



EXPANDING ACCESS TO

BILINGUAL LEARNING

FOR FOR DUAL LANGUAGE AND ENGLISH LEARNERS:
WHAT WE KNOW, WHAT WE DON'T KNOW, AND
WHAT WE SHOULD DO ABOUT IT

**START WITH EQUITY: FROM THE
EARLY YEARS TO THE EARLY GRADES**
DATA, RESEARCH, AND AN ACTIONABLE
CHILD EQUITY POLICY AGENDA

**CHILDREN'S EQUITY
PROJECT**


Bipartisan Policy Center

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This policy brief reviews the data, research, and policy landscapes of bilingual learning opportunities for dual language and English learners and provides a robust policy agenda to equitably expand access to such opportunities.

This is part of a broader effort launched in 2019 by the Children's Equity Project and the Bipartisan Policy Center, with support from the Heising Simons Foundation, to better understand the equity data, research, and policy landscapes in learning systems, across three key policy areas: discipline, inclusion, and dual language learning. This effort brought together over 70 experts to discuss the state of these issues across the United States and culminated in a report titled, [*Start with Equity: From the Early Years to the Early Grades*](#). The full report provides an equity policy roadmap for building more equitable learning systems.

Although this brief and the more extensive report were completed before COVID-19 reached our shores, the social vulnerabilities exposed and exacerbated by this pandemic make it especially important to prioritize equity in learning and align policy with research now.

The consequential nature of both the early years and the early grades cannot be ignored. Early learning experiences in these years can have long-lasting, life-changing effects on children. Unfortunately, data and research clearly indicate that the systems charged with

providing those experiences are not living up to their promise. All our children have the right to reach their full potential. To do that, the learning systems that serve them must remove obstacles and expand opportunity equitably. Now, more than ever, our country and the world are dependent on the next generation thriving.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Dual language learners (DLL) and English learners (EL) are a large, diverse, and growing population.

It is estimated that about a third of children in the country under eight are DLLs¹, though gaps in data prevent a more precise estimate.

As a subgroup, DLL and EL children have a host of linguistic, cultural, and social strengths. Their bilingualism is associated with cognitive advantages, including strong executive functioning skills, attention, perspective taking, and self-regulation.²

Dual language immersion models are associated with improved developmental, linguistic, and academic outcomes for all students. Such models present academic content in two languages in settings in which, ideally, the enrollment is roughly balanced between native speakers of each of the languages

used. Research shows that having access to learning experiences in a child’s home language alongside English strengthens the language foundation upon which literacy grows, provides meaningful access to the curriculum, and can foster better teacher-child relationships.³

Despite the advantages of bilingualism and the superiority of high-quality bilingual learning models, our learning systems are overwhelmingly depriving DLLs and ELs of such opportunities.

There is a lack of bilingual learning programs nationwide. In some places where bilingual learning programs do exist, DLLs and ELs are underrepresented; in other places, they are explicitly locked out as a matter of policy.

English immersion or “English-only” programs are commonplace for DLLs and ELs, but they are not effective. In K-12 settings, these models sometimes result in the segregation of students learning English. Research shows DLLs who are first exposed to English in kindergarten and remain in English-dominant instructional environments tend to fall behind their early-proficient and monolingual English-speaking peers on academic skills (as measured in English).⁴

This has contributed to a gap between DLLs’ and ELs’ potential and their outcomes. Beyond a lack of access to appropriate learning approaches, this gap is likely tied to a societal bias in the United States in favor of English monolingualism. Assessments are primarily conducted in English, and while bilingualism is valued for some—often higher income, native English speakers—it is seen as a deficit for DLLs and ELs.⁵ These factors not only compound to disadvantage children, they also give a misguided perception of the capabilities of DLLs and ELs.

For DLLs, bilingual learning is not an optional enrichment, as it is for children who speak English as a first language. **It can make or break their access to a quality education altogether. It is the difference between enrichment and equity.**

Assessment problems cannot be overlooked. In addition to improving access to high-quality bilingual learning models, we need better assessments for DLLs and ELs so we can effectively measure both student progress and program effectiveness. Too often, assessments are conducted in English, which end up assessing a child’s English skills rather than subject matter content. Although the field is lacking assessment tools in a diverse array of languages spoken by children in this country, there

are tools in Spanish—by far the most commonly spoken language by DLLs and ELs in this country—that are not being used enough.

Other obstacles to success are also significant. One problem that limits access to strong bilingual programs is the shortage of bilingual teachers nationally with the appropriate credentials.⁶ **In addition, research finds that teacher bias and differential expectations for DLLs and ELs also impacts the success of young learners. Nationally representative data show that teachers have lower academic expectations for children classified as ELs; this is not the case in bilingual schools.**⁷ Similarly, in countries that place value on speaking multiple languages, the academic differences between monolingual and bilingual students are small or nonexistent.

THE FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY LANDSCAPE

Federal funding for English learners is not anywhere near sufficient. Title III funding under ESSA is designed to support ELs but has been stagnant for years, not even keeping pace with inflation or the increase in the number of ELs in the country.

States and districts play a significant role in EL policy. In 2015, Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act, which shifted much of the responsibility for decision making and accountability related to English learners to the states.

Bilingual learning opportunities are growing, but they are not always growing equitably. A number of cities and states, including Utah, Delaware, North Carolina, Los Angeles, New York City, and Washington, D.C., are trying to expand access to bilingual learning programs, but the extent to which English learners and dual language learners have access has not been analyzed.

Head Start has the most comprehensive standards for DLLs across early learning systems.

Pre-K policies for DLLs vary greatly across states.

Though no state has a comprehensive set of policies or standards to support DLLs, 35 state-funded Pre-K programs have some policies in place specific to DLLs. Only one state, Illinois, explicitly requires bilingual instruction if there are 20 or more DLLs with the same home language enrolled in the same program. An analysis of state Early Learning and Development Standards found that 15 states discuss the learning and developmental needs of DLLs. However, only New Jersey was identified as having a dual language approach; every other state had an English-focused approach.

Notably, at the time of publication of this report, Arizona was the only remaining state with an English-only mandate for ELs in K–12 settings, although key provisions in the law were recently rolled back. A 2020 ballot initiative will determine the fate of the full law. California and Massachusetts repealed their English-only mandates in 2016 and 2017, respectively.

For DLLs, bilingual learning is not an optional enrichment. It can make or break their access to a quality education altogether.



SOLUTIONS BEGIN WITH POLICY CHANGE.

CONGRESS SHOULD:

- Request two Government Accountability Office reports to a) examine Title I and Title III English learner investments and the effectiveness or shortcomings of existing investments; and b) identify the funding levels necessary to promote optimal EL and DLL success.
- Hold hearings on best practices and funding models that optimally support ELs and DLLs.
- Title III funding should be at least doubled to keep pace with inflation and to account for the increase in the number of English learners.
- Use the aforementioned GAO reports and hearings to inform necessary investments—over and above doubling Title III—in reauthorization of Every Student Succeeds Act.
- Align policy with research and prioritize dual language and strengths-based approaches as optimal language instructional education programs and tie prioritization to federal funding. They should phase out ineffective English-only approaches.

FEDERAL AGENCIES SHOULD:

- Provide U.S. Department of Education (ED) guidance and technical assistance to states on Title III expenditures that are effective and research-based for dual language and English learners.
- Publish an annual ED review of Title I and III English learner expenditures.
- Pilot, test, and disseminate lessons learned by ED and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on new strengths-based models to support dual language and English learner participation in bilingual education programs.
- Identify and elevate strategies to support dual language and English learners' entry into and success in gifted and talented programs.
- Invest in developing new assessments to measure the effectiveness of bilingual learning models on children's bilingual, academic, and comprehensive development.
- Invest in child-level assessment tools in at least the top five most commonly spoken languages.
- Require states to report their plans to equitably expand access to dual language programming.
- HHS should provide more technical assistance on the Planned Language Approach, and make a specific effort to ensure that states and child care programs are targeted in this technical assistance. The Office of Head Start should update their monitoring and accountability systems to ensure that DLLs are receiving formal exposure to their home language and English through instruction and other social learning opportunities, in line with Head Start Program Performance standards. Formal exposure requires bilingual staff, and curricula and assessments in the home language, as well as English.

STATES SHOULD:

- Eliminate segregated programs for English learners, including pull-out models.
- Eliminate all “English-only” or “structured English immersion” programs.
- Adopt Head Start dual language learner standards in state-funded Pre-K, incorporate standards into accountability frameworks, and make local Pre-K funding contingent on adherence to these standards.
- Invest in producing the workforce necessary to support dual language and English learners, including strategies that create new nontraditional pipelines; improve existing teacher preparation pathways in higher education to reflect research on dual language learning; and support the existing workforce.
- Revise workforce credentialing and licensing standards to incorporate knowledge and competencies required for dual language instruction, including strategies to promote bilingualism and holistic development for dual language and English learners, appropriate assessment, and family engagement strategies.
- Use Title I and Title III funding to supplement—not supplant—existing state investments to expand bilingual education models.
- Fund new grant programs to expand dual language immersion and other proven models that support comprehensive learning grounded in children’s home language and culture in early childhood settings and Pre-K-12 grades.
- Prioritize dual language and English learners in dual language immersion programs by
 - a. reserving seats for children who speak the program’s non-English language of instruction at home and/or giving preferential weighting in enrollment lotteries,
 - b. using community demographics to prioritize areas of dual language immersion expansion, or
 - c. prioritizing dual language immersion placement for English learners.
- Require all learning programs to assess children in their home language and English using valid and reliable tools that have been tested and normed on dual language and English learners, whenever those tools exist, and administered by trained professionals.

- Require local programs to conduct home language surveys at program entry across all systems, and to include data on enrollment databases.
- Provide sequential high-quality trainings and coaching to the workforce on dual language learning, trauma-informed approaches—particularly related to immigration, and implicit bias and how it influences expectations and behavior specific to dual language learners, among other specific areas.
- Require bilingual teaching staff in schools or programs that receive public funds if at least 20% of enrolled children are dual language or English learners, and encourage such staffing in child care settings through quality rating improvement systems.
- Include dual language learner measures across every level of quality rating improvement system, including the requirement for bilingual staff, assessments and instruction in the home language, dual language learner training for all staff, and the use of bilingual models.

DISTRICTS/LOCAL COMMUNITIES SHOULD:

- Discontinue segregated programs for English learners, including English-only and pull-out English as a second language models.
- School districts and early childhood programs should expand access to dual language immersion and similar models, and prioritize access for dual language learners and English learners.

Read the full report and complete equity policy agenda [here](#).

ENDNOTES

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