

December 8, 2015

Dear members of the Oregon Board of Education,

My name is Myrna Salinas, and I have enjoyed being a bilingual teacher for 18 years. I have worked for several different types of programs including English Immersion, Dual Immersion, and have served as an ELD specialist as well in. I am also teaching a class at PSU regarding assessment of language learners in the K-12 system, and work in many capacities toward equity in our state. I am most interested in the future of language development work having grown up as an English language learner in the United States that experienced several forms of “service” that still feel questionable to me.

Unfortunately, I became ill on my way to the last Advisory committee and had to turn back my car, so I was unable to contribute to the conversation regarding the definition of the term “long term ELL” that was decided on that day. As I understand, the group split in terms of how to define language learners that have been classified as such for too long, and I feel strongly regarding this issue. Specifically, I don’t believe 6 years should be thought of as “too long” because research indicates that it is right within range of acquiring another language. There is much research to relay that the average time it takes for a learner of a language to grow it into a proficient level is 5 to 7 years. However, I have specifically cited Dr. Jennifer Dixon’s research (as presented by her at a COSA conference recently) because it is local research, and based in a district that has always held a strong commitment to the needs of their language learners:

Woodburn. In her research

<https://www.cosa.k12.or.us/downloads/profdev/State%20EL%20Conference/2013/Handouts/Jennifer%20Dixon.pdf> , Dr. Dixon found that when you look at all language learners, without pulling out students with exceptionalities (such as being labeled TAG or SPED), the mean number of years students will remain in ELD services was 7.13. I have attached a link here, for your review of the research, but specifically, I wanted to note that the only group of students that exited ELD services within 6 years were those students who had been labeled TAG. These students received services designed for English language learners for a mean of 5.42 years.

While I understand why we would like to accelerate language growth for all students, as an educator and language learner myself, I struggle to understand why we want to put pressure on systems to “fully cook” kids quickly and spit them out as soon as possible. I understand that in a capitalist society, many things are related to cost, but I urge you to see human capital differently. Providing services for students who are learning English in the time frame that we know it takes is the best thing we can do to move language forward.

Often in our meetings, we hear that we are using data and suggestions “as best we have”. This becomes frustrating when we have much more in research and linguistic understanding as professionals than our system can acknowledge when it only wants to use the data that is speedy. I understand the urgency in many community members to hurry up and give kids the English they need to succeed, as consistently the needs of language learners are not met efficiently, but I am cautious because hurrying to get students out of services is not in their best interest.

Woodburn has been a great example of this. When they implemented bilingual programs, research showed that the trajectory would look different, but they patiently stayed with the programs that moved slowly, and their graduation results certainly show that the wait was worthwhile. My hope is that we will actually look at the body of research that shows that in the best case scenario, children are given at least 7 years to grow a proficient English. Of course, this means that in the meantime, we STILL make academic inputs and work toward academic proficiency. Giving systems across our state the 7 years that research indicates it should take (on average) only creates stronger, research based systems that are willing to put in the time for the well-being of students in the long run.

The situation in our state with language learners is a sensitive one, and we must be sure to give systems the chance to do their job right. One way to do this is to acknowledge research, rather than try to accelerate known trajectories to fit how we want to move things forward in the world. I share in your urgency to want all children to succeed daily, but I caution us against rushing kids and systems, rather than helping systems understand the real length of the trajectory.

Please, let me know if I can be of any service toward reaching a decision. I am in Salem at the Oregon Leadership Network equity conference today, and would gladly come talk to you if you feel that you need to hear from me personally. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Myrna Salinas
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