

Beacon Hill Byline – By Rep. Mary Rogeness

May 29, 2001

Changing Bilingual Education

Tuesday of this week was an anniversary of sorts in my legislative career. It marked the third time I have presented testimony about the need for change in the Massachusetts system for educating children whose native language is not English. Here is an explanation of my reasons for attempting one more time a task that has resisted earlier endeavors.

First of all, I am doing it for the kids. Massachusetts passed a law 30 years ago establishing a rigid method for teaching these children. Known as Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE), it requires a school district with more than 20 children speaking the same foreign language to establish a TBE program. The curriculum is to be taught in segregated classrooms, and it is expected to provide a transition over three years to enable the students to learn in a mainstream English classroom setting.

The children, even if they start school in kindergarten, are to be taught basic skills in their native language. That law has not worked. Students who have gone through the system and told me their education began only when they were withdrawn from the program.

Second, I am doing it for the teachers in our schools. A TBE teacher from Lowell testified in support of the specific provision in my bill that requires “bilingual” teachers to be proficient in English. He teaches a fourth grade class that has completed third grade taught by an instructor who cannot speak English. Teachers from our part of the state have spoken to me about the lack of learning in their schools’ TBE classes.

Finally, I am doing it for all of us. All children need to graduate from school prepared to function in our English-speaking workplace and society.

Our schools and our legislature have gone along with the existing system until recently. The MCAS testing system has forced educators to examine the program, and successful referendum petitions in other states have forced the legislature to face public questions about it.

All students are required to take MCAS tests, and the first three years of its administration have shown educational deficits among the bilingual population. Even without legislative changes, Springfield is moving away from the model established in the 1970s and toward a sheltered, English-based classroom.

Voters in California and Arizona have rescinded their states’ bilingual mandates. Many California educators predicted disastrous results from the repeal, but the two years since its repeal have shown marked improvement in the skill levels of bilingual students.

Common sense supports the early integration with non-native students with their neighborhood classmates. Learning deficits from existing methods endorses it. Successful initiatives in other states also back a legislative change.

Other states have left that change to the voters. I have made my presentation to the Education Committee with the hope that Massachusetts will end this failed experiment in the same legislature that established it. Wish me luck.