

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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### **Bilingual Education**

The Springfield bilingual education program, legally mandated as Transitional Bilingual Education, has come to my attention as I talk with teachers throughout the district. They have told me of a program staffed at times with instructors of limited English ability, a program that fails in its mission to provide a timely transition from education in a native language to education in English. They describe a program in need of change. Because legislation controls the program, legislation is required to alter it, and last year I filed a bill to do just that.

The bill requires proficiency in English of bilingual teachers and requires parental consent before a child is placed in a bilingual program. It provides flexibility to schools in program offerings, and it removes the requirement that a separate curriculum of history and culture be offered to students. All in all, it seemed to me like a modest proposal. But not to the advocates of bilingual education, as I found out last week.

The legislature's education committee held a hearing on my bill last Thursday. It was scheduled in the State House auditorium because of the expected audience. I testified for the bill as did Abby Alers, a charming young woman from Holyoke who feels her education was harmed by that city's bilingual program. Positive testimony was also offered by Timothy Sheehan, a bilingual teacher in our state. The Commissioner of Education and the Chairman of the Board of Education made generally favorable comments, and that was the end of positive testimony.

This is a recap of the days hearing. Many of the education professionals who testified work in the administrative levels of the program. One Ph.D. stated that proficiency is in the eye of the beholder, so English proficiency should not be required of teachers. Another professional said that the program needs a stronger (does that mean larger?) administrative system in order to improve. A Harvard Ph.D. told me that parents cannot choose a child's educational placement as wisely as educators can. They all agreed that my bill is very bad. If the legislature wants to do something, it should enact a bill that requires legislative approval before any regulatory alternations can be imposed by the state.

There may have been 150 people in the audience, many of them schoolchildren who were spending a full day sitting in the room, applauding testimony when it supported retention of the status quo. It was a field trip for them, and it seemed ironic to me that other children who were at the State House were touring that historic building. I wonder if such use of class time is typical of the education that is delivered to bilingual students.

The education committee will decide the fate of my bill in a few weeks. If they decide based on the volume of testimony, it will be heard no more. If they take into consideration the comments of Abby Alers and Tim Sheehan, two ordinary citizens without vested interests, it might be advanced in part or in whole to the house of representatives for the entire body to decide the merits. I will let you know what happens.