Catching up with the rest of the world

Colorado takes steps toward supporting biliteracy

By: Mackenzie Orr / Conifer HS

Downtown Denver across from Civic Center Park stands the Capitol building. Senators, and state Representatives go about their daily business. A secretary’s heels click against the marble floor as she carries coffee back to her office. A Trump rally takes place on the west stairs.

Senate bill 17-123, a bill that if passed, will allow students who can prove they are proficient in English and another language to obtain a Seal of Biliteracy on their diploma. The bill passed 6-1 in the Senate and is on its way to be heard in the House of Education on February 27th at 1:30.

“Last year I voted for a similar bill that came out of the house, and the reason I did is my wife’s in education, I have four kids and I speak Spanish and a little Japanese. I really see the value in speaking other languages,” Senator Kevin Priola said.

  In order for a student to obtain the seal, they must have passed their high school English classes and have a 3.0 cumulative GPA or higher, pass a nationally recognized exam, and have passed 4 years of a high school world language class.

“Biliteracy is valued in most parts of the world much more than it is presently valued in the United States. Being biliterate in English and another language could be a huge advantage and more so depending on the other language,” Jorge Garcia, an adjunct professor, at CU Boulder said.

  Garcia originally brought the idea of a Seal of Biliteracy to Colorado in 2013 after he had researched the policy. He has worked with three districts who now have adopted the policy. Garcia also worked with legislators to come up with the bill and testified before the Senate Education Committee and will continue to advocate for the bill as it makes its way through the House of Representatives.

“It has to be equal, I don’t care who you are or where you're from, if we give you this seal, you are bilingual,” Representative Wilson said.

  Even students who speak another language at home and are “bilingual,” are still required to meet the requirements’ of students who learn a world language in schools. While no languages are exempt from the bill, some such as sign language, will need to be proved in other ways since there is no written form.

“Finally, and I think most importantly, there are cognitive benefits and societal benefits that can accrue from biliteracy. Students, after high school, could experience many individual benefits that are inherent to biliteracy that they otherwise would not experience,” Garcia said.

After graduating high school, a Seal of Biliteracy can help students in the workplace. It can make them more competitive and more sought after in comparison to those who speak only English. For example, if someone is working on a construction site and they speak only Spanish, they are less likely to succeed and excel at their job compared to their counterparts who speak both English and Spanish.

“In this world in which we live, the ability to be bilingual would be a huge advantage in the terms of workplace, job opportunity and mobility,” Representative Wilson said.

“All states should recognize biliteracy as the valuable skill that it is. Biliteracy is not something that has been promoted in many places in the U.S. English language proficiency has been promoted. However, the ability to know, understand, communicate and master two languages at once has not received any recognition and it should. It is not easy for anyone to become totally bilingual,” Garcia said.

  While the bill says biliteracy, if a student can provide evidence that they are fluent in more than two languages, they can receive another seal for those as well. Also, if the bill wins the vote in the house, Colorado will become the twenty fourth state to approve this bill. This is merely the first step the U.S can take to lean more and move towards being as bilingual as the rest of the world.