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Summary of Review

A new report from the Lexington Institute, *Immersion Not Submersion, Vol. III*,¹ concludes that an emphasis on English-only teaching methods mandated by Proposition 227 is responsible for notable improvements among California’s English Language Learners, and that these methods can even overcome the effects of poverty, larger class sizes, and lower per-pupil funding. This review finds these claims to be without merit. The Lexington Institute’s report suffers from poorly sampled data, inaccurate descriptions of district-level policies, failure to account for alternative explanations for observed changes in district testing data, and lack of any serious analysis of the data presented. The report also fails to acknowledge or address recently published research studies whose conclusions are dramatically different from those presented in the report. The report is not useful for guiding educational policy or practice.

Review

I. INTRODUCTION

The new Lexington Institute policy brief, authored by David White, purports to analyze the performance of English Language Learners (ELLs) in eight California school districts in an effort to evaluate the impact of Proposition 227, the state initiative that mandated the use of Structured English Immersion (SEI) and severely restricted bilingual education. Before addressing the specifics of this new report, some background regarding the policy studied might be useful.

Important concerns were raised during the Civil Rights Movement regarding the adequacy of educational programs in which minority children were enrolled. Among these was a concern that U.S. schools were failing the nation's large and growing number of Hispanic students, many of whom had limited proficiency in English. The U.S. Supreme Court in 1974 condemned such failure, noting, "There is no equality of treatment by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers and curriculum, for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education."² The same year, Congress passed the Equal Educational Opportunity Act, which defined the denial of such opportunity to include "the failure by an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by students in an instructional program."

School districts used a variety of strategies to meet the needs of English Learners in the wake of the conclusion that "submersion," or doing nothing at all, would no longer be acceptable. Although bilingual education is often thought to have been the most widely implemented program, it has actually never been used for more than a third of eligible students nationwide. Rather, English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL), a program with characteristics similar to SEI, has been by far the more widely used approach.³

Bilingual education was once popular among many Republicans, including California governor Ronald Reagan and Texas Representative George H. W. Bush. However, a political movement against bilingual education became part of the conservative agenda in the 1980s and 1990s, with rhetoric characterizing the teaching method as part of a larger agenda aimed at avoiding cultural assimilation. As Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich wrote, "Bilingualism keeps people actively tied to their old language and habits and maximizes the cost of the transition to becoming American. ... Without English as a common language, there is no such civilization."⁴ However, advocates of bilingual education have never intended that students should avoid cultural assimilation, but rather use the cultural and linguistic resources of home to improve educational outcomes at school.

As part of the conservative movement against bilingual education, California voters in 1998 passed an initiative funded by conservative activist Ron Unz that severely limited the use of bilingual education in schools, pushing instead the SEI approach. Similar initiatives, also sponsored by Unz, were passed in Arizona in 2000 and in Massachusetts in 2002. An Unz-sponsored anti-bilingual education measure failed in Colorado in 2002.

Teaching immigrant children is complex because students who do not know English well will have only limited comprehension of lessons presented in English alone. Schools have the responsibility of teaching these children English while concurrently providing for their success in the academic curriculum. Bilingual education programs were designed to solve this problem by presenting school subjects in both English and Spanish to help students learn academic subject-matter while developing English.⁵ Proponents of SEI, on the other hand, argue that children will learn English so quickly under conditions of immersion (generally within a year's time, according to the Unz initiatives) that we should expect no educational subject matter deficits to accrue.⁶

II. CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS

The brief under review makes three main claims:

1. An analysis of data from the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) and California Standardized

Testing and Reporting (STAR) program reveals “significant improvement in English proficiency across the state” (p. 2), even for districts that postponed but gradually embraced full compliance with the English-only law;

2. Teaching strategies prescribed by Proposition 227 caused these significant improvements; and
3. Teaching strategies prescribed by Proposition 227 can overcome the effects of poverty, larger class sizes, and lower per-pupil funding.

III. THE REPORT'S RATIONALES FOR ITS CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS

The report offers two sets of comparisons for the eight California school districts that it includes in its sample. The first comparison is between 2003 and 2006, focusing on a select group of students: those English learners who have been reclassified as fluent English proficient. For this comparison, the report looks at growth in the two highest achievement categories on the California Standards Test (CST), one of several tests comprising California's STAR system. The second comparison is between 2001 and 2005, focusing on a different group of students: designated (rather than *reclassified*) English Learners scoring in the two highest proficiency ranges on the CELDT.

Along with the presentation of this information, the report provides dis-

trict-level statistics for percentage of ELLs enrolled, average class size, per pupil spending, total enrollment, and free/reduced cost lunch program participation (a proxy measure for poverty).

All data presented in the report are discussed in loose, interpretive terms. Although the paper uses the language of statistical analysis (“correlate,” page 2; “significant,” pages 2, 12, 14, 19, 21; “predictors,” page 21), it does not use any actual statistical analysis or tests of any kind.

Rather, the report presents data indicating that the number of students with higher test scores has increased in the districts reviewed, ranging from 4 percent to 32 percent, and it characterizes the districts with greater improvements as more faithful to the SEI instructional approach. It concludes that a strong emphasis on “teaching English in English,” introduced by Proposition 227, caused the increases. The conclusion also returns to the district-level statistics on class size, per-pupil funding, and free/reduced cost lunch program participation, asserting that impressive improvements were evident even in the presence of such factors.

IV. REVIEW OF THE REPORT’S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

Although numerous relevant publications have appeared in recent years, the report does not cite or discuss any of them. Among the most noteworthy omissions in the report under review are these:

1. A peer-reviewed study showing that Proposition 227 has had no effects on reclassification rates or test scores in California over a four-year period.⁷
2. A five-year final report presenting results of a study commissioned by the California State Legislature to evaluate the effects of Proposition 227 on the state’s ELL students. The report concluded that Proposition 227 has had no detectible benefits for student learning.⁸
3. A peer-reviewed meta-analysis of studies comparing teaching methods for ELL students that found bilingual approaches to be associated with superior academic outcomes over English-only approaches.⁹
4. A peer-reviewed narrative review of research studies, funded by the U.S. Department of Education Institute for Education Science, which found most methodologically acceptable studies favored bilingual approaches over immersion approaches; while some studies found no difference, none significantly favored immersion programs.¹⁰
5. Two recent reports by the National Literacy Panel, both of which found bilingual instruction to be a more effective method than English-only in-

struction for improving academic achievement outcomes for English Learners.¹¹

6. An analysis of CELDT scores in select California districts that retained bilingual education programs.¹²
7. An analysis of CELDT scores, prepared by the Office of the California Legislative Analyst, which offers alternative explanations for the demographic characteristics of the CELDT scoring patterns that are discussed in the Lexington report.¹³

V. REVIEW OF THE REPORT'S METHODS

The conclusions reached in the report require a very specific kind of data and analysis. Specifically, it calls for a statistical analysis of a representative sample of student-level data for English Learners whose program of study (SEI, bilingual education, or other) is clearly identified at the student level at each time interval along with relevant indicators of school achievement. Unfortunately, no such data or analyses are presented.

Instead, the report relies upon district-level summaries of test scores for different groups of students in different years. Its author believes that one can infer from an increase in the number of students scoring at proficient levels that a particular district-level factor — namely, a strict implementation of Structured English Immersion — must be responsible for

the change. The report does not consider other competing explanations, any one of which could be independently responsible for the observed changes. Many educational reforms were implemented concurrently with Proposition 227 in California at the state level, including class-size reduction, a change to a phonics-based reading program, new language arts standards, new testing and accountability requirements, and a new emphasis on high-stakes testing. Other district- and school-level policy changes may have taken place as well. Because the Lexington Institute report compares different students enrolled at different times, we cannot know which of these factors may be responsible for the observed differences.¹⁴

In addition, a dramatic and consistent rise in test scores is often observed in the first few years following implementation of a new testing program,¹⁵ such as occurred in California following implementation of Stanford-9 testing in 1998. There are several possible explanations for this trend, including explicit coaching and teaching to the test as well as increased familiarity with the test among administrators, teachers, parents and students — a more subtle form of test preparation.

Furthermore, while the report asserts that its sample of eight districts is representative of California's 1,056 school districts statewide, no rationale or argument is given to support this claim. We do not know why the report's author selected these specific districts. A methodologically well-

designed study must use a reasonable sampling procedure and should present a rationale for the sample selected, especially in the case of an extremely small hand-picked sample.

Also, the Lexington Institute's report does not rely upon increased scores over time as evidence for its conclusions, as is traditionally done. Instead it relies on a specific *demographic* change. The report compares the number of students scoring in the highest ranges in 2003 (three years after the passage of Proposition 227) and 2006 (six years after the law's passage) on the CST for reclassified English Learners. A reclassified ELL is one who has been designated by local guidelines to be English proficient (using a CELDT score and other criteria), sometimes including more subjective factors such as teacher judgment.¹⁶

As an illustration of the problems with the Lexington Institute's approach, consider the case of Long Beach Unified School District. The report indicates that 50 percent of reclassified ELLs scored in the "proficient" and "advanced" range of the test, whereas only 44 percent did so in 2003 — a 6 percent climb. Because the report used scores of reclassified ELLs rather than actual designated ELLs, the percentage of students in the highest scoring categories would be affected by the rate of reclassification in the preceding year at the local district. In other words, after a student is reclassified from limited English proficient to English proficient, her score would factor into the aggregate for "reclassified ELLs" the next

year. In LBUSD, the 2001-2002 reclassification rate was 10.7 percent, but peaked in 2003-2005 at 18 percent. In 2003, only 11 percent of LBUSD's designated ELL students (rather than "reclassified ELLs") scored in the "proficient" and "advanced" range, and just 9 percent did so in 2006. Because some districts use CST "proficient" and "advanced" scores as one factor (among others) to justify reclassification, it is likely that districts will see a rise in the number of reclassified ELLs scoring at the higher levels the year following a peak in their reclassification rate. (Note that increased reclassification rates are not indicators of school success, as they are blind to the length of time students may have been enrolled in the district.)

These complications illustrate the general murkiness of the data presented in the Lexington Institute's report. Numerous factors influence the composition of the group of students whose scores are included in these aggregates; these factors change each year, and are not independently related to the outcome of interest (school achievement).

Finally, a very serious methodological limitation of the Lexington Institute report is its inaccurate description of program implementation at the district level. This is a crucial matter, since its purported explanation for the increased numbers depends on its claim that nearly all the districts under consideration were strong and faithful in their implementation of Proposition 227. The report offers no documentation for its claims regard-

ing district-level policies; a district's supposed program orientation is simply asserted by the report's author, and is frequently incorrectly described.

Consider, for example, the report's discussion of Los Angeles USD, the state's largest (and nation's second largest) school district. The report indicates that since 2001, the district "has made substantial changes to emphasize early English learning with an emphasis on instruction in English" (p. 20), and suggests that the district has become heavily oriented toward an SEI approach. In this context, the report characterizes the district's test score demographics as "astounding" (p. 20).

However, the report's description of the district's policy and student enrollments is not accurate. The LAUSD *Master Plan* provides for three alternative approaches for English Learners, including Structured English Immersion, the Basic Bilingual Plan, and Dual Language Program (a kind of bilingual education).¹⁷ California Department of Education data indicate that in the 2005-2006 school year, 48 percent of LAUSD's ELL students received a form of bilingual education. In fact, only 38 percent participated in the district's SEI program. Hence, whatever "astounding" gains the report's author might find in LAUSD cannot reasonably be attributed to an emphasis on English-only instructional programs.

With regard to Vista Unified School District, the report similarly claims

that the district's "leadership has largely come around to accept a new instructional focus on Structured English Immersion, and the academic results are beginning to benefit from the shift" (p. 14). However, the California Department of Education reports that 48 percent of Vista USD's ELLs are enrolled in a bilingual program, with 49 percent enrolled in SEI, as of 2005-2006. Again, the Lexington Institute's report relies on a dramatically inaccurate description of district-level policy to line up its conclusions supporting SEI with the data presented.

Table 1 gives ELL enrollments by instructional services as reported by the California Department of Education for the eight districts included in the report as of the 2005-2005 school year.¹⁸ Notice, for example, that while Oceanside USD and Orange USD used SEI for 100 percent of its ELLs, LBUSD used SEI for 76 percent of ELLs and bilingual education for 19 percent. LAUSD used SEI for 38 percent of its ELLs and bilingual education for 48 percent. The data in Table 1 serve as reasonable documentation regarding the true language program orientation of the eight districts discussed in the Lexington Institute's report.

Note that the Lexington Institute's report incorrectly characterizes three (Long Beach USD, Vista USD, and LAUSD) of the eight districts as very strongly oriented toward SEI, and incorrectly characterizes one district (San Jose USD) as very rigidly oriented toward bilingual education. The report does not attempt to support its

assertions regarding these matters with any citations or documentation.

Table 1. 2005-2006 reported English Learner enrollments by instructional services

<i>District</i>	<i>Percent in Structured English Immersion</i>	<i>Percent in Bilingual Education</i>	<i>Percent in Other Programs</i>
Long Beach Unified School District	76%	19%	5%
Oceanside Unified School District	100	0	0
San Jose Unified School District	43	31	26
Orange Unified School District	100	0	0
Vista Unified School District	49	48	3
Alum Rock Union Elementary School District	99	1	0
Atwater Elementary School District	100	0	0
Los Angeles Unified School District	38	48	15

Source: California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Unit. Available at <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>.

VI. REVIEW OF THE VALIDITY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

If we rely upon the enrollment figures reported by the California Department of Education in Table 1 to characterize the language program orientation of each district, we see that the “gains” calculated by the Lexington Institute do not favor Structured English Immersion. As shown in Table 2, the four districts (LBUSD, San Jose USD, Vista USD, and LAUSD) with significant enrollments in bilingual education programs have CST gains that are comparable or superior to those of districts with a strong SEI orientation. Similarly, CELDT “gains” in LAUSD and Vista, the most heavily oriented toward bilin-

gual education, outshine those of strongly SEI-oriented districts such as Oceanside USD and Orange USD.

Because the data used in the report have the numerous inadequacies previously discussed, it may be a mere coincidence that the conclusion suggested by Table 2 is consistent with findings of recently published peer-reviewed scholarly research (namely, that students in bilingual education programs typically outperform students in English-only programs¹⁹). Thus, the report’s poorly sampled data, compounded by its inaccurate descriptions of district-level language program orientations, leads us to abandon any hope that it might usefully inform education policy.

.Table 2. Lexington Institute report calculated gains in numbers of ELL students doing well on the CELDT and the CST.

<i>District</i>	<i>CELDT “Net Gain”</i>	<i>CST “Net Gain”</i>
<i>Districts with Significant Enrollments in Bilingual Education in 2005-2006</i>		
Long Beach Unified School District	18%	6%
San Jose Unified School District	20	4
Vista Unified School District	23	12
Los Angeles Unified School District	32	10
<i>Districts with Significant Enrollments in Structured English Immersion in 2005-2006</i>		
Oceanside Unified School District	19%	11%
Orange Unified School District	19	11
Alum Rock Union Elementary School District	23	8
Atwater Elementary School District	31	5

The report’s second claim — that SEI program implementation can overcome the disadvantages of poverty, lower per-pupil spending, and larger class sizes — is also not supported. In fact, no serious discussion of relevant data is presented in the report, and what references do occur are similarly diluted by inaccurate discussions of district policies regarding the education of ELLs. But these limitations did not stop the report’s author from drawing strong conclusions regarding this matter:

The evidence suggests that factors like poverty, per-pupil expenditures and class size have not [had a significant impact on test scores]. In fact, these factors ultimately were not strong predictors in the academic performance of the eight districts studied (p. 21).

This kind of language (“significant impact” and “strong predictors”) is generally associated with statistical analysis. However, not only were data related to these matters discussed only very loosely in the report, absolutely no statistical tests were conducted to

determine significance or prediction among variables.

A final point should be made concerning the report’s title, “Immersion Not Submersion,” which gives the impression that the author will discuss immersion as an alternative to submersion. The latter term is generally used to describe the absence of any program for ELL students, so the distinction between immersion and submersion is not a trivial policy or legal matter. However, the report actually discusses immersion as an alternative, not to submersion, but to bilingual education. Then, in the conclusions section, the author appears to define an immersion approach much as one would define submersion:

Ultimately, Structured English Immersion doesn’t cost more money, require smaller classrooms, or necessitate a more affluent student body. It simply embraces an emphasis on learning English *through* English – in the early years of a child’s schooling. That’s why some schools such as those discussed here – regardless of some short-

falls in spending, class sizes, or demographics – succeed remarkably. And it's why others continue to fail (p. 21).

If SEI consists simply of embracing an emphasis on learning English through English, then it is substantially identical to submersion programs ruled unconstitutional in Lau v. Nichols (1974).

VII. THE REPORT'S USEFULNESS FOR GUIDANCE OF POLICY AND PRACTICE

The report uses inappropriate and inadequately developed research methods whose limitations have previously been discussed in the research

literature.²⁰ Moreover, a fundamental aspect of the argument presented in the report relies upon the incorrect assumption that certain districts discussed are strongly oriented toward SEI. None of the conclusions regarding other factors, such as poverty and class size, are supported by evidence or analyses, and an unsupported discussion of “significance” and “predictors” in the context of these factors in the report's conclusions may mislead readers into thinking that actual statistical tests were used.

Because of these limitations and inaccuracies, the report is not useful for guiding policy or practice.

NOTES & REFERENCES

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- ¹⁸ In Table 1, “ELs Receiving ELD and SDAIE with Primary Language (L1) Support” and “ELs Receiving ELD and Academic Subjects through the Primary Language (L1)” are interpreted as varieties of bilingual education; “ELs Receiving English Language Development (ELD) Services” and “ELs Receiving (ELD) and Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE)” are interpreted as varieties of SEI or English-only instruction. See <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>
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