

# The Fight for Bilingual Education in Houston: An Insider's Perspective

By Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr.

During the 1990s, conservative forces in the country initiated a campaign to eliminate or replace state and local bilingual education policies with English only ones. Proponents of bilingual education challenged these efforts in policy-making arenas, in the courts, and in the streets.<sup>1</sup> The attempt to replace a strong bilingual education program with an English only one also took place in Houston.

The politics of bilingual education in HISD occurred in the context of extreme distrust between the Latina/o community and the local district. This distrust originated in the late 1960s and continued unabated into the 1990s. In the 1960s, for instance, students, middle-class groups, and grass-roots organizations voiced their concerns about inferior educational opportunities for Mexican American children. Local school officials ignored them. In the 1970s, the local school board further alienated the Mexican American community by misusing the “white” classification of Mexican-origin children to circumvent desegregation mandates and pair them with black children. In the late 1970s, HISD established its magnet school program in mostly white areas although all the Latina/o members of the HISD established advisory committee opposed that plan.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1980s, school-community relations worsened because of the board’s unwillingness to address the prob-

lems of the rapidly changing ethnic composition of the district and its impact on the education of Latina/o children. White flight out of the barrios and increased immigration led to the expansion of school segregation and of growing educational inequalities for Latina/o children residing in the East End. School board members ignored these changes and failed to make needed improvements. In the latter part of the 1980s, the board promised to use bond monies to build a new high school on the east side of town, but it failed to do so. The new high school would have relieved overcrowded conditions, especially at Milby and Austin High Schools, both located in the East End.

The pattern of profound community distrust of HISD increased in the 1990s when the board surreptitiously selected one of its own members, Rod Paige, an African American, as the next superintendent of HISD without conducting a national search. Many activists felt that if a national search had been done, a Latina or Latino would have emerged as a viable candidate. During the decade, local members also appointed Latina/o individuals to the school board without seeking significant input from the Latina/o community. The 1999 attempt by board members to pass a new Multilingual Education Policy without significant Latina/o input and with English only provisions reinforced this historic pattern of distrust between the community and HISD.

In January 1999, HISD established a Subcommittee of Bilingual Education to review the research and issues surrounding bilingual education policy. The subcommittee completed its report on May 13, 1999, and soon thereafter presented it to the school board.<sup>3</sup> The report concluded that the current department had increased student performance but argued that much more was needed for Spanish-speaking children to learn English and to achieve their full academic potential. Spanish-speaking children in this year comprised 28% (58,321) of the student population. To accomplish this goal, the subcommittee encouraged scrapping the existing policy that utilized both English and native-language instruction and developing a new one designed to teach English as rapidly as possible.<sup>4</sup> The subcommittee report provided a mission



In 1970, Mexican Americans marched to protest HISD’s classifying Mexican Americans as “white” and pairing them with black students to satisfy desegregation mandates, allowing predominately white schools to maintain the status quo.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.



*Rod Paige served as the superintendent of HISD before becoming the Secretary at the U.S. Department of Education. Many in the Latina/Latino community hoped for a national search for a superintendent that might have led to a Latina/Latino candidate for the position.*

Photo courtesy of the Department of Education.

statement, several core beliefs, and six goals for bilingual education.<sup>5</sup>

On Sunday, June 13, Gabriel Vasquez, a moderate Democrat, and Jeff Shadwick, a conservative Republican, announced in an editorial that the board would propose a new policy or blueprint, as they called it, on bilingual education. The elimination of social promotion and the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test exemptions, along with shifting public sentiment, they argued, required a review of HISD's bilingual education program. Vasquez and Shadwick asserted that students with limited English proficiency must become "fluent in English, educated beyond high school and prepared to be effective citizens." They concluded that the proposed policy would accelerate student performance and the learning of English among limited English proficiency (LEP) children. In other words, it would improve bilingual education in HISD.<sup>6</sup>

Eleven state legislators from the Houston area, including Texas Senator Mario Gallegos and Representatives Jessica Farrar, Rick Noriega, and Joe Moreno, vehemently criticized and opposed this particular proposal. On June 14, they sent a joint letter to HISD Superintendent Paige voicing their concerns over its English only directions and tone.<sup>7</sup> That same day, Gallegos also sent a letter to the board asking its members to pull the item from the agenda at the Thursday board meeting. This policy, he noted, was not an improvement of bilingual education, but an effort to replace it with an English only one. "Not only is this action a veiled attempt to promote the 'English Only Movement' the language in your document is a replica of the California initiative 'Proposition 227,'" he stated.<sup>8</sup> Several days later, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) voiced their opposition to the policy and requested that the item be pulled from the agenda.<sup>9</sup>

The legislators' opposition was influenced by an analysis of the proposed policy by Peter Roos from META, or Multicultural Education Training and Advocacy, Inc., an educational organization heavily involved in the anti-bilingual education efforts in California, and by Cynthia Cano, a staff attorney for MALDEF, the Mexican American Legal Defense Education Fund. Roos argued that, as in the California English only movement, the blueprint "downplays bilingual instruction, while emphasizing the need to

acquire English language 'quickly.'"<sup>10</sup> Cano also argued that the blueprint was "neither multilingual nor bilingual." It was an English only proposal.<sup>11</sup>

Despite this opposition, on June 17, Vasquez and Shadwick introduced the proposal to the board at its monthly meeting and, in breaking from tradition, requested that voting take place on the first reading. Normally, proposed policy changes are presented without any comments on the first reading. They are then presented two more times before board members vote on them. This timetable allows community members an opportunity to comment on the policy. In this particular case, the board wanted to bypass community input and accept this policy on the first reading. Pressure from community groups, however, forced them to postpone the vote until the following month.<sup>12</sup>

The introduction of the proposed policy at the school board meeting enraged the Latina/o community and created unity not seen for many years. It also raised several important issues that guided the Latina/o community's political strategies for the next month. One of these was the exclusion of the community from policymaking. The subcommittee, for instance, developed the policy without any serious input from the two Latinas on the school board and failed to inform them of its progress. The subcommittee also failed to inform or solicit input from Latina/o elected officials about its development of the new policy. This omission on such an important matter was significant considering that the state legislature in general and state legislators in particular were responsible for monitoring bilingual education programs statewide. Appallingly, the decision to develop a new policy was kept secret from the legislators until the legislative session ended. The school board's decision to develop an English only policy without the input of Latina/o legislators was exclusionary and aimed at circumventing established channels for revising school policies through a process of advise and consent. One can only speculate as to why HISD chose this path. But had Latina/o legislators found out about the English only contents of the policy, they would have withdrawn or questioned their support for HISD's legislative agenda in Austin.

Another important issue raised by the community was the rushed nature of the policy-making process. The need to make a quick decision did not provide an adequate opportunity for the community to comment on the plan and to make recommendations for its improvement. In addition to seeking passage of the new policy on the first reading, the school board also decided against having any district-wide meetings. This decision was left up to individual board members or to community groups. The rushed nature of this process and the lack of significant community input raised questions about the motivations for this policy. It also indicated that HISD's stated commitment to strengthen community and parental involvement in the formulation and implementation of school policy was not genuine.

A final concern with the policy was its English only overtones. Latinas/os in the community viewed the English only comments as socially offensive. For some non-Latinas/os, the English only rhetoric embedded in this policy was an innocent way for emphasizing the need to teach English to those who did not speak it fluently.

For Latinas/os in general, and Mexican Americans in particular, it was a symbol of racism, segregationist attitudes, and ethnocentrism. English only rhetoric reminded Mexican Americans of the 1950s, when they were excluded from the public schools, provided a separate and inferior education, force-fed an assimilationist curriculum, culturally demeaned in the classrooms, and punished for speaking Spanish in school. In other words, it suggested a return to the Cold War era of official racism, institutional discrimination, cultural suppression, and structural exclusion.<sup>13</sup>

English only rhetoric for Mexican Americans, in a sense, was analogous to the waving of the Confederate flag for African Americans.

During the next several weeks, the school board voiced its desire to negotiate with the Latina/o community, but those leading the struggle refused to meet unless it removed bilingual education from the agenda for the July board meeting. Despite widespread opposition, the school board engaged in secret negotiations with the Latino Educational Policy Council (LEPC), a new group made up of educators and university professors.<sup>14</sup> The larger Latina/o leadership originally opposed this group, but LEPC soon gained its support.

In the following weeks, the LEPC negotiated with the local school board members, especially Vasquez and Shadwick, and made some important headway in modifying some of the most offensive aspects of the proposed policy. Several significant changes were made. First, the new proposal eliminated much of the English only overtones of the policy. Second, an additive or enriching type of bilingual education was encouraged for all students.

This policy, however, still contained provisions that were legally suspect, educationally unsound, and socially offensive. For example, goal number three of the policy, pertaining to English reading proficiency as the sole criteria for reclassification, did not comply with state and federal policies. It violated a May 19, 1998, agreement between HISD and the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) concerning ways for improving its bilingual education program. Bilingual education policies and the OCR agreement required multiple criteria such as oral and written language proficiency tests in English and in the child's native language, a standardized English reading test, and other measurements be used to exit children out of bilingual education programs. The new policy did not.

Several pedagogically unsound provisions encouraging the acceleration of English language learning remained. Although these provisions acknowledged that children learned English at their own individual rate, they ignored research indicating that the learning of a second language could not be accelerated.

In the midst of these negotiations, LEPC hosted a com-

munity-based, city-wide forum on the proposed policy—the only public forum held on this issue. At the Wednesday, July 14, 1999, meeting held at the Museum of Fine Arts, HISD and its spokespersons reiterated the rationale and arguments in support of the proposed policy. The LEPC, in turn, reported on its progress but reiterated its objections to several provisions and called for additional changes.<sup>15</sup>

By the end of the week, the Latina/o community and every Latina/o organization in the city unanimously opposed the proposed policy. They showed up in force at the July 22 meeting to voice their objections. Every speaker before the board spoke against the board's policy. While individuals were publicly criticizing the policy, one of the LEPC members continued to secretly negotiate with Gabriel Vasquez, the school board member. Vasquez wanted additional English only statements in the revised policy while the LEPC member wanted less. The negotiations ended when it came time to vote. The board passed the measure seven to two. The two Latinas on the board voted against the policy while the rest voted in favor.<sup>16</sup> The members of the audience booed and yelled at the decision. The meeting quickly adjourned after the vote and the audience members were told to leave.

During the next two days, various Latina/o groups met to discuss their next move. No one really knew what the school board had passed since negotiations remained underway until the last moment. After several inquiries by a variety of Latina/o individuals, LEPC, and other community members, the board provided the final copy of the approved policy. To their surprise, the policy reinforced bilingual education in the schools.

The school administration said that the board had approved the policy that was negotiated by the LEPC, not the original one presented by Vasquez and Shadwick in May. This document was a significant improvement over the one presented at the June board meeting, which was narrowly construed, contradictory, and politically rather than educationally driven. It limited bilingual education to only language learning, emphasized English only for limited English proficient children and bilingual education for English speaking children, and ignored the important role



*Milby High School's student body is predominately Mexican American.*

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that the child's first language played in academic achievement and in learning a second language. The political goals of the conservative movement drove this policy.

The revised policy eliminated some of the more objectionable provisions, but not all of them. Because it was a compromise, the policy contained provisions that were both supported and opposed by the LEPC as well as the Latina/o activist community in general. The approved policy eliminated many of the unsound terms in the original document and toned down the English only references. It also expanded the goals and objectives of bilingual education, and it emphasized the importance of the native language to academic achievement and second language learning.

The new mission statement, for instance, now recognized the importance of academic achievement and bilingual fluency for all children in HISD. The core beliefs also encouraged the development of bilingual skills as well as maximizing student achievement and English language fluency. The policy goals, likewise, acknowledged the issue of compliance with federal and state laws, the need to promote gifted and talented programs for LEP children, and the importance of increasing English language learning within established bilingual education programs, and as part of parental choice. They also acknowledged the importance of a standardized curricula and assessment program for all multilingual programs, the need to increase parental involvement and the number of bilingual teachers, and the need to encourage bilingual fluency for all students.

The policy retained the provision of keeping English reading proficiency as the sole criteria for reclassification and other provisions that were legally suspect, educationally unsound, and socially offensive. It also continued to make reference to English only rhetoric and dismissed decades of research indicating that the most successful instructional practices for teaching language to minority children from poverty environments and segregated schools utilized their native language and culture.<sup>17</sup> Some of the community members, for instance, noted that while most research showed that children learned social English within two to three years, they needed anywhere from four to seven years to


learn academic English. The mission statement of the new policy by contrast, did not emphasize this. It suggested that English learning could be accelerated.

Continued reference to accelerated English learning was also found in the set of core beliefs. Under the fourth provision, which indicated that English language proficiency was an imperative, the policy stated that "HISD students must learn to read, write and speak English as rapidly as individually possible."<sup>18</sup> In the fifth, which encouraged fluency in two languages, the policy stated that "HISD should encourage its LEP students to retain and improve their non-English language skills, without sacrificing rapid English language acquisition."<sup>19</sup>

Three goals likewise made reference to the English only rhetoric. For instance, under goal three, establishing English reading proficiency as the standard for transition, the policy stated that HISD would "transition students with limited English proficiency into English as soon as they are able to demonstrate proficiency in English reading. Thereafter, all academic instruction will be provided in English." This provision based exiting decisions on narrow criteria. It needed to include not only reading but also writing, comprehension, and speaking that second language.<sup>20</sup> These narrow criteria denied equal access to other content areas because the children were not provided instruction in the core academic subjects while they learned English.<sup>21</sup>

On August 8, 1999, MALDEF, on behalf of Gallegos and other opponents, filed a grievance with the Office for Civil Rights. This grievance aimed to ensure that HISD would comply with all federal and state requirements for bilingual education as they implemented the new policy.

In response, on September 25, HISD stated that it would obey the federal mandate to keep students in bilingual education classes until they showed proficiency in English reading, speaking, writing, and comprehension. Many activists strongly believed that this essentially voided the new policy's goal of establishing English reading as the exit requirement for leaving the bilingual education program. This chapter in the controversy over bilingual education in Houston officially ended with this action.

This particular struggle showed how community members came together on a specific issue dealing with the education of their children. The policy passed by the board in July was not the one they wanted, but it also was not the one submitted in June. This revised policy, while containing some potentially negative provisions, actually strengthened bilingual education in Houston. It emphasized the learning of multiple languages and mandated the establishment of dual language schools throughout the district. This and other aspects of the new policy indicated that contradiction, conflict, and accommodation were integral to the shaping of educational policymaking in Houston. 

**Dr. San Miguel** is a scholar of U.S. history who specializes in Mexican American Education. He is the author of several books on Mexican American struggles for education in the U.S. and has a forthcoming book with Texas A&M press titled, *Those Who Dared: Ethnic Mexican Struggles for Education in the Southwest from the 1960s to the Present*.



*Mexican American students represent a large percentage of the student body at Austin High School.*

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