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Tamaulipas Declares Itself Bilingual State, Plans To Teach Conversational English In All Public Schools

by LADB Staff

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Tamaulipas, one of six Mexican states to border the US, has officially declared itself a bilingual state. This is more than a symbolic designation, as state authorities will require all students in primary public schools to begin to learn conversational English. Instruction would be continued in secondary schools. Gov. Eugenio Hernandez, the main proponent of the program (Programa de Ingles en Escuelas Primarias, PIEP), said the state aims to prepare its more than 320,000 students to learn the language skills needed to compete more effectively in the business world. "Our efforts are aimed at preparing students for a more competitive world filled with technology and English," Hernandez said at a ceremony formally inaugurating the program. "Let's face it. The world speaks English. And even if you can only speak a little, you can defend yourself and compete."

Hernandez said knowledge of English could come in handy in industries such as tourism, where Tamaulipas hopes to become more competitive with other regional sites. State and federal authorities are currently making large investments to expand the tourism-related infrastructure along the coastal areas of the Gulf of Mexico to lure more visitors from the US. "We have the tools and resources to rival Padre Island," he said. The program which will be officially initiated at the start of the 2009-2010 school year in July seeks to ensure that 100% of students have English language as part of their curriculum. State education secretary Jose Manuel Assad Montelongo said the transition should be easy because roughly 84% of the students in Tamaulipas public schools are already enrolled in conversational English classes. The PIEP builds on a program that had been in existence for the past eight years, in which English was required for students in the fourth and fifth grades. State also plans to train instructors A key to the program, said Assad Montelongo, is to make certain that the state is training sufficient instructors to teach English.

As part of this plan, the state wants to have at least 600 teachers qualified to teach English. "We want to ensure that all these teachers obtain the proper certification to teach English," said the state education secretary. Gov. Hernandez said he is working with the teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion, SNTE) to develop a training plan. "It is logical to think that learning a second language is not easy," wrote columnist Valentin Hernandez Ontiveros in the Nuevo Laredo daily newspaper El Manana. "The teaching methods, strategies, and especially the attitude of the teacher as facilitator and motivator are going to be important." James Taylor, a consultant with the Austin, Texas-based management and communications consultancy ViaNovo, applauded the decision of state education officials to promote English instruction throughout the primary school level.

The goal, he said, is to start students young to get them to focus on the importance of speaking two languages. "Because of our geographical location and history, English is key in the daily interaction with Texas," Taylor, who grew up in Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas state, said in an interview with the Dallas Morning News. Some officials said the PIEP would make it easier to create more

sophisticated English-instruction curricula in middle and high schools. Blanca Juarez Flores, who is in charge of implementing the PIEP in the Nuevo Laredo schools, noted that her school district has always offered English at the secondary level, but many students who had taken English in primary school would often receive the same instruction they had in fourth and fifth grade. Because of the PIEP, authorities can now create programs at the secondary level that offer continuity, she said. The Tamaulipas decision to formally declare itself a bilingual state is thus far the boldest effort in the country to promote English-language instruction in schools. Two other border states, Chihuahua and Nuevo Leon, have limited programs in place to promote teaching English to students and business leaders.

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