

A distinction well worth celebrating

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As this year's graduates walked down the aisle armed with Latin distinctions from valedictorian to summa or magna cum laude, tens of thousands of high school seniors also claimed an accolade dedicated to the languages they speak every day: the "seal of biliteracy," which honors students who have demonstrated proficiency in English and another language.

The movement to create the seal started in California, where educators hoped to encourage English-language learners to pick up the skills they needed to succeed across disciplines without abandoning their native tongues. Now Washington, D.C., and 26 states, including Maryland and Virginia, offer school districts the option of adding the certification to diplomas - and students who grew up speaking English are eagerly seeking it out in their studies of languages from Spanish to Mandarin to American Sign Language.

The rest of the country would do well to follow these states' lead. Bilingualism and biliteracy make individual students more competitive in the college application process and job market. Along the way, dual-language immersion helps students become better learners and thinkers generally and can help close the achievement gap not just for non-native English speakers but also for African-American students and poor students. Cities and smaller communities also benefit from a biliterate population as they build business sectors with global reach.

There are challenges. Schools across the country suffer from a shortage of teachers, especially those equipped for foreign-language instruction. And while some languages have associated standardized tests both in-state and nationwide, others do not. That means it is up to school districts to develop pathways to proficiency tailored to each language, and up to states to evaluate whether those programs meet their standards.

The payoff for clearing those hurdles, though, is worth the effort - to states, to students and to their families. "I don't think you understand that this is the most important award in the Latino community," a mother told one of the leaders behind the California campaign for the seal. In that state, organizers say, "bilingual" was once a dirty word. To some, it still is. For many of those who speak their first sentences in another tongue, the language they grow up with is part of who they are. The seal of biliteracy tells them and the rest of us that is worth celebrating.

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