

Editorial: Bridging the language gap

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Judge William Wayne Justice has done something that judges don't often do – he has abruptly reversed himself.

Last year the senior U.S. district judge said our state was doing an adequate job educating students with limited English language skills. But Friday he ruled the Texas Education Agency has violated the civil rights of Spanish-speaking students under the federal Equal Education Opportunity Act.

Why? State-approved language programs have not improved the performance of secondary students with limited English skills, according to Judge Justice. And he has given the state until the end of January to come up with a new plan.

To our eye, this is tough love doled out by a judge who doesn't see improvements coming fast enough. Compliance won't be inexpensive, easy or quick.

But the uncomfortable truth is that high school students with limited English skills are too often on a dead-end track. Texas public schools can't sustain the language education gains made by elementary-age children through their high school years. The state must close this gap if it is to have a skilled, educated workforce.

We commend those teachers and school districts that have successfully used TEA programs to help students develop language and academics skills in the early years. But it's regrettable that schools have not been able to similarly bolster limited-English students in seventh through 10th grade, many of whom fail to meet minimum TAKS standards and who drop out at far higher rates than do other students.

Elementary students more easily pick up these skills than do older students, particularly those teens who are in U.S. schools for a shorter period. An educator interviewed for a recent *Dallas Morning News* series about these challenges said, "We're doing pretty well if we can graduate 50 percent. ... I absolutely think we have a lot of room for improvement."

Judge Justice's ruling is a welcome call to action. Now it's up to state and local education officials to find better tools to boost success into the high school years.