



ESL MiniConference

Leaving Behind a Flawed Language Policy An Interview with James Crawford

Autumn 2006

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The ESL MiniConference Online is pleased to provide to readers this exclusive interview with James Crawford, President of the recently incorporated nonprofit organization, the Institute for Language and Education Policy. Among the founding members of this institute are: Alfredo Artiles, Jim Cummins, Lily Wong Fillmore, Stephen Krashen, Mary Lou McCloskey, and Sonia Nieto. James Crawford is a former executive director of the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) and former Washington editor of Education Week, in addition to his long career as an independent writer on language and education.

Why have you established the institute?

The Institute was born out of frustration that federal and state policies for English and heritage language learners are seldom based on scientific evidence about what works for these students. In particular, the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act are exerting pressure on schools to abandon everything we know about best practices for ELLs. NCLB's arbitrary, short-term achievement targets, as measured by invalid and unreliable assessment tools, are having some very perverse effects for students in general and ELLs in particular. Now that NCLB is coming up for reauthorization by Congress, we believe it is essential to inform policymakers about the research evidence they need to reform this law.

We also note with alarm a resurgence of English Only activism, coinciding with the rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, that threatens to impose harmful and inequitable language policies throughout the country. Again, this is happening in a climate of ignorance about the language needs of minority communities and of the nation as a whole. Policymakers must make decisions in this area that are informed by research.

Yet, when it comes to advocating for policies that serve English and heritage language learners, there has been a vacuum of leadership. While there are many educational researchers and practitioners who want to make their voices heard, no organization has provided an effective focus for their efforts. That's what the Institute for Language and Education

Policy hopes to offer. Already we have members in 25 states (and even a few foreign countries) who are pooling their expertise, experience, and financial resources to make this happen.

Will your new institute's work complement or substitute for work being done by other organizations, such as NABE, TESOL, or NAME?

We have no plans to duplicate the activities of existing professional organizations. At the same time, we are eager to work cooperatively with anyone who shares our advocacy goals.

You obviously are very passionate about issues related to access to learning for bilingual and multilingual children. What improvements would you like to see in this area over the next decade?

We hope to see an expansion of research-based programs that better serve the needs of these students. It's ironic -- and tragic -- that despite increasing evidence that English-only programs are not working for ELLs, they continue to spread. Meanwhile, bilingual enrollments continue to decline, even though research has consistently shown the superiority of well designed and well resourced programs that build on and develop children's native language skills. No Child Left Behind, which expunged all references to "bilingualism" and "biliteracy" from federal education law has had a lot to do with this trend. Reforming that law is therefore among the Institute's major priorities.

What did you learn during your two years at the helm of NABE that you expect will help you in your current and upcoming projects?

I learned that there's a great demand -- on Capitol Hill, for example -- for expertise on how to serve English and heritage language learners. There are clearly opportunities for advocates to have a positive impact. But to be effective in advocacy, it's essential to be well organized. Strong support at the highest levels of an organization is essential. Unfortunately, advocacy is not a high priority for NABE's current leadership.

What happened to "No Child Left Behind"? Why did this legislative initiative fail?

No Child Left Behind broke with three decades of federal policy on educating English language learners. Ever since *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), policymakers had recognized the imperative of addressing the unique needs of these students. In its unanimous decision, the Supreme Court established the principle that "equal educational opportunity" is not

always served by "equal treatment." When children face language barriers, a different educational approach is necessary, one that provides meaningful access to the curriculum. To educate them in the same way as proficient English speakers is, in the court's words, "to make a mockery of public education."

Unfortunately, that's just what NCLB does. It imposes a one-size-fits-all approach to school reform that ignores the special challenges facing ELLs and their schools. For example, the law mandates the high-stakes use of assessments that are neither valid nor reliable for ELLs in making decisions about educational programs. Among other effects, this had created incentives for schools to abandon bilingual education, despite strong research backing for its effectiveness.

Do you have any favorites in the upcoming mid-term Congressional elections? Are there bilingual education and language policy issues whose future will be determined by the outcomes of this year's contests?

The Institute does not endorse political candidates (and indeed, as a nonprofit organization, we cannot do so). Naturally we hope that language and education issues, especially in relation to No Child Left Behind, will be broadly discussed. Whether these issues will be decisive in any Congressional races remains to be seen. But there's no question that we need more representatives like the late Senator Paul Wellstone, who are both well informed and courageous enough to challenge the test-and-punish regime of NCLB.

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