Adios Bilingual Education!

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If trend-setting California passes the English For the Children initiative on June 2, that will be good news for public school children all over the country. This initiative would require that all children in California public schools be taught in English, in English-language classrooms.

The term "bilingual education" is a misnomer. No, that's too kind a word. It is a fraud; it doesn't teach children to be fluent in two languages. It's really native-language instruction.

Bilingual education is language apartheid. Didn't our country abolish segregation some years ago? Or did I miss something?

Bilingual education is a proven failure. Three million immigrant children nationwide are kept in segregated classrooms for up to 80 percent of the day, often for five to seven years, never learning English.

Nearly one-fourth of all California children in public schools -- 1,300,000 children -- are classified as not proficient in English. The number has more than doubled during the past decade.

California schools are now mandated to teach in 42 different languages. Across the country, the number is 60. It is depressing to ponder the fact that 300,000 students in Los Angeles and 147,000 in New York City can't speak English.

The initiative's whereases say that California public schools have a constitutional and moral duty to provide all California's children, regardless of ethnicity, with the skills necessary to become productive members of our society. What could be a more important skill than the ability to speak, read and write

English, or a greater handicap than to lack those skills?

The whereases also point out that English is not only the national public language of the United States and of California, but is also the leading world language for science, technology, and international business, making it the language of economic opportunity. Speaking English is the pathway to success in America, the only way to enter the mainstream of our nation's educational and commercial life.

Activist judges and power-grabbing federal bureaucrats combined in the 1970s to start us down the bilingual path. The 1974 Supreme Court decision Lau v. Nichols embarked on new ground when it held that the 1964 Civil Rights Act requires schools to give special assistance to non-English-speaking children.

Give bureaucrats an inch and they'll take a mile. They parlayed "special assistance" into a giant empire, spending $12 billion a year of federal, state and local tax dollars ($178 million of which is federal money). School administrators, teachers, textbook publishers, researchers, universities, and attorneys now all have a financial stake in maintaining the current system.

Since schools receive extra tax funds for bilingual education, the schools have an incentive to put more and more children in these classes and keep them there longer. News stories appear frequently about cases of English-speaking children who have been put in bilingual classes just because they have a Hispanic surname.

Sometimes their teachers speak almost no English. It's no wonder that the dropout rate for Hispanics is 30 percent, while the figure is 12 percent for blacks and 8.6 percent for whites.

English For the Children was initiated by Ron K. Unz, a physicist and CEO of Wall Street Analytics, a Palo Alto-based financial services software company. He has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars of his own money to raise public awareness of this issue.

Bilingual education is not only ruining the prospects for the children trapped in the bilingual bureaucracy, but it is tending to change our national identity from E pluribus unum (From the many, one) to E uno plures (From the one, many). Vice President Al Gore has already confused and transposed these concepts.

This is not just a matter of academic semantics, cultural fads, or political gaffes. The issue goes right to the heart of whether we will continue to be one nation indivisible.

From 1880 to 1950, America absorbed millions of immigrants and they all learned English. Their children were plunged into public schools where only English was spoken, and their parents were happy about that because it made them Americans who could prosper in this land of opportunity.

A Los Angeles Times poll showed that 84% of California Hispanics support this ballot initiative. Immigrant parents want their children to learn English so badly that, last year, they boycotted Ninth Street Elementary School in Los Angeles to protest the school's refusal to allow their children to be taught English.

It is conventional wisdom that the reason why the Republican leadership in Congress pushed through the Puerto Rican statehood bill was to pander to the Hispanic vote nationwide. Republicans would be a lot smarter if they would tell the Hispanic immigrants: We'll teach your children to speak, read and write English, and then they can achieve the American Dream.