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Why Are We Bilingual? U.S. Intervención en Centroamérica

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Overview

The United States has long been a country of immigrants and today has over 50 million foreign-born residents.[1] For over half a century, the immigrant share of the U.S. population has had a visible impact on the curriculum in certain public schools. In 1963, Coral Way Elementary School in Miami, Florida, was selected as the site for the first publicly funded bilingual program in the United States.[2] Now known as the Coral Way Bilingual K-8 Center, the school is recognized for being the first bilingual school to include both non-native and native English-speaking children to achieve bilingualism and biliteracy.[3] Since 1971, schools in Washington, D.C., have used this model.[4] Bancroft Elementary School—one of the District of Columbia’s top bilingual schools, notable for its large population of recent immigrants from Central America—has adopted this bilingual model.

While there has been an increase in schools adopting this instructional model, its origins are tied to migration patterns—which cannot be divorced from U.S.-Central American relations. The curriculum unit, “Why Are We Bilingual? U.S. *Intervención en Centroamérica*,” will examine the question: “When and why did Bancroft become a bilingual school?” To understand the origins of this instructional shift, students will also be asked: “Why have people left their home countries to come to the U.S.?” Students will connect immigration, the school’s demographics, and bilingual education at Bancroft. Because Bancroft has many students from Central American countries with migration patterns directly tied to U.S.-backed wars and economic and political intervention, this unit will explore the U.S.’s role in Central America. The curriculum will also address how the U.S. received immigrants from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala and describe the dual and discriminatory immigration policy toward these groups based on the U.S.’s politics and foreign policy.[5] Given that Bancroft originally launched its bilingual program to serve the language needs of immigrant students predominantly from El Salvador, several lessons will focus on that country. Ultimately, students will understand the genesis of bilingual education at Bancroft and its connection to U.S. intervention in Central America.

The unit will be tied to cartography. To help students identify Central America on a map and align with DCPS social studies standards that ask students to “analyze [...] their space in Washington, D.C., using map skills,” students will start small by finding Bancroft on a map of D.C.[6] From there, they will zoom out and find D.C. on a broader U.S. map. Ultimately, students will be able to find Bancroft on a world map, in relation to Central

America, and answer questions such as: “Where is Central America?” “What countries are part of Central America?” and “How would you get from El Salvador to Bancroft?” “Would you walk, drive, fly, or take a boat? Why?” Finally, students will share how they think or know their families arrived in the United States.

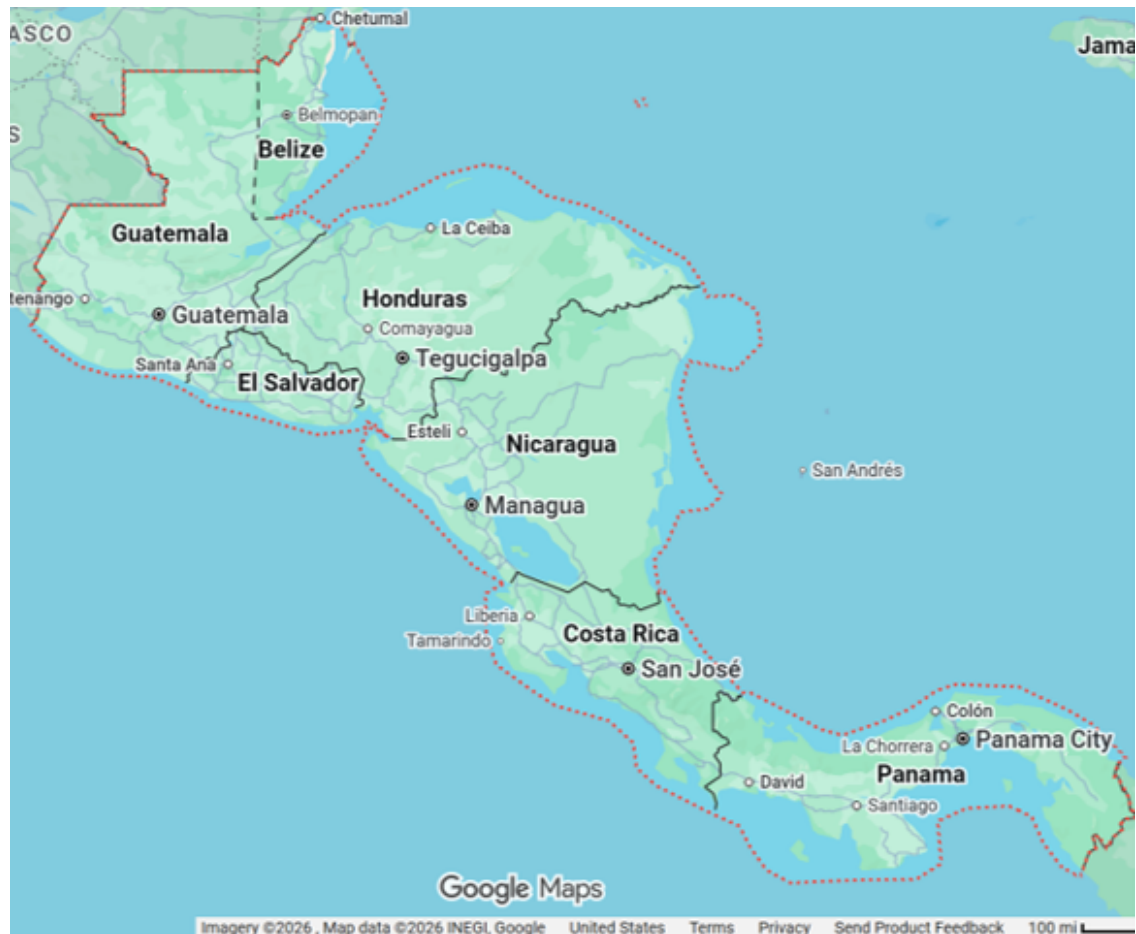


Figure 1: Map of Central America

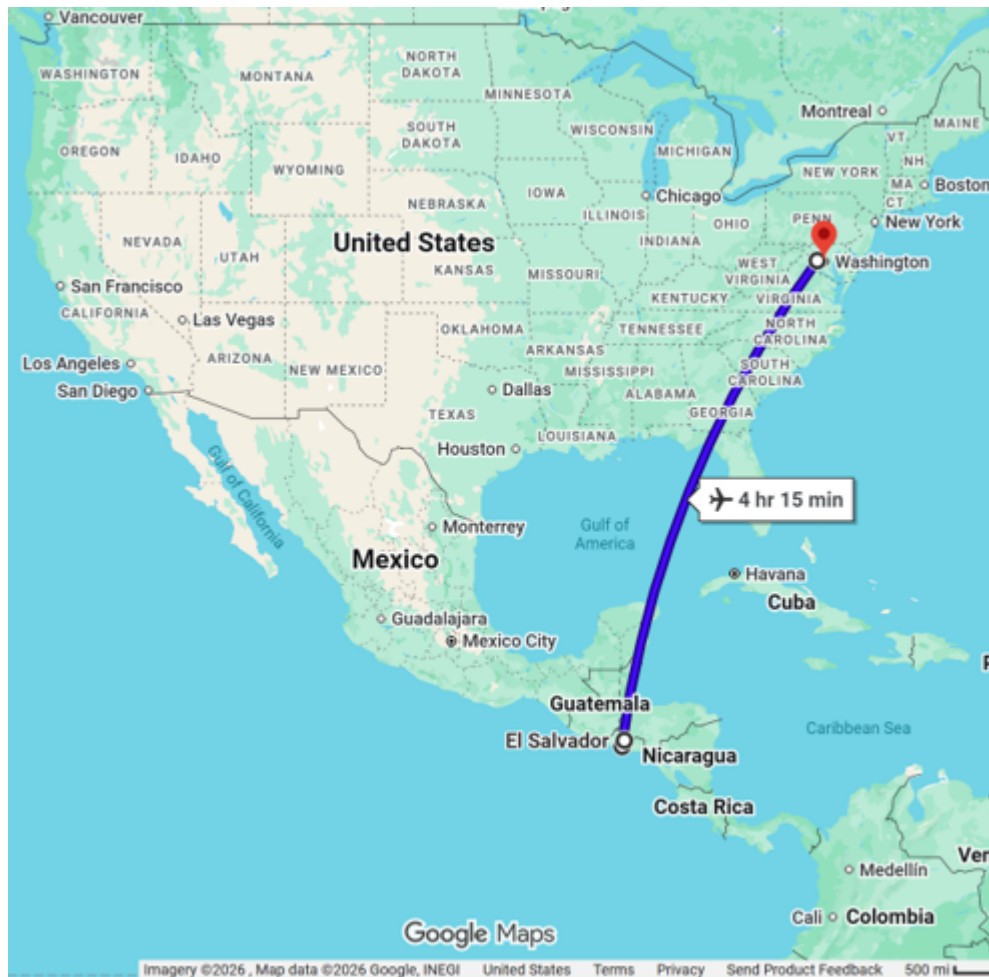


Figure 2: It takes 4 hours and 15 mins to fly from El Salvador to Washington, D.C.

Source: Google Maps

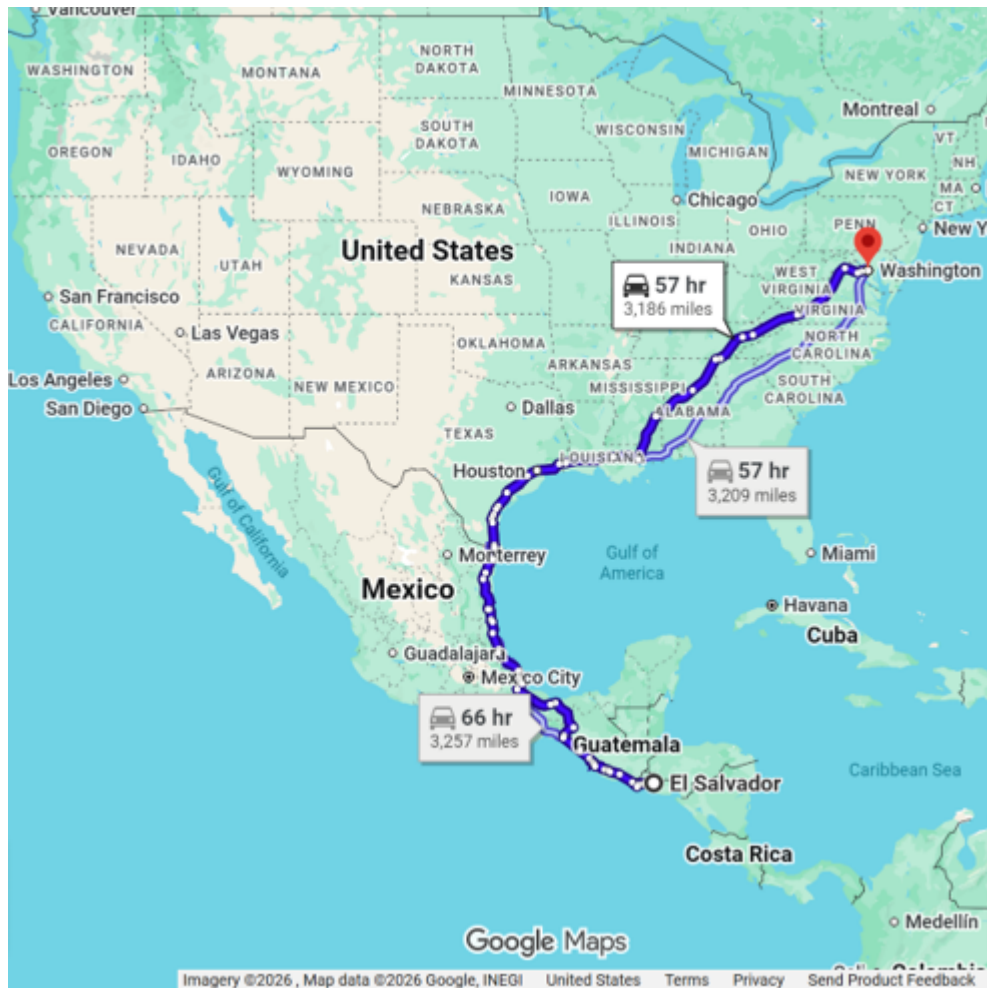


Figure 3: It takes 57 hours to drive from El Salvador to Washington, D.C.

Source: Google Maps

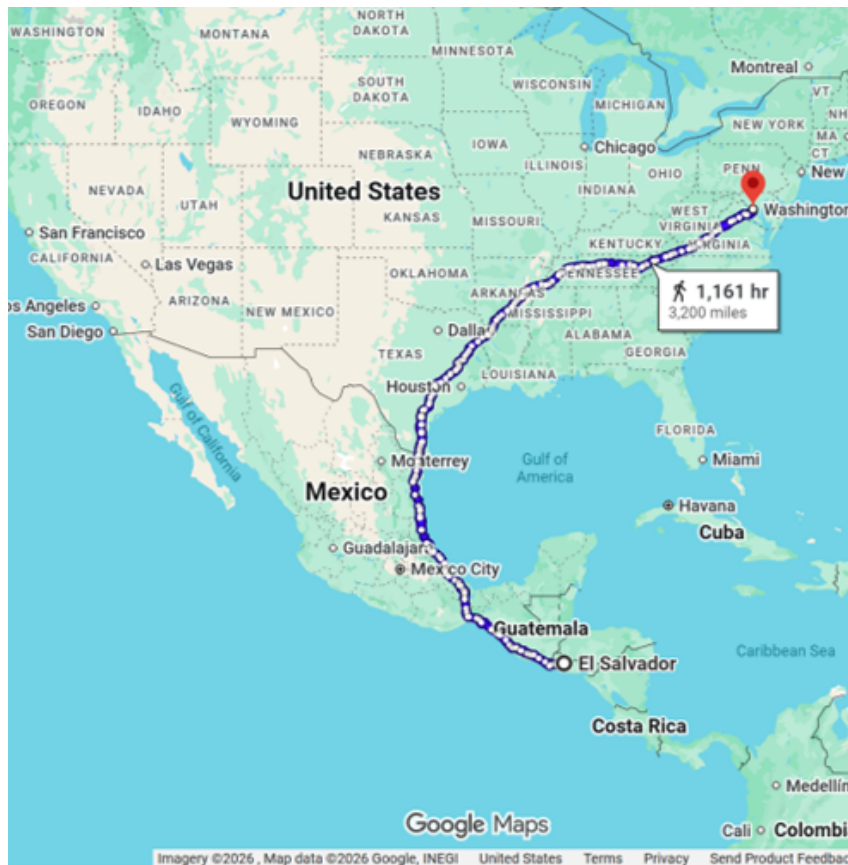


Figure 4: It takes 1,161 hours to walk from El Salvador to Washington, D.C.

Source: Google Maps

Rationale

Commentators have noted that the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) enforcement and deportations have detrimentally impacted immigrant students in D.C. schools.[7] At Bancroft, ICE’s apprehensions have caused a decrease in Latino parental involvement and presence, and students’ sense of belonging has declined.[8] To encourage student and parent engagement, this unit will discuss the immigrant experience and celebrate their contributions to D.C. The unit will address DCPS’s Social Studies Standard 1.3, which asks students to “explain the ways in which different populations, including [...] Latinx [...] communities, have shaped and defined the community of Washington, D.C.”[9] Parents will be invited to our classroom to discuss how immigrants from Latin America help D.C. thrive. Students will experience a sense of pride in who they are and appreciate what their families contribute to our city; their classmates will have an opportunity to listen to presentations by families with backgrounds other than their own and understand what those families bring to the table.

Bancroft Elementary School

Roughly reflecting the immigrant share of the U.S. population, around fourteen percent of residents in the nation's capital are foreign-born.[10] Similarly, 18% of public-school students in Washington, D.C. are classified as English language learners.[11] While the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) manages 117 schools, only around 9% of DCPS schools are bilingual. Six of the eleven bilingual schools are “whole school” programs, and all students receive bilingual instruction. The other five schools have “strand” programs, but only some students receive dual language.[12]

Bancroft Elementary School is a bilingual school founded in 1924. Located in Mount Pleasant, the school educates a large population with Latin American backgrounds.[13] As of July 2026, 64% of Bancroft's students are Hispanic/Latino; White students account for 30%, Black students for 2%, Asian students for 1%, and students identifying as multiracial for 3%.[14]

DCPS offers Dual Language Education (DLE) programs, a two-way bilingual “educational program in which students study grade-level content in two languages.”[15] This means classrooms at Bancroft are composed of both native and non-native English speakers. In other words, some students are Spanish-dominant, and some students are English-dominant.[16] Ultimately, both groups of students are expected to speak, read, and write in Spanish and English and attain “high academic achievement.”[17] At Bancroft, the target languages are English and Spanish, and beginning in first grade, students spend two-thirds of their day receiving Spanish instruction and one-third of their day receiving instruction in English.[18]

Many Latino students are immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Central America's Northern Triangle—Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. According to Terry Repak, this migration can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s, when Central American women moved to the DMV—the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia region—to work as domestic workers in the private homes of D.C.'s government officials and diplomats. Notably, “it was employees of the U.S. government and of international agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund who helped to instigate the migration stream that eventually brought tens of thousands of undocumented immigrants into the capital city.”[19] Today, the largest concentration of Salvadorans in the United States resides in the D.C. area.[20]

Bancroft's Journey to Becoming Bilingual

In the 1980s, a “massive migration of Salvadorans to the United States began [...]in response to civil war,” resulting in an increase in the immigrant student body at Bancroft Elementary School.[21] By the mid-1980s, Mount Pleasant was recognized as the center of the Latino barrio—a Spanish-speaking neighborhood—where Central American immigrants flocked.[22] [23] In fact, given the demographics, “Latinidad is often unwittingly associated with Salvadoran culture in the DMV,” serving as the “premier Latinx referential group.”[24] In a few years, the student population at Bancroft had markedly changed. In 1980, Latino/a children comprised about 5% of the student body at Bancroft, but by 1985, that number had jumped to 55%.[25]

Bancroft was launched as a monolingual school. However, when the school administration realized its instructional model was not meeting the needs of the student demographic shift, and the community demanded a bilingual school, things started to change. Seeing students at Oyster-Adams, the first dual-

language school in Washington, D.C., succeed encouraged families to push for something similar, and educators advocated for a bilingual model.[26] Jessica Morales, Bancroft’s principal, recalled that Bancroft’s transition to a bilingual school was intended “to meet the needs of so many immigrant Latino children, who happened to predominantly be from El Salvador.”[27] Unfortunately, there was no additional funding, and DCPS’s Central Office did not provide support to implement bilingual programs. Bilingual instruction was left “uneven” and unaligned with dual language best practices.[28] Some grade levels even lacked Spanish instruction or stopped to prepare for English exams. [29]

In 2002, when Morales was hired as a teacher, the school was already considered bilingual. Morales, however, described the implementation of bilingual instruction as inconsistent, since “things weren’t being done with fidelity.”[30] In 2005, the situation improved. DCPS received a Foreign Language Acquisition Program (FLAP) grant—“designed to allow more students to master a new language”—from the federal government.[31] Although Bancroft was excluded from the grant, it was able to join the cohort of dual-language schools, providing Bancroft and its teachers support in dual-language training and hiring structures. By 2006, Bancroft’s dual-language model had become more consistent, resembling the Coral Way model.

But how did we get here in the first place? What brought so many Central Americans to the U.S? To answer these questions, we will have to take a closer look at the history of U.S. intervention in Central America. Furthermore, to understand the trends and reasons behind U.S. intervention in Central America and the treatment of immigrants from that region, we’ll focus on three countries: Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. These were the three nations that erupted into violent civil wars.

U.S. Intervention in Central America

Nicaragua

From 1893 to 1909, under the presidency of José Santos Zelaya, Nicaragua was a “stable and prosperous country.”[32] Zelaya provided a well-run government, welcomed foreign investment, and paid Nicaragua’s debt on time.[33] He was, however, a nationalist who favored Nicaraguans and provided them with commercial monopolies.[34] U.S. executives who owned banana, mahogany, and mining concessions saw this as a threat; in 1894 and 1899, they fueled “anti-Zelaya revolts.”[35] These U.S. executives were not alone; the U.S. Navy protected their properties from confiscation.[36]

After William Howard Taft came into power, Philander Chase Knox—Taft’s secretary of state—implemented the “dollar diplomacy” policy, which aimed to replace European investment backers, who held most of Central America’s debt, with U.S. companies.[37] When Zelaya reached out to a German firm to build a railway connecting the West Coast of Nicaragua to the Atlantic region and secured a \$1.2 million British-French loan, Knox immediately viewed Zelaya as an obstacle.[38] In 1909, with the support of U.S. companies, the likes of Alfonso Diaz—an executive at Fletcher’s Los Angeles Mining Company (in Nicaragua)—Juan Estrada, a Nicaraguan military officer, and Conservative Emiliano Chamorro rebelled against Zelaya.[39] Among the Anglo rebel advisers were businessman Leroy Cannon and Leonard Groce, who had mining interests in Central America.[40] Soon after the rebellion commenced, Zelaya sentenced Cannon and Groce to death for attempting to dynamite a troop boat.[41] This death sentence was the justification Taft needed to end diplomatic relations and launch a campaign for Zelaya’s ouster.[42] Pressured by the U.S., Zelaya resigned.[43] Nonetheless, Estrada, Chamorro, and Diaz continued fighting until they deposed José Madriz, Zelaya’s chosen successor.[44]

In 1910, once in power, the Estrada forces curried favor with the U.S, carrying out Knox’s “reforms.”[45] They

refinanced Zelaya's old debt—handing it over to U.S. banking houses Brown Brothers and J.W. Seligman—allowed the U.S. to collect customs duties, and welcomed the American military into Nicaragua. To add insult to injury, they looted the treasury too.[46] By mid-1912, these two U.S. firms controlled the National Bank of Nicaragua.[47] U.S. forces stayed in Nicaragua for the next thirteen years as “Wall Street dictated the country's financial affairs.”[48] In 1926, a civil war broke out in Nicaragua, and the U.S. Marines returned to support the faction that served U.S. interests—they fought against Liberal Juan Sacasa to reinstall Diaz to power.[49] A peasant revolt in favor of Sacasa, led by César Sandino, ensued—lasting seven years.[50] In 1927, when U.S. soldiers massacred three hundred unarmed people, including women and children, public opinion in the U.S. turned against the war. Finally, in 1932, Sacasa won the presidential election, and protesters forced the withdrawal of U.S. Marines.[51]

For the first time, the U.S. faced defeat in Latin America.[52] Yet, prior to leaving Nicaragua, U.S. Marines trained a new National Guard, positioning Anastasio Somoza Garcia as its commander.[53] Two years later, Somoza's soldiers executed Sandino. Soon after, Somoza ousted Sacasa, and the Somoza family controlled Nicaragua until the Sandinista revolution in 1979.[54]

The U.S. assisted the Somozas' dictatorship—training Nicaraguan military officers at the U.S. Army's School of the Americas—and accepted its “pillaging of the country.”[55] By the 1970s, Nicaraguans were growing tired of the Somozas.[56] In 1972, a deadly earthquake hit Managua, the capital of Nicaragua.[57] President Anastasio Somoza Debayle and his junta, the Liberal-Conservatives, stole millions of dollars' worth of relief supplies, leading to public outcry and the rise of revolutionary groups.[58] The Sandinista National Liberation Front, named after Augustino Sandino, formed and spread its influence.[59] Despite the Sandinistas' rapid growth and spread through the countryside and anti-Somoza public sentiment, including the Catholic Church, the U.S. continued to support the Somozas.[60] In 1979, however, the Somozas were toppled, and the Sandinistas took over.[61]

When Ronald Reagan stepped into the presidency in 1981, he established the Contra army—composed of former Somoza soldiers. Reagan directed the CIA to train, arm, and finance the Contras to fight the Sandinistas.[62] The Contras' goal was to sabotage, terrorize, and ultimately destabilize the Sandinistas.[63] U.S. and international law, however, forbade unprovoked incursions and toppling of other independent countries.[64] Hence, Reagan's war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua was illegal.[65] Nevertheless, Reagan argued that Nicaragua and Cuba were sending arms to rebels in El Salvador, and the military aid he was sending was aimed at halting the flow of arms rather than to overthrow the Nicaraguan government.[66] To that end, the Reagan administration used Cuban Americans to raise funds for the Contras, organize shipment of weapons, serve as military advisers, and organize resupply operations out of El Salvador, while looking to uncover Cuban military involvement in El Salvador.[67] The CIA tapped Cuban exiles for anti-communist actions in Central America; they were trained by the CIA for years and were also active in clandestine anti-communist projects throughout the Western Hemisphere.[68] Soon, a majority of the U.S. Congress concluded that Reagan's goal was indeed to overthrow the Nicaraguan government and stepped in.[69] In 1984, Congress passed the Boland Amendment that banned all military aid to the Contras.[70]

Elements within the Reagan Administration, including in the CIA and White House, looked for alternative sources of funding.[71] Ultimately, they illegally funded the Contras, including by selling weapons to Iran through foreign intermediaries in the Middle East.[72] As the Reagan and then Bush administrations amped up the war efforts against the Sandinistas, “the number of Nicaraguans fleeing their country kept growing.”[73] Indeed, during the 1980s, the Nicaraguan population in the U.S. mushroomed from 25,000 to 125,000.[74]

El Salvador

This pattern of U.S.-backed dictators also emerged in El Salvador.[75] In 1931, Arturo Araujo won El Salvador's first free presidential election.[76] Unfortunately, Araujo's presidency only lasted a few months. By the end of 1931, a military coup named General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, the vice president, the "constitutional successor," and initiated "the longest unbroken period of military rule in Latin American history. [77]

In 1932, the communists and leftists won several municipalities, but the government ignored the results.[78] In response, peasants planned to take over local town halls and carry out a workers' strike in the capital.[79] The government heard about the protest plans and arrested Farabundo Martí, the Communist Party Leader.[80] In the coffee region, however, revolutionaries executed the rebellion as planned—resulting in about fifty-one hundred people killed.[81] In response, armed Ladinos carried out a "racial reign of terror," known as *La Matanza*, and killed close to 30,000 indigenous people.[82] The threat of U.S. intervention provoked the Martínez government to ruthlessly maintain order and resort to extreme violence.[83]

From 1932 to 1944, with U.S. consent, Hernández ruled with an iron fist—eliminating all unions—until he was ousted by his army subordinates. After that, the Salvadoran Oligarchy—the fourteen families—took turns controlling the government through generals, and coups between factions of the ruling class became the standard way of life.[84]

Between 1961 and 1975, the number of landless peasants quadrupled as the coffee oligarchy expanded its control over so many farms.[85] Consequently, landless and seeking work, more than 300,000 Salvadorans migrated to Honduras.[86] Overwhelmed by the migrants, Honduras deported them, exacerbating tensions between the two countries and ultimately resulting in the "Soccer War." [87] By the end of the war, over 130,000 Salvadorans returned home; the rest fled to Mexico and the United States.[88]

In 1979, a civil war was unleashed after "an army coup aborted the results of a democratic election." [89] For the next couple of years, right-wing death squads targeted dissidents—murdering, wounding, abducting, or disappearing more than eight thousand union leaders.[90] In response to this repression, by 1980, several opposition guerrilla groups joined and established the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.[91]

Regardless of the brutal atrocities carried out by right-wing militias, the U.S. backed the oligarchy. During that time, right-wing death squads assassinated Oscar Romero—San Salvador's archbishop and harsh critic of the Salvadoran junta—and government soldiers brutally assaulted and killed four American Catholic nuns. Yet, the Bush and Reagan administrations responded by rewarding the government.[92] Believing that the country's oligarchy was a reliable anti-communist force, Washington pumped nearly 4 billion dollars into El Salvador—making it the largest "recipient of military aid in Latin America." [93] As the war escalated, the number of Salvadorans fleeing the country also increased.[94] According to the U.S. Census, in 1980, there were around 94,000 Salvadorans in the U.S.[95] Ten years later, that number skyrocketed to 701,000, and by 2017, there were 2.3 million Salvadorans in the U.S.[96]

Guatemala

Similarly, the violence that consumed Guatemala during the late twentieth century was a consequence of U.S. foreign policy.[97] Dwarfing all of the Central American countries in terms of mass-scale atrocity, "Guatemala was home to the longest and bloodiest civil war in Central American history." [98] The origins of that war date back to 1954, when a CIA-sponsored coup overthrew Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, a democratically elected president. [99] Prior to that, Guatemalan presidents protected the interests of an American-owned behemoth

known as United Fruit Company (UFCO).[100] From 1931 to 1944, President Jorge Ubico bestowed many favors on UFCO, enabling it to own more than a million acres of banana fields in Central America by the end of his term.[101] Ubico also forced landless Maya to work on government projects, made them carry passbooks, and implemented “vagrancy laws to compel them to work for big landowners.”[102] Furthermore, as Ubico jailed opponents and snuffed out dissent, Washington turned a blind eye so long as U.S. investment was protected in the country.[103]

As with all dictators in the region, Ubico “aroused the population against him.”[104] Thus, in 1944, Ubico was ousted and succeeded by Juan José Arévalo in the first democratic election in Guatemalan history.[105] Once elected, Arévalo abolished Ubico’s vagrancy laws, recognized labor rights, established social security and rural education programs, and provided loans to farmers.[106] In 1951, Arévalo was succeeded by Jacobo Arbenz, a military officer who wanted to push Arévalo’s revolution further “by redistributing all idle lands to peasants.”[107] Guatemala’s fundamental economic challenge was ownership and control of the land. While eighty percent of people in the countryside struggled to survive, a mere two percent of landowners held seventy-two percent of the arable land.[108]

In 1952, Congress passed Decree 900.[109] Uncultivated lands bigger than six hundred acres were “confiscated and divided among the landless.”[110] The owners were compensated according to the land’s assessed tax value.[111] Although only 1,700 holdings of the 341,000 landowners were subject to this law, it covered a large part of UFCO’s holdings; it owned around six hundred thousand acres that were mostly unused.[112] When Arbenz confiscated a huge part of UFCO’s holdings and offered the company \$1.2 million in pay—the value the company reported on its taxes—UFCO and the U.S. State Department countered with \$16 million.[113] When Arbenz refused to meet their counteroffer, Secretary of State Foster Dulles and CIA Director Allen Dulles reached out to Eisenhower and persuaded him to oust Arbenz.[114]

In 1954, Eisenhower “authorized the CIA to organize Operation Success, a plan for the armed overthrow of Arbenz.”[115] Selecting Carlos Castillo Armas, a Guatemalan colonel, as the leader of the coup, the CIA trained Castillo’s rebels in Nicaragua. Regardless of Castillo’s illegal and violent rise to power, Washington endorsed his dictatorship and provided it with foreign aid.[116] Once in power, Castillo banned over five hundred trade unions and returned over 1.5 million acres of land to UFCO.[117] For the next forty years, Guatemalans “suffered from government terror without equal in modern history of Latin America.”[118] During this period, people in Guatemala were kidnapped in broad daylight, helicopters would drop mutilated bodies onto crowded stadiums, and those who inquired about “disappeared” loved ones would have their tongues cut out.[119] By 1960, students and intellectuals had formed guerrilla groups to resist the dictatorship.[120] To quash dissent—and with the help of U.S. Special Forces—the government responded with “scorched-earth campaigns, pacification programs, and paramilitary death squads.”[121] By 1976, over twenty thousand people had been murdered. By 1985, that number reached 75,000.[122]

More than 200,000 people died over the course of the thirty-six-year war. However, between 1982 and 1983, “the most extensive state-sponsored political violence occurred” under Guatemalan President Efraín Ríos Montt.[123] Of the tens of thousands killed in the early 1980s, more than eighty percent were Mayan.[124] According to the official report published by the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*, the Guatemalan government commission established to investigate human rights violations during the Guatemalan Civil War, the army’s perception that Mayan communities were “natural allies of the guerrillas” resulted in extreme brutality and the mass extermination of defenseless Mayan communities, including children, women, and the elderly, through shocking means.[125] It should be no surprise that, to escape these atrocities, a surge of Guatemalan civilians fled to neighboring countries. During the 1980s, the number of Guatemalans in the U.S.

jumped from 71,642 to 226,000.[126]

Cold War Policies in Central America

As mentioned earlier in this unit, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala were involved in civil wars—in which the U.S. played a significant role—that led to massive migrations. But what happened once these people arrived in the U.S? How were they received? Given that they were fleeing wars, surely, they would all be considered refugees.

For almost thirty years, U.S. law granted asylum to refugees. Under the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, refugee status was reserved for people escaping Communist regimes.[127] However, the influx of immigrants changed that. During the Carter administration, Congress passed Public Law 96-212, the 1980 Refugee Act.[128] As shown in Figure 5, the law stated that anyone was eligible for political asylum if they had been persecuted or had a “well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”[129] Alas, the fair application of this law was brief.

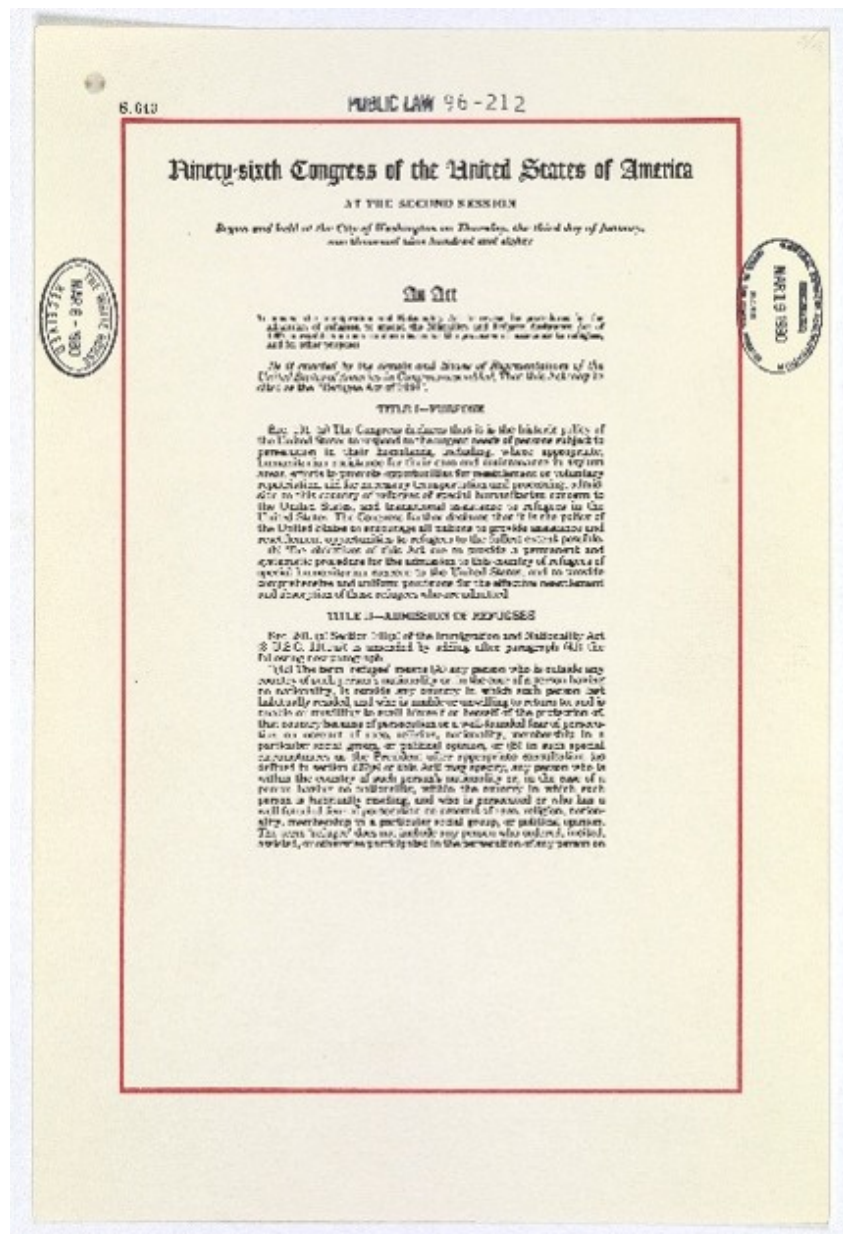


Figure 5. Refugee Act of 1980

Source: National Archives Foundation

At the dawn of the 1980s—as Central American migration increased—the U.S. changed its immigration policies.[130] Prior to the law taking effect, Reagan became president and undercut the 1980 Refugee Act.[131] He reasserted the fight against “Communists” in Central America and militarized U.S. borders.[132] In 1981, Attorney General William French Smith instructed that the Immigration and Naturalization Service detain undocumented Central American immigrants applying for political asylum.[133] However, while immigration jails overflowed—and the INS built makeshift detention camps to house the surplus of detainees—Salvadorans and Guatemalans continued to arrive.[134]

According to Aviva Chomsky, the U.S.’s response to refugees from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala “could not have been more different” because of Cold War policy.[135] The United States opposed the Sandinistas in Nicaragua but supported the right-wing governments in El Salvador and Guatemala.[136] The U.S. propped up governments that would fight for its interests and fought governments that would challenge them. Part of this tactic was to welcome people from countries whose leaders opposed the U.S. government and its interests, and to shun people from countries whose leaders were aligned with it. More specifically, the Reagan and Bush administrations refused to help Central Americans—particularly those from Guatemala and El Salvador—despite human rights groups frequently documenting government-sanctioned terror.[137] Between 1983 and 1990, while the INS granted political asylum to 25.2 percent of Nicaraguans—whose Sandinista government the U.S. was attempting to oust—it only approved 2.6 percent of political asylum requests from Salvadorans and 1.8 percent from Guatemalans.[138] As the data indicates, immigration policies were inconsistently applied depending on who was asking for help—disproportionately affecting groups and favoring one over the other. In fact, few Nicaraguans were deported even if they were denied asylum. Between 1981 and 1989, 31,000 asylum cases were denied, yet only 750 people were deported.[139]

In “Economic Migrants or Refugees from Violence? A Time-Series Analysis of Salvadoran Migration to the United States,” William Deane Stanley posits that the U.S. Department of State and the Department of Justice deemed Salvadoran and Guatemalans economic migrants—making them ineligible for “special treatment”—under U.S. Immigration law.[140] Representatives from the Reagan administration argued that, because Central Americans pass through Mexico on their way to the U.S., there was “evidence” to believe that Salvadorans and Guatemalans were motivated to migrate for economic reasons instead of political reasons.[141] This argument, of course, disregards the fact that Nicaraguan immigrants were also from Central America and presumably also passed through Mexico, yet were disproportionately granted political asylum as refugees fleeing violence rather than being deemed economic migrants. Conversely, legal staff members of organizations helping Central Americans in the U.S. affirm that Salvadorans and Guatemalans have fled their home countries to escape political violence.[142] As previously described, much of this violence was fueled by U.S. policies.[143] Nevertheless, despite its contributions to regional instability, “the United States continued to admit only those groups it regarded as most deserving” and “best able to promote U.S. national interests.”[144] Moreover, the number of people granted refugee status favored those from communist countries.[145]

While Central Americans, and Guatemalans and Salvadorans in particular, have faced challenges, given their importance to the U.S. economy, there have been attempts to reform immigration. In 1986, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA).[146] IRCA allowed so-called “illegal” residents to legalize their status.[147] In November of 1990, Congress granted Salvadorans—and later Guatemalans and

Nicaraguans—temporary protection status (TPS), suspending their deportations.[148] In December, *American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh*, a class-action lawsuit (ABC decision), struck down the Immigration and Naturalization Service’s (INS) policy of deporting Salvadorans and Guatemalans.[149] This ruling overturned one hundred thousand asylum cases previously denied.[150] The ABC decision, TPS, and IRCA provided Central Americans with relief from the “illegal” limbo they encountered.[151]

21st Century U.S. Foreign Policy in Central America

Central American immigration to the U.S. persists in the twenty-first century.[152] In fact, “more Central Americans have left their home countries in the past two decades than in the entire twentieth century.”[153] While by 2000 there were 2 million Central American immigrants in the U.S., by 2015 there were 3.3 million Central American immigrants residing in the U.S.[154] According to the book *Central American Migrations in the Twenty-First Century*, as of 2023, 3.8 million Central Americans were living in the United States.[155] The three largest Central American groups in the U.S. come from the Northern Triangle: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.[156] According to Espinoza, Rosalez Vásquez, and Sarmiento, migration from these countries is a product of “political repression, gangs, drug and human trafficking, and gender-related crimes” as well as reasons that are “economic in nature.”[157] Additionally, climate change and natural disasters have also contributed to the displacement of Central Americans.[158] In 2010, unaccompanied minors to the U.S. surged, and by 2014, U.S. Border Patrol stopped 57,496 unaccompanied minors, up from 24,668 the previous year.[159] By 2018, the caravans carrying large groups of migrants coming from the Northern Triangle dominated U.S. media.[160] While some of the forces driving Central Americans to the U.S. in the twenty-first century are internal, others continue to be directly tied to U.S. foreign policy.

In 2004, George W. Bush signed the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). CAFTA drove the maquiladora industry—manufacturing plants that import and assemble duty-free components for export, allowing owners to take advantage of low-cost labor and to pay duty only on the value of the finished product—to grow as U.S. manufacturers relocated their “labor-intensive production to low-wage, low-regulation countries in Central America.”[161] Between 2005 and 2006, 442,000 people worked in maquiladoras, predominantly in Guatemala and Honduras; 80,000 in El Salvador and 75,000 in Nicaragua.[162] To attract companies, the maquiladora industry encouraged Central American countries to “race to the bottom,” offering the lowest wages and the least regulation.[163] In Honduras, the growth of the maquiladora industry seemed to correlate with spikes in violence and alcohol and drug use.[164] In El Salvador, the maquiladora movement pushed people to migrate. While CAFTA promised job creation, economic investment in Central America, and a stronger relationship between Central American countries and the U.S., it worsened inequality, increased inflation, reduced jobs, weakened labor rights, and permitted less investment in social welfare programs.[165] Ultimately, these conditions pushed people to seek survival outside of their home countries. But CAFTA is only one of several U.S. policies that have influenced Central American immigration to the U.S.

With roots in Los Angeles, transnational Central American gangs such as MS-13 were an “American export”—as described by journalist Dara Lind—that also propelled immigration.[166] Between 2001 and 2010, the U.S. deported over a hundred thousand people convicted of crimes to Central America.[167] Embracing hardline anti-crime policies modeled after those implemented in the U.S., Central American governments responded with their own *mano dura* (“iron fist”) tough-on-crime policies, incarcerating many youths recently deported from the U.S.[168] This approach backfired: “Prisons became schools for gang recruitment,” and “high incarceration levels in Central America [...] strengthened the gangs” by linking them to organized crime. Ultimately, this led to a spike in violence and murder rates, creating conditions that drove immigration from

these nations.[169]

In Honduras, on June 28, 2009, Jose Manuel Zelaya, the country's democratically elected president, was ousted by the military.[170] Elected in 2006 as a center-right candidate, he shifted left once in office. Zelaya worked to end the privatization of public services, reestablished land rights for small farmers, and introduced a 60 percent increase in the country's minimum wage.[171] In 2008, Zelaya brought Honduras into the Venezuelan Bolivarian Alliance for the People of our America (ALBA) bloc, joining the anti-neoliberal trading bloc and alarming the Honduran oligarchy and the U.S. government.[172] Pentagon officers supported the coup. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton worked behind the scenes to impede Zelaya's reinstatement, and the Obama administration endorsed the regime change.[173] Right-wing governments that succeeded Zelaya sought to suppress opposition social movements. According to human rights groups, death squads regularly assassinated dissidents, and at least ten thousand complaints of military and police abuse went unaddressed. Historian Dana Frank estimates that almost one hundred peasant leaders were murdered.[174] Despite these human rights violations, both the Obama and Trump administrations supported post-Zelaya Honduran regimes.[175] Indeed, Juan Orlando Hernández, who served as Honduras's president from 2014 to 2022, was in 2024 convicted and sentenced to 45 years in Prison in the U.S. for drug trafficking, only to later receive a pardon in 2025 from President Trump.[176] Amidst the violence and political instability that accompanied Honduras's devolution into a de facto narco-state, hundreds of thousands of Hondurans fled northward.[177]

U.S. Domestic Response to Immigration

George W. Bush

Throughout the first two decades of the 21st Century, each presidential administration has attempted to grapple with issues surrounding increasing immigration to the U.S.

Upon the approach of his presidential bid, George W. Bush— “a (far from fluent) Spanish-speaking, pro-immigration, Latino-friendly Republican,” courted Hispanic voters.[178] Bush tailored his messages to suit his audiences, making Spanish-language television and newspaper ads central to his campaign.[179] Latinos responded to the ads—as support increased to 44 percent, 9 percentage points higher than four years earlier.[180] Bush announced his commitment to immigration reform, which included legalizing the status of millions of undocumented immigrants.[181] However, in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, President Bush signed the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (HSA) into law, which established the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), consolidating the departments of multiple agencies as part of the largest reorganization of the U.S. government in decades.[182] As part of this reorganization, the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement was formed as a new law enforcement agency under DHS.[183] ICE took over the investigative and interior enforcement functions of the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) and the United States Customs Service, which were both dissolved as part of the restructuring.[184]

Barack Obama

Upon entering the White House, President Barack Obama promised to safeguard the undocumented and limit ICE, as he faced pressure to address immigration and scale back the federal government's mass deportations.[185] However, during the first two years of his presidency, deportations slowly increased.[186] Around a thousand immigrants were being deported every day.[187] In June 2012, Obama responded to this pressure by issuing the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which suspended deportation and issued work permits for Dreamers.[188] DACA protected over 700,000, predominantly from Latin America.[189] This decision likely propelled Latinos to cast a ballot for Obama to reelect him; in

November 2012, 71% of Latinos voted for him.[190] Obama called for a “comprehensive immigration reform” that would lead to “a pathway for legal status for those who are living in this country.”[191] However, once Obama was in office for his second term, any progress toward comprehensive reform stopped—instead, his administration focused on enforcement.[192] As a result of the Obama administration, the number of ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations apprehensions significantly increased—earning Obama the nickname of “Deporter in Chief.”[193]

Donald J. Trump

From the moment Donald Trump announced his run for President on June 16, 2015, he focused on immigration—making it the central issue of his campaign.[194] By then, public debate over immigration was becoming even more heated, yet Congress had still failed to deliver a comprehensive reform.[195] Once in office, Trump attempted to decrease the stream of undocumented migrants—he militarized the borders, established mass detention centers, separated families, and reversed actions Obama had taken to legalize some undocumented migrants.[196] More intently, Trump wanted to profoundly restructure the U.S. immigration system. He reduced the number of newcomers—including refugees, asylum seekers, and legal migrants from Muslim countries—that could be admitted per year.[197] Trump eliminated “chain migration” policies—those meant to reunite families—and prioritized visa applicants who were well-off and well-educated.[198] The Trump administration did not only target unauthorized immigrants, but it also harkened back to the country’s past—when racially infused policies prevailed.[199] By 2018, Trump had implemented a “zero tolerance” policy, prosecuting all migrants crossing the border—a misdemeanor, under federal law, for first-time offenders.[200] These policies produced images of thousands of immigrants, including children and toddlers separated from their parents, housed by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) inside chain-link cages.[201] For the fiscal year 2019-2020, nearly seventy thousand migrant children were held in U.S. detention centers with no parents in sight.[202] By the end of 2020, Congress still had not reformed the nation’s immigration system.[203]

The Continuing Value of Bilingual Education

The United States’ domestic and international policies continue to impact Central America and immigration from the region as unresolved immigration issues persist. While, as discussed, ICE’s increasingly visible enforcement actions have impacted Bancroft, they are only the latest challenges faced by immigrants in Mount Pleasant, the District of Columbia, and beyond. Despite such difficulties, bilingual programs such as those at Bancroft continue to meet the language needs of immigrant students, enabling them to participate fully in school and society. In this sense, bilingual education is not merely an instructional approach, but a vital institutional response to the linguistic and social challenges faced by immigrants and their communities.

Teaching Strategies

Bridging

Throughout the unit, we will bridge—or connect—vocabulary words and sentences. The Bridge, as defined by Beeman and Urow in *Teaching for Biliteracy: Strengthening Bridges between Languages*, is “when teachers purposefully bring two languages together, strategically guiding bilingual learners to...transfer the academic content they have learned in one language to the other.”[204] We will compare “immigrant” in English and

“inmigrante” in Spanish. Because at Bancroft we use purple for English words and orange for Spanish words, I will use these colors to highlight the different languages and prompt students to notice that these words are cognates. We will discuss their similarities and differences, circle what is the same, and underline what is different about these words. Using their prior knowledge, students will define these words; they will use their knowledge of Spanish words to understand the meanings of English words, and their knowledge of English words to understand the meanings of Spanish words. To help students develop a habit of bridging English and Spanish words, we will continue this word activity with other vocabulary words in the unit.

Repeated Reading

We will read the text several times to develop fluency and expression. For example, we will take excerpts from the book *Yes! We are Latino: Poems and Prose about the Latino Experience* by Alma Flor Ada and F. Isabel Campoy. After editing the text to make it more age-appropriate and pairing some images with the words, we will build meaning by previewing key vocabulary and activating prior knowledge. Students will take turns reading passages aloud to a partner. We will repeat this process three times as they build their fluency. Then, students will summarize and discuss their passages with their partners.[205]

Think-Pair-Share

To provide all students with an opportunity to grapple with questions and participate in discussions, we will use think-pair-share. This strategy encourages students to think, collaborate, and share their response with their peers. For example, I will pose questions such as: “Did you know that not all schools in D.C. are bilingual? Why do you think students at Bancroft learn English and Spanish?” Students will have a minute to think about their response, then discuss it with a partner, and then share their answers with the whole class.

Classroom Activities

Waiting for Papa

Learning Objective: Students will understand immigration and describe the pros and cons of immigrating to a new country.

We will read *Waiting for Papa* by René Colato Lainez. In this book, a boy named Beto moves to the United States with his mom, but his father stays behind in El Salvador because of the civil war. After Beto shares a letter he wrote to his father for Father’s Day on the radio, an immigration lawyer is moved to help Beto’s father reunite with his family in the U.S.

As we read the text, students will answer questions such as: “Why did Beto and his mom come to the U.S?” “What is an immigrant?” and “From what countries do immigrants originate?” Lastly, students will discuss whether they think immigrants would prefer to remain in their country of origin or move to another country.

Celebrating Trabajadores

Learning Objective: Students will identify and describe what immigrant workers contribute to our communities.

Guest speakers, including Senor Cruz, Bancroft's janitor, and students' parents, will deliver presentations on their roles in the school, neighborhood, or city. There will be a Q&A session at the end of the presentation, where students will get the opportunity to ask questions.

By the end of the week, or after all guest speakers have visited our classrooms, we will create a class poem that describes and appreciates the contributions of *trabajadores*. Because these lessons will occur during the first two weeks of school, and students are still mastering how to write a complete sentence, I will provide bilingual sentence starters such as: "*Trabajadores* are special because..." and "Workers are important because...". Lastly, Students will read these poems to our guest speakers.

Traveling from *Centroamerica* to D.C.

Learning Objective: Students will use cardinal directions to move from one point to another on a map.

Students will name which cardinal direction—north, south, east, or west— they used to answer the question: If you were traveling from El Salvador to Bancroft Elementary in Washington, D.C., how would you get there? What type of transportation would you use? Why? Students will draw their routes on a world map and write a sentence explaining the type of transportation they use and why.

¿Por qué somos bilingües? Let's Write!

Learning Objective: Students will explain why they and their schoolmates are bilingual.

As an end-of-unit activity, students will demonstrate their understanding of why Bancroft is a bilingual school. They will draw and write to answer the question, "Why are we bilingual?" Before students go off to their desks, we will have a class discussion about why, ultimately, students at Bancroft are bilingual. Because at Bancroft students start learning English in first grade and have previously only been asked to speak and write in Spanish at school, I will provide sentence starters such as: "We learn Spanish and English because..." and "Students at Bancroft are bilingual because...". Students will turn and talk and tell their classmates why they know students at Bancroft are bilingual. Then, they will go to their seats to complete their drawings and sentences. Lastly, students will share their responses with their classmates.

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Materials for Classroom Use

Google Maps

Waiting for Papa by Rene Colato Lainez

Yes! We are Latino: Poems and Prose about the Latino Experience” by Alma Flor Ada and F. Isabel Campoy (available on getepic.com)

Guest speakers

Sentence strips

Chart paper

Appendix for Implementing District Standards

1.3: “Explain the ways in which different populations, including but not limited to Latinx, Black, Asian, white, immigrant, religious, LGBTQ+ and indigenous communities, have shaped and defined the community of Washington, D.C.”

In first grade, students are expected to understand what different groups of people and communities contribute to D.C. and how they have helped define the city. They are expected to meet Social Studies Standard 1.3. where they “Explain the ways in which different populations, including but not limited to Latinx [...] communities, have shaped and defined the community of Washington, D.C.” Homing in on one community, people of Latin American descent, makes this standard—composed of many groups of people—more digestible. Because this is a two-week unit, it lends itself to depth rather than breadth. Ultimately, students will understand that people with backgrounds similar and different from their own are part of our community, and that everyone has something to contribute.

“Driving Concept 2: In This Space”[206]

According to the DCPS Social Studies Standards guidebook, the second DCPS social studies concept asks first-grade students to: “analyze what makes their space in Washington, DC unique, using map skills and historical sources to clarify how humans changed the landscape of the city over time.” By embedding the history of Central American immigration in our unit on maps, students can visualize the routes people took to arrive in D.C. They can also analyze their space in D.C. by noting its location relative to Central American countries, the places of origin of many Bancroft students and their classmates.

1.21: “Construct a simple map of the classroom, school or local community, using cardinal directions, physical features and map symbols.”

Another first-grade DCPS Social Studies standard related to maps is 1.21, in which students are expected to: “construct a simple map of the classroom, school or local community, using cardinal directions, physical

features and map symbols.” While this unit doesn’t ask students to draw a map of their classroom or school, it does teach students how to use cardinal directions—to get from one place to another—on a map of the world. As students use maps, they will notice physical features, such as oceans, and come to identify map symbols. Lastly, students will apply their knowledge of cardinal directions as they draw and label their routes.

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