

¡ESPAÑOL?

Judge needs to hear case for bilingualism

Let's just say state District Judge Samuel C. Kiser had a little difficulty embracing the notion of cultural diversity.

Ruling in a child custody case involving Hispanic parents in Amarillo, Judge Kiser ordered the bilingual mother to speak to her 5-year-old daughter in English because not doing so would mean she was "abusing that child and ... relegating her to the position of a housemaid."

Despite the judge's later apology for a "poor choice of words," his ruling has brought the wrath of the Hispanic community. The decision sends a disturbing signal about the broad powers the courts are willing to assume to ensure a monolingual and monocultural society.

Before their separation, Timothy Garcia and Martha Laureano had agreed to share the responsibility of teaching their daughter to speak. The father would talk to the child in English, while the mother would converse in Spanish.

Hispanic parents often use this technique to make sure their children keep their native language while becoming acclimated to their English-speaking environment.

Educational and linguistic research confirms the fact that, regardless of the language used, children who learn the basic skills well at an early age will experience success in school. A bright student isn't intellectually restrained by the language he or she understands.



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Randy Mack Bishop/The Dallas Morning News

For all his judicial wisdom, however, Judge Kiser was convinced that primarily speaking Spanish to the girl would virtually guarantee that she would become a maid. Like many Americans, the judge's views have been shaped by a litany of media reports that portray Hispanics as a burden to society.

Perhaps the following facts would have persuaded Judge Kiser to see things otherwise:

- Hispanics have long recognized the importance of learning English.

Although steady immigration assures us that there always will be a Spanish-dependent segment of Hispanics in the United States, the 1990 National Latino Political Survey confirmed that 58.4 percent of Mexican-origin citizens spoke primarily English at home, 26.7 percent spoke both languages and only 14.9 percent spoke primarily Spanish at home.

- Knowing English is no guarantee of getting a good job in the United States.

Industrial demands, technological developments, employment discrimination and a host of other factors can influence job opportunities at any time. While it is true that Hispanics with a higher proficiency in English typically get better jobs and pay than Hispanics with less proficiency, employment discrimination often leads to better jobs and pay for whites than similarly qualified Hispanics.

Clearly, English skills can't insulate ethnic minorities from that reality.

- By contrast, Spanish-language proficiency can lead to better job opportunities and pay for tomorrow's job

seekers.

By 2020, the Census Bureau projects that Hispanics will grow to 51 million in the United States, including 5.2 million in Texas. Coupled with the global market opportunities created by the North American Free Trade Agreement, the demand for bilingual professionals literally is exploding in many industries.

As a result, *both Hispanics and non-Hispanics* should be encouraged to develop a proficiency in Spanish and other languages.

Judge Kiser isn't alone in his beliefs about language development. Many Hispanic parents also mistakenly think a child's use of Spanish at home will interfere with the development of English-language skills. Certainly, Mr. Garcia raised such a concern in his effort to cast doubt on Ms. Laureano's parenting skills.

It is critically important for Judge Kiser and others to realize that intellectual stimulation can occur in any language and that Hispanic children have the capacity to learn more than one language.

Moreover, parents should have the sole discretion to choose how their children will be intellectually stimulated at home. The courts must resist the temptation to counsel Hispanic families on linguistic theory and expected career opportunities.

As for Judge Kiser, there still is hope his views will fade over time as increasing numbers of Hispanics choose judicial careers over housekeeping jobs.

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