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Policy Comparison

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POLICY COMPARISON

Many states across the United States have adopted a ‘no bilingual education’ policy. That means schools cannot teach content to students in their native or most easily understood language. For example, according to the Code of Virginia, Chapter 829 (1996), under §22.1-212.1: Obligations of school boards, school districts are not required to offer education in any other language than English (Commonwealth of Virginia, 2005). As a result, many school systems in Virginia have opted for the English-only stance. However, the code does not explicitly ban bilingual education in the classroom.

Richmond Public Schools

Before the 2020-2021 school year, Richmond Public Schools had an English-only education with a Partial-Immersion Program that placed English Learners in Spanish-bilingual Foreign Language, Math, and Science classes and English-only English and Social Science classrooms (Richmond Public Schools, 2017). However, last school year, FY21, RPS established Newcomer Academies at George Wythe High School and Boushall Middle School. These academies target students with little English language competency to focus on “project-based, bilingual learning,” and teachers will instruct in a bilingual format with bilingual educators (Richmond Public Schools, 2019). In addition, RPS is looking to hire more bilingual educators. Although RPS has not stated that all schools can teach in languages other than English, they have made it clear to the public that we are moving in that direction by addressing the need for better communication with our Spanish-speaking community (NBC 12 News & Hargrove, 2020).

According to the Virginia Department of Social Services, “Virginia’s Latinx population is projected to increase to 1.6 million by 2030, at which point it will represent 17% of the total

state population” (Virginia Department of Social Services, n.d.). In 2020, Virginia established an Office of New Americans to assist the growth of immigrants in the Commonwealth. In addition, Richmond Public Schools is beginning to address the continuing development of immigrant students, primarily Spanish-speaking, in the district.

Miami-Dade Public Schools

Although English Language Learners only make up approximately ten percent of the student demographics in Florida, 71% of students in Miami-Dade Public Schools (MDPS) are Hispanic, and the primary language of 72% of those students is Spanish (New America, 2020; Miami-Dade Public Schools, 2020). According to the Statistical Highlights 2019-2020, the primary language spoken at home for 57% of students in the MDPS system is not English (Miami-Dade Public Schools, 2020). Even though Florida allows bilingual education, it does “not “make every effort” to provide native language assessment for languages present to a significant extent” (New America, 2020). Florida education lawmakers use the state’s constitution to prohibit services in languages other than English; however, the statute used only says that the established language of Florida is English, and it does not address education in any way (Ballotpedia, 1988). The Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) estimated that Florida’s immigrant population would continue to grow since their initial report in 1995 (The Center for Immigration Studies et al., 1995). Between 1970 and 1995, the immigrant population in Florida increased by 207.7%. The Census Bureau estimated that the Hispanic/Latino population for Florida would be at 26%, while the city of Miami would be nearly 73% in 2020 (US Census Bureau, 2019).

MDPS addressed their students' needs by creating a Pathways for Biliteracy in Elementary Education taskforce (Izquierido, 2016). The task force's mission was to review and provide recommendations to recreate the district's world language program. As a result, MDPS moved forward with their bilingual program in 2016 by purchasing materials for students to access foreign-language instruction and a "revamped" World Language program that includes Bilingual School Organization (BISO), International Studies (IS), International Education (IE), and Extended Foreign Language (EFL) (Izquierido, 2016; Miami-Dade Public Schools, 2021). The MDPS website for the Department of Bilingual Education & World Languages demonstrates the seriousness of their efforts.

Comparing the two districts, it is easy to see why MDPS has moved swiftly to address bilingual education as their population demands it. However, while RPS has just begun to address the need for bilingual education, Richmond could learn from Miami-Dade by mimicking their website and steps to create a much more inclusive program to meet those needs. RPS has recently begun actively searching for bilingual educators and has even started looking at recent graduates in Puerto Rico to supplement schools with the highest Spanish-speaking students. MDPS has not needed to do this as many teachers are bilingual, if not the majority. The contract between MDPS and the United Teachers of Dade (UTD), Section 7: Minority Evaluation Needs Program, specifies that the M-DCPS program "is primarily designed to attract teachers who are bilingual Haitian-Creole/English." The document indicates positions that are required to be bilingual (Cornell University, 2003). As to how RPS is attempting to retain teachers in the bilingual education field, it is unknown. Like many school districts, both RPS and MDPS are struggling to find and retain qualified teachers. According to Miami Today News, MDPS hit an all-time low since 1996-1997 with 23% fewer teachers (Miami Today News & Scheckner, 2020).

The reasons given in studies across the US indicate that teacher retention issues are the same: lack of teacher preparation, lack of administrator support, low salary, and adverse school climate (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014). In an interview with RPS Chief of Staff Michelle Hudacsko, she stated that they are working to address those issues with new teacher academies, mentorships, professional development, adjusting the salary scale, and hiring experienced educators (Hudacsko, 2021). In addition, the MDPS human resources website has multiple new teacher induction and onboarding, teacher leadership and development, and a teacher leadership academy that focuses on recruiting, retaining, recognizing, and rewarding “the highly effective teaching force needed” (Miami-Dade Public Schools, n.d.).

Although neither schools system directly states that hiring and retaining bilingual educators will impact the issues of student absenteeism and dropout rates, proponents of bilingual education believe that EL students who learn core content in their native language and take English as a foreign language will thrive in the school setting and will show progressive student outcomes. Teachers who speak the same language as students allow students to feel less frustrated and interact with students and families better. RPS is initially looking to hire more bilingual teachers at the beginning of the process, while MDPS has been hiring bilingual teachers for years. The teacher retention issue is not directly related to teacher retention but can be affected by other matters involving retention.

RPS needs to use school districts with growing EL populations as templates and guides on what is working and what not to do to effectively impact student outcomes and obtain, maintain, or retain qualified bilingual teachers. However, it is a national problem affecting all school districts across the US, and one school district can impact their practices but not a nationwide shortage.

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“I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.”

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