

Oklahoma teachers' march: immigration debate fuels calls for bilingual education

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“Growing up as a kid in northern Wisconsin and Texas, I used to get in trouble for speaking Spanish at school,” said Rogelio Contreras, a 44-year-old Spanish teacher from Tulsa. “That mentality has totally changed because now people value the second language. Now they encourage being bilingual.”

Contreras’s daughter attends a Tulsa public school, where she is taught in English and Spanish. It is one of three dual-language immersion elementary schools in Tulsa, where half the students, many undocumented, are native Spanish speakers. The other half are non-native Spanish speakers.

Many education professionals say bilingual schools are critical to integrating immigrants. Young children can grow and learn in the language they speak at home without being ashamed to do so at school, as Contreras was. At the same time, their classmates can learn Spanish with help from Latino peers.

Contreras is one of more than 100 teachers marching from Tulsa to Oklahoma City, in search of better funding for education in the state. Many leaders of the march have said funding bilingual education is vital, not just for integrating Latinos but for improving education overall.

“I think this is something that people are missing when they speak of the expense of when English language learners come to America and we have to teach them to speak English,” said Danielle Terrio, an elementary school teacher who grew up in a bilingual household – speaking sign language and English.

“I was raised to think of the idea of ‘the deaf benefit’, that it’s not a disability. I’m multilingual and it’s a real benefit. Same thing for my bilingual kids.”

Terrio said teaching in elementary school had shown her that bilingual students could learn faster than those who stuck to their mother tongue. “The bilingual second-grader can take a paragraph of information and summarize it well with skill,” she said. “The bilingual second-grader can pick the main topic out of a paragraph better; the bilingual second-grader can take multiple perspectives better. They can understand that from this character’s view the story looks like this, and from this character’s point of view it looks like this, because they are translating and transitioning between different cultures all the time.”

At a time when migrants are being demonized, some teachers on the road to Oklahoma City said they were marching to get more support for Spanish speakers and to better fund bilingual education.

Cindy Gaeta, the daughter of Chilean immigrants, is one of the lead march organizers. While the media have compared the teachers’ strikes to recent student walkouts over gun violence, Gaeta said, it has largely ignored the inspiration some teachers have drawn from Latino students who walked out in protest when Donald Trump repealed protections for undocumented young people. “Same thing for all the marches led by black youth in low-income communities,” she said. “They don’t get media attention.”

Gaeta said some of the inspiration for the seven-day, 110-mile march came from the historic 1966 United Farm Workers March from Delano to Sacramento, a 340-mile journey.

“Marches in the US have a huge historical legacy,” she said. “Dr Martin Luther King is well known for leading his marches for sanitation workers’ rights, but there was also Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta and they believed in the power of marches. We need to keep those historical Hispanic leaders in mind.”