

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

March 28, 2002

### **Teaching Children English**

Last week I testified at a legislative hearing on Bilingual Education. It really like, to quote Yogi Berra, “déjà vu all over again.” It was the fourth or fifth time my testimony has been offered over a period of years. In some ways it was like all of the previous hearings, but this year offered a new aspect – a pending November referendum on the issue.

I have worked for many years to change the Massachusetts Transitional Bilingual Education law, a statute from 1971 that requires school systems from Boston to Northampton to offer native language instruction to children from non-English-speaking homes. Until this year the legislature has refused to consider alternatives, ever though a growing body of evidence shows that the mandated programs are failing their intended beneficiaries.

Last summer I seized the opportunity to join with Ron Unz of California and Rosalie Porter of Amherst in supporting “English for the Children.” It is a ballot initiative that dismantles the paternalistic model that segregates children and tries to educate them in their native language before introducing English. As my name became linked with the issue, both acquaintances and strangers called me to endorse the issue because it so intuitively sensible.

Like any proposed referendum English for the Children goes first to the legislature for consideration. This month gave me my first opportunity to defend the petition to other legislators. This is what I said.

Two news stories from the same day were my first exhibit. The Springfield Union-News featured Lukasz Jaroszewicz, an East Longmeadow High School senior who came to the United States from his native Poland as a fourth grader. Knowing no English, he was placed in a regular classroom. He admits, “It was hard, because I didn’t know what the teacher was saying,” but he now tutors classmates in Spanish in addition to being a star athlete and member of the National Honor Society.

A Boston Globe story the same morning featured a high school sophomore from Brighton who is in her fourth year of bilingual education. Her English speech is almost unaccented, but most of her classes are in Spanish. She is quoted saying, “It’s uncomfortable. And I like to be with my friends.” Both students are with their friends, but Lukasz has obtained the tools for English language success.

It is our job to educate non-native children for life in our English-speaking society, to integrate them with other children, to give them the same education that is the right of every other child. No first grader who is born in Massachusetts should be educated in another language; a year of intensive English instruction, “structured immersion,” will allow them to exercise that right.

The existing structure cannot remain an option (as proposed in a compromise bill) because the bilingual education professionals endorse its methods. They will not introduce structured immersion until law requires it.

I urged the legislature to adopt the referendum bill.

My discussion with people throughout our region indicates that the people of Massachusetts do not support language segregation. If the legislature fails to eliminate it they will accomplish that change at the ballot in November.