

# Richard A. Carranza

*Recognized for Leadership in English-Language-Learner Education*

## **A One-Time English-Language Learner Puts Premium on Bilingual, Bicultural Education**

By Madeline Will February 24, 2015



Richard Carranza, Superintendent, San Francisco Unified School District  
Photo: Luanne Dietz/Education Week

- **Expertise:** English-Language-Learner Education
- **Position:** Superintendent
- **District:** San Francisco Unified School District

Richard A. Carranza first stepped into a Tucson, Ariz., kindergarten classroom not speaking any English. By 2nd grade, the now-superintendent of the [San Francisco Unified School District](#) was fully bilingual.

Mr. Carranza’s experience — growing up in a Spanish-speaking home with parents who were also bilingual—has shaped his passion for language. It’s also the driving force behind his commitment to ensuring that English-language learners in San Francisco’s public schools not only become fluent in their new language, but also have the opportunity to become fully fluent and literate in their native one. That passion has stuck with him throughout his career in K-12 education: first as a bilingual social studies teacher and principal and then in various administrative roles, including a stint as a regional superintendent in Clark County, Nev., before becoming superintendent of the 53,000-student San Francisco district in June 2012.

Language, he believes and says repeatedly, is an asset, not a liability.

*“I think it’s so important that language becomes depoliticized and becomes what it is—a vehicle for communication,”* Mr. Carranza, 48, said.

*“We take the approach that everybody deserves an excellent education,”* he said.

*“It’s not the student who’s at fault [regarding] whether they’re learning or not. It’s really the system being able to meet the needs of the students.”*

## LESSONS FROM THE LEADER

- **Value Language, Culture:** By valuing the language and culture of English-learners, you can build on their assets. Students should be given the opportunity to graduate bilingual and bicultural.
- **Power of Data:** When schools have access to disaggregated data by classroom, leaders and teachers are able to use the data to inform and adjust their instruction and identify any gaps in curricular resources for English-learners.
- **Family Support:** Providing English-learner families with translated information, community resources, and culturally competent support services is essential to supporting students.

San Francisco Unified’s English-language-learner services are governed by the Lau Action Plan, which outlines steps the district must take to ensure students with limited English proficiency receive sufficient language instruction in English and full access to the mainstream curriculum. That plan stems from the 1974 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the landmark civil rights case, *Lau v. Nichols*, that ordered San Francisco’s schools to provide Chinese children who didn’t speak or understand English with a bridge to the curriculum. That case greatly expanded the rights of all children with limited English skills to receive special language instruction to learn English.

## Bilingual Education

In part because of the *Lau* ruling, the district has built up a robust offering of language-learning pathways, even as many districts around California either diminished or did away with their bilingual offerings in the wake of a 1998 state ballot measure that put severe restrictions on bilingual education. English-learners can choose between an English-immersion program or various multilingual pathways that promote biliteracy.

*“I don’t see how any student is going to be successful in the next 10 years without being multilingual, without at least being bilingual,”* Mr. Carranza said.

*“For us, we see this as something that just has to happen.”*

A study conducted by the school district and researchers at Stanford University, and published last year, found that students in the district’s English-only programs performed better than their peers in bilingual education programs in the early grades. **But** by the 5th grade, students who received instruction in two languages performed as well as or, in some cases, better than their English-immersion peers on English-proficiency tests and academic-content exams.

The state law restricting bilingual education requires districts to obtain parent waivers in order for English-learner students to be enrolled in programs with instruction delivered in languages other than English. San Francisco has about 15,000 English-language learners, and 35 percent of them are in a language pathway requiring a waiver.

In November 2016, California voters will have a chance to repeal the law, which could lead to more schools in the state following San Francisco’s lead to expand bilingual and dual-language programs.

*“It’s important the state of California recognizes that monolingualism is on the way of black-and-white TV—just not current,”* Mr. Carranza said.

*“Why would you not want to produce bilingual students in the public education system? It baffles the mind.”*

Jan Gustafson-Corea, the chief executive officer of the California Association for Bilingual Education, said San Francisco has been a leader in systematizing bilingual education.

*“In order for that to happen, you have to have a strong leader who believes in [bilingual education],”* she said of Mr. Carranza.

## Making Learning Relevant

Under Mr. Carranza, the district has made it a priority to work closely with local universities to establish a reliable pipeline for bilingual teachers. Christina Wong, the special assistant to the superintendent who oversees implementation of the Lau Action Plan, said the universities receive information about hiring needs and new district initiatives to inform their instruction and training of new teachers.

*Still, finding teachers who are both bilingual and bicultural is a challenge, Mr. Carranza said. Finding teachers with basic skills in another language isn't difficult, but finding teachers who are able to have a "content-rich conversation with understanding of the cultural implications, ... that's a little more challenging," he said.*

*It's important for the district, though, because teaching students a culturally relevant curriculum breeds success, especially in a school system as diverse as San Francisco's, Mr. Carranza said. Thirty-eight percent of students in the district are Asian, 26 percent are Latino, 13 percent are white, and 8 percent are African-American. Twenty-nine percent are English-language-learners. "The more relevant you can make the learning in the classroom to the students, the more you can engage them so they ... want to learn more," Mr. Carranza said.*

The San Francisco school board recently voted to have all its high schools offer ethnic-studies courses in the 2015-16 school year, with the goal of making the classes a graduation requirement within the next five years. The district has been piloting the courses for the past few years, and Mr. Carranza said the data collected show that enrollment in ethnic-studies classes leads to better attendance and better grades.

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In what has always been an immigrant-rich city, the San Francisco district has become increasingly attuned to the needs of its recently arrived students, developing a "newcomer" pathway to help those who are new to the United States adjust both to English and American culture. This school year saw a marked increase of students in that pathway as a result of last year's surge of undocumented minors crossing the border from Central America. As of last month, the district had enrolled nearly 350 new Central American immigrants since the beginning of the school year. Mr. Carranza said the district "scaled up" its existing services for recent immigrants. Any student who lives in San Francisco, he said, will get a high-quality education.

## **An Equity Agenda**

Ms. Wong, the special assistant overseeing ELL access, said Mr. Carranza has a strong vision and takes risks to reach it. *"We're all in the moment, and sometimes it's a challenge for us to take a step back and look to the future, but he encourages us to do that," she said.*

The district, under Mr. Carranza's leadership, recently unveiled such a plan—Vision 2025, which outlines 10 big shifts over the next decade that range from making sure all students have a personalized learning pathway to equipping all schools with technology that supports blended learning.

Another goal is to graduate students who are globally aware, culturally competent, and multilingual. *The district has already made important progress toward that goal, with 850 graduates (out of 3,400) last year earning a “seal of bi-literacy” on their diplomas for demonstrating their mastering of two languages,* Ms. Wong said.

And in 2025, all English-learners should have access to technology, Common Core State Standards-aligned material in multiple languages, and the opportunity for English-language development throughout the school day. The plan condemns the district’s current large achievement gaps between student subgroups. *School systems aren’t always set up to be equitable,* Mr. Carranza said, adding that he is working to address that in San Francisco. For example, the district has cut central-office expenditures before cutting funds from school sites. And even before California recently revamped its statewide K-12 funding formula to concentrate more funds in schools with high numbers of ELLs and other vulnerable students, the district was targeting extra money to schools with the greatest number of poor students and English-language learners, he said.

In the 2015-16 school year, the district will open a new middle school in the Bayview community, one of the most historically underserved areas of the city. It will have a STEM-focused curriculum, wireless Internet capability to support student devices, and various wraparound services to serve the community.

Eric Guthertz, the principal of the city’s Mission High School, said, *Mr. Carranza constantly works toward his vision of equity in education.*

*“He’s brave, he’s honest; he’s more than just an advocate, he’s a fighter for social justice,”* Mr. Guthertz said. *“He’s been an inspiration in my career.”*

## 2015 Leaders To Learn From

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