

Bilingual Education and Desegregation in Boston 1974-1979:

*Contradictory Goals or Mutually
Supportive Movements?*

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Introduction

In the years preceding *Morgan v. Hennigan* (1974), a landmark ruling that mandated desegregation in Boston Public Schools, the movements for bilingual education and racial desegregation existed on parallel tracks among distinct groups of grassroots organizers, activists, and parents. Alleging that the Boston School Committee had “intentionally brought about and maintained racial segregation” in Boston Public Schools, civil rights activists in Boston and across the country fought for integration in the wake of the Supreme Court’s assertion in *Brown v. Board* that “separate but equal’ ha[d] no place” in public education.¹ Yet, bilingual education activists were less concerned with racial integration than with bolstering the bilingual education programs that were established following the passage of the federal Bilingual Education Act in 1968 and the Massachusetts Transitional Bilingual Education Act in 1971.² Both movements sought equity and opportunity for their communities. Both fought a racially conservative Boston School Committee committed to maintaining a discriminatory status quo. And both relied on a combination of grassroots activism and pragmatic legal strategy to accomplish their goals. Yet, in the early 1970s, one movement pushed for integration while the other seemed to call for a type of linguistic separation.

This contradiction was not purely ideological. Indeed, Carmen Pola, President of the Bilingual Master Parents Advisory Council

(PAC) and a leading bilingual education activist, was initially skeptical of desegregation. Her “first reaction” to the Morgan decision, she explained in a 1981 interview with *The Chronicle’s* Catherine Walsh, was of “complete disdain and disagreement with the desegregation issue.”³ Relying on testimony from both Pola and Herman Hernandez, a bilingual parent and staff member of the Boston Education Project, Walsh explains that the majority of Latino parents were initially both “apathetic” to the logistical challenge posed by desegregation and “fearful” of losing the relatively few bilingual education programs that did exist.⁴ Thus, in the wake of Judge Garrity’s June 1974 ruling in *Morgan v. Hennigan* that “the entire school system of Boston [was] unconstitutionally segregated” and would have to integrate immediately, parents whose children relied on bilingual education reacted with concern rather than relief.⁵

Pola and Hernandez had real cause for concern. The bilingual education programs that they had worked to establish in the years preceding Morgan relied on the formation of large enough “clusters” of Latino students to sustain language programs, but desegregation – particularly when treated as a narrowly Black-White issue – threatened to eliminate these clusters and dismantle many of the language programs that bilingual students relied on. Indeed, the desegregation plans proposed by both the plaintiffs, represented by the Boston chapter of the NAACP, and the Boston School Committee as outlined in Morgan would have done just that. The defendants proposed that Latino students be classified as either “Hispanic-white” or “Hispanic-black”

1 *Morgan v. Hennigan*, 379 F. 410, Justia, (D. Mass. 1974).

2 Tatiana Cruz, *Boston’s Struggle in Black and Brown: Racial Politics, Community Development, and Grassroots Organizing 1960–1985* (PhD diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2017), 156. https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/140982/tatianacruz_1.pdf?ts.

3 Catherine Walsh, *Bilingual Education and Desegregation: What Boston’s Hispanic Parents Have to Say*, *The Chronicle* (Boston, MA), September 1981, 1, Carmen A. Pola papers, Northeastern Digital Repository, <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20180380>.

4 Walsh, *Bilingual Education*, 2.

5 *Morgan v. Hennigan*, 379 F. 410 (D. Mass. 1974).

– a distinction which organizer Edwin Colina rejected as “totally contrary to what we are and what our characterization of race is.”⁶ Yet the plaintiff’s plan – which would classify Latinos under an umbrella “Other Minorities” category – would fail to consider linguistic needs entirely in school assignments. The result: only sixteen of 121 elementary and middle schools would have had enough students for effective bilingual education programs.⁷ At least in the short term, bilingual education required some level of temporary linguistic separation, but integration as initially conceived left no room for this accommodation.

For scholars such as Perry Zirkel and Ernest Bernal, this initial friction highlighted a broader historical and sociological trend – that desegregation and bilingual education were fundamentally incompatible.⁸ Opponents of bilingual education, such as Boston Superintendent Robert Wood, meanwhile, sought to frame bilingual education as a proxy for the maintenance of segregation. Yet, activists and legal scholars, including Jose Cárdenas and Herbert Teitelbaum, asserted that integration and bilingual education could not only coexist but also support one another.⁹ This paper explores this question of compatibility through the lens of Boston’s bilingual education activists and their opponents in the wake of the Morgan decision. How did these predominantly Latino parents reconcile their desire for community control and self-determination with the cultural, political, and educational benefits of integration? How did they reconcile bilingual education with desegregation? And, finally, how

did they come to understand the purpose of bilingual education both for their own children and for the public school population more broadly?

Despite their initial concern over the impact of desegregation on bilingual education, bilingual education activists articulated a multicultural and pluralist vision for Boston Public Schools which sought to maintain students’ native languages and cultures and promote cultural and linguistic sharing across student populations in addition to teaching English to language learners – an understanding of bilingual education that saw desegregation and bilingual programming as mutually supportive. Integration, as these activists came to understand it, was actually at the heart of effective bilingual education.

Bilingual Education Before *Morgan v Hennigan*

Bilingual education began in Boston as a relatively makeshift grassroots movement built on the ideals of community control and self-determination. In fact, its first iteration was a series of informal English lessons offered by Latina mothers on their doorsteps, but by 1969, bilingual parents had established two summer programs aimed at teaching English in addition to offering cultural enrichment, field trips, and free meals.¹⁰ Next, tapping into the federal and state grants offered by the 1968 Bilingual Education Act, parent organizers pushed for the establishment of a Bilingual Department within the Boston School Committee, and by January 1970, they had successfully gotten the Boston School Committee to organize and staff fourteen bilingual education classes.¹¹ Importantly, even

6 Cruz, *Boston’s Struggle*, 189.

7 Cruz, *Boston’s Struggle*, 189.

8 Perry A. Zirkel, “Bilingual Education and School Desegregation: A Case of Uncoordinated Remedies,” *Bilingual Review / La Revista Bilingüe* 4, no. 3 (Fall/Winter 1977): 180. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25743733>.

9 Jose A. Cardenas, “Bilingual Education vs. Segregation,” 5, October 1975. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED125155.pdf>; *Aspira of NY v. Bd. of Ed. of City of New York*, 423 F. Supp. 647.

10 Cruz, *Boston’s Struggle*, 148.

11 Cruz, *Boston’s Struggle*, 149.

as state and federal funds increased their scale, these programs were, as one bilingual teacher put it, a distinctly “Hispanic project.”¹² “It was the first program ever started in the Boston schools where school people were not involved in planning it,” reflected Alex Rodriguez, a Latino activist and leader of the Hispanic Office of Planning and Evaluation (HOPE). “The community planned it, we hired the staff. They gave us an empty building, we even had to get pencils and the chalk.”¹³

Yet, bilingual education remained underfunded and understaffed given the relative lack of support these programs received from the School Committee. Classrooms were often unheated, overcrowded, and under-resourced, and teachers were frequently forced to buy their own materials and clean their own classrooms. As a result, bilingual programs faced low teacher morale and high rates of teacher turnover.¹⁴ Further, resource and staffing limitations meant that early bilingual education programs were only able to serve a fraction of the students who would have needed their services. Latino parents and activists did not mince words over the failure of the School Committee: “For years,” Rodriguez asserted, “the School Department has failed to provide an education for [Latino] children... It must provide class for every one of these children, and in every part of the city.”¹⁵ Yet, the School Committee resisted, arguing that the Task Force was overstating the problem.¹⁶ As chairman Joseph Lee argued, the School Committee was “doing more for [the Latino community] than [it had] ever done” for other groups.¹⁷ Yet, the Transitional Bilingual Education Act, passed in Massachusetts in

May 1971, once again shifted Boston’s bilingual education landscape. Requiring school districts with over twenty limited English proficiency students to create bilingual education clusters and provide bilingual programming, the state Department of Education established a Bureau of Transitional Bilingual Education in addition to a Bilingual Advisory Council to ensure that the new law would be implemented adequately at the local level. In response, Latino parents sought to create their “own school” in which primary subjects would be taught in Spanish and English would be treated as a foreign language. The Hernández School, education scholar Barry McDonald explained, was “a de facto segregated school for Puerto Rican children.”¹⁸

The Supreme Court’s 1974 decision in *Lau v. Nichols* would also come to be central to the push for adequate bilingual education in Boston. Dealing with a group of about eight hundred Chinese students in San Francisco claiming that their school district had discriminated against them by failing to provide adequate language support, the Supreme Court asserted that it was the responsibility of public school districts to accommodate English language learners.¹⁹ Though the Court did not offer any specific prescription for providing this language support, the Office of Civil Rights released guidelines – named the “Lau Remedies” – in 1975, which promoted a distinctly transitional model of bilingual education.²⁰ Much of the negotiation and restructuring of bilingual education that followed over the next decade was done in the framework set up by *Lau*, but as will be discussed below, bilingual organizers

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Cruz, *Boston’s Struggle*, 150.

15 Cruz, *Boston’s Struggle*, 152.

16 Cruz, *Boston’s Struggle*, 153.

17 Cruz, *Boston’s Struggle*, 154.

18 Cruz, *Boston’s Struggle*, 156.

19 *Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563, Justia, (1974).

20 David Nieto, “A Brief History of Bilingual Education in the United States,” *Perspectives on Urban Education* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 64. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.224.1008&rep=rep1&type=pdf#page=61>.

sought a far more ambitious vision for bilingual education than that articulated in the wake of the decision.

***Morgan v. Hennigan* and Bilingual Education**

Morgan v. Hennigan once again shifted the landscape of bilingual education in Boston. Just over two years before the decision, the NAACP and the Harvard Center for Law and Education had sued the Boston School Committee for running a segregated school system.²¹ This segregation was intentional, they argued, and was thus in violation of the “separate is inherently unequal” standard set about twenty years earlier in *Brown*. Garrity agreed, recognizing that the Boston School Committee had “knowingly carried out a systematic program of segregation.”²² It would need to move swiftly and purposefully towards desegregation, but Latinos and other non-Black minorities were ignored almost entirely during the case and throughout the legal proceedings that followed. Garrity mentioned Latino students only once in his decision, though their inclusion served only to clarify that they could be lumped in with Black students in determining whether particular schools were segregated: “petitioners [were] entitled to have schools with a combined predominance of Negroes and Hispanos included in the category of ‘segregated’ school.”²³ Garrity recognized that Latinos comprised about seven percent of the Boston Public School population, but since “the parties did not frame any issues as to discrimination against non-black minority students,” he made clear that his opinion would

discuss “racial segregation” as it applied “to blacks only.”²⁴ He recognized that the court would eventually have to consider the impact of desegregation on other minority groups, but that would be a matter of “fine tuning.”²⁵ In the meantime, Latino students would be used to balance the desegregation plan – pawns serving White-Black desegregation rather than students with specific needs to attend to. “When fifty minorities were needed in one particular school where the blacks did not want to go,” Hernandez remembered, “they started sending Hispanics or other linguistic minorities to comply with the court-ordered guidelines, the numbers game.”²⁶

Latino parents and activists had few illusions about the way they were seen – or unseen – in *Morgan* and the school desegregation movement more broadly. As Carmen Pola explained, Latino students were “invisible” – “the people that nobody sees” – and, according to Herman Hernandez, on the desegregation issue “the Hispanics had not been invited to dance.”²⁷ Indeed, given the inaccessibility of English-only information materials for linguistic minority families, many parents felt “powerless,” even deciding momentarily to “give up” as a result of their inability to “communicate [their] thinking” and lack of “political clout in the Boston system.”²⁸ Yet Latino parents did not give up: they mobilized, demanded representation, and achieved both legal and political visibility against a system that otherwise threatened the institutions that they had worked for years to build. As Tatiana Cruz argues in both her dissertation and related article for the *Journal of Urban History*, the extent to which

21 Cruz, “Boston’s Struggle,” 181.

22 *Morgan v. Hennigan*, 379 F. 410, Justia, (D. Mass. 1974).

23 *Morgan v. Hennigan*, 379 F. 410, Justia, (D. Mass. 1974).

24 *Morgan v. Hennigan*, 379 F. 410, Justia, (D. Mass. 1974).

25 *Morgan v. Hennigan*, 379 F. 410, Justia, (D. Mass. 1974).

26 Walsh, “Bilingual Education,” 2.

27 Walsh, “Bilingual Education,” 1–2.

28 Walsh, “Bilingual Education,” 2.

historical representations of desegregation and education in Boston during the 1970s have focused on the backlash from White parents to the busing of Black students both mischaracterizes desegregation in Boston as a binary Black-White issue and fuels narratives of Latino political inaction. In tracking the history of Latino mobilization around bilingual education, Cruz decentralizes busing and highlights the agency and activism of bilingual parents and organizers. As students received their assignments for the 1975 school year in the wake of *Morgan*, parents found a number of issues with the largely arbitrary assignment process, which used Latino students to balance quotas and at times even separated siblings based on subjective racial classification.²⁹ In response to this assignment process and the inadequacy of the plans introduced following *Morgan*, Daisy Díaz and Natividad Pagán, two students in Boston University’s bilingual education teacher training program and parents of the bilingual education program themselves, worked to organize Latino parents and fellow education students in Jamaica Plain and Mission Hill to demand representation in court. As Jim Caradonio, another early leader in the bilingual education movement, remembered:

“The organizing strategy was right out of Saul Alinsky... Basically it was, as I saw it, taking the structure of the court... How do we provide the information? How do we provide the political pressure? How do we do the advocacy needed? Because this is the only game in town. If you are not in this federal court order, you’re dead.”³⁰

After consulting the Lawyer’s Guild in Cambridge

29 Cruz, “Boston’s Struggle,” 186.
30 Cruz, “Boston’s Struggle,” 191.

for legal advice, the group eventually called El Comité de Padres Pro Defensa de la Educación Bilingüe (Parent’s Committee for Defense of Bilingual Education), decided to petition to become plaintiff-interveners in the *Morgan* case.

Before El Comité could take the lead on the case, though, it had to establish itself as the best representative for the Latino community. The Hispanic Office of Planning and Evaluation (HOPE), a group led by middle-class Latino men, believed that it should represent the interests of Latino students and parents, but Díaz and Pola among other parents argued that HOPE could not truly represent them: “A leader is not a leader when he gets a 20,000 dollar a year job, comes to an office at 9 o’clock in the morning, go home at 4, have a nice steak dinner, put on the TV, and go to sleep at 10.”³¹ According to Betsy Tregar, a bilingual education teacher, El Comité was much more grassroots,” whereas “HOPE was the intelligentsia,” and “there was no way the intelligentsia was going to win.” Tregar was right. After inter-group conflict which extended into the courtroom itself, El Comité established itself as the leader of the bilingual education movement and worked to assert itself in the courtroom through a combination of legal strategy and grassroots organizing. By January 23, 1975, El Comité had collected about 1,600 parent signatures and over 50 affidavits from agencies and organizations supporting them as representatives of Boston’s Latino students, and Garrity granted their motion to become plaintiff-interveners in *Morgan*. As one member of El Comité, Edwin Colina, explained, the group triumphed as a result of “energy, sweat, and blood,” operating through “volunteer contributions” rather than state, federal, or municipal funding:

31 Cruz, “Boston’s Struggle,” 193.

“We took ‘em on. We took on the school department, the city, the state, the federal court—a lot of different places... We had Judge Garrity’s courtroom packed many a time. We demonstrated in front of the State House in the snow.”³²

Garrity responded by recognizing both Spanish-speaking students’ “right to adequate bilingual education” and the subsequent need for the *Morgan* remedy to provide “bilingual schooling for Hispanic students and for others in need of this service” through “the ‘clustering’ of bilingual class.”³³ El Comité had succeeded in achieving representation in court, but it maintained a “vamos a ver” (let’s wait and see) approach to Phase II of court-ordered desegregation.³⁴ Their inclusion in the case was just the beginning of the fight for recognition and rights against a Boston Public School system that remained resistant to their cause.

The Debate over Desegregation and Bilingual Education

Desegregation offered an opportunity for bilingual education – the systemization of bilingual programs as part of a larger overhaul of Boston Public Schools. Yet, many supporters of bilingual education voiced significant concern over what complete desegregation would mean for the “clusters” on which bilingual education relied. There seemed, at least initially, to be a type of friction between desegregation and linguistic accessibility in Boston Public Schools.

32 Cruz, “Boston’s Struggle,” 195.

33 *Morgan v. Kerrigan*, 401 F. Supp. 216, Justia, (D. Mass. 1975).

34 Cruz, “Boston’s Struggle,” 195.

Yet, over time, a more nuanced debate emerged over whether desegregation and bilingual education were fundamentally reconcilable or contradictory.

As already mentioned, Perry Zirkel argued in 1977 that “bilingual education, the predominant remedy for Puerto Rico pupils, [was] not readily compatible with desegregation, as typically implemented for black pupils.”³⁵ The two programs, Zirkel wrote, “have meant practically very different, if not opposite, things in the short run” since desegregation called for “scattering” while bilingual education required “the clustering of Spanish-speaking students in order that they receive instruction through their native language.”³⁶ Interestingly, Zirkel recognized efforts to reconcile bilingual education and desegregation through “true integration” and two-way multicultural models, but he argued that these programs were exceedingly rare. Ernest Bernal’s 1974 research on “Models of Bilingual Education, Grades K-3” came to a similar yet even starker conclusion: “truly comprehensive program models for integrated [bilingual] schools,” he argued, “exist neither in theory nor in the real world.”³⁷ Robert Wood, Superintendent of Boston Public Schools from 1978 to his firing in 1980, echoed a similar skepticism. Indeed, as Pola explained in a statement to the Boston School Committee about the 1979 *Lau* plan negotiation process, Superintendent Wood “tried... to convince” them “that [bilingual parents and organizers] don’t support desegregation and that what [they] want is a segregated education system.”³⁸ Given the limited available source

35 Zirkel, “Bilingual Education,” 180.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Zirkel, “Bilingual Education,” 182.

38 Memorandum by Carmen Pola, 1979, Carmen A. Pola papers, Northeastern Digital Repository, <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20179390>.

base, it is impossible to know exactly why or even how Superintendent Wood opted to cast El Comité as anti-desegregation. Yet, in doing so, he suggested, perhaps disingenuously, a type of binary, antagonistic relationship between integration and bilingual education; support for one, he implied, amounted to rejection of the other.

Similarly, though court rulings on bilingual education and desegregation would evolve throughout the 1970s, the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals held in *Keyes v. Denver* (1973) that bilingual “must be subordinate to a plan of school desegregation.”³⁹ Focusing primarily on four elementary schools that had been allowed by a Denver district court to maintain heavily Latino populations in order to sustain bilingual education programs, the circuit court reversed the previous ruling, holding that the Fourteenth Amendment did not guarantee the right to bilingual education. The plan in question, the court asserted, could not “justify [the] continued segregation of any of the noted schools.”⁴⁰ Bilingual education “[wa]s not a substitute for desegregation.”⁴¹

Yet, many activists and legal scholars argued that desegregation and bilingual education could coexist – or were even complementary. José Cardenas, founder of the Intercultural Development Research Association, an organization which works to achieve equity in education through litigation and legislation, explained that “though the implementation of bilingual programs in a desegregated school setting... produced increased logistical programs, it [wa]s not administratively or pedagogically prohibitive.”⁴²

The question of desegregation versus bilingual education amounted to a false choice, argued Cardenas: “With minimal effort and a minimum of cost, school districts can offer a third option to the two dysfunctional alternatives, segregation with bilingual education or integration without, which perpetuate the denial of educational opportunities to non-English-speaking children.”⁴³ In a 1979 article entitled “Bilingual Education and Desegregation,” a group of *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* editors took this argument one step farther, asserting that through the lens of desegregation as a multicultural and pluralist rather than assimilationist movement, bilingual education actually facilitated integration rather than impeding it.⁴⁴ Similarly, in her 1981 case analysis on “Hispanos, Desegregation and Bilingual Education,” Sarah Melendez recognized the potential for conflict between desegregation and bilingual education before arguing that with “a great deal of communication, coordination and compromise” these movements were “both more likely to prevail.”⁴⁵ Though they were at times in conflict with one another, argued Melendez, the movements for desegregation and bilingual education needed each other.

A number of landmark legal cases supported the notion that desegregation and bilingual education were compatible. In *Aspira of New York vs. Board of Education of New York City*, a 1972 case in which a Latino educational advocacy group successfully sued the New York City Board of Education for offering unequal educational access to Latino students with limited English proficiency, Teitelbaum

39 Editors, “Bilingual Education and Desegregation,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 127 (1979): 1603, https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/penn_law_review/vol127/iss6/3.

40 *Keyes v. School Dist. No. 1*, 413 U.S. 189, *Justia*, (1973).

41 *Ibid.*

42 Sarah Elba Melendez, “Hispanos, Desegregation and

Bilingual Education: Analysis of the Role of ‘El Comité de Padres’ in the Court-Ordered Desegregation of the Boston Public Schools (1974–1975)” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1981), 30, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

43 Cardenas, *Bilingual Education vs. Segregation*, 5.

44 Editors, “Bilingual Education.”

45 Melendez, “Hispanos, Desegregation,” 34.

and Himmer, the plaintiffs' attorneys, argued that though the "overriding mandate to desegregate w[ould] present formidable obstacles" to bilingual education programs, "bilingual education and desegregation need not be headed on a collision course."⁴⁶ The two, Teitelbaum and Hiller argued, were "not necessarily mutually exclusive." In fact, they asserted that "desegregation may provide the best hope for achieving comprehensive court-mandated bilingual education programs."⁴⁷ *United States v. Texas* (1971), a circuit court ruling which affirmed a lower decision ordering the Texas Education Agency to assume responsibility for school desegregation, illustrated an even more far-reaching association between desegregation and bilingual education – a brand of pluralist integration that relied on two-way linguistic and cultural exchange. For desegregation to succeed, the court held, "the Anglo-American students too must be called upon to adjust to their Mexican-American classmates and to learn to understand and appreciate their different linguistic and cultural attributes."⁴⁸ Indeed, "the process by which all students participate in a joint learning and adjustment process" would "not only constitute an educational enrichment but, also, will bring the school system as a whole closer to that goal or state-of-being referred to by the Supreme Court as a 'unitary system.'⁴⁹ The multidirectional cultural and linguistic sharing achieved through bilingual education, the court asserted, would actually be pivotal in achieving true integration.

El Comité articulated a similar

46 *Aspira of NY v. Bd. of Ed. of City of New York*, 423 F. Supp. 647, *Justia*, (S.D.N.Y. 1976).

47 Melendez, "Hispanos, Desegregation," 30.

48 *United States v. State of Texas*, 342 F. Supp. 24, *Justia* (E.D. Tex. 1971)

49 *United States v. State of Texas*, 342 F. Supp. 24, *Justia*, (E.D. Tex. 1971)

understanding of the compatibility of bilingual education and desegregation. As Catherine Walsh reported, Hernandez, Pola, and other Latino parents "ha[d] learned from their struggle that desegregation and bilingual education [were] not enemies" but rather "allies and friends."⁵⁰ Though Pola recognized that many critics of bilingual education sought to portray the movement as supporting segregation, she explained that her goals were quite the opposite: "what we want for our children... is a good, quality, and integrated education."⁵¹ "It is obvious," she continued, that "if our kids are going to a school building with quality integrated education, they cannot get it by themselves."⁵² But within the confines of the Boston School System, what was the vision of bilingual parents and organizers for bilingual education, and how would that vision reconcile bilingual education and desegregation? Finally, how did El Comité's understanding of the relationship between bilingual education and desegregation evolve throughout the 1970s and early 1980s?

Vision for Bilingual Education: Immediate Need and Integration

Latino parents and activists came to articulate a vision for bilingual education which maintained native languages and cultures in addition to teaching English, emphasized multicultural sharing, and protected direct community influence. In embracing an integrated bilingual education, they challenged the notion that desegregation and bilingual "clustering" were contradictory goals. Yet, bilingual parents and organizers did not

50 Walsh, "Bilingual Education," 1.

51 Walsh, "Bilingual Education," 1.

52 Walsh, "Bilingual Education," 1.

lose sight of more immediate resourcing, curriculum, and school assignment issues. Their goals for bilingual education, in turn, might be characterized by a dual commitment to addressing pressing community needs while continuing to work towards a more ambitious multicultural vision.

Throughout the 1970s, bilingual parents and organizers fought to secure greater resources and improved facilities for bilingual students. Even after *Morgan*, bilingual education programs continued to be grossly under-resourced. Indeed, as Judge Garrity lamented, “the performance of the school department in this area... is probably the worst performed in the entire panoply.”⁵³ Even Superintendent Wood recognized that the history of bilingual education in Boston was “one of long neglect.”⁵⁴ Thus, parents were naturally concerned with issues from understaffing to the inadequacy of academic materials to poor curriculum design. Bilingual programs were “treated [too often] like step-children,” Pola explained, isolated and offered relatively little attention as compared to mainstream Boston Public Schools. Indeed, as Pola wrote in an essay entitled “Working Together,” oversight from the State Board of Education “found on many occasions that the school system in Boston has not provided many of the mandated services and has not provided money resources to bring about the necessary working relationships that must exist.”⁵⁵ Pola continued that “the lack of basic needed curricula, books, and other resources for our children must be addressed,” and El Comité would continue to mobilize until it was.⁵⁶

Bilingual parents also called for stability in their children’s school assignments. Again, even after Garrity’s ruling in the wake of *Morgan* that Boston Public Schools must maintain bilingual education “clusters,” student assignment issues persisted.⁵⁷ And as these concerns accelerated into the summer of 1977, El Comité met with bilingual parents and educators to plan a legal case advocating greater continuity in student assignments and condemning the 1977–1978 assignment plan that was set to relocate more than 40 percent of bilingual students and eliminate 18 bilingual programs.⁵⁸ In a letter to Judge Garrity, Pola voiced her and other bilingual parents’ frustration: “we feel that our students have been reassigned more times than any other racial-ethnic groups” despite having had “only one year of relative stability.”⁵⁹ She then requested that the school committee “give bilingual parents the right to have their children remain at the same school this year.”⁶⁰ Thus, Pola not only voiced her desire for stability but claimed it as a “right,” once again responding to immediate needs while building a vocabulary and vision for what bilingual education should look like.

In a similar vein, bilingual parents sought greater flexibility and autonomy around their children’s transitions from bilingual to mainstream education. In the years following *Morgan*, as *Christian Science Monitor* staff writer Luix Overbea reported, bilingual parents complained that, given the rigidity of the transitional bilingual education programs, students who did not speak fluent English after three years were nonetheless rushed into English-speaking classes where

53 Cruz, “Boston’s Struggle,” 204.

54 Robert Wood to Carmen Pola, 1979, Carmen A. Pola papers, Northeastern Digital Repository, <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20179333>.

55 Carmen Pola, “Working Together,” Carmen A. Pola papers, Northeastern Digital Repository, <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20179405>.

56 Pola, “Working Together.”

57 Cruz, “Boston’s Struggle,” 201.

58 Cruz, “Boston’s Struggle,” 201.

59 Carmen Pola to Wendell Arthur Garrity, 1978, Carmen A. Pola papers, Northeastern Digital Repository, <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20179391>.

60 Pola to Garrity.

they typically struggled to keep up.⁶¹ Indeed, the drop-out rate for those who remained in bilingual programs was 20 percent less than bilingual students following their transitions to mainstream schooling, and many bilingual organizers understood these dropouts as an issue of transition rather than discipline. The Bilingual Master Parents Advisory Council, for example, advocated more transitional leniency in terms of when students transitioned in addition to greater opportunity for maintained linguistic support following their transitions. As Pola argued, “we are not going to have our children shoved around and pushed out of school because they and their parents know very little English.”⁶²

Bilingual parents and organizers also demanded representation and direct influence over bilingual education – an extension of the principles of community control and self-determination that had always been central to their conception of equitable bilingual education. In the wake of *Morgan*, bilingual parents feared not only the dismantling of bilingual education clusters but also the loss of community control over bilingual education. Once a distinctly “Hispanic project” driven and managed by bilingual parents themselves, bilingual education seemed at risk of being undermined by *Morgan* and the reassignment plans that followed threatened to remove much of this direct influence. The level of community control enjoyed before *Morgan* was no longer possible, but through both community mobilization and the use of the state-mandated Bilingual Master PAC, bilingual parents maintained influence against the language barriers which threatened their access. And in demanding

representation, bilingual organizers reconciled their commitment to self-determination and community control with the post-*Morgan* public school system.

Language was at the core of this fight for representation and self-determination. As Pola explained, the underrepresentation of Latino parents in school-related decisions was in large part due to issues of language and communication, which in turn bred a sense of disconnection and helplessness: “If you don’t speak English, what is the use of going to a meeting when you know you won’t be able to participate, understand, or argue your point?”⁶³ Yet, Pola and others refused to allow language to bar bilingual parents from having their voices heard, turning to the state-mandated Bilingual Master Parents Advisory Council as a type of intermediary translating information for bilingual parents and representing their interests before the School Committee and the Superintendent. Above all, bilingual organizers emphasized the persistence of their movement. “If the system and institutions insist on isolating us again,” Pola explained, “just as we have found strategies and ways to be part of that decision making... we will find ways to reach out to other communities, work together, and share our skills.”⁶⁴

Pola also made clear that not all leadership would suffice; those who represented bilingual parents and students must come from the communities that they represented. This “fact,” Pola argued, “is very important because [of] the need for understanding [the] living conditions” of the community, maintaining “availability to students and parents in their neighborhood,” and being “identifi[ed] by others as a resident since most of our people

61 Luix Overbea, “Hub schools lower ‘Tower of Babel,’” *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston, MA), December 7, 1979, Carmen A. Pola papers, Northeastern Digital Repository, <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20180318>.

62 Overbea, “Hub schools.”

63 Walsh, “Bilingual Education,” 4.

64 *Ibid.*

are very parochial.”⁶⁵ In other words, leaders must have an intimate sense of the issues affecting Latino communities in order to truly maintain community control through representative councils. Pola did not take this direct representation for granted: since the organization of parent councils as mandated by Massachusetts state law were chosen by administrators on the payroll of Boston Public Schools, Pola recognized that “the tendency [was] to handpick parents and others in order to follow the school department agenda... and priorities” rather than “parents’ concerns and plans.”⁶⁶ Thus, bilingual organizers not only demanded access to important decisions related to bilingual education but also genuine representation to capitalize on this access.

Yet, as bilingual parents fought recurring battles with Boston Public Schools over necessities such as community representation, stability in school assignments, and resource equality, Pola and other activists also offered visions of near-universal bilingualism as a central tenet of Boston Public Schools. In her 1981 interview with *The Chronicle*, Pola focused not only on the value of bilingual education to language learners but also to students whose primary language was English. “My message to white and black parents,” Pola explained, “is that it shouldn’t be only my child speaking Spanish and English or Chinese and English, it should be your child, too, learning a second language.”⁶⁷ Pola continued that bilingual children “will be better able to get a job in the future” and “will have a broader outlook on life.”⁶⁸ Thus, she envisioned a broader reimagination of public education that would offer both tangible and cultural benefits to all students. “That’s my

vision... my hope that someday, somehow, this community will have bilingual education for all kids... will have schools with quality, integrated education for all kids.”⁶⁹ Pola recognized the difficulty of achieving this vision; “[T]hat’s a dream, I might not be able to see it – but “that’s my struggle.”⁷⁰

In a separate interview, Pola spoke more directly about what her vision for bilingual education would mean for the parents of bilingual children themselves – the maintenance of native language in addition to effective English support:

“[Y]ou should have a goal for your children to learn English because you respect this country and you love this country. But you must maintain your own cultures and your language; that dual language and dual culture is [so important]; that if you can learn ten languages, and ten cultures, the better this world would be.”⁷¹

Pola once again alludes to the importance of multiculturalism, but she also discusses cultural and linguistic maintenance. Bilingual education, for Pola, should achieve two cultural goals which were so often viewed as opposites: supporting and bolstering students’ own cultural and linguistic identities while also adding learning and enrichment in other languages and cultures through both curriculum and student interaction.

A few years later, bilingual organizer Hilda Vega echoed a similar vision in her letter welcoming Laval Wilson as superintendent of Boston Public Schools. Expressing resentment

65 Ibid.

66 Pola, “Working Together.”

67 Walsh, “Bilingual Education,” 5.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Eloise Libre, “Learning English: The Changing Shape of Bilingual Education in Massachusetts Since 1965” (master’s thesis, Tufts University, 2014), 55.

over the “common allegations” that the bilingual Master Parents Advisory Council did “not want [its] children to learn English,” Vega argued that bilingual education “provide[d] an opportunity not only for [bilingual] children to learn English plus the subjects others learn, but provid[ed] a unique opportunity for children whose first language is English to participate in the educational process through the medium of more than one language.”⁷² Again, organizers portrayed the ideal version of their program as beneficial for all students rather than just English language learners. Vega continued that this universalized bilingual education would “give all children the opportunity to learn more about the world in which they are to participate while in the classroom.”⁷³ It would also ease ethnic and racial conflict: “many resentments and fears, which are the result of ignorance, can be addressed early on and, hopefully, children will not repeat the mistakes of their parents.”⁷⁴

Negotiations over the 1979 *Lau* Compliance plan – which straddled issues of resource equality, community control, and multiculturalism – reflected this dual commitment to short-term needs and a longer-term multicultural vision. In their final August 1978 report, the Bilingual Multicultural Transition Team articulated a much more ambitious vision for bilingual education than had been adopted in the years following *Morgan*. “The paramount objective of bilingual education,” the report argued, “is to give bilingual children the best education possible, so that they can achieve as other children, and not merely to teach them the English language.”⁷⁵

In other words, the school system should be both responsive to student needs and cultures rather than forcing them along a narrowly transitional track. Yet, “in a truly integrated system, a parallel objective should be to extend the benefits of the bilingual education program to the other students and teachers as well.”⁷⁶ Bilingual education, they asserted, should be multi-directional and “multi-cultural,” enriching Boston Public Schools for all students through cultural pluralism. Pola also reiterated her conviction that heritage language should be maintained even as students learned English, and in outlining a series of “procedures to encourage multi-cultural sharing” and “methods for language maintenance activities,” the Transition Team supported this conviction. Pluralist integration, as the Transition Team understood it, was both a necessary ingredient and a worthy goal for bilingual education.⁷⁷

In a March 1979 statement to the Citywide Parents Council, Pola made even more explicit her support for an integrated bilingual education system:

“We don’t want our children to be separate, to be shuffled into some basement classroom and given the leftover crumbs of this department – we want them to get basic services, using their own language and learning English, so that they can receive an education which will prepare them to deal effectively in this country.”⁷⁸

Bilingual parents, Pola argued, should not have to sacrifice resource equity for language support. But, interestingly, Pola made an explicit connection between these resource issues and

72 Letter by Hilda Vega, 1985, Carmen A. Pola papers, Northeastern Digital Repository, <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20179501>.

73 Letter by Vega.

74 Ibid.

75 “Bilingual Multi-Cultural Transition Team Final Report,” August 25, 1978, Carmen A. Pola papers, Northeastern Digital Repository, <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20179301>.

76 “Bilingual Multi-Cultural.”

77 Ibid.

78 Cruz, “Boston’s Struggle,” 205.

the separation of bilingual students. As Pola eventually understood it, the ultimate goal of bilingual education – “to get basic services, using their own language and learning English” to better “prepare them to deal effectively in this country” – required that bilingual students no longer “be separate.”⁷⁹

Superintendent Wood ignored much of this vision, opting to attack bilingual education rather than expand its reach. As Caroline Playter lamented in a letter to the superintendent himself, Wood’s proposed plan for bilingual education was “totally educationally unsound and merely continue[d] a course of blatant discrimination against the thousands of Hispanic and other minority children in these programs.”⁸⁰ The plan, explained Pola in a similar letter to Superintendent Wood, “left [bilingual organizers] wondering if [he] had even read [their] report.”⁸¹ She continued that Wood’s proposal was “riddled with gaps that w[ould] emasculate bilingual education in” Boston Public Schools.⁸² The Transition Team articulated a number of specific issues with the plan, including the lack of educational rationale for much of what the plan recommended, the understaffing of important departmental positions, and, perhaps most saliently, the threat posed by the decentralization of the bilingual department to the oversight and accountability structure that bilingual parents relied on.⁸³ Overall, Playter and her clients considered Superintendent Wood’s plan “a direct and deliberate attack on bilingual/bicultural education in the Boston school system” that

would “destroy most of what [bilingual parents] together with the PACs, community groups, and faculty worked so hard to build for children in need of bilingual education.”⁸⁴ Just as bilingual education seemed primed to enter a new era of multiculturalism, its opponents sought to limit its scope. Education for Latino students hung in the balance.⁸⁵

Yet, the implementation team continued to apply pressure, eventually turning directly to the School Committee after negotiations broke down with Superintendent Wood. After two weeks of negotiations, the School Committee accepted their demands, and though bilingual parents maintained their “vamos a ver” (wait and see) attitude, Pola recognized that the new *Lau* plan proved a major victory: “I feel we have moved ahead.”⁸⁶ Boston School Committee president David Finnegan, meanwhile, described the plan as a “brand new beginning for bilingual education in Boston.”⁸⁷ The plan did not amount to a complete embrace of the multicultural and multidirectional bilingualism that Pola envisioned, but it certainly reflected a shift in the nature of bilingual education towards a more multicultural and integrated approach.

The “Philosophy” section of the plan illustrated significant development from the rigidly transitional model outlined immediately following *Morgan*. In addition to “assist[ing] children from distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds to realize” their “educational goals,” building important skills “to function successfully in society,” and providing “a well rounded education appropriate to [student] needs,” the plan also committed to “enriching the entire school system by sharing these linguistic and cultural backgrounds among all

79 Ibid.

80 Caroline Playter to Robert Wood, 1978, Carmen A. Pola papers, Northeastern Digital Repository, <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20179303>.

81 Playter to Wood.

82 Ibid.

83 The Bilingual Implementation Team to Robert Wood, memorandum, February 28, 1979, Carmen A. Pola papers, Northeastern Digital Repository, <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20179331>.

84 Playter to Wood.

85 The Bilingual Implementation Team to Wood, memorandum.

86 Cruz, “Boston’s Struggle,” 205.

87 Ibid.

members.”⁸⁸ The plan made clear reference to many of the baseline needs that organizers fought for throughout the 1970s, but it also referenced their longer-term vision for bilingual schooling. The goals and benefits of bilingual education, it suggested, should be two-directional – “bilingual/multicultural education programs which w[ould] permit children to learn in more than one language and be exposed to the distinct cultural heritages represented in the Boston Public Schools.” And in addition to this cross-cultural enrichment, the plan also emphasized cultural maintenance – public education would affirm the identities and backgrounds of linguistic and ethnic minority students rather than forcing rushed assimilation. Finally, the *Lau* plan viewed bilingual education as an important mechanism for “promot[ing] understanding and break[ing] down barriers of fear and ignorance.”⁸⁹ Thus, integration needed bilingual education, and bilingual education needed integration. From their initial concern over desegregation as a threat to bilingual education, bilingual organizers, parents, and educators had articulated an understanding of the two as joint goals in a broader movement for educational equity.

The ambitious change outlined in the *Lau* plan did not take place as hoped for, and throughout the 1980s and early 1990s Boston Public School eventually returned to a more transitional model of bilingual education. Although the *Lau* plan “Philosophy” remained similarly progressive in 1981 and 1985, the revised 1992 *Lau* plan omitted nearly all mention of the importance of linguistic and cultural maintenance in addition to English language learning. Instead, it opted for a series of short bullet points that emphasized “adequate abilities in reading, writing, communications,

computation, and critical thinking” and “skills and knowledge to enable students to perform favorably in a complex and changing society.”⁹⁰ Though the list did include a note about the preservation of each student’s “multicultural heritage,” the plan had clearly pivoted from any genuine focus on multicultural learning and towards the scaled-back transitional models adopted in the aftermath of *Morgan*. This more conservative shift was not unique to Boston. Indeed, attitudes shifted across the country throughout the 1980s and early 1990s as conservative voices – like that of former *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* editor Noel Epstein and, more prominently, former President Reagan – gained traction on the issue of bilingual education.⁹¹

Conclusion

The fight for adequate bilingual education is as relevant today as it was in the wake of *Morgan* – in some ways even more so given the ever-expanding number of dual-language students across the country. Indeed, English learners make up the fastest-growing student demographic in the nation, but outcomes – in terms of both test scores and graduation rates – have lagged behind this population growth.⁹² And though bilingual parents and organizers saw significant progress in Boston throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, many of their focus issues either remain unresolved. Some have even exacerbated, and debates over the nature of bilingual education – or even whether

88 Libre, “Learning English,” 55.

89 Libre, “Learning English,” 56.

90 Ibid.

91 Libre, “Learning English,” 57.

92 Kristin Lam and Erin Richards, “More US schools teach in English and Spanish, but not enough to help Latino kids,” *USA Today*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/education/2020/01/06/english-language-learners-benefit-from-dual-language-immersion-bilingual-education/4058632002/>.

students should have a right to bilingualism in the first place – remain prevalent, echoing historical debates in Boston and across the country over whether bilingual education should be rigidly transitional or longer-term and multicultural. “The research is really clear on what works,” argues Maria Cody, a professor of bilingual education at the University of Florida: “students learning English benefit from high-quality, long-term bilingual instruction programs,” but models vary widely across states.⁹³ Some opt for transitional models. Others use strategies initially developed for foreign diplomats and college students which teach exclusively in English. And some use “English-only” models in which language learners are separated from other students but learn exclusively in English. As of 2015, there were also over 3,000 dual-language programs across the county – a major increase from about 300 in 2001 – but these programs continue to face public hostility and staffing shortages among other issues reminiscent of 1970s Boston. Further, these programs have often developed fastest in wealthier areas, suggesting that significant barriers remain for lower-income linguistic minority students.⁹⁴ Thus, decades removed from the founding of El Comité and the fight for bilingual education following *Morgan*, the vision for bilingual education outlined by parents and organizers remains deeply relevant. As education policy experts, politicians, and activists continue to wrestle with the nature of dual-language learning, the integrated, multicultural, and long-term bilingual education advocated by Carmen Pola among other bilingual parents and organizers should not be forgotten.

93 Lam and Richards, “More US schools.”

94 Ibid.

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