

## **Hed: Standardized testing a hindrance to dual language programs**

By: Kalyn Belsha

In recent years, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has voiced increased support for “additive” models of bilingual education — those that teach English and also develop a native language — in order to close the achievement gap between English–language learners and their peers.

In part, this move comes after a CPS bilingual education commission issued a [report](#) in November 2010 that found programs with the goal of bilingualism were more effective at helping English–language learners develop language proficiency and overall academic success than those that transition to all English.

One of the additive models that is gaining traction at the district level is dual language, a program in which students are taught to be bilingual and literate in two languages over the course of several years.

There are at least a dozen schools that offer dual language programs in CPS, all of which are currently in English and Spanish, though the children who enroll come from linguistically diverse backgrounds. Bilingual education experts support the model because they say the children learn from each other and build cross–cultural competence.

But in order for such programs to truly expand throughout the district, how students in dual language programs are tested and how data is gathered about the district’s more than 64,000 English–language learners — who make up 15.8 percent of CPS students — needs to change dramatically, education experts say.

“Our teachers were practically in tears because they couldn’t teach,” said Guadalupe Sandoval, the dual language coordinator at Volta Elementary in Albany Park, referring to the past school year. “They were constantly assessing.”

Many dual language educators say district– and state–mandated achievement and language proficiency tests don’t accurately portray what their students are learning, especially in the Spanish language. In absence of comprehensive tests, they’re left with a hodgepodge of assessments to determine their students’ progress, often limiting instruction time.

“We’re doing exponentially greater work than a monolingual school,” said Jill Sontag, the dual language coordinator at Whittier Elementary, a dual language school in Pilsen. “Because it’s the academics, but it’s also the language proficiency. There’s a big difference between what we have to do and what our teachers are doing.”

### **Testing 1–2–3**

In its report, the bilingual education commission emphasized an “urgent need” for better data collection and analysis of English–language learners, noting that current data is limited to enrollment figures, identification of students’ native language and English proficiency.

The commission recommended that CPS measure English-language learners' proficiency in English and their native language and their progress over time to help the district make "data-driven decisions" about language education.

The problem with that suggestion is that there is no standardized test that evaluates native language proficiency, which for 87 percent of English-language learners in CPS is Spanish. The commission recommended that the district develop or adopt a standardized test to determine proficiency in languages such as Spanish, Arabic and Mandarin, but CPS has yet to do so.

Since 2008, English-language learners have taken the ISAT starting in 3rd grade, which measures their academic knowledge in subjects such as reading, math and science.

Before that, English-language learners in Illinois took another test, the IMAGE, which was also in English, but with simpler language and more pictures. The U.S. Department of Education ruled the test had to be changed because it was not comparable to the ISAT and the state made plans to develop a new test, but English-language learners are taking the ISAT in the meantime.

Because different groups of students have been required to take different tests from year-to-year and the ISAT doesn't record which type of bilingual program a student participated in, it's "almost impossible" to correlate long-term achievement data for English-language learners, the commission's report said. The commission suggested that the district work with a university or organization to develop data systems for long-term analysis of these students, but that idea has yet to be realized.

Beyond data collection problems, teachers and principals say the ISAT is simply not the best way to test English-language learners, whose limited English skills often prevent them from doing well on a test that measures their knowledge in content areas. In the 2010 school year, less than a quarter of CPS students in bilingual education programs met or exceeded ISAT reading standards, compared with about three-quarters of their English-speaking peers.

It's not ideal for dual language programs either, since they often follow a model that teaches mostly Spanish in the early grades, and work up to an even split of English and Spanish after a few years.

"Our kids don't do that well," said Zoila Garcia, the principal at Whittier, of the ISAT. "Especially in third grade, they might even do worse than other program models, because their exposure to English has been less."

Research shows it takes about five to seven years to demonstrate mastery of a second language, which is when dual language students usually catch up to — or outperform — their English-only peers on standardized tests.

But many administrators don't want to wait that long to see their students perform well on state tests, which has been a hindrance to the spread of the dual language model throughout the district.

“Literacy in their first language will make their English literacy stronger and deeper and, over time, better,” says Olivia Mulcahy, who oversees dual language at the district level, of English–language learners. “What people aren’t willing to do is invest the time. They want to see it by third grade.”

### **Managing instruction time**

English–language learners are mandated by the state to take the ACCESS test, which measures their English language proficiency. But neither the ACCESS nor the ISAT looks at Spanish language proficiency or mastery of academic content in Spanish.

So dual language schools end up choosing other independent tests to measure student progress, or creating their own tools. And because language proficiency spans four areas — speaking, listening, reading and writing — there is a lot to test.

Dual language educators say the extra time they spend testing their students takes away from instruction time.

“The challenge that teachers face now is: How do you manage district and mandated tests that may not really be the best tools to inform your instruction?” said Vernita Vallez, the principal at Inter–American, a dual language magnet school in Lakeview. “We need to do those tests and then we still are left with the need to assess what we’re teaching. They (the teachers) are sometimes doing double or three times as much.”

For example, at Calmecca Academy, a dual language school in Brighton Park, kindergarten, first and second grade teachers use a basic early literacy assessment in Spanish that looks at how a child identifies letters, sounds and word fluency. The teacher administers the test one–on–one with a small electronic palm device, often while the rest of the class works independently in small groups. It’s a time–consuming process, especially when class size tops 30 students.

The independent tests that dual language schools use aren’t perfect, and because each area chooses its own tests, schools can’t always compare data with one other. And as research and tests improve, CPS dual language schools are constantly looking for ways to better assess Spanish literacy — which means taking time to pilot new tests and training teachers how to administer them.

### **Testing bilingualism**

In addition to tests mandated by the state, district and a school’s area, dual language teachers often create their own tools to measure their students’ academic and language progress.

By its nature, dual language is a flexible program that changes to suit the student population. Dual language educators note that in the past their students were mostly dominant in Spanish, but now they see more children entering school with strong English skills, already bordering on the verge of bilingual.

That constant demographic flux means dual language teachers frequently reevaluate and change their curriculum. Because in dual language assessment is strongly tied to instruction, dual language teachers spend a lot of time designing and updating “authentic” assessments to measure what their students are learning, says Whittier’s Sontag.

“I personally prefer to use rubrics and checklists and anecdotes — that gives me much more concrete information,” she says. “We’re not talking about data and big numbers.”

For example, she says, to look at language development she might listen to students talking to each other or give an assignment that necessitates the use of vocabulary words being taught in class, then score each child using a rubric she designed for that activity.

Of course, that data is difficult to compare from year-to-year and with other schools. But there is hope that dual language programs in Illinois — and other programs that work with English-language learners — will eventually be able to use a more standardized approach to testing Spanish language proficiency.

In October 2010 the Illinois State Board of Education, in conjunction with the nonprofit WIDA Consortium, won a federal grant to develop Spanish language standards and a matching proficiency assessment. ([Standards](#) for academic progress in Spanish already exist in Illinois, but there is no corresponding test. Experts abandoned development of it to focus on developing proficiency standards.)

It’s a “fairly technical and careful process,” says Mary Fergus, a spokeswoman for the Illinois State Board of Education. A draft of the standards isn’t due to the federal government until summer, she said, so it will be some time before an assessment is available for piloting. (Though Illinois is among several states slated to test out the assessment when it’s ready.)

As those standards are being drafted, bilingual education experts caution that a Spanish language proficiency test that doesn’t have a “bilingual standard” would be a problem.

“We have an assessment in English that tells us our students are weak in English, and that’s the ACCESS,” said John Hilliard, who specializes in dual language education at the Illinois Resource Center, an agency that helps train language teachers. “We don’t need an assessment in Spanish to tell us the same thing: That they’re weak in Spanish.”

Mulcahy in CPS’s central office envisions a bilingual standard that would give students credit on a Spanish language proficiency test when they “do things that are linguistically complex but don’t register as correct on monolingual paradigms.” In essence, they would receive credit for “Spanglish.”

Such a Spanish test would be welcome in dual language schools not only to save teachers time, but to establish the importance of the Spanish language.

“There’s a great deal of worry about what a huge impact standardized testing done entirely in English (has) when trying to espouse the importance of bilingualism,” says Josie Yanguas, who directs the Illinois Resource Center.

Inter-American’s Vallez says she and her teachers think “all the time” about how to counter standardized testing in English with “important and serious things in Spanish.”

“Spanish and English need to have the same integrity otherwise students think one is less important,” Vallez says. “You compromise cognitive development with that kind of dynamic.”