

February 2012

What are the implications of the Common Core and the Understanding Language Initiative for bilingual education?

We know the best research evidence indicates that instructing ELL students bilingually strengthens their academic content knowledge and skills. We also believe bilingualism and biliteracy are twenty-first century skills for global citizenship and competitiveness, and that ELLs represent a natural resource for fostering language competencies in American society. A thoughtfully planned and well-implemented bilingual education program clearly contributes to students' developing the college and career-ready capacities envisioned in the Common Core.

There are two major challenges to realizing this resource for all our students: political will and systemic capacity. Americans continue to be wary of non-English languages despite the nation's immigrant history, and also believe that English language acquisition is impeded by what is perceived as pampering in the native language. Political will varies and attitudes toward bilingualism change slowly. For communities that do value bilingualism, the challenge of systemic capacity must be addressed by preparing teachers to provide language-rich environments that ensure academic and interpersonal competencies in both languages, and by providing instructional materials in the native language that are aligned to the Common Core. Comprehensive assessment resources also need to be developed in multiple languages. None of this is unrealistic, but communities must value their linguistic resources enough to commit firmly to their development.