



Orlando Sentinel

February 4, 2020

Teach students English, but let them take tests in a language they understand | Editorial

By Orlando Sentinel Editorial Board

In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria's devastation, scores of Puerto Rican families made their way to Florida.

Already traumatized by the hurricane's destructive power, Spanish-speaking kids were enrolled in Florida schools, which expects them to take tests in English.

How? How can a child who may have spoken nothing but Spanish their entire lives be expected to answer questions to an assessment test when they don't understand the words?

In Florida, the answer is, "Tough luck, kid."

Here, in one of the nation's most culturally diverse states, more than a quarter-million students are tested only in English, regardless of their proficiency.

It's a cruel, pointless exercise that a pair of bills now in the Legislature could remedy.

The bills would require state education officials to adopt native-language versions of Florida's various assessment tests — starting with Spanish and Haitian-Creole — and offer those to kids who aren't yet ready to take the tests in English. It wouldn't mean developing new tests, it just means providing them in the two languages understood by about 80% of the kids trying to master English.

Nothing complicated here, just an effort to let kids take standardized tests in a language that isn't gibberish to them.

Lots of other states — about 30 of them — already do this, including deep red Texas, Louisiana and Nebraska.

Florida contends it doesn't have to make testing accommodations because of the state [Constitution](#)'s provision that says English is the official language. Somehow, that's been twisted into some type of prohibition against testing kids in other languages.

"Florida's constitution does not provide for the delivery of governmental services in languages other than English." [the state told](#) the U.S. Department of Education in 2018 as part of a report under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act.

Strangely, that provision of the constitution doesn't exclude Spanish translations [on the governor's website](#), or the [attorney general's website](#), or the state [Division of Emergency Management](#). The state Department of Education [offers help by phone](#) in Spanish and Creole. Counties provide voting ballots in Spanish, too. We'd go on, but you get the idea.

Florida noted in its report to the feds that 6.8% of the state's students who took the statewide reading test were Spanish-speaking students who aren't yet proficient in English. Another 2.1% were students who speak a wide variety of other languages.

In the state's judgment, nearly 9% of the student population isn't significant enough to warrant giving tests in those students' native languages. In part, the state contends, because that would hinder them in learning English.

"It becomes a crutch for students," state Sen. Manny Diaz, who heads the Senate Education Committee, [told Education Week](#) in 2017.

That argument is absurd. Florida is correct to emphasize the importance of learning English. It's essential to a student's academic and workplace success. English needs to be learned quickly so that students can thrive as soon as possible. There's no question about that.

But how are teachers to assess a student's knowledge at a given point in time by shoving a reading or math test in front of a kid that she can't possibly understand? It makes no sense.

National education scores show how poorly English-language learners do on standardized tests compared with other students. Last year's National Assessment of Education Progress results showed gaps of 24 points in [average fourth-grade math scores](#) for kids still learning English and 35 points in [fourth-grade reading](#).

Twin bills in the [House](#) and [Senate](#) would simply give parents and students the option of taking an assessment test kids can understand, without slowing a student's ability to learn English. English instruction continues, unabated. But now the students' teachers might have a better handle on how much they know about algebra, and where they need help.

The bills have bipartisan support, with several Republican lawmakers from South Florida backing them, as well as Republican state Rep. Rene Plasencia of Orlando.

And yet, well into this year's lawmaking session, the bills haven't gotten a hearing.

Why? The testing stakes are high in Florida. They're used to assess students' progress and can determine whether they graduate. They're treated as a big deal in Florida schools, and kids know that, making it all the harder on kids when they see a test with words that make no sense.

If testing means so much, shouldn't the Legislature at least consider ways to ensure students can take the tests in a language they understand, while continuing to learn English?

Testing shouldn't be another culture war battle, with kids as collateral damage.

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