

**Education of Limited English Proficient  
Students in California Schools:  
An Assessment of the Influence of Proposition 227  
on Selected Teachers and Classrooms**

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**Abstract**

This pilot study provides documentation on policy- and practice-based questions regarding the implementation of Proposition 227 in eight selected but representative districts. Focusing on teachers' reactions to Proposition 227, this study examines how teachers both shape and are affected by Proposition 227 implementation. Proposition 227 was intended to place a premium on English language development in a highly uniform and prescriptive manner throughout the state. Our initial study reveals that the nature of Proposition 227 implementation has a great deal to do with teacher ideology.

When 227 passed, I felt anger. I was really pissed off. I mean they keep attacking education, so in that respect teaching was difficult. But in other ways, I felt more charged and more committed to do bilingual education. They are not going to stop me from doing what I need to do. (fifth grade teacher from district 6)

I am really glad the proposition passed. Because the longer we kept the students in Spanish, the more we kept them back. (third grade teacher from district 5)

In their examination of the success and failure of a century and a half of American school reform attempts, noted reform scholars and educational historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995) claim that Americans “have translated their cultural anxieties and hopes into dramatic demands for educational reform” (p. 1). The passage of Proposition 227 represents the latest manifestation of public hope and anxiety, but—as scholarship on school reform has clearly indicated (Cuban, 1993; Rowan, 1990)—attempts to change educational institutions and educational practice do not always have their intended results. Reform attempts are complicated by the nature of schools as “buffered institutions” and the political and social climate in which the reform effort takes place (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In addition to political and institutional factors which influence the nature of reform attempts, teachers play an important role in resisting, appropriating, and adapting elements of reform.

The largely autonomous nature of the profession and a professional socialization process which has been described as “sink or swim” have been highlighted as reasons why reform attempts seldom are enacted as they are planned (Lortie, 1975; Rosenholtz, 1989).

However, as the opening interviews excerpts indicate, when it comes to teacher reactions to Proposition 227 all teachers are not created equal. For example, for the teacher in school district 6 who rebuked the voting public’s recipe for change, Proposition 227 served to strengthen his commitment to bilingual education. For the teacher in school district 5, Proposition 227 allowed her to abandon primary language support for her students and adopt the English-only provisions. The dramatic difference in their responses to the passage and subsequent implementation of Proposition 227 raise two important questions: First, what perspective can be built to account for the extreme differences of these two and other teachers’ reaction to Proposition 227?; second, once a perspective that accounts for these differences is built, what is its relevance in understanding the nature of Proposition 227 as a reform strategy? In answering both questions, we hope to draw lessons about the nature of Proposition 227 as a reform attempt and to build an understanding of its influence on classroom practice.

### **Theoretical Frame: Understanding Teachers’ Role in Top-Down Reform**

While district, state, and federal reform is nothing new to public schools, the idea of direct intervention from the electorate in the workings of public schools is a significant departure from past reform attempts. This research, which builds on open-ended interviews with 32 teachers in eight districts across California, argues that seeing Proposition 227 through the eyes of teachers offers a clear look at how Proposition 227 is behaving as reform and its long term impact on the education of language minority students. A generation of reform scholarship has grappled with the question of what types of reform work best. Although the field is not in complete unanimity, a picture has emerged which has questioned the potential success of top-down reform strategies—that is, reform attempts that come from with-out rather than with-in the institution of schools (Cuban, 1993; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Rowan, 1990). These reforms, it has been argued, have met with limited success because they ignore important realities about the structure of schools as institutions. Because top-down reform stresses increased bureaucratic control and oversight, it has been less successful. Rowan (1990) has argued that reform based on control strategies is more likely to fail because it damages teacher commitment to overall school goals. Further, such control strategies ignore an important reality about the organization of schools and the teaching profession. Lortie (1975) convincingly argues that the cellular organization of teaching—the reality that teachers work in virtual isolation with little or no

professional interaction or supervision—creates a situation of a highly individualistic and autonomous profession. To address these problems with reform, Rowan (1990) concludes that for reform strategies to work they must be based on plans which seek to build teacher commitment through collegiality rather than control. Collegiality and commitment, argues Rowan, move teachers away from a situation where they are merely dependant on their own resources to resolve educational issues they face.

The implementation of Proposition 227 as a reform strategy falls in line with past top-down reform attempts. Proposition 227 was presented by the voting public as a solution to a problem that schools were unable to address on their own. The outwardly negative reaction of teacher unions and teacher associations to the law indicates that many key education professionals saw the Proposition 227 as a top-down reform attempt.

The contrasting tone and message of the opening excerpts indicates that the way Proposition 227 is functioning as a top-down reform strategy is vastly different for the two teachers. While past top-down reform attempts have met with limited success because of schools as “buffered institutions,” teachers ideologically supportive of the English-only provisions of Proposition 227, as in the case of the teacher from district 5, seem more likely to adopt measures of the reform. Woods (1994) argues that when top-down reform attempts are not in direct opposition to teacher ideology, teachers are more likely to completely adopt the reform. Because teachers are the final line of implementation of any reform attempt, a theoretical frame must be built that allows us to understand how their reactions to the law will influence and shape its implementation.

Although each generation of reform scholarship has come closer and closer to examining teachers’ roles in the reform process, reform has generally been viewed as something done *to* or *for* the teachers (Fullan, 1991; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). Even Fullan (1991) and Hargreaves (1993), who tend to take a more active view of teachers’ role in the reform process, tend to frame teachers as a group, not as individuals whose unique characteristics will impact the shape of reform. But as the introductory interview excerpts indicate, teachers see Proposition 227 as far more than something being done *to* and *for* them.

A group of readings that has moved away from merely framing teachers as a collective and generic group in the reform process emerged in work examining England’s 1988 National Curriculum Initiative. Osborn and Broadfoot (1992) and Woods (1994) adapt a dynamic conception of the reform process and view the Curriculum Initiative as site of struggle. Rather than focus on teachers as a generic whole, this body of literature argues that new policy decisions must be mediated through and by teachers: “The way that teachers translate new initiatives into practice are dependant upon their prior beliefs and practices” (Vulliamy & Webb, 1993, p. 21). Woods (1994) examined specific ways that teacher biography and entry into the profession might cause teachers to resist or appropriate particular reforms. Teachers who resisted the national reform attempt had a clearly defined idea of what the needs of their students

were—needs they felt were not being addressed by the new National Curriculum Initiative. Based upon their past experience the resisting teachers concluded that the new curriculum offered nothing new and useful for their students.

Building from a perspective which accounts for the role that individual teachers play in the success or failure of reform attempts, we examine how teachers' reactions to Proposition 227 and the context in which they teach simultaneously shape the influence the new law is having on classroom practice and tell us a great deal about how Proposition 227 is functioning as a reform attempt.

## Research Plan

In order to explore the nature of Proposition 227 as a reform attempt, this study used data collected from a semi-structured interview conducted with 32 teachers in eight districts (see Appendix for implementation procedures and demographic information of the eight district samples). The interviews centered around the following five policy- and practice-based questions:

1. How was Proposition 227 being implemented at the school and classroom level?
2. What types of training did teachers receive specific to their district/school implementation plans?
3. How was classroom instruction affected as a result of Proposition 227 implementation?
4. What effects has implementation of Proposition 227 had on students?
5. How were social and professional relations among major school actors (district level personnel, school administration, teachers, and parents) affected as a result of implementation?

While this pilot study was not able to answer the above questions in significant detail, the data collected do provide an initial snapshot of how Proposition 227 is being implemented in classrooms serving LEP students and how teachers are affected by and are affecting this implementation. In addition, this early work has laid the foundation for a more substantial and more expansive longitudinal study of policy significance. The design of this planning work and the eventual longitudinal study will take advantage of the "natural" experiment produced by the statewide presence of Proposition 227 and the State Board of Education's decision to implement this proposition in the fall of 1998. Eight school districts (identified for confidentiality purposes as districts 1-8) and two elementary schools, each with a 30-50% LEP student population were selected for this study. The districts were selected for their geographical representation in the state and represent both urban and rural school districts. Two teachers from each of the 16 schools in the study were interviewed. Teachers were nominated for interview by principals.

## Results: Emerging Teacher Responses to Proposition 227

Focusing on understanding teacher reaction to Proposition 227 as both an outcome *of* and contributor *to* the nature of the reform, we have identified three types of teacher reaction: outward defiance, clarification of pedagogical purpose, and anxiety in the face of climate change. Each type of reaction tells us something about the individual characteristics of the teachers in the sample and something of how the proposition is functioning as a reform strategy in the respective districts and schools in the sample.

### *Outward defiance*

In districts that pursued parental waivers (three of eight districts) as an implementation strategy, a group of teachers took civil disobedient stances to the provisions of the law which prohibited primary language instruction. Teachers in this category reported that they would rather go to jail or leave the profession altogether than switch to the English-only/immersion models outlined in Proposition 227. An eighth-grade teacher from a school in district 6 framed his outwardly defiant stance in relation to his work with three recent immigrants: “They couldn’t tell me not to give these students the Spanish textbook. They’d have to stick me in jail. I would go to jail.”

Because these teachers worked in district and schoolwide contexts that were supportive of bilingual education, they were not fearful of lawsuits or other sanctions. In one case, a teacher in school district 6 actually welcomed legal action. Offering himself as a sort of constitutional test case of Proposition 227, he said, “I would actually welcome being sued because it would make public what a sham 227 is. I would welcome a suit just to see if we are really as committed as we say we are—easy for me to say now, but I think I would stand up for what I believe.”

Teachers who reported this outwardly defiant response had striking similarities in a host of individual characteristics including: entry into the field of teaching, ideological and political beliefs, and current pedagogical approaches. For example, many of the teachers in this group commented that they knew they wanted to be bilingual teachers from a very early age. Six teachers in this category connected that desire to racism and xenophobia they had experienced as students. Their individual similarities as well as their similar reaction to Proposition 227 correlate with the policy research chronicling England’s National Curriculum Initiative (Osborn and Broadfoot, 1992; Woods, 1994). Teachers who resisted Proposition 227, like their resistant British counterparts, made pedagogical decisions not in response to reform demands but in relation to their understanding of the educational needs of their students. The teachers who took outwardly defiant stances toward Proposition 227 translated their own teaching and personal experience into action—aiding their districts and schools in pursuing and obtaining parental waivers and continuing primary language instruction—when it came to allowing the English-only provisions of Proposition 227 to filter into their classroom practice.

Teacher defiance and resistance to Proposition 227 offers some indication of how the new law is functioning as a reform strategy in the three districts in the study that pursued waivers as an implementation strategy. In these districts, there is an ideological alignment among district, school, and teacher perspectives on primary language instruction. A teacher from a school district which implemented the waiver explained it this way:

I think bilingual education is absolutely necessary because it maintains a sense of identity. I think all children should grow up bilingual. But I think for people who are learning English as a second language that staying bilingual keeps the family stronger. It keeps communication within the family stronger. I think also, from what I can tell, that the kids who have the strong skills—reading and writing—in their primary language are the kids who really do well academically overall. (Teacher from district 7)

Although teachers, district personnel, and school administrators may have articulated their beliefs in slightly different ways, the similarities in their support of primary language instruction was a significant factor in the form that Proposition 227 implementation took in their schools.

It is significant to note that we did not observe any teachers taking the outwardly defiant stance in schools or districts that made decisions to implement the English-only/immersion provisions of Proposition 227. Teachers seemed to gain strength from working within institutions that buffered the reform attempt to fit into existing beliefs and practices. The teacher reaction in these districts demonstrates that when a top-down reform attempts to fundamentally alter teaching practices which are bolstered by both district and teacher ideology, the reform may not achieve some of its intended consequences. When the provisions of Proposition 227, which attempted to eliminate primary language instruction, met teacher ideology that ran counter to this goal, the result was increased ideological and political commitment to the goals of primary language development.

### *Clarification*

For many teachers in the study, Proposition 227 implementation was a clarifying force in the way they conceived of their main purpose in the classroom. Teachers in this category had two very different reactions which were influenced by their individual characteristics and the contexts in which they worked.

Teachers who worked in districts or schools that implemented the English-only/immersion provisions of Proposition 227 saw the law as an outside influence that helped them clarify their long standing doubts about the benefits of native language instruction. These teachers saw Proposition 227 in a positive light and credited the law with helping them do something that they had long wanted to do—“push English.” A teacher in district 8—which decided against pursuing waivers—reported that because she “never really believed in the

effectiveness of bilingual education,” she was very willing to implement the English only provisions of Proposition 227.

Although Proposition 227 was perceived as an outside influence, the rate of acceptance of the law’s English only/immersion provisions and teachers’ commitment to the spirit of law shows how a top-down reform can achieve its intended goal when it is consistent with teacher beliefs. This was the case with schools and teachers that were never pedagogically or ideologically committed to primary language instruction before Proposition 227. The new law served to legitimize their doubts:

It wasn’t until this year that I realized how much they [students in bilingual classes] were lacking. In hindsight, I think the bilingual kids were really being neglected. The old program was a real disservice to them. (Teacher from district 5)

Schools where teachers saw Proposition 227 as clarifying their pedagogical mission related to emphasizing English, were characterized by negative overall climates toward primary language instruction. Proposition 227 did not represent an outside reform attempt in conflict with past beliefs and practices. The spirit of the law was consistent with certain schools’ and teachers’ way of seeing things. Consequently, Proposition 227 was able to achieve its intended political goal of elimination of primary language instruction.

A second group of teachers within this same category had a very opposite reaction. Many teachers in districts and schools that maintained their primary language programs through the parental waiver process rejected the public intrusion into their classrooms. The passage of Proposition 227 and the struggle over its implementation worked to strengthen teachers’ commitments to primary language instruction. Teachers who were ideologically committed to primary language instruction before Proposition 227 reacted to the proposition not with a decreased commitment to overall school goals, but with renewed energy to continue what they felt was right. During the 30-day waiting period, teachers exercised these commitments. A teacher from district 4 reported: “I shut the door and taught in Spanish anyway. I did what I felt was right.” Similarly, a teacher from district 2 reported:

I think because I’ve tried to keep the . . . impact of 227 out of my classroom as much as possible, it hasn’t really impacted my students. If anything, it’s strengthened my resolve to at least give them as much primary language as they can have before being forced to mainstream if that ever comes about.

Similar to the teachers who took a civil disobedient stance to the law, these teachers reacted to the proposition in direct relation to their pedagogical beliefs about the effectiveness of primary language instruction. By obtaining parental waivers and continuing primary language instruction, they drew upon their prior teaching experience to do what they felt was right for their students.

### *Anxiety in the face of climate change*

The preceding two types of teacher reaction were characterized by a certain level of consistency among district, school, and teacher perspectives on Proposition 227. In districts and schools that pursued waivers, teachers' prior commitments to primary language instruction were strengthened based upon the implementation decisions made by their districts. In districts and schools that took Proposition 227 as an opportunity to eliminate bilingual programs, a group of teachers—whose ideological commitments to primary language instruction were not strong—were eager to adopt the English only provisions of the law. In sum, teachers acted very predictably when there was an ideological consistency among district, school, and teacher views on primary language instruction. It was not the case that districts, schools, and teachers all viewed Proposition 227 in the same way. In cases where there was a large discrepancy between attitudes toward bilingual education teachers reported feeling anxiety and the frustration of working in an overall negative school climate. When teachers ideologically committed to primary language instruction worked in contexts where Proposition 227 had exposed previous ideological fault lines, the result was an extremely tense situation. A teacher from district 8 commented that there was a sense of fear about a lawsuit at the district level and “that trickles down into the classroom.” This sense of fear and instability has surfaced as teachers negotiate the shape of the law. A teacher from district 4 explained:

I must tell you that this [Proposition 227 and its implementation] has aggravated frustrations a lot. Because now they are feeling like “the law says no Spanish, so why are you pushing it.” So internally, 227 has caused a lot of problems and it's meant that some teachers who are below me (in grade level), are doing English instruction more aggressively, and of course did not pursue the waiver.

Beyond the social tensions created by the new arrangement, this teacher lamented the educational cost of students who were caught in the middle of the ideological tug-of-war.

In addition to school tension, some teachers reported a great deal of anxiety working in environments where they felt they needed to continually monitor both their use of language and the types of educational materials used. In district 8, teachers reported that district and site administrators would frequently enter classrooms to “police” language use. Teachers reported being closely monitored with the purpose of ensuring that their use of Spanish did not exceed the amount specified in the districts implementation plans.



## **Conclusion: Understanding Proposition 227 as a Reform Strategy**

At surface level, the diversity of reaction to the implementation of Proposition 227 does little to clarify the way law is influencing the education of California's language minority students. What does emerge from the varied responses is that when teachers "shut the door" a host of factors contribute to how they resist, mediate, implement, and appropriate elements of Proposition 227 into their classroom practice. The two key factors that this research has highlighted are the individual characteristics of teachers—including their reasons for entering the field of teaching and their own educational experiences—and the course of implementation taken by their districts and schools.

The teacher reports of civil disobedience and renewed commitment to primary language instruction indicate in some districts that Proposition 227, like many top-down reform attempts, is not achieving its politically intended result: the elimination of primary language instruction. In these districts and schools, Proposition 227 has not penetrated the buffered institution of schools because of the ideological and pedagogical strength that bilingual education enjoys. Cuban and Tyack (1995) comment that "preserving good practices in the face of challenges is a major achievement, and sometimes teachers have been wise to resist reforms that violated their professional judgement" (p. 5). It seems that the group of teachers whose commitments to primary language have deepened are following this course.

While we see hope in this sense, the other types of teacher reaction—a clarification of pushing English, and anxiety—are quite lamentable. It seems that in districts and schools which did not have particularly strong primary language programs for their language minority students, the English only/immersion Proposition 227 was accepted by teachers as a pedagogical "magic bullet." We are concerned that the relative ease of acceptance of Proposition 227 in certain schools and districts has legitimized what might have been questionable practices for language minority students, such as in district 5 where these practices seemed to be justified by the school's adoption of the English-only provisions of Proposition 227. The school had switched to a skills-based decontextualized method of teaching reading. Students with little grasp of the English language struggled in classrooms where phonics and writing drills were used. Rather than consider an alternate curriculum to address these student difficulties, teachers and administrators at the school decided that language minority students should receive curriculum one or two grades below their chronological grade level. In the spring of 1998, most first-grade language minority students were working in the pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten reading curriculum. Third grade students were working in the first and second grade curriculum. In both classrooms, student and teacher discussion surrounding literacy texts were very minimal. Teacher-led discussions focused on simple recall questions to which students seldom responded with more than three- or four-word phrases.

At the time of the observations, the school was making plans to create a K–1 repeater class for many of the schools' language minority students. All of these approaches to the education of language minority students were a part of the schools' implementation of the English-only Proposition 227.

A second concern relates to the negative and adversarial climate created in some schools as a result of Proposition 227 implementation. We are concerned about the possible deleterious influence on the professional health of teachers who find themselves in teaching situations where they are constantly forced to monitor their language use.

These results are not surprising. Proposition 227 in its manifestation is a top-down school reform agenda, which when related to instruction have had limited, if any, lasting affects on schooling (Cuban & Tyack, 1995).

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## Appendix

### *1998-99 Study of Proposition 227: District Profiles*

	Implementation Procedure	Type	Total Enrollment	Major Ethnic Groups	School Lunch	% LEP
1	Eradicated Bilingual Education	K-8	11,592	Asia 44.9% Hispanic 42.1% White 11.0%	60.9%	46.1%
2	Maintained Bilingual Education covertly	K-12	53,462	Black 51.7% Hispanic 21.7% Asian 18.2%	66.7%	31.6%
3	Choice	K-12	133,687	Hispanic 34.4% White 29.3% Black 16.9%	63.2%	28.0%
4	Choice (waivers)	K-12	78,470	Hispanic 43.6% White 22.8% Asian 21.1% Black 11.1%	70.8%	33.1%
5	Negotiated Choice EO and M	K-12	3,519	Hispanic 62.8% White 34.2%	57.1%	32.6%
6	Maintained	K-12	61,174	Asian 40.8% Hispanic 20.9% Black 16.8% White 12.7%	52.1%	31.8%
7	Maintained	K-8	6,480	Hispanic 93.0%	95.8%	79.5%
8	Eradicated BE implemented SEI	K-12	19,47	Black 34.3% White 22.6% Fi. 21.0% Hispanic 15.1%	40.1%	9.7%
Explanation of Terms: EO English Only M Maintained existing bilingual program SEI Structured English Immersion						