

# Measure 58's goal of English-only classes already a reality

Oregonian

Posted by [sroux](#) September 20, 2008 21:27PM



Doug Beghtel / The

Oregonian Verenise Hernandez, a fourth-grader at Cornelius Elementary, practices reading in Spanish with help from teacher Marcia Camacho. Forest Grove educators say teaching Spanish-speaking students to read and write well in Spanish is the best way to help them become strong readers and writers of English.

Voters are being asked to decide how Oregon schools should teach nearly 70,000 students learning English as their second language.

Measure 58, one of five measures on the November ballot authored by Bill Sizemore, would prohibit schools from teaching English learners in their native language after one year in elementary school or two years in high school.

Sizemore wants to plunge them into all-English classrooms as soon as possible because, he says, schools intentionally delay getting students fluent in English.

His proposal, and the strong opposition it is generating among educators, spotlight how little most people know about the way the children spend their days in Oregon classrooms.

Roughly 85 percent are taught exclusively in English, without any teaching in their native Spanish, Russian, Somali or Vietnamese, an analysis by The Oregonian shows.

They rely on their teachers' gestures, pictures, diagrams and carefully enunciated English words to learn their new language and math, history, science and literature at the same time.

### **Oregon's English language learners**

**80%** are in sheltered instruction, in which students learning English go to regular class with English-speaking classmates but the teacher uses extra visual clues, vocabulary lessons, etc.

**8%** are in short-term instruction in the first language, along with instruction in English, until the student gains basic literacy in the first language plus gains English skills. This is usually done in primary grades.

**5%** are in dual-language immersion programs, in which English-speaking students learn Spanish, Japanese or Mandarin, while native speakers of those languages learn English.

**4%** are in long-term instruction in native language and English so they become and stay bilingual. (This happens almost only in Woodburn and Canby.)

**3%** are in separate ESL classes taught exclusively in English.

*Source: Oregon Department of Education*

The rest of Oregon's English learners are taught part of the day in their native language, in either Spanish, Russian or Chinese.

Most are in classes exclusively for students learning English. But some, such as those in immersion magnet programs in Portland, are in classes designed to help both native English speakers and those learning English become bilingual.

The idea behind teaching English learners partly in their own language is twofold: Students learn to read and write faster when taught in their first language, and those literacy skills then transfer to English. During the years students are still shaky in English, they can learn meaty academic content in their native tongue.

A coalition that includes every major education group in the state is working to defeat Measure 58.

Schools agree that getting nonnative speakers proficient in English is the paramount goal for those students, says Diana Fernandez, director of English as a second language instruction for Portland Public Schools, where about 90 percent of English learners are taught only in English. She acknowledges that some students still languish with only intermediate English skills.

But the approach to teaching English should be based on research and on individual needs of students -- whether they can read and write in any language, for example, or whether they have a

learning disability, says Wei-Wei Lou, director of English as a second language instruction in Beaverton schools.

Although it seems counterintuitive, teaching students to read and write in their first language, then transitioning them to English, leads to students who are the strongest at reading and writing English, says Perla Rodriguez, principal of Cornelius Elementary.

Research consistently finds that teaching students literacy in their own language makes them stronger readers of English, agrees Claude Goldenberg, a Stanford professor who directs the Center for Language Minority Education and Research.

A time limit, as would be set by Sizemore's measure, makes no sense, Beaverton's Lou says. "All children are very different. So if you say cap it at one year or cap it at two years, that's not appropriate."

### **Most-common approach**

Unlike other states, such as California and Arizona, Oregon has never been a battleground over bilingual education, in part because the number of students not fluent in English was small.

That population has grown in the past decade, however, and now almost one of every eight students in Oregon is learning English as a second language.

Under federal law, all 68,000 English learners are guaranteed two things: They are entitled to special teaching in English to help them write, read and speak English, and they must be taught the same core academic content as native English speakers.

Oregon school districts have developed a host of different approaches to do that.

By far the most common is what's known as "sheltered instruction," which calls on teachers to use gestures, visual aids, repetition, simplified terms and other cues to teach math, social studies, writing and other subjects. There is no teaching in or translation to students' native language.

With 40 different languages sprinkled across hundreds of Oregon schools, it is impractical to teach each student in his or her native language.



Michael Lloyd / The Oregonian Westview High teacher Brian Squire gives Abdi Somow, a refugee from Somalia, feedback on a writing assignment. Like most Oregon students learning English as their second language, Somow is taught exclusively in English with no teaching in or translation into his first language. Students who arrive in the United States as teenagers with little formal education in any language face a steep learning curve to master reading and writing English.

At Beaverton's Westview High, for example, Brian Squire's seventh-period class has 23 students who speak 11 different languages -- Cantonese, Somali, Hebrew, Russian, Mandarin, Japanese, German, Spanish, Taiwanese, Korean and Uzbek. Most of them are recent arrivals. The biggest group, Spanish speakers, make up one-third of the class.

The school cannot afford and could not find qualified teachers fluent in all those languages. So Westview groups students by their English level and gives them targeted help in English with biology, global studies and other subjects as well as English instruction.

Squires speaks slowly, gestures emphatically, rephrases and repeats his key messages and tries to tie new ideas in English to familiar ideas and details from students' home cultures.

"I can understand my teacher, just sometimes it's hard," says Alice Morgenva, who arrived from Uzbekistan six months ago after her family won a green card that allowed them to immigrate. "I know information, but to write in English, it's hard for me."

### **Dual-language instruction**

School districts in Woodburn, Forest Grove and Salem-Keizer -- where at least 20 percent of the students speak Spanish as a first language -- together account for about 60 percent of all Oregon students who get taught in a language besides English for part of the day.

#### **How are students taught English in Oregon?**

Exclusively in English: **85%**

Part of the day in English, part of the day in their native language: **10%**

In a dual-language immersion program, where some students learn their first language plus English, and native English speakers learn to become bilingual: **5%**

*Source: Oregon Department of Education*

Other school districts, including Portland, Corvallis and Phoenix-Talent, offer popular immersion programs that allow native English speakers to gradually become bilingual in Spanish, Mandarin or Japanese -- and allow speakers of those languages to gradually learn English -- while they learn academic subjects in both languages. Woodburn has switched to that approach in primary grades and will move almost entirely to dual-language immersion one grade at a time.

In most Forest Grove elementary schools, students who speak Spanish at home are taught reading and writing in Spanish for 90 minutes a day, along with a 30-minute English language development class.

Once they have mastered reading and writing in their own language -- by fourth or fifth grade for those who start in kindergarten in Forest Grove -- they are put into an English reading and writing class.

Fourth-grader Alberto Acension came to Cornelius Elementary in second grade. Last week, he was taught in Spanish about techniques for strong, independent reading. "Leer a si mismo" ("to read on your own") read the chart he helped create. He read a biography of Cesar Chavez in Spanish.

Later that day, Alberto learned how to search for books in the school library, eagerly tracking the librarian's directions in English. He checked out a book about soccer, written in English.

"In my house, I already know how to speak Spanish," he says. "In my class, I speak English, too. It's fun."

Which language does he like to read in? "Both," he says.

Forest Grove students show strong results in English. More than half moved up a full level in English proficiency last year. By high school, 60 percent of Latino students read at grade level -- nearly the statewide average for all Oregon sophomores.

But Woodburn, which also teaches its students to read and write in their first language, posts poorer results. After five years getting help with English, only 13 percent of its students were proficient. Only about 40 percent of its Latino 10th-graders passed the state reading test.

That's why the district has switched its approach to be more like Forest Grove's, Superintendent Walt Bloomberg says. The district knows it must do better at getting students fully proficient in English.

### **Sizemore's reasoning**

Sizemore says he got the idea for his ballot measure from a pair of teachers who told him their students were sidelined for years in classes for English learners when they could have done fine with regular all-English lessons.

Schools receive nearly \$3,000 in additional money from the state for each student in English as a second language. Sizemore says many schools keep students in the program just to get the money.

"My message is that if you're going to come here, we want you to be successful, and you have to learn English, because it's the gateway to success," Sizemore says. "Instead, for the first two years here, we teach them to be proficient in Spanish or Laotian or whatever their language is. That's nonsense."

Educators say he is misinformed -- no Oregon students are taught in Laotian, for instance, and every English language learner is taught in English for part of every day.

Eduardo Lopez, a second-grader at Cornelius Elementary, is glad he gets to learn about animals and other second-grade subjects in two languages. It allows him to communicate with people who speak only Spanish, like his parents, and only English, like many of his schoolmates.

"That way you can understand and talk to them," he says.

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