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The Plight of Hispanic Students in Fairfax County



By Frederick A. Costello and Laura Ramirez-Drain

Claudia was born in Fairfax County, but spent three pre-teen years in Mexico while her father was on duty there. Upon returning to Fairfax County, the family decided to retain their Spanish fluency by speaking Spanish at home. Over her parents' protests, Fairfax County Public Schools classified Erin as ESOL (English Speaker of Other Languages) because Spanish was spoken at home — even though English was Claudia's first language. The school system, after all, gets considerably more funding for each ESOL student as compared to a non-ESOL student.

Being classified as ESOL seems harmless enough (except to the taxpayer); however, when other students are in AP, IB, Honors, or other advanced classes, ESOL students are in classes where the English language is taught simultaneously with mathematics, literature, etc. They are with other Spanish-speaking students; therefore, Spanish is commonly heard in these classes. Their language proficiency is thereby retarded as are their skills in the other subjects. It should not be so surprising that there is a performance gap between Hispanics and other students.

Hispanics are handicapped not only by being sent to ESOL-based classes, but also by the way reading is taught. In Fairfax County, reading is taught by the "whole-word" method, rather than by phonics. Yes, some phonics is taught, but phonics is not the basis by which reading is taught. Hispanics are more accustomed to using phonics to

learn Spanish. They must make the transition not only to English but to the “whole-word” method — a method that has proven to be inferior to phonics-based methods.

The deficiencies in the instructional methods used for Hispanic students is evident not only by their lower performance on the SAT’s but also by their hurried education. The school district wants all students to graduate with other students of the same age. For ESOL students, this frequently means cutting short what they should have learned. Instead, ESOL students should have up to one year of intensive English-language education, based on phonics, and should then be declassified as ESOL and put into regular classes so they learn what other students learn.

The school board certainly would rebel against declassifying ESOL students. Declassifying would result in less funding. There is no incentive for the schools to transfer a student from ESOL to non-ESOL status. In fact, there is a disincentive because, by state formula, fewer teachers will be needed and funds flowing to the school will be decreased. The current school board majority has its eyes on the money, not on the good of Hispanic students. This will not change if we do not elect people to the school board who look in a new direction — the student’s direction.

Frederick A. Costello is a board member of the Fairfax County Taxpayers Alliance — learn more at FCTA.org. Laura Ramirez-Drain is a candidate for the Fairfax County School Board in the Hunter Mill District — to learn more, or to get involved, visit Vote4Laura.com.