

SHOPBOP

Follow @Shopbop on Twitter for early access to sales



Soft Joie
Soft Joie Bond Dress

FREE 3 DAY SHIPPING & FREE RETURNS

Joie

SHOP THE LATEST COLLECTION

Free Shipping & Returns on all US orders



AdChoices

Joie

SHOP THE LATEST COLLECTION

Free Shipping & Returns on all US orders



AdChoices

[Log In](#) | [Sign Up](#) | [Join the Action Alert list!](#) | [Help](#)

DAILY KOS



NEWS · COMMUNITY · ACTION

[PEOPLE](#) [GROUPS](#) [DIARIES](#) [TAGS](#) [LABOR](#) [COMICS](#) [ELECTIONS](#) [ECON](#) [RADIO](#)



Cassiodorus [Follow](#) · [RSS](#)

Daily Kos member

[Profile](#) · [Diaries \(list\)](#) · [Stream](#)

[Subscribe](#) or [Donate](#) to support Daily Kos.

THU JUL 17, 2008 AT 08:48 AM PDT

Kate Menken's "English Learners Left Behind"

by [Cassiodorus](#)

Like

1

Tweet

0

Email

13 Comments / 0 New

This is a book review of Kate Menken's **English Learners Left Behind**, which details the difficulties faced by "English language learners" under the testing regime faced by NCLB, with special emphasis upon problems the author observed and researched in New York State.

(crossposted at [Docudharma](#))



Book Review: Menken, Kate. **English Learners Left Behind: Standardized Testing as Language Policy**. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 2008.

-- Description of the book --

This book is the product of research conducted in New York State on "English language learners," students caught in the public school system whose command of English is not "up to grade level" and who typically speak another language at home. Menken's research combines interviews, observations, test questions, test performance data, and other accumulated data about the public schools (51). The emphasis in all this research is to observe how "English language learners" cope with the high-stakes standardized testing structure of New York State, and with the high-stakes testing regimes of the No Child Left Behind Act as applied nationwide. She reveals a set of data which are both peculiar to New York, in which a set of "Regents' exams" count as high school exit exams, and generally applicable to the United States as a whole.

Menken's book aims to describe the educational realities faced by "English language learners" under the No Child Left Behind Act, and to suggest ways in which the educational system can be changed to better accommodate them. Menken's conclusion is this: although there may be benefits to the expectations attached to the No Child Left Behind Act, said benefits are outweighed by the fact that, since NCLB mandates "high-stakes" tests, said tests constitute de facto language policy, and drive public school curricula in ways broadly detrimental to "English language learners."

As a footnote, here, I need to explain this, about "English language learners." This term will consistently be put in scare-quotes, for the main reason that school administrations typically separate out their "English language learners" without reference to their native-language abilities. Many students within the public school system are exceptionally bright; yet since their abilities in English suffer from a lack of English-language experience, the system stigmatizes them as "English language learners" rather than respecting the foreign language in which their abilities really shine. The term "English language learners" is thus symptomatic of school systems throughout America which privilege English language instruction over multilingual instruction programs. The current NCLB regime of high-stakes standardized testing is said to reinforce this "deficit" characterization of "English language learners," thus producing a "subtractive" model of education:

Valenzuela (1999) makes the argument that educational policy in the United States serves to subtract from students their linguistic, cultural, and community-based identities, instead of building on these aspects of diversity as assets. (99)

Menken otherwise shows that the "English language learner" or "ELL" category is a large and growing one within America's public school systems:

It is estimated that approximately 5,119,561 ELLs were enrolled in United States public schools during the 2004-2005 school year; this represents approximately 10.5% of the total public school student enrollment and reflects a 60.82% increase over the reported 1994-1995 enrollment (**National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006a**). During this same period, the growth in enrollment of all students in public schools increased by only 2.6%. (21)

The growth in the total population of ELL students cannot be blamed, suggests the author, upon the failure of assimilation, as **James Crawford** notes that "the pace of Anglicization (of immigrants) has never been faster." (21)

The first part of this book deals with the specifics of NCLB and its application to "English language learners." As NCLB insists that students be tested in English whether they know the language or not, "English language learners" are inevitably going to register poorly on such tests. The pressures of "Adequate Yearly Progress," to which all schools must cleave in order to avoid sanctions, oblige public schools to reduce the number of students under their purview which are "English language learners." Each school must improve the aggregate of test scores so as to make "Adequate Yearly Progress" goals, and thus pressure is put upon "English language learners" to learn English quickly so as to become "English proficient." Thus:

It becomes clear that high-stakes testing places great pressure on ELLs and their teachers to speed up the process of English language acquisition; this is part of new language acquisition policy whereby English acquisition is promoted through standardized testing. Yet from second language acquisition research we know that it typically takes an English

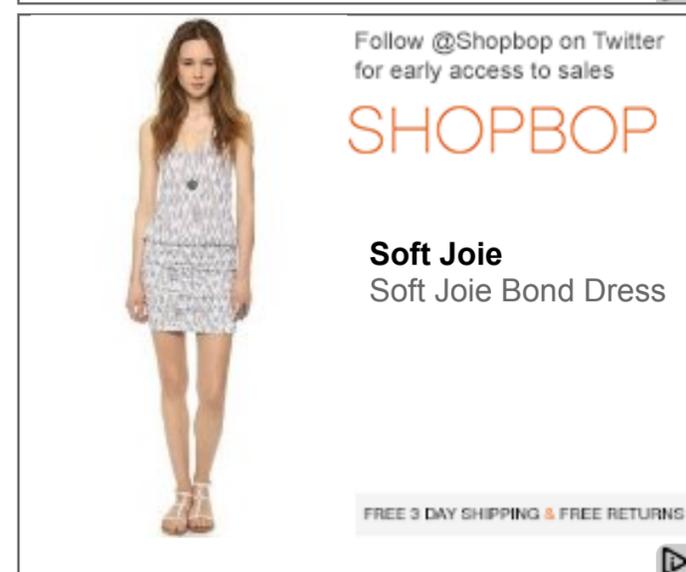


Follow @Shopbop on Twitter for early access to sales

SHOPBOP

Soft Joie
Soft Joie Bond Dress

FREE 3 DAY SHIPPING & FREE RETURNS

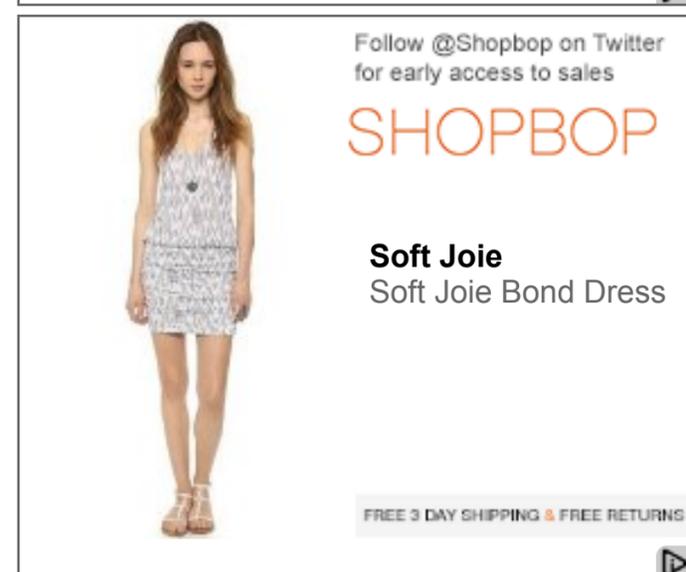


Follow @Shopbop on Twitter for early access to sales

SHOPBOP

Soft Joie
Soft Joie Bond Dress

FREE 3 DAY SHIPPING & FREE RETURNS



Follow @Shopbop on Twitter for early access to sales

SHOPBOP

Soft Joie
Soft Joie Bond Dress

FREE 3 DAY SHIPPING & FREE RETURNS

DIARY RECOMMENDED BY



RECOMMENDED BY CASSIODORUS



Principles: Beyond Snowden

by **Lady Libertine**

214/214 New 94 Recs

The Breakfast Club: 5-23-2014

by **psychodrew**

33/33 New 22 Recs

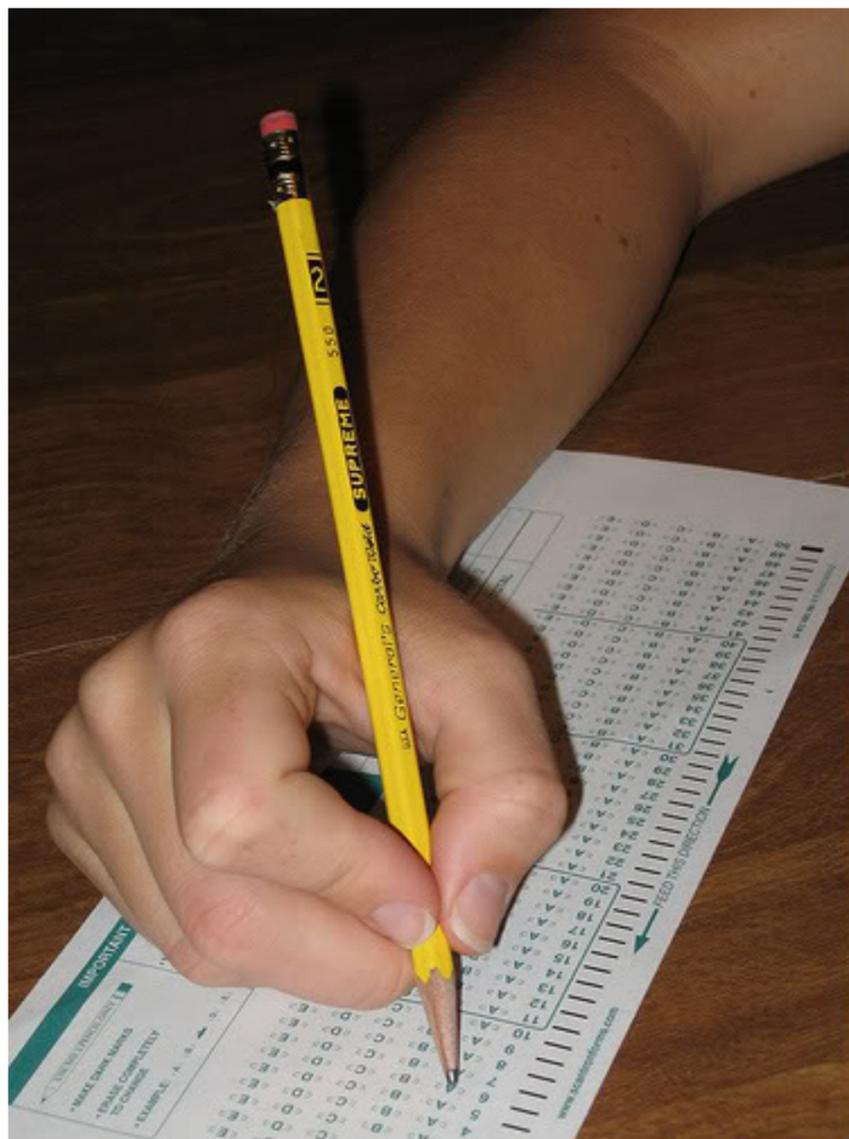
language learner at least five to seven years to acquire the academic language in English needed to perform to the level of native English speakers on assessments (**Cummins, 2000**; Thomas & Collier, 1997).

(In this regard, Menken is respectful of the main pretext given by advocates of bilingual education -- that learning in one's primary language will "transfer over" to learning in a second language when one is ready to think in that second language.)

So, as Menken reports, there are rather high failure rates for such students at English-language standardized tests, and high dropout rates in general for "English language learners." The author tells us that "just 33.2% of ELLs passed the English Regents exam (in New York) in 2005, as compared to a pass rate of 77.9% of all students taking the English Regents exam in the same year." (44) The dropout rate for New York City for the 2002-2003 school year is, moreover, 30.5% for high school senior ELLs, with another 37.9% of high school senior ELLs scheduled to take a fifth year of high school.

(Inquiries about "English language learners" should be forthcoming in the state of California, as well, given recent data given front-page attention by the **Los Angeles Times** which reveals that nearly a quarter of California's students drop out.)

The second part of this book deals with the data its author has collected around the real people who make up these statistics. Chapter 4 of this book deals with "the linguistic challenges that standardized tests pose for English language learners," and is a line-by-line critique of the language of standardized tests, much of which is completely opaque to those learning English for the first time. One interesting point made here is that the Math Regents' test given in the state of New York requires of students a broad knowledge of English -- so for "English language learners" it is an English test as well as being a math test.



(From **Mars Hill Church Seattle** via **Creative Commons**)

Generally speaking, under the nationwide regime of high-stakes testing, dropout rates have increased among "English language learners," and more students are being retained (forced to repeat grades) and forced out of school (99). To explore this reality, in Chapter 5 Menken characterizes her interview data on ELL students as fitting into several "human story" plots: 1) students retaking the tests over and over again until they are passed, 2) prolonged time in school, 3) testing as an incentive to leave school, to return to their home countries, or to take the GED, 4) interruptions and challenges to the schooling process, and 5) stories of the "thrill of

Representative Democracy is a cruel hoax

by **Don midwest** 155/155 New 83 Recs

I Think About Things

by **LaEscapee** 19/19 New 20 Recs

Daily Kos's Blind Spot on Reality

by **psychodrew** 1479/1479 New 418 Recs

Glenn Greenwald on Hillary Clinton: "She's a f*ing hawk and like a neocon, practically.."**

by **Seattle Socialist** 705/705 New 52 Recs

Why, Yes, Bill Clinton Has Nothing But Contempt for You

by **Liberty Equality Fraternity and Trees** 737/737 New 243 Recs

House Committee's Vote to Rein in NSA Would Not Have Happened Without Edward Snowden

by **David Harris Gershon** 101/101 New 52 Recs

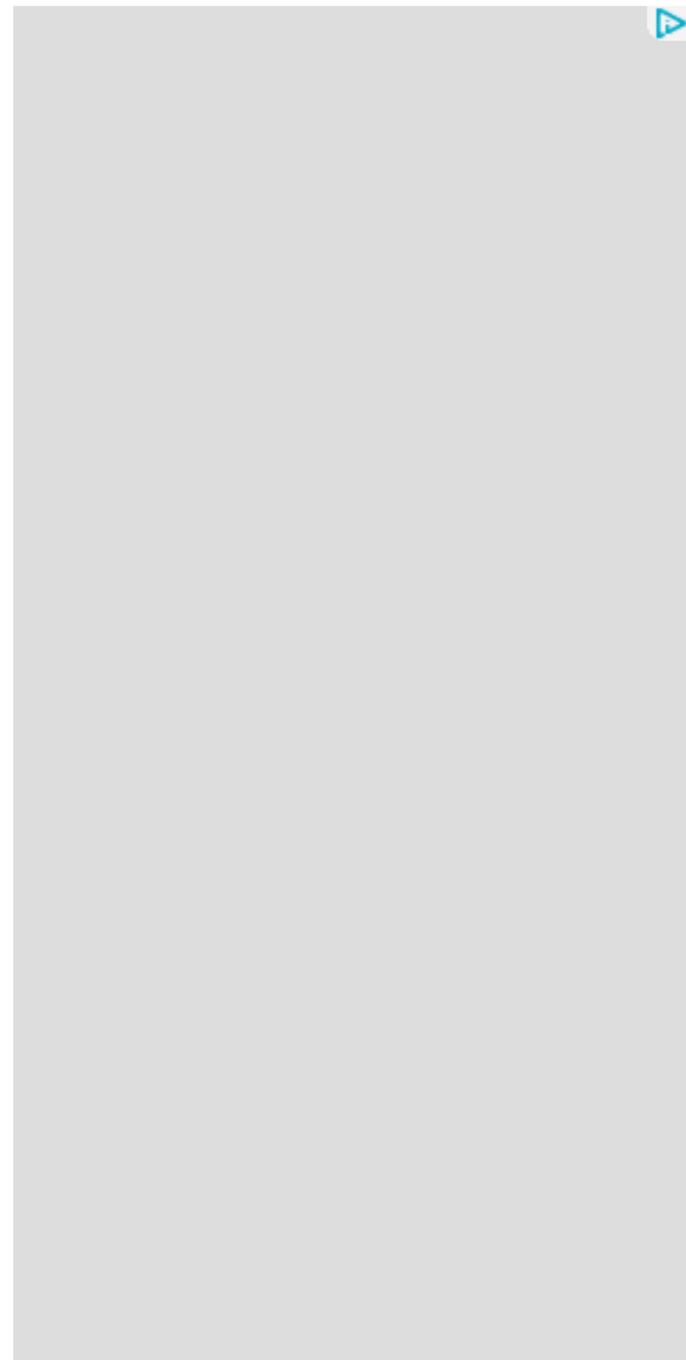
I Laugh at People

by **LaEscapee** 18/18 New 19 Recs

Is Hater the Best You Can Do?

by **psychodrew** 219/219 New 54 Recs

NEXT »



victory" and the "agony of defeat." (97) In the book, Menken describes a number of such stories which she recorded in her research on New York public schools.

In general, the primary change in school practice for "English language learners" is this: as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act, a large portion of the standard curriculum of many schools has become a "teach to the test" curriculum, and this has invaded the English as a Second Language classroom as well. This

has resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum to the material of the tests and a new definition of English as a Second Language that is more similar to English language arts classes taken by native English speakers. (107)

Menken sees this as generally being bad for "English language learners."

The solutions proposed in the last part of this book are to take place on the school level: Menken suggests that schools need to have two things in place to counterbalance NCLB:

- a strong, coherent, clearly articulated and implemented schoolwide language policy
- Top-down educational policies that support local language policies and practices

These recommendations, as Menken recognizes, mean that schools must resist the tendency under NCLB to "teach to the test," and they must, contrary to initiatives such as California's Proposition 227, implement bilingual education of some sort. It is hard for me to see how Menken's proposals will take any sort of flight in a good number of school districts throughout America without a serious and thorough repoliticization of schooling.

-- Analysis and Commentary --

(Autobiographical note)

For a small portion of the 1990s, I was a substitute teacher in a small number of districts in southern California which had genuine bilingual programs. I enjoyed this work, and it paid well enough to pay the bills -- \$125/day at its best times. Unfortunately I never felt like I was "of the system" enough to be able to put together an entire year's worth of innovative, bilingual curriculum (though I tried mightily at times), so I never actually went on to become a full-time public school teacher. However, I was good at putting together individual days' worth of bilingual curriculum; days in which I could organize real learning experiences, were joyful, and free of cheap ploys like "show the kids a film," unless that was on the prescribed lesson plan. I didn't care much for the imposition of Proposition 227 upon schools in 1998, in the wake of a failed campaign to stop it; the requirement that teachers in "immersion" classes spend large portions of the day speaking in English seemed to me to be a waste of time, in situations where teachers could have taught a lot of valuable things in Spanish (the main alternate language in my community). "Structured English Immersion" seems like a good idea if you forget that your students are learning academic English and not conversational English -- though I'm sure the teachers in such programs are doing the best they can. I don't know whether it would still be any good for me to go back to substitute teaching in the current era of standardized test-mania. (I may have to find out, as funds are getting low and it's not even August yet.)

Critique of the book

This is a good, meaningful book on New York schools, with meaningful applications for US schools in general. It seems to draw some of its energies from the comprehensive, ethnographic studies of school done by Texas researchers Linda McNeil and Angela Valenzuela. At many points its main points are drawn from its citation of other research; the firsthand research upon which it is based is still basic to its main points, though.

As Menken points out, the US does not have an intentional language policy. NCLB has scrapped the "Bilingual Education Act" that existed with the 1994 version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, yet bilingual education still persists in isolated locations. Instead, with NCLB and its promotion of "teaching to the test," we have a *de facto* language policy.

If we were somehow to have an intentional language policy in this country, we'd first have to admit to ourselves that "English language learners" were actually worth teaching. We'd have to make a commitment to their schooling process that went beyond mere compliance with the court mandate established in the 1974 case **Lau v. Nichols**, which decreed that the public schools actually had to HELP "English language learners" learn English, rather than just letting them

"sink or swim" in a classroom whose curriculum was directed toward those who knew English already. We'd have to invent bilingual curricula as standard practice to be implemented by bilingual teachers teaching in schools with good bilingual libraries.

If we were to have a real language policy for the schools, America would have to get over its collective distrust of immigrants who can't speak English, of languages which aren't English, and of academic language in general. Is that really so tall an order?

ORIGINALLY POSTED TO [CASSIODORUS](#) ON THU JUL 17, 2008 AT 08:48 AM PDT.

TAGS
[Education](#) [English language learners](#) [Immigrants](#) [New York](#) [No Child Left Behind tests](#)

FROM THE WEB

Sponsored Content by Taboola



12 Lingerie Looks We Dare You To Try
Refinery29



A Simple Way To Reverse Age Related Weight Gain
Real Dose



Wrinkle Trick Horrifies Surgeons
HealthyLife Magazine



Be prepared. There are no warnings.
HealthiNation



Explore the Legacy of the Civil War in Connecticut
CT Visit



Sloppy Joe Biscuit Casserole
Manwich

FROM THE WEB

Sponsored Content by Taboola



12 Lingerie Looks We Dare You To Try
Refinery29



A Simple Way To Reverse Age Related Weight Gain
Real Dose



Wrinkle Trick Horrifies Surgeons
HealthyLife Magazine



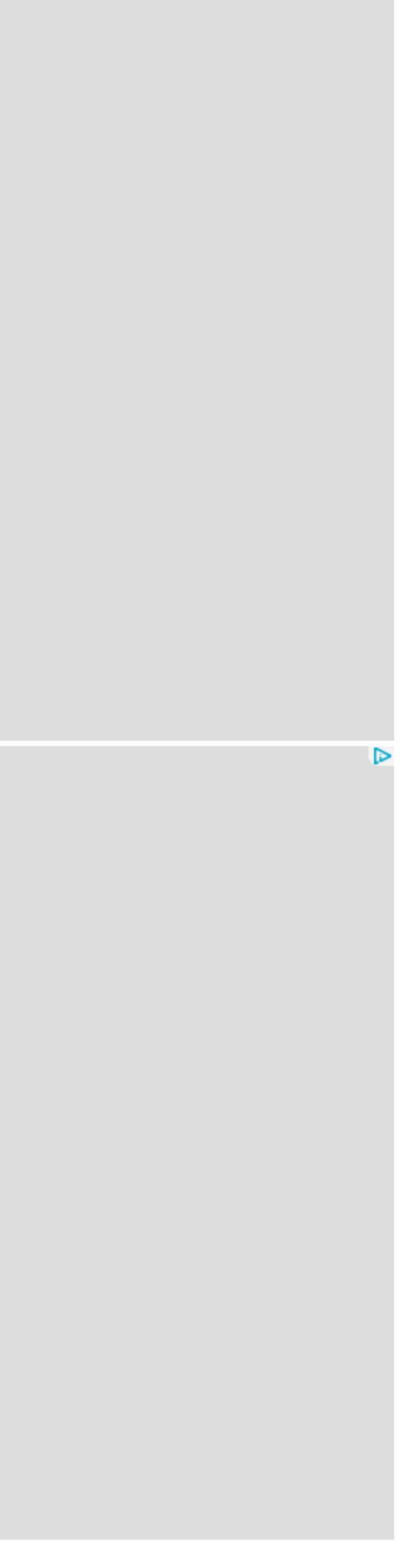
Be prepared. There are no



Explore the Legacy of the Civil



Sloppy Joe Biscuit Casserole



COMMENT PREFERENCES EXPAND SHRINK HIDE AUTO REFRESH?

13 COMMENTS | PERMALINK

▼ **Tips for English language learners (11+ / 0-)**

May we learn their languages too!

*"The freeway's concrete way won't show/ you where to run or how to go" --
Jorma Kaukonen*

by **Cassiodorus** on **Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 08:49:14 AM PDT**

▼ **NCLB tests are anti-science, music & arts (7+ / 0-)**

Immigrants make huge contributions to America in math, science and the arts but the NCLB tests are loaded to tests English language skills even in the math tests.

That's wrong and counterproductive.

Educational tests need to measure broad learning, not a narrow set of English language skills.

Thanks for another excellent, thoughtful, intellectual diary.

"It's the planet, stupid."

by **FishOutofWater** on **Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 09:01:27 AM PDT**

▼ **Indeed! (nmi) (2+ / 0-)**

*"The freeway's concrete way won't show/ you where to run or how to go" --
Jorma Kaukonen*

by **Cassiodorus** on **Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 09:31:05 AM PDT**

[**Parent**]

▼ **A personal experience (4+ / 0-)**

My son had an experience with this three years ago when he was in 10th grade.

About a month into the school year, a new boy joined his math class. The boy's name was Roberto, and he had just moved from Guatemala. He spoke almost no English.

There was no English help for Roberto, except for an ESL class. He was put into classes and just expected to manage as best he could.

The math teacher sat Roberto next to my son and instructed my son to help him. "You're good at math and your last name sounds Hispanic," she told my son. Truth be told, our last name is Portugese, two generations removed, and no one in our family speaks Spanish.

My son spent the rest of the semester teaching Roberto enough English to get through math. It was a *wonderful* experience for our son, and I am so grateful that he had it. He started out thinking that Roberto was stupid because he didn't understand the problems, but as time passed, he discovered that Roberto was very bright and had no trouble at all with the math once he understood the language. It was an "Ah-ha" moment for our son.

But my point here is that this kid was thrown into 10th grade with virtually no help with the language at all, and another student was tasked with teaching him enough to get by in his class.

We could do better than that.

I never thought I'd miss Nixon...

by **DixieDishrag** on **Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 09:59:42 AM PDT**

CASSIODORUS'S BLOGROLL —

- Capitalism Nature Socialism**
- Alternet**
- Climate and Capitalism**
- Counterpunch**
- Docudharma**
- Green is the New Red**
- Grist**
- Naked Capitalism**
- Nick Turse**
- The Oil Drum**
- Peter McLaren**
- Jason W. Moore**
- Agroecology**
- Cornelius Castoriadis**
- Global Political Economy**
- WWOOF USA**

MOST SHARED —

- Open Carry Texas harasses, threatens former Marine for speaking against them**
by **Hunter** 935 6
- GOP Senate candidate describes mass murder as an 'unfortunate accident'**
by **Laura Clawson** 1763 64
- Stark Infographic of Too-Big-to-Fail Banks Represents 1% Consolidation in America**
by **David Harris Gershon** 591 8
- White House press secretary Jay Carney stepping down**
by **Jed Lewison** 102 12
- Utah school altered yearbook photos to make girls appear more "modest"**
by **Jen Hayden** 954 4

NEXT »

▼ **thanks DixieDishrag (2+ / 0-)**

-- that's a meaningful story!

*"The freeway's concrete way won't show/ you where to run or how to go" --
Jorma Kaukonen*

by **Cassiodorus** on **Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 10:09:22 AM PDT**

[**Parent**]

▼ **As a bilingual teacher myself (3+ / 0-)**

I think your son's math teacher did the right thing, given the resources she had.
Of course, assuming anything about your son's language ability from his surname was wrong, but it seems to have worked out for the best. Peer coaching is powerful. Much better than leaving the child isolated by the language barrier.

by **Flintcitylimit** on **Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 11:03:22 AM PDT**

[**Parent**]

▼ **Thanks Flintcitylimit! (nmi) (2+ / 0-)**

*"The freeway's concrete way won't show/ you where to run or how to go" --
Jorma Kaukonen*

by **Cassiodorus** on **Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 11:40:19 AM PDT**

[**Parent**]

▼ **Oh, given the resources she had (1+ / 0-)**

or should I say the lack thereof, I think the teacher absolutely made the right decision.

And given the insight that my own son got from the experience, it was a good thing for him too.

But what if he hadn't been willing to help this kid? What if he had "copped an attitude" and refused? What if he hadn't been able, for whatever reason, to help? He has no teaching credentials. He was a 10th grader for goodness' sake!

I just don't think it's fair to kids with a language barrier to depend on this catch-as-catch-can method of getting them through.

I never thought I'd miss Nixon...

by **DixieDishrag** on **Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 02:03:37 PM PDT**

[**Parent**]

▼ **On one hand (1+ / 0-)**

we tell immigrants that they must learn English. On the other we do everything we can to make sure that learning it is as difficult as possible.

My dad's folks came from Lebanon a hundred years ago. For whatever reason, they settled in a German area of town. When dad went to school at age 4, he spoke Arabic and German. There were no ESL/ELL classes but he was not the only one with this problem and he and his multilingual classmates did just fine.

Now the climate for immigrants is so toxic that they are encouraged to self-isolate in order to avoid criticism and abuse. Then we penalize the kids by taking away every program that would help them become productive members of our country.

When they fail, we say, "Aha! See those stupid people can't even learn English and graduate from school!" To be honest, I don't know why anyone **wants** to come here anymore....

-7.62, -7.28 "We told the truth. We obeyed the law. We kept the peace." - Walter Mondale

by **lucky lizard** on **Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 11:49:34 AM PDT**

▼ **America must get over -- (1+ / 0-)**

its collective distrust of immigrants, otherwise the wound in the social fabric will remain unhealed...

*"The freeway's concrete way won't show/ you where to run or how to go" --
Jorma Kaukonen*

by **Cassiodorus** on **Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 11:58:34 AM PDT**

[**Parent**]

▼ **We have overcome (1+ / 0-)**

other waves of immigration, not without strife, but we have gotten past them. Why is this so different? I wonder if it's the constant drone of the media that feed it all in real time... all the time?

-7.62, -7.28 "We told the truth. We obeyed the law. We kept the peace." - Walter Mondale

by **lucky lizard** on **Thu Jul 17, 2008 at 12:23:25 PM PDT**

[**Parent**]

▼ **Sorry I'm too late to tip or rec. (1+ / 0-)**

Thanks for highlighting the issue!

"No his mind is not for rent, to any god or government. Always hopeful yet discontent, he knows changes aren't permanent. But change is." -Neil Peart

by **Boisepoet** on **Fri Jul 18, 2008 at 11:49:27 AM PDT**

▼ **thanks for dropping in! (nmi) (1+ / 0-)**

*"The freeway's concrete way won't show/ you where to run or how to go" --
Jorma Kaukonen*

by **Cassiodorus** on **Fri Jul 18, 2008 at 12:27:15 PM PDT**

[**Parent**]

PERMALINK

BROWSE TAGS

CIVIL RIGHTS COMMUNITY CONGRESS CULTURE ECONOMY EDUCATION ELECTIONS ENERGY

ENVIRONMENT HEALTH CARE INTERNATIONAL LABOR LAW MEDIA META NATIONAL SECURITY SCIENCE

TRANSPORTATION WHITE HOUSE

© **Kos Media, LLC**

Site content may be used for any purpose without explicit permission unless otherwise specified

"Kos" and "Daily Kos" are registered trademarks of Kos Media, LLC

[Privacy Policy](#)

DAILY KOS NETWORK

Daily Kos | Comics | Elections | DKTV | RSS
Mother Talkers | Street Prophets | Congress Matters

ABOUT

Masthead | History | Writers | Frequently Asked Questions | Endorsements

ADVERTISE

Advertising Overview | Visits and Other Stats for Advertisers

STORE

Shirts

