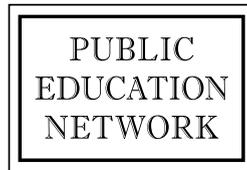


**Educating English
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in Dexter**



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This case was commissioned by Public Education Network (PEN) and prepared by the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy. Written by Jill Norton and Paul Reville, the case was designed for use at PEN's 2006 annual conference. This case is hypothetical and not based on any actual people or events. All names and locations are fictional.

Educating English Language Learners in Dexter

Judy Dunlap hung up the phone, closed her office door, and, exhausted, fell into her chair. It was September 16, 2005, and Judy, executive director of the Dexter Partnership for Children (DPC), had just finished a conference call with the editorial board of the *Dexter Free Press*, the city's largest paper.

The editorial board was pressuring Judy and the DPC to take a position in the current contentious debate about a new referendum being proposed by the state legislature that would mandate the use of English immersion to teach the state's English language learners.

The debate had stirred up racial and cultural tensions in Dexter, a city of 2.1 million located in the western United States. The state had been mandating transitional bilingual education (TBF) for three decades, requiring non-English speakers to take subjects such as math or science in their native language while easing into English over a period of months or years. About 8 percent of the state's total K–12 enrollment participated in such programs. The new referendum, called Question 3, aimed to eliminate most bilingual programs, and would limit TBF students' participation in English immersion classes to no more than one year. With English immersion, students learn English before returning to regular classrooms to learn other subjects such as math, science, and social studies, with all books, materials, and instruction in English. Under Question 3, teachers would be limited to a "minimal" use of material and instruction in a student's native language.

Question 3 has divided the Dexter community. Many public school staff and supporters were lobbying to protect the status quo bilingual program. Community groups were making claims of discrimination and racism, accusing Question 3 of attempting to erase the native language and culture of immigrant students. Proponents of the referendum cited the abysmal track record of the district's existing bilingual program, which has yielded a very low percentage of students proficient in the English language.

Judy and the DPC board, like the community at large, are split over Question 3. DPC had opted not to take a stand on the issue, fearing it was a lose-lose proposition for them. No matter which option they backed, they would anger some members of the community and of their own board. The referendum would go before voters on November 6th and, as that date drew closer, so did Dexter's attention to the issue. With pressure from all manner of business, community, and political groups as well as the media, Judy had scheduled a last-minute board meeting for the following week to discuss the issue and make a decision about whether and how to weigh in on the issue.

Dexter

Located in the Rocky Mountains, greater metropolitan Dexter, with a population of 2.1 million, was experiencing rapid population growth. Many US residents were relocating to Dexter from other areas due to its moderately priced housing and active lifestyle. Immigrants, both legal and illegal, were also moving to Dexter in large numbers, drawn by the new jobs that accompanied the population boom. The *Dexter Free Press* recently reported that, from 1998–2005, the Hispanic population had grown 42.2 percent, the Asian presence grew by 62.1 percent, and the white population went up 19.3 percent. Still, the population of Dexter was largely white (58 percent) with only 6 percent of residents black and 31 percent Hispanic.

Among people at least five years old living in the Dexter area in 2005, 18 percent spoke a language other than English at home. Of those, 69 percent spoke Spanish and 31 percent spoke some other language. A recent magazine article about Dexter's changing population reported that 47 percent of the residents in Dexter acknowledged that they did not speak English "very well."

The issue of immigration reform was generating renewed interest in the state legislature. Republicans and Democrats had been at odds since the previous May when the Senate voted down a ballot proposal designed to deny most non-emergency government services to illegal immigrants. Among other things, the amendment would have barred illegal immigrants from getting in-state college tuition. In response to the ballot initiative, more than 50,000 people gathered in downtown Dexter to protest against the proposed crackdown against immigrants.

The legislature recently came to agreement on a bill requiring employers to certify that all their employees have legal photo identification; the bill increased penalties for falsifying employment applications and also mandated that local governments use a federal background-checking system to verify that applicants for public assistance were legal residents. Reaction to the legislation fell along party lines. Many Republicans were disappointed that the bill didn't go far enough to ensure that illegal immigrants would be denied services. Many Democrats were concerned that the proposed legislation was too harsh on illegal immigrants and their employers.

Dexter Public Schools

The Dexter Public Schools educate 73,000 students in 151 schools. The district's student population is 51 percent Hispanic, 24 percent black, and 23 percent white. The city schools also have a large immigrant population, with 36 percent of its student population foreign-born and 16 percent without US citizenship.

Dexter schools had the lowest school test scores in the area and the highest dropout rates, especially for Hispanic students. Dexter's dropout rate is 36 percent overall, with a 51 percent dropout rate for Hispanics. A recent community poll, conducted by a local non-partisan think tank, reported that nearly two-thirds of Dexter residents felt the failure of public schools to provide a quality education was a significant problem.

Based on a 1974 Supreme Court decision stating that children who were not proficient in English had a right to special assistance in the classroom, Dexter began offering a bilingual education program in which children from other linguistic backgrounds were taught in their native languages prior to learning English. The theory was that once students had attained a strong understanding of concepts in their own language, they would be better equipped to learn those same concepts in English.

In 2000, the federal Office of Civil Rights (OCR) recommended that the Department of Justice file suit against Dexter regarding its transitional bilingual education program. The suit put the district's \$30 million in federal funding – about 8 percent of the district's total budget – in jeopardy. OCR claimed that bilingual students were lagging behind other students academically and that the bilingual program was discriminatory because it was less challenging than the district's regular courses. In response to this threat of a suit, the school board and Superintendent Charlene Walker were eager to improve the TBE program and developed a new plan for its 13,000 limited English proficient students, 85 percent of whom spoke at least some Spanish.

Under Dexter's original transitional bilingual program, English language learners could languish indefinitely in the program. The new plan required that students exit the program within three years. The school board and Superintendent Walker agreed that grades, teacher evaluations, parental wishes, and test scores would determine student readiness for mainstream classes. Unfortunately, 2001–2005 district data showed that only 30 percent of bilingual students actually moved into regular education classes after three years and those who did so, consistently trailed their peers in academic performance.

The Dexter Partnership for Children

The Dexter Partnership for Children is a partnership of business and education leaders committed to strengthening Dexter's public schools and improving academic achievement for all students. DPC also focuses on building public awareness and understanding of fundamental education issues and needs. It advocates for effective education policies, and works to mobilize the business community to support initiatives critical to the improvement of the district.

DPC works closely with the Dexter Public Schools and focuses on providing professional development services for teachers, principals, and administrators. Its intensive professional development and leadership training programs are a cornerstone of the district's array of staff development and are aimed at raising the performance level of the teachers and principals directly charged with educating students.

Founded in 1983, DPC has worked to leverage the investment of Dexter's business community and private donors to ensure that innovative reforms were initiated in the Dexter Public Schools. DPC views education as a pathway out of poverty and works to ensure that Dexter's schools effectively address the full range of its diverse student body's abilities and needs. When Judy Dunlap became DPC's executive director in 1995, she recommitted the organization to helping Dexter's low-income and minority communities gain access to high quality learning opportunities in the Dexter Public Schools from preschool through high school.

The Debate over Question 3

Momentum to change the district and state approach to educating English language learners had been building over the past decade. Both opponents and proponents agreed on one vital point: The ultimate goal of any approach was for students to become proficient in the English language.

In recent months, national events and state immigration issues had further politicized the debate about English language learners. Generally, those who opposed bilingual education were also advocates of "English only" legislation. These groups included many conservatives and local business leaders, who felt that English should be the official language of the nation and teaching students in other languages was counterproductive. Some of the proponents of English immersion and Question 3 were also supporters of tougher restrictions on immigration and of a reduction of services for illegal immigrants.

Also among English immersion proponents were those who felt that allowing students to learn in their native languages, instead of focusing on English, was doing them a disservice and would

force them to leave school unprepared for college and the workforce. They cited the strikingly low test scores of students in the current bilingual program as evidence that the bilingual approach was not working.

Those on the other side of the debate, supporters of bilingual education often accused the English immersion advocates of xenophobia and even racism. While this was true in some instances, some members of the immigrant community also favored English immersion. Over the past six years, Arizona, California, and Massachusetts had voted for legislation similar to the plan proposed by Question 3. In these states, the Hispanic community was divided on the issue. Some Hispanic families were adamant about preserving the culture and language of their heritage through bilingual education; others were equally steadfast in their desire to have their children learn English quickly and well. The same was proving true in Dexter's Hispanic community, which, like those in other states, was split in its support of Question 3.

Most professional educators and school district officials in Dexter supported the existing bilingual program and opposed Question 3. They acknowledged that the current system was in need of improvement, but were adamant that it was better for kids than English language immersion. They pointed to the shortage of well-qualified, fully bilingual teachers and argued that the problem with the bilingual program was with the teaching, not the curriculum. They argued that the TBE programs required fully qualified bilingual teachers and high quality training for existing teachers, and that this was doable. Even without this fix, they maintained that TBE was by far the better of the two approaches for teaching English language learners. Many cringed at the "sink or swim" mentality they felt was inherent in the English immersion approach proposed by Question 3.

Adding more confusion to the debate was the fact that research on the two approaches was mixed. Thus, both sides could refer to studies that proved their approach was best. Bilingual proponents cited research that found children enrolled in "properly designed" bilingual education programs learned English quickly and met grade-level standards in English and mathematics in three to five years. This report disputed the claim that bilingual programs slowed the acquisition of English and kept children out of the mainstream longer. Backers of Question 3 cited studies that they said proved that students enrolled in English immersion programs outperformed their bilingual counterparts on standardized tests and reached a higher level of English proficiency in a shorter amount of time.

A Call from the Dexter Free Press

On September 16th, Judy received a call from Dan Parker, editor of the *Dexter Free Press*. Dan wanted to discuss the English language learner referendum for an editorial he was writing. Judy said that she would be happy to provide Dan with information, but said that she and the DPC were not taking a position on the issue.

Dan was somewhat taken aback, "Judy, you and the partnership are supposed to be looking out for Dexter kids' best interests. How on earth can you not support Question 3? You've seen the sorry excuse for an education that the bilingual approach has provided. It's failed tens of thousands of kids for decades and now that we have a legitimate chance to get a better education for English language learners, you're playing it safe? That doesn't sound much like advocating for kids to me."

Judy explained, "Dan, we just don't see how DPC can benefit from choosing sides. Our board is as divided on this issue as the rest of the community. Even if we could come to consensus, we are guaranteed to alienate our business partners, or the school district staff, or community members with whatever approach we support."

Dan responded, "Pardon my frankness, but that is such a cop-out, Judy. When the going gets rough, you stop playing? Please, spare me the sob story about the risks for DPC – I thought you were supposed to be about kids. I'm sure the community would love to know what its so-called "advocate" is doing to help English language learners – absolutely nothing! Judy, I strongly encourage you and DPC to look at the evidence and support this English immersion proposal. Otherwise, I hate to say it, but there may be some unflattering coverage of DPC in the coming weeks."

Judy explained, "Dan, give me a couple of weeks to meet with my board and discuss this with them. Give me until October 1st to formulate a response. I will be back in touch with you then to let you know where DPC stands."

Dan agreed to call Judy again on October 1st to continue their discussion.

The DPC Board Meeting

Judy called an urgent meeting of the board, which convened on Tuesday, September 20th, at the DPC offices to discuss the partnership's position on educating Dexter's English language learners. The board members who were present are:

- Frank Scott, Chair, President, Warner Construction Group, Inc.
- Charlene Walker, Superintendent, Dexter Public Schools

- Maria Vazquez, Member, Dexter School Board
- Robert Bennett, President, Dexter Education Association
- Daniel Wiu, Chief Oncologist, Dexter Memorial Hospital
- Jorge Garcia, Executive Director, Association of Latin American Citizens
- Andrea Mattaliano, President, Western Bank and Trust
- Ben Barton, Partner, Barton, Lewis and Chandler, LLC
- Claudia Castro, President, Mountain Community College
- Harold Turner, Professor, Western State University School of Education

Judy welcomed all board members and informed them that the main purpose of the meeting was to discuss the current debate on the proposed referendum. She recounted her conversation with Dan Parker of the *Dexter Free Press* the previous week and explained that Dan, along with others in the community, expected DPC, as a partner to the district and an advocate for students, to support Question 3. She reminded them that there was a regularly scheduled board meeting the following Tuesday, September 27th, and that they would have time to think about their positions between now and then, with the goal of coming to consensus on whether or not to support Question 3.

Board Chair Frank Scott reinforced the need for the board to weigh in on the two options, bilingual education vs. English immersion, and to make recommendations to support or oppose Question 3 based on what they deemed best for the students of Dexter. With that, he opened the floor for comment.

Superintendent Charlene Walker began, “I have to say, I am losing faith in bilingual education. Since 2000, we have been working hard to move students out of the bilingual program within three years, but we’re still only able to move about a third of our students out of the program. Some of them languish for years. There’s more and more conflicting research about how long it takes for students to move into English-only classes. It seems like I can find research to back almost any theory that’s out there. But the bottom line for Dexter students is that we are unable to educate these kids, even in English, because we do not have a highly qualified staff. We simply cannot expect to educate kids to be literate in two languages when we don’t have enough qualified staff to make them literate in one! I am becoming increasingly willing to support the English immersion approach – I just can’t find hard evidence that TBE is helping kids and I’m ready to try something new.”

Teachers Union President Robert Bennett argued, “This school board and district administration have consistently sabotaged

bilingual education by not providing adequate funding. Bilingual education hasn’t been given a fair shake because we’ve never had the resources to implement it correctly. This Question 3 referendum, with its sink or swim approach to learning English, is going to turn kids into victims, throwing them into classrooms where they can’t understand what’s going on or keep up, where they will be punished for not knowing English. I believe it will increase, not decrease, the dropout rate as kids get frustrated with not understanding what’s going on in the classroom and leave. If we received the proper funding and training to implement bilingual education the way it was intended, you would see remarkable results. I urge the board to support the existing program and ask NEF to work with us to provide specialized training for bilingual teachers to improve the current program.”

Jorge Garcia agreed, “If you look at Latino students in the nation, we are approaching half of the population in the US. If our graduation rate is less than 50 percent, then 20 years down the road, we’re looking at 25 percent of the population without a high school education. Research has shown that for people 18 years and over with less than a high school education, the average yearly earnings are only about \$6,000. Add to that the fact that 82 percent of all prisoners in this country are high school dropouts and it’s clear that the implications for abandoning bilingual education are enormous. I believe that if our Latino students were not able to come to school and learn in Spanish, many of them would hit the streets.”

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Professor Harold Turner added, “I think it’s important to discuss the experience in California, which implemented similar legislation five years ago. Critics of bilingual education claimed that bilingual programs only moved 5 percent of students per year from English learners into students with fluent English proficiency and touted this as an indication of its failure. However, since the English immersion legislation has been enacted in California, the annual reclassification rate of students from English learner to English proficient is still hovering near 5 percent. Therefore, the English-only legislation appears to have had no effect on the reclassification of students. Researchers have analyzed California’s test results and found that English immersion has also had no effect on test

scores as compared with bilingual education. There really is no reliable data to show that English immersion is better.”

Frank Scott responded, “Currently, Dexter has at least 25,000 illegal alien children who cannot, and with our current system, likely will not speak English. We’re not just talking about Hispanic immigrants; over 40 languages are spoken among the illegal alien student population in our school system. It’s not their fault, but it is a menacing problem for this city and for this country. Their parents are functionally illiterate in English, and cannot help these children learn the language. No amount of bilingual classes is going to solve this problem – how could we ever find teachers fluent in over 40 languages to teach in truly bilingual classrooms? The current bilingual approach to language instruction is surely not equipped to create programs in 40 languages; we can’t even create a decent bilingual program in one language – Spanish. Currently, we’re failing to reach kids who speak the other 39 languages and I say its time to try English immersion and to sharply focus on the instruction of English. This is our role as an education fund – to look after the kids who are the innocent victims here.”

Ben Barton commented, “Frankly, I’m just not convinced that the English immersion approach will yield better results. I think we’re up against the larger issue of immigration reform and this discussion of language instruction programs doesn’t get to the root of the problem – we’ve got a huge influx of illegal, uneducated immigrants flooding our schools and they are taxing our public education system. I don’t believe we’re going to see any of this get better until we have stricter restrictions on illegal immigrants in this state and in this country.”

Andrea Mattaliano concurred, “What worries me is this enormous dropout rate among English language learners. I’m not convinced that either approach to teaching language learners is going to address that, and we all know that a community’s chances for advancement are drastically reduced in proportion to its high school dropout rate. Without a high school diploma, these students have no future in this country. These uneducated youth are going to become liabilities in the work place, and end up populating welfare lines, homeless shelters, drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers, and prisons – all on the public’s dime. We’re never going to get a handle on this problem unless we stop the invasion of illegal aliens.”

Daniel Wiu responded, “I can’t believe you, of all people, think a harder line on illegal immigration is warranted. Andrea, isn’t your father an immigrant from Sicily? This is how our nation was built. Since we founded this country, immigrants – legal or not – have been coming to this country in search of a better life. My parents came for that reason and I can’t see how we improve this country by closing ourselves off to the very immigrants that made the US a world leader. We need to respect the rights

of immigrants and their cultures and bilingual education is one way to do that.”

“I agree,” said Claudia Castro, Mountain Community College president. “If students’ rights as bilingual individuals are limited and they are forced to learn only English, they will end up feeling disenfranchised, dropping out of school and hitting the streets. Is this what we want, to see Hispanics as terrible statistics, adding to our unemployment and poverty rates?”

“That’s what I used to think,” said school board member Maria Vasquez. “I supported bilingual education for years. Eight years ago, I enrolled my own son in the bilingual program at Central Elementary School in Dexter, but I pulled him out in second grade. He wasn’t doing anything academic in those classes. He was bringing home pieces of math schoolwork where he had copied numbers across the paper. At home, he was adding three digit numbers, and even doing some simple multiplication. I was watching him bring home pre-school level work and that was just unacceptable. So I met with the teacher and told her I wanted him taken out and put into an English speaking classroom. I have never regretted it.”

Jorge Garcia responded, “Maria, I respect your decision, but there are many in our Hispanic community who want their children to maintain Spanish. They want their children to retain and be proud of their cultural heritage.”

Maria reacted, “Jorge, I struggled with that. I could have kept my son in a program where he could learn more Spanish and that would have made my husband and me happy. Ultimately, we decided that we wanted our child to come out of the Dexter public schools with the ability to compete for scholarships, and to go to the college of his choice. And to do that, he absolutely needs a mastery of the English language.”

Claudia Castro argued, “My children thrived in their bilingual classes and their Spanish instruction allowed their grandmother to help with their learning at home since I was often teaching evening courses at the college. As educators, we all know how vital home support is for kids. If my kids had been in an English-only program, there would have been no one at home who could help them. Each of my kids were mainstreamed after five years and they are both in college now and still fluent in both English and Spanish. They can move seamlessly between cultures.”

Union President Robert Bennett added, “There’s absolutely no evidence that a person can learn a second language even in the three years that our current bilingual program mandates. Research tells us that it takes from five to seven years to become orally proficient in a second language and by the seventh year, students can approach the reading and writing levels of a native English speaker. So, with direct instruction in the second language, we’re still talking about a seven-year

process. It's simply ludicrous to think that we're going to drop students into an English-only classroom and they're going to instantly pick up English through osmosis."

Superintendent Charlene Walker argued, "I've studied bilingual programs in other cities and states and it seems like everybody says they are doing bilingual education without really knowing how to do it or having any agreement about what it is. All these schools and districts are doing something different and saying 'we're doing bilingual education'. It's no surprise then that when you look at the research, lo and behold, doing bilingual education doesn't seem to be much better than not doing bilingual education. I think it's time to try a new approach and to focus our attention on instruction in English."

Maria Vasquez agreed, "I think culture, tradition, and language are all responsibilities of the family. Families should be making the decisions about which of their cultural traditions should be maintained. The public school system's responsibility is to give students the tools they need to become assimilated, productive members of society. And one of the most important tools they provide is the ability to read, write and speak in English. We have to stop locking students who don't speak English away in special programs that focus on maintaining native languages instead of teaching English."

Board Chair Frank Scott weighed in, "As it stands now, tens of thousands of our students are leaving Dexter's public schools illiterate in English and I believe this is closely related to our refusal to teach them English at a young age. I think Dexter's crime rate and gang participation would significantly decrease if the district took responsibility for this misguided, poorly implemented mistake that we call bilingual education. I think we can safely close the door on this experiment and acknowledge that it just doesn't work in practice. It's time for a new model."

Claudia Castro, Mountain College president, responded, "I think it's important to point out that many of the students who are currently failing and dropping out are not English language learners, they are native English speakers. There are many students for whom English is their first language graduating after 13 years in our schools unable to read or write well. Bilingual education is not to blame for this. It couldn't be – these children were never in a bilingual education program. I think we're looking to scapegoat bilingual education when the real issue is poor schools."

Charlene Walker countered, "It's true that there is much work to be done in the Dexter Public Schools to improve achievement for all students. What I'm concerned with is what works for kids and I haven't seen bilingual education work for many kids. I was talking with a parent last week who graduated from our schools and now has a child in a Dexter elementary school. This parent was a bilingual education student and she never learned English. Now her child is enrolled in our bilingual program and

she wants to make sure the same fate doesn't befall him. She wants us to ensure that her son is proficient in English when he leaves our schools. I don't think that's too much for her to ask of us. We've got to change the way we teach English language learners and I think Question 3 is worth a try – it can't be much worse than what we're already doing."

Professor Harold Turner spoke up, "We're so prone to go to extremes in education – either whole language or phonics, either new math or traditional math. Rather than supporting the one-size-fits-all approach of English immersion, I would rather see us working to identify those components of a language program that, backed by solid research findings, will work in Dexter."

Judy said, "That will have to be the last word, since we are just about out of time. As we know, this is a contentious issue for which there are no easy answers. Let's all take the week to consider our positions, perhaps do some reading and reflecting, and we'll meet back here next week. In the meantime, I will draw up a recommendation for whether or not the Denver Partnership for Children should support Question 3, which I will present at next Tuesday's meeting. At that time you should be prepared to vote either for or against supporting Question 3."

With that, the meeting adjourned and Judy returned to her office. Sitting down to draft a recommendation to the board, she wondered how to proceed as she considered the implications of taking a stand for or against the legislation.

If DPC supported Question 3, it would likely alienate a large portion of the immigrant community as well as the teachers union. It would be difficult to continue many of DPC's professional development programs without the support of the union. And, if a substantial number of teachers stopped participating in DPC programs, it could ultimately affect DPC's ability to secure funding. No donor would want to fund a program that was only reaching a handful of the district's teachers. She also worried that some community members would lump DPC in with the anti-immigrant groups that were supporting Question 3.

On the other hand, if DPC opted to oppose the legislation, it could be construed as supporting the status quo bilingual program. Judy recognized the preference among some immigrants and community members for instruction in their native language and an acknowledgement of their cultures. But it was clear that the bilingual program needed more support and qualified teachers in order to be properly implemented. She wondered if this was what the DPC should be supporting – fixing the current program before jumping into a new one. She considered all of these options as she began to write her recommendation to her board.