

LWVSNM Op Ed April 2023
New Mexico's Bilingual Multicultural Education Act

The nonpartisan League of Women Voters studies many issues. After a comprehensive study, a position is established and advocacy can occur. The education position of the League of Women Voters of New Mexico, *As a multicultural and multilingual state, New Mexico must incorporate the principle of educational equity in its practices and policies to ensure the highest level of academic achievement for all students.*

March 14 was the 50th anniversary of the New Mexico Bilingual Multicultural Education Act (BMEA) of 1973. New Mexicans can be proud, as the Act was the first of its kind in the United States. This anniversary is an appropriate occasion to reflect on the meaning of the legislation and efforts to support the cultures and languages of the region. The BMEA requires research-based bilingual and multicultural education programs to be fully implemented, including professional development for teachers and learning experiences for students. To receive State financial support that comes with the Act, programs must address students' cultural and linguistic needs, use two languages for learning, employ teachers who are licensed in bilingual education, emphasize the history and cultures associated with the students' home language, and establish a parent advisory committee. With these practices, students learn to value their own culture and history. Bilingualism strengthens peoples' abilities to manage complex tasks and to solve problems. Learning another language exercises brains in diverse ways.

During the 2023 New Mexico legislative session, House Joint Memorial 3, requesting the governor to proclaim 2023 as "the year of bilingual multicultural education," received a "do pass" from several committees and passed the House. Time ran out before it was considered by the Senate. But that should not stop the Public Education Department and public schools from proclaiming 2023 the year of bilingual multicultural education, to celebrate the Act, as well as review ways to improve bilingual multicultural education.

New Mexico's commitment to bilingual multicultural education started prior to 1912 when the state constitution was being developed. Article 12, Section 8, calls attention to training all teachers to be bilingual. The first bilingual policy statement originated in 1967. It outlined advantages and led to the State Board of Education establishing the Division of Bilingual Education. Then in 1969 the Bilingual Policy Statement authorized school boards to implement bilingual programs and approved instruction in languages other than English. In 1971 the Bilingual Instruction Act established that bilingual programs must instruct in two languages, as well as include the history and culture of the students.

While the Bilingual Multicultural Education Act has advanced learning opportunities for students, there is more to be done. The Act is intended for all students, but local districts decide to have BME programs or not. The programs encourage students to appreciate the value and beauty of different languages and cultures. 2023 is a good year for public schools to review and

reaffirm the value and importance of bilingual multicultural education, finding more ways to move equity forward for future generations.

The term of office for our Co-Presidency of the League of Women Voters of Southern New Mexico ends April 30th. We have enjoyed writing monthly opinion pieces and will probably write periodically in the future.

Kathy Brook and Eileen VanWie, Co-Presidents
League of Women Voter of Southern New Mexico