

More money for teachers, and forget the kids

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By Richard Miniter, Bridge News

George Louie worried that the biggest barrier to his young son's education would be found amid the crime, drugs and desperation of his inner-city neighborhood in Oakland, Calif. Then he learned what was going on in his son's kindergarten classroom.

Shortly after his son, Travell, started kindergarten at Lincoln Elementary School last September, Louie arrived almost an hour early to pick him up.

When Louie walked into his son's class, he was astonished. The teacher and 22 students were sitting in circle and speaking Cantonese, a Chinese dialect.

His son, an African-American, sat in back of the room with three other students. Because they speak only English, the teacher and his assistant ignored them.

"They're robbing him of an education," complains Louie, a widower and amputee who lives on a Social Security disability pension, welfare and food stamps. "I listened for 45 minutes, and not one word of English was spoken. Not even hello."

Louie went to see Wendy Lee, the school principal. Lee offered to transfer Travell to another bilingual class in which English is spoken part of the time.

In this class, some lessons are given in English and then immediately translated into Chinese, while others are given only in Chinese.

Travell would be one of three or four native English speakers in that class of 27 children. Still, according to Louie, his son would "be getting a third or a half of an education."

Couldn't my son be taught all subjects in English, like the vast majority of American students? Louie asked.

We don't offer full-time English language instruction in kindergarten, said Principal Lee. Besides, there are not enough non-Chinese to make an English class. The school requires at least 26 students to form a new class, and there are only 20 non-Chinese students in kindergarten.

How will my son learn if he can't understand? Louie asked.

Why wasn't I told that my son would be in a Chinese class? Louie asked, adding that state law requires a letter notifying parents before their children are put into bilingual classes.

Lee admits she didn't send the letter on time. "It was my oversight," she concedes. She sent the letter after he complained.

How could the Lincoln School put an African-American in a class composed mostly of people who don't speak English? Every kindergarten class is bilingual, Lee says.

Louie suspects another motive: money. The California state government and the federal government give public schools more money per pupil for students in bilingual education programs. "Travell is being used to fill out the class and get more money for the school. But he's the one paying the price," charges Louie.

The state and federal governments do provide more money for students who know little or no English than for those who speak English well, Lee admits. She wouldn't say how much more money her school received.

Bilingual teachers are paid on average \$2,060 per year more than English language teachers.

The Oakland School District receives more than \$4 million per year in federal dollars for its bilingual students.

This is not an isolated case, critics charge.

"Many children have been dumped into bilingual programs in order to make more money for the school," says Jorge Amselle, a bilingual education expert at the Center for Equal Opportunity. He cites cases in California, New Mexico and Colorado.

The Pacific Legal Foundation, a Sacramento, Calif.-based nonprofit law firm that is representing Louie in court, contends that it has identified more than 20 cases like Louie's in the Oakland School District alone.

"Remember, this is the school district that gave us ebonics," says a spokesman for Pacific Legal Foundation.

Once children are put into bilingual classes, it is often difficult to get them out - even if the only language they speak is English.

When the Denver public school system tried to allow English-speaking students to leave a bilingual program, the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights threatened to cut off federal funds.

A letter from Lillian Gutierrez, an Office of Civil Rights official, spelled out the "bilingual lingual" orthodoxy:

"Determining that a national-origin language-minority student speaks only English, or speaks English most of the time, is not equivalent to determining that the student is proficient in the language skills required to participate meaningfully in an English-only academic environment."

In other words, even if your child speaks English, he must stay in bilingual classes until the government decides that he can "participate meaningfully" in a classroom in which the teacher speaks the same language that he does.

As lawyers and bureaucrats battle over the state and federal regulations, George Louie just wants his son to take classes in English at this neighborhood school. "Is that too much to ask?" he says.

This June, California voters will be able to vote on the merits of bilingual education for the first time in the almost 30-year history of the program.

Known as Proposition 227 or "English for Children," the ballot issue would require access to English-speaking teachers for students like Travell Louie.

"I hope it passes before Travell has to go to the first grade," Louie says.

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