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2017

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#### Recommended Citation

Jansa, T., Brezicha, K., (2017). The Georgia Seal of Biliteracy: Exploring the Nexus of Politics and Language Education. *Dimensions*, 45.

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# The Georgia Seal of Biliteracy: Exploring the Nexus of Politics and Language Education

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## *Abstract*

*On May 3, 2016, House Bill (HB) 879—the Georgia Seal of Biliteracy—was signed into law by Governor Nathan Deal and went into effect on July 1, 2016. Outside of the language education sphere, many educators and policymakers may not fully understand the benefits of studying other languages. Yet, this policy hinges on the utility of simultaneously demonstrating proficiency in a foreign language and an advanced command of English, thus forming the foundation of biliteracy. This article provides an overview of the political landscape in Georgia as it pertains to language education and analyzes how lawmakers translated the issues at hand into specific goals for the Seal of Biliteracy. The paper concludes with four policy proposals to improve the implementation of the legislation and provide suggestions for enhancing pending legislation elsewhere.*

**Key Words:** *Seal of Biliteracy, bilingualism, education policy, language competence, policy implementation*

## **Introduction**

A Seal of Biliteracy is defined as “an award given by a school, district, or county office of education in recognition of students who have studied and attained proficiency in two or more languages by high school graduation” (Californians Together, n.d.-c). It is awarded to high school graduates who meet certain requirements in at least one language other than English, as well as in English Language Arts. In Georgia, the awarding entities are individual schools or districts who must obtain a physical seal from the Georgia Department of Education (DOE) and attach it to a student’s diploma. Compared to other states, the requirements for obtaining the Seal in Georgia are stringent (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages [ACTFL], 2015a) exceeding the basic recommendations for award eligibility as issued by Californians Together (n.d.-c), the original author of the legislation.

The Seal of Biliteracy originated in California in 2011 and, as of the fall 2016, has been adopted by 22 states, as well as the District of Columbia. In the wake of legislation such as Proposition 227, the “English in Public Schools” initiative passed in California in 1998 (California Department of Education, n.d.-a), Californians Together formed as a “statewide advocacy coalition of powerful organizations from all segments of the education community . . . to promote the use of students’ linguistic skills as a positive asset contributing to their success” (Californians Together, n.d.-a).

Proposition 227, in particular, presented a significant blow to bilingual education programs in California public schools (California Department of Education, n.d.-a). On November 8, 2016, California voters decided to amend Proposition 227 through the California Multilingual Education Act of 2016 (California Proposition 58) and to revoke key stipulations against bilingual education in the state (California Legislative Information, n.d.; CATESOL, n.d.; Mongeau, 2016). Despite recent developments, the debate over bilingual education continues to this day, not only in California (Mitchell, 2016a; Mongeau, 2016), but in states throughout the U.S. where “legislation and policies that control the language, curriculum, and resources in the classroom” (Brooke-Garza, 2015, p. 75) are in place (Olsen & Spiegel-Coleman, 2016, para. 2; C. P. Williams, 2015). This ongoing struggle is also evident at the national level with the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 that only marginally addresses bilingual education.

### **Problem Definition**

The problem addressed by the Georgia Seal of Biliteracy lies at the intersection of two primary areas: (1) the absence of a world language graduation requirement for Georgia high school graduates, and (2) the Georgia international business community’s concern for linguistic job readiness and practical applicability of language skills by recent graduates in a competitive global workplace.

To define this problem, this section will both explore the nature of biliteracy in K-12 bilingual education, and the political landscape in Georgia as it pertains to world language teaching. The benefits of bilingual skills and the state of foreign languages in Georgia against the background of employer and business demands form a central tenet of this paper.

#### *Benefits of Bilingual Education*

As this section will demonstrate, bilingual education provides a number of significant benefits to the learner. The two main areas of interest are the positive effects on cognition, as well as the value future employers place in potential employees’ world language skills.

**Cognitive benefits.** Extant scholarship generally agrees on the positive cognitive benefits of acquiring a language other than one’s mother tongue (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2010). Apart from improvements in attention span, as well as the ability to grasp new information more quickly due to greater executive control (Barac, Moreno, & Bialystok, 2016; Calvo & Bialystok, 2014; Giambo & Szecsi, 2015; McKenzie, 2015), neurological changes in the brains of multilingual speakers appear to also protect against cognitive decline due to the aging process (Dreifus, 2011; Marian & Shook, 2012). Some research has also pointed to bilinguals’ enhanced conflict management and multi-tasking skills (Marian & Shook, 2012), as well as the ability to solve certain types of problems more quickly (Dreifus, 2011). Research has even demonstrated that practiced bilingualism has the power to overcome obstacles to cognitive and academic development in children due to a family’s low socioeconomic status (Brooke-Garza, 2015; Calvo & Bialystok, 2014; Giambo & Szecsi, 2015), thereby creating opportunities for greater societal and educational equity.

**Vocational benefits.** Within the debate over the usefulness of foreign language skills in a globally connected economy, the question of linguistic and—increasingly—cultural proficiency in the job market looms large (Jones, 2013). Here, Hispanics may enjoy a particular advantage given the strong value employers place on Spanish (Porrás, Ee, & Gándara, 2014) and the fact that many are bilingual (Krogstad & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015).

Studies by Grosse (2004) of graduates from the renowned international business program at Thunderbird, The Garvin School of International Management, and Porrás et al. (2014) found that that foreign language skills and cultural proficiency provided professionals in international commerce a noticeable advantage over monolinguals. The latter may encounter what Tochon (2009) called a “competitive disadvantage for a growing number of jobs” (p. 656). Professional advantages of bi- or multilingual speakers are not only present in the domestic job market but affect both inbound and outbound international assignments. As the Forbes Insights survey of 2011 demonstrated, the latter presented a particular challenge to US-based companies who recognized that “it was easier for foreign nationals to work in the US than for US nationals to work overseas because they were more likely to be multilingual” (Forbes Insights, 2011, p. 8). This observation lends additional support to the utility of world language proficiency.

Grosse’s (2004) study also found that the business leaders polled in her survey considered cultural skills of slightly more value than actual language proficiency. Fitch and Desai (2012) came to the same conclusion in their qualitative study among employers in Australia and Singapore a few years later. These findings are salient because they support (often monolingual) critics of foreign language education in their assumption that the need for K-16 universal language teaching is a thing of the past.

### *English-Only Movements*

Although the value of world language education is widely acknowledged, there exists a sense of systemic “marginalization of world language instruction” (Rifkin, 2012, p. 54) as manifested in the English-only movement. Many contemporary scholars, practitioners, and laypeople consider English the global language of academia and business (Agnew, 2012; Altbach, 2007; Tochon, 2009). Critics of this development warn that only an elite few benefit from this process because it primarily “increases the influence of the major English-speaking academic systems, particularly in the US and the UK” (Altbach, 2007, p. 3609). According to Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2010), it is monolingual English-speaking “linguistic free-riders” (p. 92) who propagate the global use of English and who tend to discount the utility of other languages (Tochon, 2009, p. 653). Agnew (2012) warns that “the adoption of English as a global language... operates to marginalize non-English speakers and non-Western ideas” (p. 192). De Wit (2011) mirrored this sentiment arguing that too little attention to languages other than English leads to a decrease in the quality of instruction in English-taught programs, especially when paired with an “insufficient focus on the quality of the English spoken by students and teachers for whom English is not their native language” (p. 6). Tochon (2009) pointedly summarized the threat posed by the excessive focus on English as the universal language of business and academia: “Linguistic and cultural diversity are among the treasures of human-

ity; they are our tools for survival. Each culture has its own solution for self-sustainability that works in specific contexts, the disappearance of which would deprive humanity of solutions to possible future problems” (p. 662).

### *The Political Landscape of Foreign Language Study in Georgia*

**World language teaching in Georgia public schools.** Throughout the United States, schools struggle to support bilingual education due to a dearth of reliable funding, lack of understanding among educational professionals regarding the value of bilingual education, and a dominant focus on English as the language of instruction (Giambo & Szecsi, 2015). As of the 2008-2009 school year, world languages no longer constitute a requirement for high school graduation in Georgia (Georgia Department of Education, 2007). In spite of hopes that ESSA would place a greater focus on foreign language learning at the federal level, the act “remains silent in addressing the value of bilingualism and biliteracy” (Hakuta & Linqunti, 2016, *Enduring Issues*). This has resulted in decreased importance of world language education to the benefit of Common Core and STEM disciplines, despite the many positive effects of foreign language proficiency both on the cognitive capacity of language learners and workforce readiness, as well as greater linguistic diversity (Barac et al., 2016; Calvo & Bialystok, 2014; Giambo & Szecsi, 2015; McKenzie, 2015; Porras et al., 2014; C. P. Williams, 2015).

Although world languages are no longer a graduation requirement in Georgia, the Department of Education’s *World Languages Data Summaries* indicate that enrollment numbers in the state’s public primary and secondary schools have been robust and increasing steadily for the years 2010 through 2016 (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.-e). Extant scholarship appears to support the notion that this phenomenon is largely due to the “increasing demand of middle-class parents . . . to educate their children in English and another world language” (Porras et al., 2014, p. 235), a hypothesis that is mirrored by other scholars (Calvo & Bialystok, 2014; Scanlan & López, 2015). Spanish, French, Chinese, Arabic, as well as Russian, have experienced the most relative gains in the K-12 sector while most other languages show stagnant to slightly declining numbers (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.-e, *GA World Languages Data, Policies, and Initiatives*). The Georgia DOE data also indicate that overall linguistic diversity in Georgia schools has slightly decreased. In this regard, the development is somewhat analogous to trends in the higher education sector where foreign language enrollment numbers, however, have been experiencing a downward trajectory since 2009 (Modern Language Association, 2013; T. Williams, 2015). The ongoing predominance of Spanish mirrors the national trend as the most widely-spoken language other than English (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013).

**Employer demands.** In response to the need for more effective and efficient employees in a global marketplace, the international business community in Georgia lobbied the DOE to grant high school graduates some form of indicator that would reliably attest to the candidate’s language proficiency and make a job applicant more attractive for businesses. Concurrently, both the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) and the University System of Georgia (USG) stressed the need for language certification that would prove a high-level of language proficiency to college admissions officers. In summary, developing a Georgia Seal of Biliteracy had primary “ap-

peal for business elites interested in economic development “ (McDonnell, 2009, p. 422) through greater access to uniquely qualified and now easily identified employees.

### **Policy Goals**

To translate these demands into policy and thereby make Georgia a more attractive location for conducting business—while simultaneously addressing the absence of a foreign language graduation requirement in Georgia schools—policy-makers pursued the Seal of Biliteracy as the favored and only viable policy solution (M. Claus-Nix, personal communication, September 14, 2016). Stakeholders in this policy initiative were similar to those for the standards-based accountability provisions in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (“No Child Left Behind,” 2002), namely a “general government and business coalition that pressed for the policy, and”—this is a matter of interpretation—“provider organizations that have an economic interest in the services authorized” (McDonnell, 2009, p. 422).

By late 2014, the Georgia DOE had begun work on an internal proposal to establish the Seal in Georgia (Claus-Nix, 2016). While the initial focus of this measure was to address the lack of a world language graduation requirement, this measure provided a blueprint for subsequent legislation. Additionally, the Seal is designed to “provide universities with a method to recognize and give academic credit to applicants seeking admission” (“Georgia Seal of Biliteracy,” 2016, lines 21-22). By the time the Seal became a full legal initiative in early 2016, the DOE’s Policy Committee had already reviewed this internal proposal by the Division of World Languages and Global/Workforce Initiatives.

During the policy conception and subsequent amendment process, primary contention centered around three areas: (1) how English language learners (ELLs) may fulfill high school graduation requirements in English; (2) what level of world language proficiency students would need to attain in order to qualify for the Seal; and (3) what examinations would be used to test students’ language skills.

### *English Language Proficiency Testing*

The policymakers agreed that native speakers of English would still be required to pass all standard English Language Arts requirements for high school graduation (Georgia Department of Education, 2007) with a minimum GPA of 3.0 to qualify for the Seal. However, the question prevailed how to best ascertain the most equitable level of English proficiency for ELLs, thereby empowering these students to obtain the award. Members of the DOE’s Office of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) voiced their concern that requiring ELLs to meet the same English Language Arts criteria as native speakers of English could be interpreted as a violation of these students’ civil rights by the Office of Civil Rights at the United States Department of Education. They cautioned that requiring ELLs to pass an English language test in addition to meeting certain foreign language requirements would constitute an unjust burden on these students and place them at a disadvantage for obtaining the Seal. Policymakers ultimately decided that Georgia schools would continue to evaluate an ELL’s English language proficiency through the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State to State for English Language Learners (ACCESS

for ELLs 2.0) exam (WIDA, n.d.). ACCESS for ELLs is a “standards-based, criterion referenced English language proficiency test designed to measure English learners’ social and academic proficiency in English” that “assesses social and instructional English as well as the language associated with language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies within the school context across the four language domains” (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.-a, para. 1). ELLs would then be allowed to fulfill necessary English language requirements by either completing all prescribed ESOL coursework or by testing out of their school’s ESOL program and completing regular English Language Arts courses. To be awarded the Georgia Seal of Biliteracy, all students would be required to complete either option with a minimum GPA of 3.0.

### *Language Proficiency Requirements*

Being able to apply their world language skills in an international work environment with relative ease, recent high school graduates must possess a significant command of a world language (ACTFL, 2015b). This crucial requirement resulted in debates about the proficiency demands to be mandated. Both the internal DOE proposal and later legislation were therefore designed to adhere to rigorous language standards that would meet the chief policymakers’ needs.

While Californians Together have issued recommendations for world language and English proficiency levels to be attained to qualify for the Seal of Biliteracy (Californians Together, n.d.-b), actual requirements differ considerably between states. Most adhere to the minimum prerequisite of *Intermediate Mid* as defined by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) *Oral Proficiency Levels in the Workplace* (ACTFL, 2015b). In most states, students must (1) complete all required English Language Arts or ESOL coursework with a minimum GPA of 2.0, (2) pass either a foreign language Advanced Placement (AP) examination with a score of 3 or an International Baccalaureate (IB) examination with a score of 4, and (3) successfully complete a four-year high school course of study in a foreign language with an overall 3.0 GPA (California Department of Education, n.d.-b).

To address Georgia businesses’ concerns regarding too low a language requirement for the Georgia Seal, policymakers reached a consensus on the proficiency level of *Intermediate-High* per the ACTFL proficiency standards (ACTFL, 2015b). In this regard, the initial version of House Bill 879 adhered closely to the original California Seal. However, the verbiage was later changed to require higher scores for language proficiency testing, exceeding the minimum eligibility requirements in most other states and alleviating employers’ concerns of inadequate language preparation.

### *Admissible Proficiency Exams*

As with eligibility criteria, the types of examinations accepted by a state department of education for the Seal of Biliteracy also differ between states. The New Jersey DOE, for instance, recognizes ten different exams to assess a student’s foreign language proficiency (State of New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.) while the California DOE allows only three: AP, IB, and SAT II (California Department of Education, n.d.-b). As the following section will demonstrate, the selection of acceptable examinations for the Georgia Seal of Biliteracy presented a contentious issue in the policy selection process.

## Policy Selection

In the fall of 2015, the lobbying firm COMM360, representing Georgia businesses, contacted the Georgia DOE and the Division of External Affairs and Policy who then engaged the Office of World Languages and Global/Workforce Initiatives and requested feedback on the proposed policy, especially concerning the National World Languages Standards (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2010). Soon after, the initiative found its legislative sponsor and principle author in Rep. Tom Taylor (R) of the 79<sup>th</sup> District (Dunwoody); House Bill 879 was referred to the House Economic Development & Tourism Committee—of which Rep. Taylor was a member—in February 2016.

### *Legislative Process*

Similar to the Seal of Biliteracy in states such as New Jersey, the Georgia DOE initially proposed a larger number of accepted language proficiency exams, with AP and IB being two of many options. Against DOE recommendations for even greater diversity of accepted language proficiency exams, the text of HB 879 as first read on the Georgia House floor on February 1, 2016, listed AP and IB exams, as well as the SAT II, as the only possible mechanisms to prove language skills. This first version of the bill also required that students hold a minimum GPA of 3.0 in their foreign language courses, which would have presented a significant obstacle to implementation due to the unavailability of classes in many of the languages spoken by potential candidates for the Seal. Amendment AM 40 0153, offered by Rep. Taylor, was adopted on February 18, 2016, and changed the verbiage of the legislation to list only AP and IB as primary world language exams. The amendment further raised the minimum required scores from 3 to 4 (AP) and 4 to 5 (IB) and struck the GPA requirement for world languages. Given the substantial cost of these College Board tests, one may consider the potential revenue generated by students taking these exams to qualify for the Seal as a possible incentive to limit the number of eligible tests (for a similar observation in the context of No child Left Behind, see Syverson, 2009, p. 3). As a concession to this limitation, HB 879 stipulated that the DOE may suggest other exams in cases where no such assessments existed in the AP or IB portfolio for less commonly taught languages (“Georgia Seal of Biliteracy,” 2016, lines 30-33).

After the adoption of Amendment AM 40 0153, the bill was referred to the Georgia Senate and its Education and Youth Committee on February 19, 2016. Sen. JaNice VanNess (R) of the 43<sup>rd</sup> District (Conyers), a member of both the Senate Economic Development and Tourism, as well as the Education and Youth Committee, became the bill’s Senate sponsor. After a delay of 15 legislative days, the Senate adopted an amended version of the bill on March 22, 2016. This amendment was significant because it intersected with the battle over another legislation, the controversial “Student Protection Act” (SB 355) of 2016. Against the background of the Georgia Milestones exam, this unpopular measure, sponsored by Sen. William Ligon, Jr. of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Senate District (Brunswick), provided an opt-out provision for mandatory standardized testing (Craig, 2016; “Student Protection Act,” 2016; Tagami, 2016). Although SB 355 was vetoed by Georgia Governor Nathan Deal on May 3, 2016,



its central provision was first attached as an amendment to HB 879 and passed the Senate in that form (HB 879/FA). Before the House voted on the change on March 24, 2016, Rep. Taylor pressed to strike the added SB 355 verbiage from the bill. Only five members of the House objected; that same day, the final version of the bill was adopted, first by the House and later by the Senate.

### *Policy Alternatives*

Based on a lack of documents to the contrary, it appears that policymakers never considered alternatives to the Seal of Biliteracy. Another measure, the International Skills Diploma Seal of 2015 (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.-d), does not include language proficiency testing and focuses on intercultural competence and global experiences instead. Therefore, it does not address the demands of the Georgia business community for higher-level language skills. The only quasi-alternatives initially discussed included variations to the Seal by offering a *silver* and *gold* version for different levels of student accomplishments in both world language, English Language Arts, and GPA. Georgia is now the only state that offers both a global skills seal and a State Seal of Biliteracy, although the former can be considered a lesser qualification because it is not anchored in law.

## **Policy Implementation**

### *Implementation in other States*

Even in the national context, the Seal of Biliteracy is a relatively recent development; in California, the first students did not earn a Seal until 2012. For this reason, scant information exists on the implementation effectiveness of specific stipulations and actions, such as the dissemination of information or policy dilution, appropriation, or nullification measures by street-level bureaucrats (see Malen, 2006). Based on the little extant evidence, however, implementation of the Seal across the United States appears to have proceeded without any major setbacks. Because the Seal presents an additional qualification for graduating seniors and does not constitute a significant school reform initiative, having encountered little opposition may not come as a surprise. The only primary area of contention during the implementation process appears to be an ongoing struggle over eligible proficiency examinations (see, for instance, Kukulka, 2016).

### *Implementation in Georgia*

Preparations for implementation of the Georgia Seal of Biliteracy began even before the law went into effect on July 1, 2016. This section will first outline responsibilities and the timeline for implementation and then address the intended implementation strategy, including disseminating information about the Seal.

**Responsibilities.** The Georgia DOE assigns districts the task of designating coordinators at either the district or school level. These individuals both ascertain which students meet the requirements for obtaining the Seal and report this information to the Georgia DOE. Since required data include students' grades and academic history, this individual must be privy to such information. Therefore, the coordinator position is likely to be filled by a school counselor or registrar—both individuals with a multitude of competing responsibilities.

Although the DOE will designate its own coordinator, as well as design and purchase the physical seals from a third party supplier before mailing them to each school, districts bear the primary administrative workload in this initiative. While the Georgia Seal of Biliteracy statute stipulates that “no local school system shall be required to expend additional resources or hire additional personnel to implement the provisions” of this law (“Georgia Seal of Biliteracy,” 2016, lines 39-40), it also does not provide funding sources of any kind.

For students who met the foreign language requirements before entering high school, the DOE interprets the legislation to mean that these students may use these results to fulfill the Seal’s world language requirements. Such an exam might be the *Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages* (AAPPL) issued by ACTFL (n.d.). It is, however, the families’ responsibility both to obtain the respective language certification and then submit these test scores in a student’s senior year and thereby prove that they have attained a minimum world language proficiency.

**Timeline.** Since the statute did not take effect until July 1, 2016, students who graduated in spring of that year were unable to obtain the Seal. Several districts indicated interests to the DOE to offer the Seal to its students shortly after the date of enactment. The DeKalb County School District, for instance, informed the DOE that more than 100 students would potentially qualify for the Seal by the end of the 2016-2017 school year (Claus-Nix, 2016).

By May 1 of each year, district coordinators are to report to the DOE the names of all students interested in the Seal. Once AP and IB test scores are available in July, districts will report these to the DOE no later than September 1, together with a list of all pertinent world language, English classes and GPAs. Once the DOE has received these data, it will send seals out to schools or districts who then award them to students post hoc.

**Information dissemination and enforcement.** The Georgia Seal of Biliteracy has no binding mandate for districts and schools in the state of Georgia to actively seek out eligible students and provide them with a pathway for obtaining the Seal. As the Georgia DOE reads the statute, any student is *entitled* to participate in the Seal but must take the initiative and make this interest known to his or her school or district, at which point the latter is obligated to offer the Seal to this student and provide a strategy to earn the award. The burden of disseminating information lies on the districts; students are required to self-report. Since no stipulations for enforcement of the Seal exist, a district may choose not to provide such information to students and their parents, thereby de facto nullifying implementation. Among other repercussions, this omission may end up potentially limiting the social mobility of students and their families (see Labaree, 1997) as not obtaining the award may later result in fewer opportunities on the job market.

The Georgia DOE’s Division of World Languages and Global/Workforce Initiatives has launched an information campaign that includes (1) an English-language website (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.-c), (2) information material sent out to all Georgia district superintendents, as well as (3) disseminating information at various education leadership conferences and through its curriculum newsletter. Circulating material to potentially interested businesses falls under the purview of the Career Technical and Agricultural Education (CTAE) division of the DOE under their Economic Development Liaison.

## Policy Evaluation

Due to the relative overall novelty of the Seal of Biliteracy, virtually no concerted evaluation of the measure has been conducted in participating states. The only notable exception is the abovementioned report issued by Porras et al. (2014) for the state of California. The authors found that although “the ‘market value’ of both the Seal and bilingual and biliteracy skills remains unclear” (Porras et al., 2014, p. 236), several indicators suggest the benefits of acquiring both. This 2014 study among 289 employers in the public and private sectors yielded several important findings: First, bilingualism was a trait much in demand among employers. Second, most positions would benefit from bilingual skills. Third, bilingual speakers tended to either earn more or have greater opportunities for professional advancement. Fourth, language proficiency enhanced the probability of being hired by the companies surveyed. And fifth, many employers considered students who had obtained the Seal of Biliteracy as more valuable assets than those who had not. Although industries in which employees are less frequently engaged in human interaction assigned somewhat less salience to foreign language skills, the overwhelming majority of companies did express a favorable attitude toward multilingual skills.

One important measure of the success of the Seal is the number of students who have received the award. A precise evaluation of these figures is difficult because most data are reported in the press and pertain to the district or school level (see, for instance, D’Amico, 2015; Higgins, 2015; Pritchett, 2014; Tonis, 2016); relevant statistics from individual states’ department of education are largely unavailable. Here, California is again an exception in that it reports state-wide numbers of Seal of Biliteracy recipients. In 2012, one year after the law was enacted, approximately 10,000 high school graduates obtained the Seal (Gándara, 2014) and received special recognition during graduation events and ceremonies (Olsen & Spiegel-Coleman, 2016). In 2016, the initiative honored more than 40,000 students in California alone (Mitchell, 2016b, para. 3). In addition, California employers have indicated that holders of the Seal would likely enjoy an advantage when being considered for jobs in various industries (Gándara, 2014; Porras et al., 2014).

While the Georgia Seal of Biliteracy is designed to encourage schools to offer a wider range of foreign languages to a broader student body and provide increased opportunities for speakers of less commonly taught languages, the policy is sufficiently vague concerning key elements of implementation. This analysis identifies four main potential problem areas that may impede effective policy realization: (1) lack of capacity building, (2) potentially hindered communication, (3) lack of enforcement, and (4) timing of key requirements.

### *Inducements, Capacity Building, and Enforcement*

The law stipulates that districts are not required to incur added expenditures linked to the implementation of the Seal (“Georgia Seal of Biliteracy,” 2016, lines 39-40) and the legislation provides no additional funding to implementing schools. In this regard, the Georgia statute matches those in all other participating states save one. The lack of available funds and people power, however, may present a considerable constraint at the local level. Since districts are required to designate at least one

individual with sufficient access to student data to serve as coordinator, already underfunded or understaffed districts may not have the capacity to find a qualified staff member to collect the required student information. Additionally, the statute places the financial burden of costs associated with the required language proficiency exams on students and their families. The fact that many of them may not be able to afford either the AP or IB exam constitutes, in itself, a degree of inequitable access to the Seal. Therefore, time will tell whether the Seal may be more widely used and offered by more affluent schools who have the financial means and capacity to implement this policy and can cover administrative workload and course offerings at the appropriate levels necessary for students to attain the necessary proficiency.

Such limited capacity does not extend solely to the individual school district, but also to the Georgia DOE. Since only one person will be responsible for coordinating administration of the Seal at the state level, checking each reported student's grades, GPA, course history, and test results will likely prove unfeasible and force the DOE to rely on district coordinators who may not receive extra compensation or workload reduction for these additional duties.

#### *Information Dissemination Gaps*

While the statute makes school or district participation in the Seal *voluntary* ("Georgia Seal of Biliteracy," 2016, line 39) the legislature is conspicuously vague concerning the definition of this term. Schools and districts are "strongly encouraged" (Claus-Nix, 2016) to provide information about the Seal to potentially interested students and parents. The latter pertains particularly to rising 9<sup>th</sup>-graders who can then plan their 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade world language course sequence accordingly. Since each district has de facto power to decide whether or not—and in which manner—to disseminate information about the Seal, it may result in some districts not making such information sufficiently available and thereby limiting students' opportunities to participate in the program.

#### *Choice of Allowable Proficiency Examinations*

The provision that only AP and IB exams can prove sufficient world language proficiency at the high school level for most commonly taught languages presents a conundrum in the implementation process. If, for instance, a student with a sufficient level of proficiency in one language seeks to obtain the corresponding Seal but attends a school that offers AP courses only in other languages, the school may find itself obligated to support the students in his or her AP preparation. It is unlikely, however, that districts will establish additional AP or IB programs to accommodate students interested in obtaining the Seal in a language not currently available. The Georgia DOE has interpreted the statute such that if a school or district is not currently offering either an AP or IB exam in the language in question, the DOE may recommend another exam, even if the school offers AP or IB courses in other languages. This interpretation allows for greater flexibility in proficiency exam administration.

#### *Considerations Regarding Policy Logistics and Timelines*

A final potential obstacle to effective implementation is one of logistics. Per the statute, awarding the Seal in Georgia is predicated on earning a 3.0 GPA in English

Language Arts or ESOL. However, school or district coordinators will not be able to report this important metric to the DOE until the very end of a student's senior year. Additionally, AP/IB score reports are not available until July, necessitating that the Seal be awarded post hoc and, at times, months after high school graduation. Although the test scores for examinations in less commonly taught languages may be available before the end of the school year, the timing of their availability may lessen the likelihood of awarding the Seal during commencement ceremonies. The combination of these factors may reduce the attractiveness of the Seal considerably because students will not be able to receive the award at the time of graduation.

### **Proposals for Policy Improvement**

Based on the above analysis of potential obstacles to faithful implementation of the Seal, this manuscript proposes four policy modifications to improve access and outcomes. First, the state should make widespread dissemination of information on the availability and content of the Seal of Biliteracy mandatory for all districts and schools. This should include the translation of necessary information into various languages in adherence to Title I of ESSA that requires “ensuring regular two-way, meaningful communication between family members and school staff, and, to the extent practicable, in a language that family members can understand” (“Every Student Succeeds Act,” 2015, Sec. 1114(b)(5)(D); see also Hakuta & Linquanti, 2016). Parents with limited English language proficiency would thereby receive the necessary information on whether to encourage their child to attempt earning the Seal. Qualified heritage speakers of certain languages may also live in school districts where implementation of the Seal is regarded an unnecessary administrative and academic burden. Such districts may otherwise choose not to disseminate information necessary for students to declare their interest in earning this distinction.

Second, the authors recommend that a wider variety of primary language proficiency assessment measures be accepted. Mandating AP and IB exclusively as primary exams may not only disadvantage low-income parents who would be required to pay for expensive testing preparation and fees but also compel schools to reallocate resources to assist candidates for the Seal. An additional advantage of allowing a greater variety of assessment tools would be a broader range of testing formats. Some heritage speakers, in particular, may not possess the appropriate skill set to excel in certain standardized language testing environments (Solana-Flores, Wang, Kachchaf, Soltero-Gonzalez, & Nguyen-Le, 2014; Syverson, 2009). Providing up-front access to other exams—such as the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), Reading Proficiency Test (RPT) and Writing Proficiency Test (WPT) or OPIc, the Standards-Based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP) Test, or Diplomas of Spanish as a Foreign Language (DELE) (see, for example, Georgia Department of Education, n.d.-c; State of New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.)—may enable them to obtain proof of language proficiency required to earn the Seal more expeditiously.

Third, with decreased educational state funding for districts and no added accountability incentive like Exceeding the Bar (ETB) points on the state's College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) (Barge, 2013; Georgia Department of Education, 2016; n.d.-b), districts are forced to focus funding on CCRPI relevant measures. Therefore, including the Seal as a statewide CCRPI measure would not only increase

its relevance as an educational tool throughout the state but also circumvent above mentioned potential problems with the dissemination of information on the award.

Finally, funds should be made available to districts to help build capacity for implementation. These would be used in three areas: First, districts could offer subventions to parents and students for test preparation and testing fees. Second, districts could incentivize administrators to take on the additional workload of coordinating student selection and data reporting to the DOE. Finally, schools or districts could afford to either hire additional teachers with specialization in foreign language acquisition or shift some instructional workload to part-time teachers, which would free up instructional capacity to address language students' needs and help them obtain the Seal.

While the latter proposal would require the commitment of substantial financial resources at the state and district level, the other three proposals could be implemented without much additional funding.

### **Conclusion**

The Georgia Seal of Biliteracy presents a valuable legislative addition to the state's educational landscape. While this policy was initially designed for the primary benefit of the international business community, it may also shift the deficit narrative around linguistic minorities and enhance their standing in society. In particular, heritage speakers of world languages—instead of potentially being ostracized—may find themselves in a more advantageous position than their (monolingual) English-native peers. Although time will tell whether implementation of this policy will be effective and in keeping with its original intent, the act creates a pathway for Georgia students to earn the distinction in a highly marketable global skill. How employers in Georgia and elsewhere view future job applicants will significantly impact the real-life utility of the Seal. Given the language proficiency level required by the legislation, businesses may find that these new employees possess the necessary 21<sup>st</sup>-Century skills to become valuable and productive members of a global workforce—thereby fulfilling the wishes of the business community who played such a crucial role in the Georgia Seal of Biliteracy.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Ms. Michaela Claus-Nix, Program Specialist for World Languages and Workforce Initiatives and primary contact for the Seal of Biliteracy at the Georgia Department of Education until September 2016. A substantial amount of information that forms the body of this policy analysis originated from a personal conversation with Ms. Claus-Nix that took place on September 14, 2016. We also appreciate the invaluable feedback provided to us by our reviewers which helped to shape this paper. Finally, we would like to thank Dr. William Nichols, chair of the Department of World Languages and Cultures at Georgia State University, for initially proposing this topic for policy analysis.

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