



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Five-Minute Floor Speech
“Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners”
Statement As Prepared For Delivery
June 1, 2011

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The 2010 Census confirmed that Hispanics are a growing part of the American family. There are now more than 50 million Latinos in the United States, accounting for more than half of the nation’s population growth between 2000 and 2010. Today, one in six Americans is Hispanic.

This tremendous growth adds to our country’s rich diversity, but it also brings challenges. The number of English-language learners in our nation’s schools has increased by 50 percent over the past decade. English learners are found in states with traditionally large Hispanic populations, like Texas and New Mexico, and in states that have experienced a recent influx of immigrants, like Colorado and Indiana. And English learners are found in large numbers in the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico.

How well our schools educate those students will help determine the future success of our nation. And providing a quality education means ensuring that they graduate from high school with proficiency in English.

The benefits of learning English are clear for students living in the 50 states, where it is difficult to obtain most jobs without being fluent in the language.

But learning English is also vital for students in Puerto Rico. In my life, I have visited many countries around the world. And everywhere I have traveled, I have seen young people studying English with passion and determination. Puerto Rico’s sons and daughters, particularly as

American citizens living in a U.S. territory, simply must be proficient in English to compete effectively in the modern, globalized world.

Yet, for too many years, some politicians in Puerto Rico sought to limit the teaching of English in our local schools in a misguided effort to influence the debate over Puerto Rico's political status. This cynical approach has harmed our children—and our Island. Regardless of one's views on Puerto Rico's status, there can be no question that proficiency in English—as well as in Spanish—is in the best interests of Puerto Rico's youth. To deny our children the opportunity to learn English is to deny them the countless opportunities that come with being bilingual.

Accordingly, since arriving in Congress, one of my primary goals has been to improve English-language instruction in Puerto Rico's schools. That is why I have introduced a bill to raise a cap that restricts the amount of federal funds the Island can receive to strengthen its English-language programs. In order to ensure that the children of Puerto Rico have the same opportunities as children in the states, it is imperative that the Island be treated fairly when it comes to allocating federal funding for English-language programs.

Moreover, our schools' success in teaching English learners in Puerto Rico and in the states will depend on the number of well-prepared bilingual teachers available to instruct these students. In Puerto Rico, the challenge has been to find enough teachers who are sufficiently proficient in English to effectively teach the language. At the same time, the increased number of English learners in the states has left school districts scrambling to find enough teachers who are fluent in foreign languages, such as Spanish or Mandarin, and are qualified to teach English to those immigrant student populations.

In both cases, schools are asking themselves: How can I find an experienced teacher to meet this need? One answer: teacher exchanges.

I recently introduced legislation that would fund teacher exchanges between school districts in different regions of the United States. Under my bill, for example, a teacher in Puerto Rico could improve her English ability by spending a year in the states, trading places with a native English-speaking instructor who seeks to improve her Spanish-language skills. Through this exchange, the teachers—and, more importantly, the students in each community—would benefit. No wonder that

organizations representing English teachers, foreign language instructors, principals, and school boards have all endorsed my bill.

As Congress works to reform the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, I urge my colleagues to address the needs of English-language learners, whether those students are located in Santa Fe, San Antonio, or San Juan. Our goal should be as simple as it is ambitious: to ensure that every student in our nation has the opportunity to graduate from high school as a fluent English speaker.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I yield back the balance of my time.