

**TESTIMONY OF MARTA GUZMAN
PRINCIPAL, OYSTER BILINGUAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (WASHINGTON, DC)
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION
“IMPACT OF NCLB ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS”
MARCH 23, 2007**

Chairman Kildee, Ranking Member Castle, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education I am pleased to appear before you today to testify on the “Impact of NCLB on English Language Learners”. As the principal of Oyster Bilingual Elementary School, a public school of the District of Columbia I welcome the opportunity to share with you the many successes and best practices that make Oyster’s program unique.

I. School Background

Oyster Bilingual Elementary School is the only public school in Washington, DC that educates all students from Pre-Kindergarten to 6th grade in two languages: Spanish and English. Two core features define Oyster’s dual language immersion model:

1. An admission policy that creates a 50-50 balance between students who are native Spanish speakers and those who are native English speakers.
2. An instructional model that teams a native English-speaking teacher and a native Spanish-speaking teacher in each classroom, with every subject taught equally in both languages.

In the Oyster model students do not switch languages at mid-day, or change according to classroom or topic. Rather, there is a seamless integration of the two languages across all subject matter – students don’t just learn Spanish, they learn *in* Spanish. So while the Oyster curriculum meets all of the DCPS academic standards, bilingualism is not an educational tool toward this end, but rather an essential goal in itself. All Oyster students are expected to (and do) become fluent and literate in both Spanish and English, most by the time they finish 3rd grade.

In addition to 2006 recognition as a U.S. Department of Education “No Child Left Behind-Blue Ribbon School,” Oyster students’ academic achievement in both English and Spanish is consistently above par. Scores in reading and math always exceed those for the District of Columbia as a whole, and 2006 testing in Spanish puts Oyster students in the 75th percentile in reading and the 84th percentile in math for the nation (Oyster is the only school in DC to test all of its students in reading and math in both English and Spanish, so no system-wide comparisons are available). However, compared to scores on the *Apranda* test nationwide, Oyster students consistently show strong results.

II. BEST PRACTICES

Oyster Bilingual Elementary School Offers a Challenging Curriculum That Integrates International Content

Oyster Bilingual Elementary School is the only public school in Washington, DC that educates all students from Pre-Kindergarten to 6th grade in two languages: Spanish and English. Launched as a dual language immersion program in the 1970s by Latino, community and education activists, the school achieves academic excellence with an ethnically and socio-economically diverse student body. Oyster's model of bilingual education mandates a highly challenging curriculum that logically integrates an international focus throughout its study content.

The Oyster model requires that each classroom have two teachers, a native English-speaker as well as a native Spanish-speaking teacher, and that every subject is taught equally in both languages. Students do not switch languages at mid-day, or change according to classroom or topic. Rather, there is a seamless integration of the two languages across all subject matter. Further, Oyster's faculty hail from all over the world, and bring unique culture and values to the content they teach. The result is a global ethos that enables Oyster to nurture children who not only become fluent in two languages, but who gain a deeply-felt understanding of, and respect for, the diverse cultures that make-up our world.

The seamlessly integrated focus on language learning is supported by the school's admission policy which requires a 50-50 balance between students who are native Spanish speakers and those who are native English speakers. **When English-language learners and Spanish-language learners are educated on an equal playing field like this, an advanced level of cross-cultural acceptance and understanding is possible, and this forms the basis of language learning at Oyster.**

Given Oyster's program and student/family population, the school is well-situated to help offer DC Latinos needed services and support. Oyster recently received a grant from the DC Mayor's Office on Latino Affairs to take on this work, in partnership with the Carlos Rosario International School. The funding is enabling Oyster to provide ESL classes for Latino parents of elementary-age children. The Oyster School has an informal relationship with Mary's Center for Maternal and Child Care, a family health and social services center dedicated to increasing access to comprehensive bilingual care to low-income, uninsured residents of Washington, DC. Eligible families are identified by Oyster and referred to the Center, while Center staff refers patients with educational needs to Oyster. Working with the community and supporting families is at the core of supporting English language learners.

III. OYSTER BILINGUAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CAN PROVIDE MEASURES OF STUDENT SUCCESS, INCLUDING PROFICIENCY IN LEARNING WORLD LANGUAGES.

In 2006, Oyster was named a U.S. Department of Education “No Child Left Behind-Blue Ribbon School.” This honor goes to schools that are either academically superior in their states or demonstrate dramatic gains in student achievement. Oyster was the only school named in Washington, DC in 2006, and was the only bilingual school named nationwide, public or private.

In addition to this recent national recognition of the school’s success, Oyster regularly measures and documents student achievement in both English and Spanish. As a DC public school, Oyster administers the *Stanford Achievement Test* 9th Edition (SAT-9), and beginning this school year, the *DC Comprehensive Assessment System* (DC CAS). In addition, Oyster administers the *Aprenda: La Prueba de Logros en Español- 2nd Edition*. All Oyster students, including special education students, participate in testing.

Every year and on every test, Oyster students’ scores in reading and math greatly exceed those for the District of Columbia as a whole. In 2006, 79% of Oyster students tested “at proficient” or “above proficient” in reading; 21% tested as “advanced.” In math, 72% of Oyster students tested “at proficient” or “above proficient”; 30% tested as “advanced.”

Thus, the dual language immersion model at Oyster is additive – not only celebrating a student’s heritage and making it stronger, but simultaneously developing high levels of competence in English. This philosophy undergirds instruction at Oyster. Minority and majority students at Oyster come together in an environment that celebrates an equal balance between cultures and languages, thus eliminating the divide and providing for a high degree of self-esteem in all students. Thus, the high academic performance level at the lower grades provide for higher achievement in the middle and high school years. All of these factors contribute to academic success of our students and diminish the possibilities of having students drop out of school.