



EDWARD T. RINCÓN

# Bilingual benefits

Dallas school district could take  
a lesson from advertisers

**H**iring practices in the Dallas school district, as in many public agencies, seem disconnected with the changing demographics of the customers that it serves.

Of the total student enrollment of 158,059, fully two-thirds, or 98,858, are Latino. More important, most of these Latino students' parents are foreign-born and experience difficulty communicating with the district's largely English-speaking, monolingual workforce.

**Editorial: What the board should consider, 18A**

This growing linguistic disparity undermines the ability of Latino parents to influence their children's performance and makes the job of educating Latino children riskier than it needs to be.

This month, DISD trustees will vote on a proposal submitted by trustee Joe May that addresses this disparity. In schools in which 50 percent or more of students have limited English proficiency skills, the proposal would require principals to become proficient in Spanish within three years at the district's expense. Mr. May believes that Latino parents would become more involved in their children's education if they could communicate more effectively with their school principals, leading to improvement in their children's achievements. Not all DISD trustees, however, support the proposal and point to the lack of evidence supporting the plan's goal. The proposal, however, deserves consideration for two reasons.

First, numerous studies of Latino adults show that more than 80 percent of those not born in the U.S. prefer to communicate in Spanish when given the choice. Why should this matter? When communicating in their dominant or preferred language, Latinos are more likely to comprehend and act on important information. The advertising industry has recognized this concept for many years and uses it to shape the buying behavior of Latinos.

Second, a principal who can communicate school policies and programs in Spanish will be more likely to capture the attention of Spanish-dominant parents and establish higher levels of trust and rapport — another important advertising concept known as “message credibility.” Hence, Latino parents who are more informed and trusting of school leadership may be more likely to influence their children's school performance.

The research conducted by the school district, which concluded that bilingual principals have no effect on achievement, was poorly conceived. The study did not measure the extent to which bilingual principals used Spanish. It just might matter whether these bilingual principals spoke Spanish once a year or more frequently. It appears that district researchers also overlooked factors, other than test scores, related to achievement — such as increased contacts by parents, greater parental involvement in the PTA and improvements in student attendance, grades and discipline.

The Dallas school district is not alone in its reluctance to realign its hiring practices. Health care, transit, emergency response and law enforcement agencies also have maintained a primarily English-speaking workforce despite radical changes in their communities' demographics. This can have serious consequences for the quality of life of all residents who speak limited English: confusion in using the transit system, more medical mistakes, slower response times to emergency situations and the questionable use of deadly force.

Because Latino residents pay their share of the taxes that support such agencies, their linguistic needs should be accommodated as well.

Dallas school trustees have an opportunity to reverse this trend by supporting Mr. May's proposal and sending a message to the broader Dallas community that speaking the language of your customer is an important priority.

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