

Sweeping changes are approved for bilingual education

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The Board of Education unanimously OK'd a proposal last night that calls for sweeping changes in bilingual education, a move that could affect almost 2,000 Staten Island students.

Schools Chancellor Harold Levy's \$75 million overhaul offers parents four paths for children to learn English: Traditional bilingual education; English as a second language (ESL); a more intensive version of such classes, and a program known as dual language instruction.

Under the current program, students are either thrust into bilingual education, where students are instructed in two languages, or an ESL program, where students are removed from the class for additional help in English.

If parents don't indicate otherwise, children are automatically placed in a bilingual class if one is available. These classes are organized when 15 children speaking the same language are in one grade or two continuous grades.

On Staten Island, most students learning English enroll in ESL classes, with less than 100 students in bilingual education classes. Only two schools offer bilingual classes: PS 16 in Tompkinsville and PS 20 in Port Richmond. Both have a mixed first- and second-grade Spanish speaking group.

Staten Island representative to the Board of Education Jerry Cammarata applauded the changes for providing parents with greater flexibility.

"I'm particularly pleased because this is the first time we are paying attention to the need of re-thinking bi-lingual education," he said. "It is my opinion that this resolution represents only a platform by which we need to further tool the way we make all students quickly proficient in English and re-tool public education to have

the capacity to provide polylingual instruction in order to meet the challenges of the united international community."

"If children in Europe can speak several languages fluently and articulately there is no reason why the education system of New York City cannot give its students an equal opportunity."

Much of the plan is based on a report by the Mayor's Task Force on Bilingual Education, of which Levy was a member.

The intense ESL is a sort of crash course in English involving weekend classes and summer school. In dual language classes, English and non-English speakers study in two languages.

"The plan has great potential if it is done right," said Dr. Gail Slater, coordinator for bilingual education for Brooklyn and Staten Island high schools.

The initiative to reshape English proficiency programs in city schools came about after findings that students in ESL programs strongly outperform their peers in bilingual education. Those who bounce between the two programs perform the weakest.

Points of the plan include:

- Informing parents of their right to choose.
- Establishing a goal to develop English proficiency in three years.
- Creating intensive language programs.
- Ending the practice of alternating between programs from year to year.
- Researching English language development for students with disabilities.
- Revising entry and exit criteria.
- Improving teacher quality.

The Board of Education added amendments to look into more ways to help special education students in bilingual education and non-English speaking students who enter the system after the sixth grade.