

# Local

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## Mello working on safeguards for bilingual education

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Since 1987, California has been without a formal and comprehensive legislative act to govern bilingual education, but State Sen. Henry Mello, D-Watsonville, wants to change that.

Mello has introduced a bill — SB2026 — that would institute bilingual education guidelines throughout the state. In 1987, the state's 10-year bilingual-cultural education act expired. Since then the state has been using guidelines drafted by the state Board of Education and federal education department officials.

Those guidelines work fine, Mello said. His bill would not introduce any major changes to the state's current bilingual-cultural programs. But the Legislature needs to enact a formal set of regulations that would become state law, he said. This would give bilingual education programs a legal base of support if they were challenged by opponents.

Mention bilingual education to a random group of people and the responses can run from its being the salvation of society to its damnation.

Mello knows that. He also knows that many people are "threatened" not only by bilingual education, but by anyone who does not speak English.

"They say, 'Let them learn English,' and that's what I'm trying to do," Mello said.

The main purpose of bilingual education is to help Limited En-

glish Proficient (LEP) students learn English, Mello said. Currently, there are 1.5 students in California whose primary language is something other than English, and about 2 million adults of the same background. It is projected that by the year 2000 there will be 2.5 million LEP students.

"My goal is for them to learn English and to become part of our society and become employed and become taxpayers," he said.

In the Pajaro Valley school district, Hispanics make up 65 percent of the enrollment. A fairly large portion of that population are considered LEP students, according to district officials.

Tony Calvo, assistant superintendent, said if the bill is enacted, "it would not make any significant difference to us." What it would do is solidify bilingual education and give it a legal base.

When the state's 10-year bilingual-cultural act expired in 1987, the state launched a comprehensive study of bilingual education and its programs around the state. Earlier this year, the state released its report and found that bilingual education worked and it also reduced the dropout rate among LEP students. That report supported similar findings of both a separate state study and a federal eight-year study of bilingual education across the United States.

Mello's bill is currently in the Assembly's Ways and Means Committee. Mello is optimistic that Gov. Pete Wilson will support the bill.