

Sealing the Deal for Biliteracy

I enjoy the diversity and beauty the U.S. has to offer, especially when it comes to heritage and immigrant populations and their native languages. As a second-generation American whose parents grew up speaking Polish at home, yet who chose not to teach it to my siblings and me, I've always felt a twinge of envy when I meet people whose parents did continue both the language and cultural traditions of their countries of origin. Often our country insists immigrants adapt and "leave the old world behind." That is certainly what my grandparents wanted for my parents as they adapted to the "American way of life" for most of the 20th century.

But times have changed, and both business leaders and educators have begun to recognize the importance of tapping into the 350 languages spoken here. Yes, learning English is an imperative to succeed in the U.S.—and the rest of the world—but there is no reason why we shouldn't promote both English and a native or second language.

It seems I'm not alone in my belief. There has been a quiet yet powerful and progressive trend taking place across the U.S. in state capitals, where legislatures are passing a State Seal of Biliteracy. The Seal is awarded by an individual school, school district, or county office of education to students who have studied and attained high proficiency in two or more languages by high school graduation. Language skills are measured by national exams.

Students who receive the Seal may have a gold seal placed on their transcripts and diploma, be awarded a medal, or have a simple line added to their transcripts. But the result is the same: proof of biliteracy to college admissions offices and future employers. The Seal of Biliteracy acknowledges students' hard work and achievement

in their pursuit of a new language. Any student who masters English and a second language, be it a native language spoken at home or a world language studied in school, can be awarded the Seal.

The Seal began as a movement by parents, teachers, education advocates, and civil rights groups in California both to improve education for non-native English speakers and to encourage language study in schools. The coalition helped implement the program across the state, and in 2011, California became the first state to pass legislation around a State Seal of Biliteracy.

Since then, 12 states have passed legislation creating a State Seal program: Texas, New York, Illinois, New Mexico, Washington, Louisiana, Minnesota, Washington, D.C., Virginia, Indiana, Nevada and Hawaii.

Tireless lobbying efforts of parents, teachers, and other education advocates have progressed 15 more states closer to passing legislation.

Parents are crucial to the success of the State Seal of Biliteracy. The Seal supports our goal of preparing children for today's global marketplace. It encourages language learning from an early age through high school, rewarding those who master a second or third language. A Seal for high school seniors not only appeals to colleges and employers, but can save money for parents by eliminating language credits at the university level.

I started getting involved as a professional and parent when I learned about the Seal from colleagues in Illinois, Indiana, and Minnesota and have been

actively engaged with the Connecticut group working toward the Seal in our state. Here are some ways you can get involved:

Ask your district school board about the program. In states that have already passed legislation for a State Seal, it is still up to individual school districts to adopt the program. Talk to the district board about incorporating the program in your district. Approach them with a coalition of parents, teachers, and education advocates so they can understand how important the issue is.

Inquire about the Seal in your child's

Parent's Corner

school. As more parents ask about the Seal and how their sons and daughters can attain the merit, more schools will begin considering implementing their own program. High school parents especially should ask about the program if their children can pass tests in English and another language, but also to provide them with an incentive to continue studying Spanish, French, German, Mandarin, or other languages available throughout their four years of high school.

Contact your state representatives. Call, write, or visit your state representative to convince him or her of the importance of the Seal of Biliteracy, and to start a bill that would create a state-sponsored program. They don't cost

much—if anything—to run, but the student benefits are great.

Advocate for mandatory world language learning in your school and/or district K-12. Whether you have a full or partial language program, show your support with teachers, principals, PTO/PTA, and board of education members. Encourage your children to take the subject just as seriously as others. If you have no program, create a group of like-minded parents who want to build a language program and start advocating. Studies show that language learning comes more easily to those whose brains are still in the development phase—up until roughly 13 or 14 years of age. Parents with children in elementary schools should push for early language education since the Seal requires these programs to survive.

Gather together with families who speak another language at home. Heritage speakers are great supporters of the Seal. They pass their language along to their children who are able to communicate verbally in the language, but may not be able to pass a writing or reading test. The Seal of Biliteracy enables these students to become completely proficient.

The Seal of Biliteracy encourages language learning from an early age and celebrates it—something that has disappeared in today's school districts across the country as language programs are cut just when we need them most. Get involved. Make a difference. Join the movement.

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