passed nearly 10 years ago. Something must be done now.

Current law mandates that ELLs “shall be educated either in sheltered English immersion [SEI] or English language mainstream classrooms with assistance in English language acquisition” (M.G.L. Chapter 71A, § 4). The law promotes ELLs remaining in SEI programs for only one year and also requires a waiver process for any other program except two-way immersion (TWI). This one-size-fits all, inflexible approach to teaching ELLs in Massachusetts is problematic and inconsistent with decades of educational research; for many ELLs it postpones access to the academic grade level curriculum until they have mastered enough academic English to participate in English-only classrooms. It is also inconsistent with the desire to promote innovation and choice in education, as signaled by passage of the Education Reform Bill in 2010.

Conventional wisdom suggests that children can quickly and efficiently learn new languages. However, while children may quickly become proficient in social or conversational language, it takes significantly longer to effectively master the more complex, abstract and cognitively demanding academic language of the classroom. Research has shown academic language proficiency takes between four and seven years to fully develop (Cummins, 2000). While there will never be one programmatic model of instruction for ELLs capable of working effectively in every school and district with every student, research has consistently shown the intense value of integrating students’ home languages and cultures into classroom instruction in order to ensure high academic achievement (Crawford & Krashen, 2007). However, the current law in Massachusetts prohibits this kind of instruction for the majority of ELLs in the Commonwealth.

On October 6, 2009, the Joint Committee on Education held a hearing for House Bill 486 “An Act Relative to Enhancing English Opportunities for all Students in the Commonwealth.” At that hearing, a coalition of various organizations including MATSOL, Massachusetts English Learner Leadership Council (MELLC), Massachusetts Association of Bilingual Education (MABE), Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA), Multicultural Training and Advocacy (META), Suffolk University, Boston College, Lesley University, Mass English Plus Coalition, and the Boston Parents Organizing Network offered over two hours of testimony on behalf of H. 486. Twenty-two oral testimonies from parents, teachers, district administrators, researchers and teacher educators were delivered. Additionally, three legislators came out in support of the bill and twenty-one written testimonies were submitted to the Education Committee in support of H.486. In addition to those who came out to testify in person, eighteen additional supporters attended and wore t-shirts stating, “One Size Doesn’t Fit All - Support English Language Learners.” For much of the hearing, the room was standing room only and no testimony was offered in opposition to the bill.

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In the two years since that hearing, approximately 10,000 more English language learners have enrolled in schools in our state, and the ELL population continues to grow, outpacing any other student group. For those who have historically placed this educational issue in the context of immigration debates, it is also important to point out that a majority of ELL students nationally are born in the United States and are U.S. citizens (NEA, 2008). Several important studies on ELL education have come out since that time, including:

- The Mauricio Gaston Institute's (UMass-Boston) report on the status of English Language Learners in the Boston Public Schools that resulted in the identification of thousands of students who are receiving inadequate programs. (Gaston Institute, 2009)
- The report from the ELL Sub-Committee on the Proficiency Gap (of which MATSOL is a member) that examined the achievement gap for English language learners and made recommendations to the Massachusetts Secretary of Education and Board of Education. (ELL Sub Committee, 2009)
- The Annual Reports from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, highlighting the dire problems of school districts trying to meet the educational needs of ELLs.
- The investigation of Massachusetts schools by the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice that found serious shortcomings that deny equal educational opportunity to English Language Learners. On September 27, 2011 the Board of Education discussed these shortcomings, raising important questions as to why English language learners do not have access to the basic programmatic components they need to achieve academically as they are becoming proficient in English. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011)

The Education Reform Bill signed by Governor Patrick in January 2010 was passed in order to turn around underperforming schools, promote innovation and choice, and eliminate achievement gaps. Included in the bill were provisions for some schools to implement bilingual education as a research-based program option that has proven to be successful with ELLs. Bills H.1065/S.197 advance the Education Reform Bill (2010) by allowing teachers, schools and districts to engage in research-based best practices that have proven effective across decades of research, and by giving parents the option to choose the best educational programs for their children. These bills provide schools with the programmatic flexibility necessary to create quality programs for ELLs and the accountability measures to ensure that the educational goals are met. It is time for teachers, schools and districts to have the authority to use their educational expertise in designing programs of instruction to meet the needs of the ELLs. It is time for the legislature to untie the hands of schools and districts by allowing for programmatic flexibility and supporting the local development of ELL programs based on the high academic and accountability standards. The legislature alone has the power to accomplish in our work to support ELLs in Massachusetts. Please act on these issues immediately by reporting House Bill 1065/Senate Bill 197 out favorably.

Thank you,

Helen Solórzano
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References

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