

Robert H. Leos, Ph.D., P.O. Box 92066, Austin, TX 78709-2066
report@robertleos.com Phone: 512-914-5998 Fax: 512-892-1781

A Conversation With Joe J. Bernal, Ph.D.

By Robert H. Leos

Joe J. Bernal, Ph.D., is moving on to new challenges after 10 years as a member of the State Board of Education (SBOE). During his tenure on the SBOE, Dr. Bernal has served on each of the committees—Planning, School Finance/Permanent School Fund and Instruction (he chairs the Committee on Instruction). In addition, he is a former Vice-Chair of the SBOE.

Taking on new challenges is not new to Dr. Bernal. Following his service in World War II, Dr. Bernal has been a social worker, teacher, principal, assistant superintendent, State Representative, State Senator, adjunct professor, and SBOE member. According to his biographical sketch on the Texas Education Agency web site, Dr. Bernal was the primary author of legislation that “provided elementary teachers a 45-minute planning time period; created free statewide kindergarten for some five-year-olds; established The University of Texas at San Antonio; authorized the first minimum wage law in Texas; and expunged from state statute all



Joe J. Bernal, Ph.D.

laws supporting segregation of the races. He also authored the legislation that created a dental school and nursing school at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.” Equally impressive as the work is the compilation of the *Joe J. Bernal Papers, 1942-1981*, which reflect over 40 years of service to his state and country. The papers are housed in the Benson Latin American Collection at The University of Texas at Austin.

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Dr. Bernal agreed to discuss some of the issues that have been at the heart of his efforts in education for many years. In the conversation, he also offered a glimpse of what lies ahead for him and for Mary Esther Bernal, former San Antonio Independent School District administrator, member of the school district's Board of Trustees, and his wife of 50 years.

His Early Involvement in Bilingual Education

I served on the NABE (National Association for Bilingual Education) board for about seven years so I was very acquainted with the discussions that were going on nationally in the 1970's. And bilingual education has been a contentious issue since then. Advocates supported a maintenance model because they could see the advantages of learning two languages. Governmental insiders supported a transitional model which would end the program at a particular elementary grade level. Opponents raised a red flag stating they did not want to support teaching 64 foreign languages. Advocates, mostly Hispanic, countered that it would involve mostly Spanish because Mexico and the United States shared hundreds of border miles. Also, because Hispanics dropped out in large numbers. Other language groups crossed oceans to get here and their acculturation would take two to three generations. Such a process with Hispanics would take longer being that Spanish is used fluently on both sides of our southern border.

Switzerland, as an example, has no official language. They officially speak German, Italian, and French because these countries border the Swiss. No prejudice there. However, here we had to deal with a "no Spanish rule" which was highly discriminatory against Tejanos. Historically, Mexico's wars with Texas and the United States certainly added to it.

Why Bilingual Education Has Remained Primarily Transitional

Bilingual education here has remained a transitional program because Texas law

states that its purpose is to learn English. The question is, where does the use of the child's home language stop and an all-English program begin? Federal Judge Wayne Justice, who ruled against the state in 1981, called for a K-12 bilingual education program to offset 50 years of discrimination against Mexican American school children.

Dual Language Bilingual Programs

Dual language programs in Houston and San Antonio, as in border towns and cities, have had great academic success using both languages throughout the elementary grades and secondary schools in some. The most effective have been where English speaking Mexican Americans are included with limited English proficient (LEP) children. State test results (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills-TAKS) show that both groups have made great academic advances in reading, writing, and math . . . in English! Having both LEP children and English speaking Mexican Americans in the same classroom has worked quite successfully. However, very



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little credence has been given to the fact that the use of native language instruction really improves reading and math in English. Dual language programs are proven programs. The question is, when will they become available to a greater number of limited English proficient children? The perplexing high dropout rates among Hispanic children would surely be diminished.

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Research in Bilingual Education

Let me tell you about the significance of this article (referring to “Achievement of English Language Learners—What the Research Tells Us” by Claude Goldenberg, Education Week, Published July 26, 2006). We started with a gut feeling about this and now the National Literacy Panel and researchers from the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) have concluded that: (1) Instruction in the primary language aids achievement; (2) Good instruction for English-language learners is similar to good instruction for other English-speaking students; and (3) English-language learners require instructional accommodations.

We’ve been saying that the use of the native language can enhance the learning of English. Now, according to the Education Week article, you have five meta-analyses that conclude that “teaching reading skills in the first language is more effective in terms of second language achievement than immersing children in English.” According to Mr. Goldenberg, “No other educational practice with which I am familiar can claim support from five separate meta-analyses

Dr. Joe J. Bernal

B.A. Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas

M.Ed. Our Lady of the Lake, San Antonio, Texas

Ph.D. The University of Texas at Austin

Dr. Bernal was elected to the Texas House of Representatives in 1964 and to the Texas Senate in 1966. He served in the Texas Senate until 1971. Bernal also taught in the public schools and retired as Assistant Superintendent of the Harlandale Independent School District in San Antonio, Texas. In 2001-2002 he served as President of the 1,200-member San Antonio Retired Teachers Association.

Joe J. Bernal, Ph.D. was elected to the State Board of Education in 1996 and re-elected in 2000 and 2002.

conducted by researchers across the ideological spectrum.”



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Plans for 2007 and Beyond?

“I’ll probably dedicate some time and do some writing. I’ll zero in on bilingual education and dropout. I don’t know how well I’ll do; I really don’t. I’m also thinking of setting up a blog where people can tap in on critical issues and keep up that way.”



Author’s note: The Bernal family will travel to Europe in 2007 and will remain active in several professional organizations as well as community and church activities.

References

Link to web site, *Joe J. Bernal Papers*, 1942-1981. Benson Latin American Collection, The University of Texas at Austin

<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utlac/00170/lac-00170.html>

“Improving Achievement for English-Learners—What the Research Tells Us”

By Claude Goldenberg

Education Week, Published July 26, 2006

See “Links” at <http://www.robertleos.com> for information on previous issues of *The Report*.

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