

In attack on rights of immigrants and Native Americans, Arizona education chief targets dual language instruction

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Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne has threatened to take legal action against schools offering dual language instruction in public school districts. Horne is a strong advocate of English-only instruction for non-native-English-speaking students and has taken a firm stance against dual language instruction programs.

Arizona is home to more than 93,000 English learning students, about 8.5 percent of the total K-12 student body in the state. Over recent years there has been a growing number of school programs that offer 50-50 instruction to students, with Spanish being the primary language in question, though there are a number of students with a Native American language as their first language as well.

Horne has stated that he will seek counsel from the state attorney general's office on how to take legal action against these programs, saying they are "not consistent with the [Proposition 203] initiative, and the 2019 law did not purport to contradict the initiative."

"I'm passionately in the favor of studying other languages once you're proficient in English, but the first priority is to learn English. That's important to survive in school and in life after school," said Horne. He added that he may not even need to take legal action, continuing, "I would just start with teach them, inform them, if they defy the law, cut off their funds."

The basis for Horne's claims is Proposition 203, passed in 2000 by Arizona voters as a ballot initiative. Prop 203 declares English the national language of the United States and effectively bans educational instruction in a student's native language. It requires that students be placed in a one-year English immersion program before being integrated into general English

instruction.

Advocates for the proposition argued that non-English-speaking students, principally Latin American immigrants, were not learning English well enough and were falling behind in academic standards. They argued that by banning native language instruction for English learners they would catch up to native English speakers faster.

However, after two decades of the ban, repeated data and research found the ban was having the opposite effect. Test scores and graduation rates for English-learning students worsened over the life of the law and public support for repealing the law grew.

By 2019 Republican and Democratic state legislators had agreed to relax the restriction with a state law that reduced the number of mandatory English instruction hours from four to two and provided a framework for schools to offer dual 50-50 language programs in which parents could enroll their children.

Over the next three years several Republican and Democratic Party politicians sponsored legislation to further reform the Prop 203 ban but failed to get the bills passed into law. In 2023, these politicians have abandoned reforming Prop 203 entirely.

This is in part because UnidosUS, the largest Latino advocacy group in the US, has dropped the issue from its platform. Representatives of the organization say they still support repealing Prop 203, but that they are more interested in other legislative efforts to lift a ban on undocumented immigrants utilizing in-state tuition rates for public colleges and universities.

Liz Salazar, a policy adviser for UnidosUS, said, "It's going to get prickly trying to make sure the tuition equity stays on the ballot. We didn't think this would

be the year that [the English-only repeal] will make it through. We anticipate that no Republican would want to sponsor that legislation in an election year, and there's other issues that might make their constituents think twice about the English-only repeal if there is a tuition equity piece on the ballot, too."

This retreat from the Prop 203 repeal has opened the door for Horne to attack dual language instruction and preserve Arizona's status as the last remaining state with a dual language instruction ban.

Arizona's ban was part of a wave of anti-immigrant politics that swept the nation at the turn of the century, with California, Arizona, and Massachusetts passing bans on dual language instruction.

California was the first, with voters passing Prop 227 after millionaire Ronald Unz launched a campaign to ban dual language instruction in 1998.

Unz gained his wealth by developing a software for banks to manage mortgage securities in the 1980s. He used his new wealth to fund an aspiring political career which included a failed campaign for the California Republican gubernatorial nomination in 1994. Unz saw greater potential in ballot initiatives and in 1998 launched his successful campaign to impose a ban on dual language instruction across the state.

Unz had no background in education, using language instruction as a thinly veiled attack on immigrants. He is primarily known for his support for far-right views and commentators and antisemitic positions about Jewish influence in politics and academia.

In 2013 he founded the Unz Review online publication as a hub for far-right, racist, antisemitic and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Unz claims that he does not agree with the positions expressed in the articles he publishes and that it is simply a place for "controversial" opinions.

Among such controversial ideas is that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated by a Jewish plot and that the Democratic Party is attempting to destroy suburbia, the "backbone of Western civilization," by sending immigrants to suburban communities.

The latter was written by John Derbyshire, a racist and anti-communist political columnist who was fired from the conservative *National Review* for making racist comments about African Americans.

This is the political sewer from which the assault on dual language instruction has emerged. Prohibitions on

instruction in a student's native language have a very reactionary political history. Concealed behind a false concern for the well-being of English learners, the ban on non-English instruction is a blatant attack on immigrants.

It is hardly a coincidence that this attack is coming now, given that the Biden administration is ramping up its own assault on immigrants at the Mexican border, in which children continue to held in cages and active duty military personnel detain immigrants fleeing poverty and violence wrought by American imperialism in their home countries.

The legitimacy of Horne's legal challenges remain to be seen, but the bipartisan assault on immigrants will continue to escalate as long as the two big-business political parties dominate American politics.



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