

PROPOSITION XX (Number not yet assigned by Secretary of State)

Initiative: California Education for a Global Economy Initiative (Calif. EdGE Initiative)

Status: Qualified for the November 2016 ballot.

Proponents: This was put on the ballot via legislation passed in 2014, SB 1174, authored by Senator Ricardo Lara.

Known Support: As the bill establishing this initiative moved through the legislature, it had support from various education organizations, a couple of local chambers of commerce, school districts, immigrant policy organizations, the governor, many Democratic legislators, one Republican Senator (Anthony Canella).

Known Opposition: There was no listed opposition as the bill moved through the legislature. Most Republican legislators opposed the bill on floor votes.

Background: This initiative would overturn Proposition 227, passed by voters in 1998. Proposition 227 was an initiative that essentially ended bilingual classrooms and education in the state, and forced non-English speakers into “total immersion English” classrooms. The initiative was generally viewed as a form of backlash against the growing immigrant population in the state and defeating the initiative became a rallying point for progressives, and especially for young Latinos and Latinas.

Certain aspects of Proposition 227 are either ignored or have been changed or are not enforced. However, the fact that the statute still prevents bilingual instruction has been viewed as bad for the economy, bad for multiculturalism, and essentially racist.

Environmental Content: The Sierra Club board in 2012 came out in support of immigration reform that would allow undocumented immigrants to earn documented status. It did this with the argument that all residents deserve the opportunity to advocate and protect themselves and their communities from environmental pollution. If people living in the U.S. are forced to continue living in the shadows, they are also prevented from safely using their voices to reveal and fight pollution.

Proposition 227 did not/does not directly impact the environment. However, its restrictions on teaching methods have been identified as hurdles to helping non-English speakers to comfortably learn English and other topics. If restricting teaching methods reduces a person’s ability to communicate and participate in the larger society, then it follows that it also restricts a person’s ability to effectively and safely learn about and advocate for public health and the environment.

Politics: Many of our members and allies were touched by Proposition 227 directly and indirectly. The measure was generally touted by anti-immigrant forces in the state and pushed by former Governor Pete Wilson. For some of our members and allies, the initiative became their introduction to politics as they walked precincts and attended rallies to defeat the measure. For others, the initiative changed the way their local schools responded to their needs, forcing them into total English immersion classrooms where they struggled to learn and fell behind on basic skills.

A law birthed by anti-immigrant sentiment that squelches multiculturalism and multilingualism while denying adequate education simply wouldn't make it onto the ballot today, much less receive more than 60 percent of the vote. In 1998, the state was led by a governor who was growing increasingly conservative and who, now, in his retirement, continues to mold an increasingly out-of-touch Republican Party. Today, the statewide candidates cannot progress if they overtly espouse an anti-immigrant philosophy. At least three Latinos—sons of immigrants-- are considered among the leading candidates to run for Governor in 2018. Diversity is celebrated, not condemned. One of our strong allies on environmental issues in the Capitol, Sen. Ricardo Lara, is the author of the bill requiring the initiative to overturn Proposition 227.

Staff Recommendation: Sierra Club California should support the California EdGE Initiative on the grounds that it will end restrictions on teaching methods that logically would allow every student in California the chance to get the most appropriate language instruction for their situation and help them become engaged residents who can effectively speak out for the environment and public health.