

1 Language Wars:  
2 The Struggle for Bilingual Education in Connecticut

3  
4 By Jacob Werblow, Aram Ayalon, and Marina Perez-Taverner

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6 “We want to have the right to speak Spanish and to be able to do our work in both languages,”  
7 said Yasmin, a Puerto Rican middle school student. Her words were met with a sea of applause  
8 as she turned from the microphone and returned to her seat in the overcrowded school board  
9 room. Nearly 100 other students, teachers, and parents had joined Yasmin in advocating to save  
10 the dual language program at DiLoreto Dual-Language Magnet School and had packed the board  
11 meeting on a cold November night in New Britain, Connecticut.

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13 After two hours of public testimony to save the program, one of only six in the state, it soon  
14 became clear that the school board had made up its mind to immediately dissolve the Dual  
15 Language Program and bilingual education across the district and replace them with English-  
16 only grammar instruction.

17  
18 **Background of New Britain, CT**

19 New Britain is a small, racially and ethnically diverse, post-industrial city. Once referred to as  
20 the thriving, “hardware capital of the world,” New Britain’s economic history is similar to  
21 countless other cities scattered across the Northeast: In the last 50 years, the local economy has  
22 been nearly decimated by globalization. In the 1960’s, there were 24,000 manufacturing jobs,  
23 representing sixty percent of New Britain’s labor force. Three decades later, only 3,000  
24 manufacturing jobs remained.<sup>1</sup> Then came a new wave of migrants, mostly Puerto Ricans, who  
25 relocated to New Britain; however, by that time most of the good paying, unionized  
26 manufacturing jobs were gone.

27  
28 In the late 1990’s, when asked about the causes of the struggling local economy, a prominent  
29 business leader said that the real problem is, “The Hispanic population has poor language skills.  
30 They have bad work habits. They’re always late for jobs. They take off from work when they feel  
31 like it, and, as a consequence, are very undependable.”<sup>2</sup> According to a report by scholar William  
32 Hansen, this comment signifies a common perception held by local business leaders in New  
33 Britain at the time and an unwillingness to see their own role in contributing to the downfall of  
34 the economy.

35  
36 **Dual-Language Rises and Falls**

37 Despite this anti-Puerto Rican climate, in the late 1990s, a group of local administrators,  
38 educators and parents lobbied the school district to implement an English-Spanish dual language  
39 school, which eventually became the DiLoreto Dual Language Magnet School. The school  
40 thrived for a number of years, and in 2007 hired a prominent school principal and dual-language  
41 expert, Senora Marina Perez-Taverner, who expanded DiLoreto by adding grades 6-8 and by  
42 hiring experienced bilingual educators. In 2009, a local newspaper article described DiLoreto as  
43 “one of the district’s most sought-after (public) schools because of its dual-language

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<sup>1</sup> Hansen, W. W. (1997). *New Britain’s Business Climate*. Trinity Center for Neighborhoods. Available at:  
[http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/tcn/Research\\_Reports/resrch29.htm](http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/tcn/Research_Reports/resrch29.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Hansen, W. W. (1997).

44 curriculum.”<sup>3</sup> The school held a long waiting list of applicants each year. Even some parents  
45 from neighboring towns paid thousands of dollars in out-of-district fees to send their children to  
46 DiLoreto. The school followed the 50/50 model, in which the school enrolled approximately  
47 50% native English Speakers and 50% native Spanish speakers. This model is ideal because it  
48 provides students with a truly bilingual and bi-cultural education. At Diloreto, both groups of  
49 children learned together in the same classroom, where they spent half the school day learning  
50 their academic subjects in English and the other half learning in Spanish.

51  
52 Despite DiLoreto’s prominence, the previous superintendent began to undermine the integrity of  
53 the dual-language program. In the summer of 2010, the superintendent started closing four of the  
54 transitional bilingual education (TBE) programs in elementary schools across the district and  
55 relocating the students to DiLoreto. The result was that DiLoreto’s 50/50 English-to-Spanish  
56 speaker ratio soon became compromised because the number of emergent bilingual (EB)  
57 students far outnumbered English speakers, three-to-one. Furthermore, class size grew from  
58 under 24 to over 33, with no paraprofessional support. At this time, several of the more affluent  
59 parents became disillusioned and began withdrawing their children from the school.

60  
61 So, what might be the rationale for undermining a successful dual-language program?  
62 Evidence points to the fact that consolidating TBE programs across the district and  
63 relocating the children into DiLoreto was a simple way for the superintendent to  
64 consolidate resources for bilingual education and, more importantly, artificially inflate  
65 standardized test scores in the four other elementary schools by shrinking or removing  
66 the EB population. Robert Cotto, Jr., Senior Policy Fellow at CT Voices for Children,  
67 calls this “addition through subtraction;” whereby school administrators manipulate  
68 inflated standardized test scores by removing historically ‘low-performing’ students from  
69 taking the test. Of course, relocating or removing entire subgroups of children to yield  
70 higher standardized test scores is not an uncommon practice, and is a technique used by  
71 many well-known urban ‘reformers’ including Geoffrey Canada (President of Harlem  
72 Children’s Zone)<sup>4</sup> and Dr. Steven Adamowski (former Superintendent of Schools,  
73 Hartford, CT).<sup>5</sup>

74  
75 *Mr. Cooper Comes to Town*

76 In 2010 Governor Malloy hired a new commissioner of education, Stephan Pryor, a lawyer with  
77 extensive involvement in running charter school corporations and no previous teaching  
78 experience. One of Pryor’s major initiatives was to create a ‘commissioner’s network’ aimed  
79 at ‘turning around’ low-performing urban schools. Schools that were pressured to join the  
80 commissioner’s network were promised additional funds if they agreed to a set of educational  
81 policies, such as becoming a charter school, extending the school day, increasing teacher  
82 accountability, etc. How empirically sound were Pryor’s policies? Nationally renowned educator  
83 Diane Ravitch later called him, “the worst commissioner of education in the nation.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Velasquez, L (Oct 23, 2009). 800 students thriving in dual-language curriculum at (DiLoreto) Magnet School. *Hispanic Trending*. Taken from: <http://www.hispanictrending.net/2009/10/800-students-thriving-in-duallanguage-curriculum-at-DiLoreto-magnet-school.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.notwaitingforsuperman.org/TakeAction/GEMInconvenientTruth>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/addition-through-subtraction-are-rising-test-scores-connecticut-school-districts-relate>

<sup>6</sup> Ravitch, D. (Oct. 8, 2014). Personal communication. Quinnipiac University, Hamden, CT.

84 In 2012, after repeated years of flat-funding and rumors of a state takeover, New Britain was  
85 desperate to hire a strong superintendent. When the Board of Education narrowed the search to  
86 three finalists, several were immediately impressed with the charismatic Mr. Kelt Cooper, from  
87 Del Rio, Texas. Despite his age, Cooper was a physically imposing figure, standing over 6 feet  
88 tall and large in girth. With a brown handlebar moustache, a cowboy hat, and the ability to speak  
89 Spanish, he exemplified western authenticity. As he was the only candidate to reach out to the  
90 Latino community, many were excited about the possibility of the district hiring a bilingual  
91 speaker and an advocate.

92  
93 A few local educators, however, Googled ‘Kelt Cooper’ and found some disturbing news: (a) In  
94 2009, Cooper made national news in his previous superintendent’s position for assigning his staff  
95 to videotape and threaten expulsion warnings to over 200 children and their families at a border  
96 checkpoint outside of Del Rio, Texas;<sup>7</sup> (b) Cooper testified in the Flores vs. Horne Supreme  
97 Court Case (2009) claiming that it is *not* the state’s responsibility to provide adequate funding  
98 for EB students<sup>8</sup>; and (c) Cooper played a role in passing Arizona’s legislation mandating that all  
99 EB students study English-only, instead of bilingual education.<sup>9</sup> Despite hearing of these  
100 controversies, the majority of the school board members already decided to hire Mr. Cooper after  
101 visiting him in Del Rio, Texas.

102  
103 Given Mr. Cooper’s claims to support bilingualism, Senora Perez-Taverner then reached  
104 out to the new superintendent to share research about the benefits of dual language and to  
105 ask for his help in strengthening the integrity of the DiLoreto’s dual-language model. To  
106 her shock, Mr. Cooper responded: “I do not believe in all of this research. . . Anyone can  
107 manipulate the numbers to prove their point. I’ve seen it all. I’ve read it all, and I don’t  
108 believe it!”

109  
110 Mr. Cooper soon started a radio campaign in Spanish, telling the community that he  
111 wanted what was best for its kids. He wanted students to learn English, so they could get  
112 good jobs. According to Cooper, New Britain’s schools were failing because bilingual  
113 education wasn’t working, and he was going to get them ‘out of the ditch’ with his new  
114 plan.

### 115 **Kevin Clark’s English Language Development (ELD)**

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117  
118 During his tenure in Del Rio, Cooper implemented Kevin Clark’s highly controversial  
119 version of English Language Development (ELD), which was widely implemented in  
120 Arizona and California under the term ‘Structured English Immersion (SEI).’ Clark’s  
121 model, which involves replacing daily instructional time in all core subject areas with a

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<sup>7</sup> del Bosque, M. (December 10, 2009). Child x-ing. Del Rio’s controversial crackdown on border-crossing students. *Texas Observer*. Available at: <http://www.texasobserver.org/child-x-ing/>

<sup>8</sup> Horne vs. Flores. (October, 2008). Supreme Court of the United States. No.08-289. Available at: <http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/08pdf/08-289.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Zehr, M.A. (April 11, 2007). Arizona’s Tom Horne hires “Super Cooper.” *EducationWeek*, Available at: [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2007/04/arizonas\\_tom\\_horne\\_hires\\_super\\_1.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2007/04/arizonas_tom_horne_hires_super_1.html)

122 3.5-hour block of discrete grammar skills in English-only, surprisingly does not even  
123 involve the inclusion of any textbooks or children’s literature. In fact, Clark’s ELD model  
124 has been part of a larger English-only movement in Arizona, which has resulted in  
125 several civil rights violations. Extensive research on Clark’s model finds that the program  
126 has an adverse effect on student learning. UCLA’s Civil Rights Project finds that it  
127 contributes little to closing the achievement gap, increases classroom segregation of EB  
128 students, and negatively affects academic performance, among other findings.<sup>10</sup>  
129 Regarding the man behind this incredibly destructive curriculum, little is known about  
130 Kevin Clark’s education or professional background, except for serving on the board of  
131 the Research in English Acquisition and Development (READ) Institute, a conservative  
132 think tank advocating for English-only programs.

133 In mid September, two consultants from Kevin Clark’s Consulting Company did a  
134 two-day site visit to New Britain schools. On September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012, Clark’s team  
135 submitted a report summarizing their findings, which were loaded with confusing and  
136 unsubstantiated claims, such as: “Programs referred to as ‘bilingual’ or ‘dual-language’  
137 create a negatively skewed bell curve distribution pattern with large numbers of students  
138 who can best be classified as ‘bi-illiterate’ . . . The sheer complexity of trying to implement  
139 and manage such bulk and largely theoretical bilingual and dual language  
140 designs . . . (gives) rise to site-level redundancy and minutiae in the form of Byzantine  
141 amounts of paper work . . .” When Aram Ayalon, a local professor and New Britain  
142 School board member, raised these concerns, he was ignored by other board members.

143  
144 When presented with Clark’s ELD model, Senora Perez-Taverner and several bilingual  
145 teachers at DiLoreto questioned its validity and challenged the superintendent’s plan. As  
146 Olivia (name has been changed) stated: “I immediately started researching it. . . . I was  
147 very concerned.” She told the new superintendent: “That’s not what we are working for.”  
148

149 Mr. Cooper responded: “I don’t pay much attention to research. I pay attention to data. This is  
150 the program I used in Texas. You will see. It will work.”  
151

152 In less than six months on the job, without formal input from parents or teachers or even a vote  
153 by the school board, Mr. Cooper told Senora Perez-Taverner that the dual-language program was  
154 to be replaced by Clark’s ELD model immediately. In a November 2012 memo to the school  
155 board, Cooper defended his decision:

156 DiLoreto is no longer a Dual Language School- but rather a regular K-8 school  
157 which provides Spanish as a foreign language. Our desire is that it becomes a high  
158 performing school with acceptable (standardized test) scores; that ultimately the  
159 school provides the best instruction possible and that students learn Spanish (as a  
160 foreign language) in the process.  
161

162 The disastrous effects of Clark’s 3.5-hour ELD block and teaching Spanish as a foreign language  
163 using Clark’s strict guidelines were immediate. As reported by one classroom teacher at

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<sup>10</sup> The Civil Rights Project (Proyecto Derechos Civiles). (2010). *Language minority students*. Retrieved May 19, 2014, from:  
<http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/language-minority-students>

164 DiLoreto at the time, “The kids are bored to tears. They don’t need this (because they are already  
165 fluent in Spanish).”

166  
167 “We mostly get worksheets to make sentences from word scrambles, describe objects, and long  
168 lists of letters into words and sentences. No books, no stories, no songs...,” said a seventh grade  
169 student at DiLoreto.

### 170 171 **Teachers, Parents, and Students Fight Back**

172  
173 Perez-Taverner called for an emergency parent meeting to inform parents of what had happened.  
174 Nearly 100 attended the meeting, where they were encouraged to bring their voices to the next  
175 school board meeting. At the next school board meeting, an overflow crowd of DiLoreto parents,  
176 students, alumni, and teachers came to defend the dual-language program. Some highlights of the  
177 two hours of public testimony included:

178  
179 “I’m not comfortable with the school board’s decision. You are taking away access to our  
180 culture,” said Kendris, a middle school student at DiLoreto.

181  
182 “Listen to me and the other parents. Do not change the dual language program at our school. I  
183 am proud to tell my family in Puerto Rico that my daughter is attending DiLoreto school where  
184 she can learn and speak two languages,” said Myriam Vazquez.

185  
186 Several DiLoreto teachers spoke out. They commented that the program should be improved not  
187 replaced and argued that the district’s decision-making process should be more transparent.

188  
189 After the public testimony concluded, members of the school board responded. One by one, they  
190 defended Cooper’s plan. Several board members stated that those in the audience were  
191 misinformed. “The dual language is not being eliminated at DiLoreto magnet school,” stated the  
192 Chair of the School Board, Sharon Saavedra. “The proposal made by the superintendent is to  
193 change the instructional practices on how to deliver that language, not to eliminate Spanish  
194 culture or the Spanish language.” By equating dual language instruction with instruction in  
195 Spanish as a foreign language, statements such as these muddied the debate, and confused and  
196 infuriated many parents in the audience.

197  
198 Aram Ayalon, the only member of the school board to side with the parents, said: “The Board  
199 should have told the parents that there would not be a dual language program any more. Some of  
200 my colleagues said that the dual language is not getting eliminated; however, it is.” Dr. Ayalon  
201 then called for the board to respect voices of parents and students by establishing a taskforce to  
202 take a look at DiLoreto and the education of EB students across the district. Instead of heeding  
203 the request of Ayalon and all those who were in attendance, the board passed the resolution 7-to-  
204 1 to hire Kevin Clark’s company to implement his model of ELD district wide. Ayalon was the  
205 only board member to vote against the proposal.

206

207 Following the school board meeting, feeling alone and unsupported by the rest of her colleagues  
208 in the district, Senora Perez-Taverner gave her two-week notice announcing her retirement as  
209 principal of DiLoreto School. Within a few days, the superintendent sent one of his staff  
210 members, to tell Perez-Taverner, “Get all of your things and get out of the building by the end of  
211 the day.”

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### 213 **Advocating for Bilingual Programs**

214

215 Many DiLoreto teachers and parents then attempted to use the School Governance Council as a  
216 formal mechanism to challenge the decision to terminate the dual-language program. Parent  
217 involvement at the meetings, however, soon dropped after the district appointed Mr. Fernandes, a  
218 non-Spanish speaker, as interim principal of DiLoreto. Some of the first changes made by Mr.  
219 Fernandes include: removing ‘dual-language’ from the name of the school’s website and  
220 materials, discontinuing Spanish translation at the parent meetings, and enforcing Cooper’s  
221 mandate to remove all Spanish textbooks and children’s literature. As a result, half of the  
222 educators at DiLoreto School, many of whom were experienced bilingual teachers, left the  
223 district by the end of the year. As one teacher reported, “The morale of the school was at an all  
224 time low. Instead of teaching this absolutely racist curriculum, I decided that I had to leave. So, I  
225 took a teaching position outside of the district.”

226

227 In reflecting upon the three years that have passed since the termination of the dual-language  
228 program at DiLoreto, the authors of this article, along with a small group of other parents,  
229 educators, and students in the community continued to organize in an attempt to bring back  
230 bilingual education. Highlights of our efforts include:

231

232 • *Filing a formal legal complaint.* Ayalon filed a legal complaint to the U.S. Office of Civil  
233 Rights (OCR) against the school district’s implementation of Clark’s ELD program. After  
234 doing a site visit in June of 2014, OCR opened a full investigation of the New Britain  
235 school district, which is ongoing.

236

237 • *Telling our story in the national media.* As we reached out to various media outlets and  
238 presented this story at national educator conferences (National Association for  
239 Multicultural Education and American Education Research Association), the DiLoreto  
240 story gained national attention. In July 2013, *PBS New Hour* featured a 10-minute  
241 expose, titled “Language Wars,” highlighting the ELD controversy. According to the  
242 expose, Cooper’s previous school district (Del Rio, Texas) abandoned Clark’s ELD  
243 program shortly after Cooper left for the position in New Britain. Furthermore, *PBS*  
244 found that Clark’s program in Texas had an overall negative effect on student  
245 achievement: students’ English proficiency scores increased slightly, but their math and  
246 science scores decreased by 15%.<sup>11</sup>

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248 • *Educating teachers and students across the state.* A group of students, parents, educators,

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<sup>11</sup> *PBS Newshour* (December, 2013). Language wars: Should Spanish-speaking students be taught in English only? *PBS Newshour*.  
Available at: [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education-july-dec13-language\\_07-18/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education-july-dec13-language_07-18/)

249 and academics came together to organize a statewide workshop called, “Dos Dias Para  
250 Transforming Bilingual Education in Connecticut.” This six-hour workshop involved  
251 breakouts led by teachers, students, and academics. The keynote speakers were Dr. Mary  
252 Carol Combs, a nationally recognized author on bilingual education, and Krystal Foster,  
253 an educator and Tucson school board member, who had both fought against Clark’s ELD  
254 initiative in Arizona. Over two hundred teachers attended. The workshop also led to two  
255 front-page articles in the local newspaper, slamming Clark’s ELD program.  
256

- 257 • *Writing campaign.* After the conference, a small group of parents and educators  
258 conducted a two-month long letter-writing campaign, which included five op-ed articles  
259 to local newspapers about the controversial termination of the dual-language school at  
260 DiLoreto and promoted a vision of *bilingualism as an asset, not a deficit*.  
261
- 262 • *Promoting student voice in local media.* Bilingual advocates within New Britain High  
263 School (NBHS) helped one of us identify teenagers who had attended DiLoreto and were  
264 willing to speak with the local media about the importance of being bilingual and their  
265 support for returning the dual language program back to the school. In April, 2015, *Fox*  
266 *News Connecticut* broadcasted the students’ perspectives in an expose about the language  
267 controversy.<sup>12</sup>  
268

269 All of these efforts, as well as other controversial decisions made by the superintendent,  
270 eventually led to the school board voting 7-to-1 not to renew Cooper’s contract after the 2015-  
271 2016 school year.  
272

273 As this article goes to press, DiLoreto Magnet School has had three different principals in the  
274 last three years and the curriculum remains far from the Dual-Language Model. Meanwhile,  
275 Kevin Clark’s consulting company continues to provide professional services for the ELD  
276 program in the district.  
277

278 There is, however, good news: Many of those involved in DiLoreto activism joined other parents  
279 and educators from across the state in testifying to the *Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Council*,  
280 a state legislative commission, which was able to leverage important legislative changes in  
281 bilingual education. At the end of the 2015 legislative session, bilingual services for EB students  
282 were extended from a maximum of 30 months to 60 months and funding for bilingual education  
283 significantly increased. These changes now make it easier for communities to develop more dual  
284 language programs in Connecticut.  
285

286 In conclusion, this story illustrates how easily dual-language programs can be undermined and  
287 that the struggle for justice can be long, but it must be sustained. Although we and our  
288 compañeros are satisfied with the outcome, our story shows that a relative small group of  
289 committed activists (parents, students, teachers, scholars) can, in fact, make a difference by

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<sup>12</sup> FoxNews CT. (April 10, 2015). Superintendent with controversial language program staying in New Britain. (video). Available at:  
<http://foxct.com/2015/04/10/superintendent-with-controversial-language-program-staying-in-new-britain/>

290 utilizing their collective social capital to promote school policies that will help to prepare  
291 America's children for a multicultural, multi-lingual world.  
292