

Grappling with English

Phoenix-Talent is doing very well, but a misguided initiative would doom its effort

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It goes without saying that students who enter public school speaking only Spanish should learn English as quickly as possible. How much better it would be if their English-speaking classmates could learn Spanish alongside them.

But wait — that's exactly what is happening in Phoenix and Talent elementary schools' two-way language immersion program. Unfortunately, a misguided ballot measure on the November ballot could bring the highly successful program to a halt.

The two-language program recognizes that students who can't yet speak English well can hardly be expected to keep up in academic subjects such as math and social studies if classes are taught only in English. At the same time, the program pushes non-native speakers to learn English by switching back and forth between the languages in class.

Phoenix Elementary has increased the proportion of instruction conducted in English after graduates of the program had trouble keeping up in middle school. Last year, the breakdown was 70 percent Spanish and 30 percent English, and the year before that, 90 percent Spanish.

This year, students in grades 3 to 5 are taught for a week in Spanish and a week in English, alternating through the year. In grades K-2, the languages alternate every other day.

The program is working: Last year, more than 67 percent of students with limited English proficiency met or exceeded reading standards in the fourth grade, the first grade level at which those students must take the test in English. The state average is 52.8 percent.

And the program is extremely popular. Although it is voluntary, 40 percent of students are enrolled, and the district must allot space in the classes by lottery.

But this popular, successful program could go away if Ballot Measure 58 passes in November. The measure, sponsored by anti-government activist Bill Sizemore, would drastically limit the amount of time students could be taught in any language other than English.

Non-English speaking students entering public school in grades K-4 could be enrolled in a program such as Phoenix-Talent's for only one year, after which they could be taught only in English. For students entering in grades 5-8, the limit would be 1 1/2 years, and for high school students, two years.

At least that's how we interpret the text of the measure.

Section 1 of Measure 58 is titled "English immersion required in public schools." It states that students "shall be immersed in English" after a short period of time.

But the next paragraph declares that "English immersion classes shall be limited to not more than one year, after which time the student shall be taught exclusively in English."

Perhaps the measure's authors could benefit from some "English immersion" — whatever that means to them.

In any case, it appears that the measure's requirement that students be "taught exclusively in English" after one to two years would doom Phoenix-Talent's impressive program.

That would be a shame.