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**Language Minority Students:
Challenges and Promises**

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There are two distinct challenges to the education of students who come to school with proficiency in a language other than English (so-called "Limited English Proficient," or L.E.P. students):

- (1) providing opportunity to attain high levels of academic achievement even as they develop English proficiency; and
- (2) enabling them to fully develop functional bilingualism.

The first is a simple question of equity, reinforced by Federal civil rights and equal educational opportunity laws. As we move to elevate the level of intellectual demands in schools as a whole, we must fully recognize that all students are to be included in this endeavor. The second is a question of what we do with the natural resource that these students bring to society, i.e., high levels of competence in foreign languages from all over the world that are attained only at great cost and limited success when they have to be learned from scratch by native speakers of English.

These challenges and promises should not be confused with each other. Each must be vigorously pursued for the good of the society. Both of these goals are attainable by virtually any given child. This conclusion is clearly supported by theory and an army

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of reinforcing empirical studies of cognitive and language development. But the obstacles to attaining high academic learning and full bilingualism are formidable.

On the academic learning end, all of the problems associated with crushing poverty descend upon the L.E.P. student. The vast majority of them attend schools with high concentrations of poverty, where it is not difficult to find a long list of problems -- such as those documented in Jonathan Kozol's Savage Inequalities -- that disrupt and puncture the human potential.

Although depression may be fully justified in this situation, there are positive steps that can be taken to benefit L.E.P. students. The most important is to ensure that the state education content standards be made accessible to these students, using strategies ranging from instruction in the native language to specially tailored pedagogy. Regarding instruction in the native language (the so-called "transitional bilingual education" approach), it is important to bear in mind that the research clearly shows that this strategy in no way delays the development of English proficiency, and can even accelerate it.

Another important step is to ensure the full inclusion of these students in the local and state accountability system that is set up around education standards. Exclusion of L.E.P. students from accountability has been a perennial problem, and as the educational system moves more toward an orientation based on performance and outcomes, it becomes imperative to hold schools and districts responsible for all students.

On the bilingualism side of the issue, although there is a lot of evidence about the feasibility of dual language instruction in all kinds of settings, the major obstacle is the public perception that speaking a non-English language, especially among immigrants, is somehow disloyal or un-American. As Joshua Fishman, an observer of ethnic languages in the United States, once remarked: "Many Americans have long been of the opinion that bilingualism is a 'good thing' if it was acquired via travel (preferably to Paris) or via formal education (preferably at Harvard) but that it is a 'bad thing' if it was acquired from one's immigrant parents or grandparents." Yet study after study document the foreign language incompetence of the nation, and underscore the fact that our best avenue to wealth in this area is through the active promotion of the languages of the world richly represented in the language minorities within our very borders. A school superintendent once said, in denying a request that foreign languages be taught in high school, that "If English was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for you." Silly as it may sound, this is a perspective that substantially remains in public opinion, and one that business and social leaders competing in a global economy can ill afford.

The diversification of society is well upon us. Governors are in a clear position to assert their leadership in bringing together the education, business, and community stakeholders to address the challenges and promises brought by language minority children.