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No Child Left Behind:

The Effects on Bilingual Education in Arizona

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) passed by the Bush Administration in 2002, and Proposition 203 passed in the state of Arizona two years previously in 2000, have been the source of much controversy in the field of education. The effects of both of these policies are still being felt today, particularly in Arizona with the Navajo Nation and the high population of Latin Americans. Both NCLB and Proposition 203 were created to close the increasing gap in academic achievement between white students and their non-white counterparts, and current arguments circle around whether or not bilingual education programs are hindering the progress of ELL students (English Language Learners).

Besides raising achievement and closing gaps between students, NCLB was also intended to hold schools accountable for their success or lack thereof by hiring more highly qualified teachers, requiring schools to hold annual testing, and so on. The policy served as a contemporary replacement of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, passed by President Lyndon Johnson, and allowed the federal government to increase its influence over education. The federal influence has taken away a certain degree of controllability from state and local levels of education as well as parent’s choice, which is also a big source of debate.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Proposition 203 was a policy passed specifically in Arizona, limiting the curriculum available to ELL students and replacing bilingual education with English Immersion programs. While Arizona remains a state that is rich in diverse Native cultures and Latin American cultures, it is severely lacking in the number of qualified bilingual teachers. Modeled after a similar policy passed in California, Proposition 227, Proposition 203 prohibits native-language instruction in all public schools. The initiative for the policy, written shortly before the policy itself was passed in November of 2000, declared that “the public schools of Arizona currently do an inadequate job of educating immigrant children wasting financial resources on costly experimental language programs whose failure over the past two decades is demonstrated by…low English literacy levels…”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Problems with assimilating indigenous cultures into the American public education system date back to the time when boarding schools were becoming popular during the mid-19th century. Boarding schools were the first attempt at forcing white man’s learning upon Indians while simultaneously trying to squash the “Indian” out of them, essentially grooming them to become future citizens of the United States. This was the early solution to what was commonly known as the “Indian Problem.” However, the solution to this problem was in actuality the problem itself. The results of boarding school education, according to an article published in the *Review of Research in Education*, were “[the] breakdown of tribal culture, alienation of Indian parents from the education of their children, and emotional, psychological, and mental anguish.” By the early 20th century, the majority of Indian children were enrolled in white public schools rather than BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) schools, with little to no improvement from the boarding school experience.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The pressure on the federal government to facilitate a shift in Native American education increased dramatically in the 1960s and ‘70s. It was clearly evident that Indian children were failing in academics when compared to the standards upheld by white students, and the first influential report about these statistics was published in 1970. The Havighurst Report “offered data on the academic performance of Indigenous youth and the lack of curriculum that supported tribal languages and cultures in school,” and started the trend for increased awareness about the state of Native education in America[[4]](#footnote-4). Many more reports and initiatives for increased cooperation with tribal communities dotted the timeline between 1970 and 2002. However, research reveals that there was no significant improvement in the academic achievements of Natives. No Child Left Behind was enacted in large part with good intentions to remedy these problems, but the “values, ideas, and priorities embedded in NCLB are not necessarily shared within tribal nations and Indigenous communities.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The causes as to why indigenous assimilation has been unsuccessful on such a large scale range from lack of funding, unrealistic standards, increased diversity levels in public schools, and racism, to blaming bilingual educators themselves. Ron Unz, an American education activist and the man responsible for the passing of Proposition 203 in Arizona stated in one of his arguments for the policy that “bilingual education has failed in its mission to teach children English. By doing so, it has denied thousands of young Americans the opportunity to fully realize the American Dream.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Unz’s opinion is one of many that openly support the policy in today’s education, while others are beginning to realize the extent of the negative effects on ELL students. A popular author and speaker on education, Sir Ken Robinson has also spoken out about this issue. “With programs like No Child Left Behind and its insistence that all children from every part of the country hew to the same standards, we’re putting a greater emphasis than ever before on conformity and finding the “right” answers… [instead of creative thinking].”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Arguably the most important perspective on this issue comes from those who are most impacted by these policies in Arizona: the Navajo Nation. Heritage and community are vital parts of learning and while we don’t think to question this idea for white English-speaking students, cultural traditions and especially languages from the Native American populations are being tragically overlooked and underappreciated. A teacher from one of the Navajo Reservation schools in Arizona commented on the negative impacts of NCLB and Proposition 203 by saying “Since we’re an underperforming school, we’re concentrating more on improving the school according to the standards, and we’re more focused on the standards than working with the students to learn their own language effectively.” Another reservation teacher “described that emphasis of state policy was to ‘completely take the [non-English] language(s) out of Arizona.’”[[8]](#footnote-8)

A case study on how culture and language could be beneficial to academic achievement regarding bilingual Native American students was completed in Rock Point, Arizona, at a community Navajo school. The educators at this particular school developed a “bilingual-bicultural” program in which their students were provided with a complimentary education where they were taught equally in both their native language and English. When the students were with Navajo teachers they interacted completely in their native language and when they were with the English teachers they interacted solely in English. Not only did they show remarkable success in academic achievement when compared to other Navajo schools, “they surpassed their own previous annual growth rates and those of comparison-group students in BIA schools – and they did so by a greater margin each year.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

The solution to these problems is not something that will be easily found due to the complex nature of educational reform and the continual disagreements concerning how to go about that reform. NCLB and Proposition 203 were both intended to be solutions to the growing problem of the gap in academic excellence between white students and the diverse indigenous students, solutions that many people hoped would be successful. Ideas about how to balance cultural education and standards are also fuzzy because how does one go about standardizing culture and creative thinking? Wayne Wright’s article in the *Heritage Language Journal* argues that:

NCLB needs to include the same recognition of the individual and societal values of bilingualism as appeared in the former Bilingual Education Act, and there needs to be a substantial federal commitment to encouraging and supporting programs based on these principles. With such policies in place, schools would begin to view the heritage language of students as a resource to develop, rather than as a problem to be overcome[[10]](#footnote-10)

The validity of this argument is solidified by the fact that the research being done on these issues shows that eliminating the bilingual programs has not achieved any more success than when they were in place.

One step to a solution that has been agreed upon is the increased cooperation and communication between the federal government and the leaders of tribal nations. Tribal leaders “emphasized the need for better, consistent, and meaningful consultation…with the understanding that tribal governments represent sovereign nations.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. Editorial Projects in Education, “No Child Left Behind,” *Education Week*, Aug. 4, 2004, www.edweek.org/ew/issues/no-child-left-behind/ (accessed April 7, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Arizona Secretary of State, *Proposition 203: An Initiative Measure*, 2000 Ballot Propositions, Sec. 1, No. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Donna Deyhle and Karen Swisher, “Research in American Indian and Alaska Native Education: From Assimilation to Self-Determination,” *Review of Research in Education 22* (1997): 114-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Angelica E. Castagno and Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, “Culturally Responsive Schooling for Indigenous Youth: A Review of the Literature,” *Review of Educational Research 78* (2008): 945. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. 946. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Arizona Secretary of State, *Proposition 203,* 2000 Ballot Propositions, Arguments “For” Proposition 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ken Robinson, Ph.D., *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2009), 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Wayne E. Wright, “Heritage Language Programs in the Era of English Only and No Child Left Behind,” *Heritage Language Journal 5,* no. 1 (Summer 2007): 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Teresa L. McCarty, Ph.D., “The Role of Native Languages and Cultures in American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Student Achievement” (policy brief, Kauffman and Associates Inc., Spokane, WA, 2009): 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Wayne E. Wright, “Heritage Language Programs in the Era of English Only and No Child Left Behind,” *Heritage Language Journal 5,* no. 1 (Summer 2007): 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. U.S. Department of Education, *Tribal Leaders Speak: The State of Indian Education, 2010*, Report of the Consultations with Tribal Leaders in Indian Country, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)