


## **New York State and the Puerto Rican Community Join Forces to Educate English Language Learners/Emergent Bilinguals**

*by Laura Kaplan*

New York is unique among states in terms of its progressive and enlightened policies on behalf of its English language learners/emergent bilinguals. In addition to guaranteeing English as a second language instruction to all of its ELLs, New York State education policies have long recognized ELLs' home languages as instructional assets and consequently has guaranteed bilingual education programs for ELLs aimed at maintaining and developing the home language and attaining English proficiency as well as ESL classes. While California passed an anti-bilingual education proposition in 1998, known as the "English for the Children" initiative by its supporters, and Arizona and Massachusetts passed similar English-only propositions in 2000 and 2002, New York effectively prevented this movement from gaining any foothold in the state; its exemplary policies and principles upholding multiculturalism and biliteracy include Commissioner's Regulations Part 154 (1981), the Seal of Biliteracy (2012), Common Core Bilingual Standards (2012), the Dignity for All Students Act (2013), and Blueprint for English Language Learners (ELLs) Success (2014). While these education policies show New York to be a state with a vision of bilingualism and biliteracy, their enactment was not smooth. Committed educational leaders and a determined movement initiated by the Puerto Rican community in the 1960s helped ensure that policies were put in place that preserved students' native language at the same time as they learned English. Today's English language learners, who speak Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Hindi/Urdu, Korean, and Russian, can thank the Puerto Rican community for the New York State Education Department's firm commitment to their native languages in the form, for example, of bilingual education classes and native language Regents testing that lasts through today. This article provides a brief history of those efforts.

Puerto Ricans began to migrate to the continental United States in large numbers after WWII, and their main destination point was New York City. By 1964, Puerto Ricans comprised 9.3% of the total New York City population (Bean, Horne, Lobo, & Salvo, 2005). The New York City public school system, however, was totally unprepared for an infusion of Spanish-speaking students. Immersion into English-only classes led to devastating consequences for Puerto Rican students. In 1966, 87% of Puerto Ricans in the United States 25 years or older had dropped out of high school, and by eighth grade the dropout rate was 53 percent (García, 2009, p. 169).

 **THE PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY 1940s-1960s**

Puerto Rican Population in NYC		Puerto Rican Students in NYC Public Schools	
Year	Total*	Year	Percentage**
1940	61,463	1956	28% of Manhattan public schools
1950	254,880	1958	15% of the total NYC school population
1960	612,257	1966	21% of the total NYC school population
<b>Dropout Statistics***</b> 80-85% of the population in the 1960's			
(*) Source: Garcia, 2011; Sanchez-Korrol, 1994. (**) Source: NYCDOE, 1958; Castellanos, 1983. (***) Source: Velez, 2008.			

In response to the bleak educational conditions facing their children in New York City schools, the Puerto Rican community began to organize. In the 1950s and 1960s, community leaders formed multiple educational advocacy organizations, including the Puerto Rican Educators Association, United Bronx Parents, the Puerto Rican Forum, and ASPIRA, an organization dedicated to promoting Puerto Rican educational attainment and leadership. From the beginning, one of their non-negotiable demands was the implementation of bilingual education in the schools, both as a means of facilitating educational achievement and of preserving the cultural/linguistic heritage.

By 1968, the Puerto Rican community's lobbying efforts paid off at the federal, state, and city levels. In that year, the federal Bilingual Education Act, or Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, was passed; New York State approved its own Bilingual Education Act; and P.S. 25, New York City's first Spanish-English bilingual elementary school, opened its doors. The legislation brought funding and resources to support the implementation of bilingual education, and programs were established throughout the city. The number of new bilingual education programs, however, failed to meet the demand of English language learners who needed them. The Puerto Rican Forum found that in 1970, only 27% of over 100,000 students who required bilingual education were receiving it (García, 2011), leading ASPIRA and the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund to file a lawsuit against the New York City Board of Education in 1972. As a result of the ASPIRA Consent Decree, bilingual education programs were created to accommodate an additional 60,000 Spanish-speaking children who did not yet speak English (García, 2011).

Following the lead of the groundbreaking organizing to establish bilingual education as a right for non-English speakers in New York and nationally, the New York State Department of Education took up the mantle and established forward-thinking policies, mandates, and

initiatives for ELLs/emergent bilinguals that recognize the native language as a strength to build upon. Some of the most noteworthy measures include the following:

- 1970: New York State Education Law s. 3204 was amended by the legislature to allow school districts to provide instruction in languages other than English—that is, to allow bilingual programs.
- 1972: The Regents Position Paper on Bilingual Education came out, stating: “The Regents reaffirm their dedication to the principle that all children without regard to differences in economic, religious, racial, or national backgrounds, be provided the opportunity for equal education.”
- 1980: Teacher certification in bilingual education and TESOL.
- 1981: Commissioner’s Regulations, Part 154.
- CR Part 154 states that a bilingual education program must be provided in “each school district which has an enrollment of 20 or more pupils with limited English proficiency of the same grade level assigned to a building, all of whom have the same native language which is other than English.”
- 1983: Bilingual/ESL Technical Assistance Centers (BETACS) were established and located in BOCES and colleges throughout the state to provide technical assistance and professional development.
- 1984: Two-way bilingual education programs.
- Late 80s/early 90s: New York State rejects the “English Only” movement.
- 2011: Regional Bilingual Education Resource Networks (RBERNs) were established to replace the BETACs.
- 2012: Seal of Biliteracy – Governor Andrew Cuomo signed a bill to recognize high school graduates who demonstrate proficiency in multiple languages by affixing a biliteracy seal to their diploma and transcript.

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