



New Mexico Milestone Conference

Mary Jean Habermann López describes how her state's 35th annual conference underscores bilingual education leadership and history

The New Mexico Association for Bilingual Education (NMABE) celebrated its milestone 35th Annual State Conference at the end of April. Although NMABE officially began in 1969 — 38 years ago — the organization has hosted the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) Conference on three occasions.

Over 650 bilingual education professionals attended the conference in Albuquerque. The site offered students, presenters, keynoters, and participants alike a comfortable setting for learning and networking.

"The NMABE State Bilingual Conference continues to be a time for bilingual educators from throughout the state of New Mexico to come together to network, share ideas, and get rejuvenated for the challenges they face in their professional lives," said NMABE executive director, David Briseño.

The conference theme, "Bridging the Generations through Languages" accentuated the critical role language plays in preserving values, culture, and wisdom. History shows that immigrant groups who have lost their heritage languages have not only lost intrinsic cultural

understandings, but also vital communication links that bond children with their grandparents.

Dr. Kathy Escamilla, professor of Education at the University of Colorado, Boulder, opened the conference brilliantly by weaving the theme, "Bridging the Generations through Languages" into her remarks.

"Thirty five years ago, I was a new bilingual education teacher in Southern Colorado. At that time, we were looking for ideas on exactly how to implement a bilingual program at our school. I remember we went to Las Vegas, New Mexico to observe a well designed program that was already in place."

That school was one of three Bilingual Education Teacher Training Demonstration Centers that trained the first cadre of bilingual education teachers throughout the state. Nationally, New Mexico was a leader in bilingual education from very early on. Dr. Escamilla then elaborated on what has changed in bilingual education over the years and what, unfortunately, has remained the same in the nation, despite solid research findings.

Gloria Ann Begay, second speaker for the opening session narrated the story of her work with the Navajo people over the same period of time. She is president and owner of the Indigenous Institute for Native Arts.

Dr. Donaldo Macedo, professor of English and a distinguished professor of Liberal Arts and Education at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, spoke during the second general session. His remarks targeted the political factors at work today that have unleashed a vicious attack on immigrants. "Language remains the last refuge that one can be openly racist without much repercussion. In fact, denying people access to their language and culture is presented as a positive step that is for their own good," said Dr. Macedo.

Dr. Gladys Herrera Gurulé, state director for Bilingual Multicultural Education, said, "New Mexico's rich cultural heritage is reflected in the many languages we speak. I'm proud that our school system offers students and parents the opportunity to continue their linguistic traditions in bilingual schools. The New Mexico Association for Bilingual Education has created a strong legacy of support of our state programs. This is reflected in the number of bilingual educators attending this wonderful conference. Our current Bilingual Education Law requires that all district personnel — including administrators, teachers, and instructional support individuals — receive professional development in the areas of bilingual education and English as a Second Language."

These messages set the tone for NMABE's milestone conference. They furthered reflection on past accomplishments while informing us of pressing issues that affect our students every day in classrooms and communities throughout New Mexico.

Bilingual Leadership Underscored

New Mexico's unique multicultural milieu draws visitors from around the world; without its living heritage languages, its uniqueness would become mundane. Culture, a partner with language, is irreplaceable — once lost, it is gone forever. This is ever so apparent in places throughout the U.S. where Native Americans have lost their languages — the link to their past and bridge to the tribes' future.

Preservation of New Mexico's languages in a multicultural setting is an inherent outcome of bilingual education. Many states have now legislated English immersion instructional options for their English language learners. New Mexico has chosen and continues to choose to remain a bilingual state, as stipulated through its constitution and laws. It is important to advise that while laws are made by people they can also be changed by people.

NMABE president, Dr. Julia López Emslie, reminded participants why bilingual educators must become active in statewide and local task forces and committees that make essential decisions about educational practice and policy. This type of activism gives rise to leadership in the form of a necessary, continuing, and principled voice for English language learners.

At the opening session Dr. Emslie told the participants, "I am very proud of our state when I look at the history of bilingual education and the many milestones and pioneers that we have had. Throughout the conference you will be able to reflect on our accomplishments as you view our history and visit with past presidents." Attendees were able to view an ongoing PowerPoint presentation highlighting 40+ years of bilin-

gual education in New Mexico, beginning in the 1960's to the present.

The leadership that advanced both the scope and breadth of bilingual education programs in the past must serve as a bridge to the future.

President elect Dr. Loretta Salazar spoke to this point. "Dr. Macedo's words are especially poignant as he beckoned us to 'sever the yoke of linguistic oppression.' As our New Mexico Association for Bilingual Education embarks on its 39th year, let us cherish the legacy that we guard, and may it be a springboard to further our steadfast determination in defending, promoting, and nurturing heritage languages as well as insisting on the worth of learning other languages."

Student Competitions — Spanish/Navajo Language and Literacy

NMABE annually weaves two important student competitions into the conference — the State Spanish Spelling Bee and the Native American Language Festival.

This year's State Spanish Spelling Bee brought together 38 finalists from schools districts across the state. New Mexico is the only state in the nation that hosts a statewide spelling competition in Spanish.

The excellent work of so many dedicated teachers, parents, and school district administrators must be noted. Every finalist that comes to the competition is already a champion — the best Spanish speller of their entire district! This, in and of itself, recognizes their academic achievement in Spanish.

Parents, brothers and sisters, and school sponsors of the finalists filled the room. You could hear a pin drop as each student went before the judges.

Esmeraldo Saenz of Santillana USA, one of NMABE's Spanish Spelling Bee sponsors, presented each finalist with their award.

This year's state champion, Ahmad Shambaneh of Memorial Middle School in Las Vegas, competed in the Bee for the past three years as a district finalist. Ahmad speaks three languages — Arabic, Spanish, and English. David Briseño, NMABE executive director asked Ahmad if we could expect to see him defend his title next year.

Ahmad's immediate response, "Yes!"

This is the fifth year that NMABE has hosted the annual Native American Language Festival during its state bilingual education conference. Students K-12 competed in various categories as follows: Oral Presentation, Individual Reading, and Group Presentation, Group Singing, Solo Singing, Duet Singing, and the Navajo Spelling Bee.

The enthusiasm and commitment of the conference organizers and attendees left little doubt that New Mexico will continue to be a leader in the field of bilingual education for the next 35 years. **IX**

Mary Jean Habermann López is associate director for the New Mexico Association for Bilingual Education. She has more than 30 years experience and expertise in the field of bilingual multicultural education at the local, state, national, and international levels. She served as the director of Bilingual Multicultural Education for the Public Education Department in New Mexico. She has prepared and delivered workshops, talks, institutes, and university courses in schools and school districts in New Mexico, at national conferences, and in Spain and Mexico.