Addressing the Needs of California’s Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Education

Overview

Dual Language Learners (DLLs) are children, birth to five, learning two or more languages simultaneously or learning a second language while developing home language.1 This is an important time for DLLs in our state. Together with the research advances, a succession of policies has followed to uplift and build on programs that support multilingual proficiency of students, starting in the earliest years. After almost two decades of Proposition 227’s mandate of English-only instruction, California voters overwhelmingly passed Proposition 58 in 2016, which repealed English-only laws and called on schools to expand bilingual programs. The California English Learner Roadmap enacted an assets-based policy for DLLs/ELs from early childhood through grade 12, and includes a state-wide vision of biliteracy for all students.

Given the large population of DLLs/ELs in the state, and the progress in research and policy for bilingual education, California is uniquely positioned to lead the nation in advancing DLL/EL education policy and practice and create bilingual pathways for all students. However, disparities in academic outcomes indicate that their potential is not being realized. Leadership at the state and local levels is vital to realize a vision of maximizing the full potential of our DLL/EL students, and to ensure that early care and education (ECE) and K–12 policy is effectively designed and aligned based on the assets of California’s racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity. In addition, there are key distinctions between the ECE and K-12 education systems. Effectively addressing the needs of DLL/EL students requires solutions that are tailored to target each system and create better alignment.

This memo begins by providing a data overview of who DLL students are in California, and then provides descriptions of two key issues and related policy recommendations related to ensuring ECE is included and supported in: (1) Proposition 58 implementation, and (2) workforce/professional development. There is great opportunity for gubernatorial and policy leadership on these issues, which are outlined below.

Who are DLL students in California: Data Overview

California is home to the nation’s largest population of children learning English in addition to their home language — dual language learners (DLL) or English learners (EL). In California, there are over 1.3 million ELs enrolled in public schools overall.2 And 60 percent of children ages 5 and under are dual language learners.3 In addition, roughly 72 percent of ELs are in the elementary grades, from

---

kindergarten to grade six. DLLs/ELs are part of the education system in all 58 counties. The state’s DLL/EL students enter the education system with linguistic, cultural, and intellectual assets that contribute to the rich diversity of California.

The DLL/EL population faces barriers to achieving success in school. In California, the poverty rate for school-aged children is 21 percent. The poverty rates for ELs, however, ranges from 74 percent to 85 percent, which is three to four times the rate of the state. Looking specifically at the preschool population, 45 percent of the roughly one million children ages 3–4 years in California reside in low-income families. The vast majority (73 percent) of these children living in poverty make up our DLL population. In addition, DLL students are less likely to attend high quality preschool than their peers, and they tend to enter kindergarten behind, particularly in the areas of language, literacy, and math. This group of children is also at risk of losing competence in their home language when they are exposed to English-only settings during their early years in school, which has been linked to poor long-term academic outcomes.

DLL students are at risk of becoming long-term English Learners without targeted supports and programs that begin in the earliest years. About 30 to 50 percent of DLL students who enter school in kindergarten become LTEL students. While LTELs can converse socially and informally in English, often, their proficiency is at a basic level and they struggle with academic content due to low reading and writing skills. LTELs are not always placed in settings that meet their needs.

---

6 Rose, Sonstelie, and Weston (“Funding Formulas for California’s Schools III: An Analysis of Governor Brown’s Weighted Pupil Funding Formula,” PPIC, 2012) rely on a California Department of Finance estimate of 74 percent living under the federal poverty line and the LAO has reported that 85 percent are economically disadvantaged (LAO, “Analysis of the 2007–2008 Budget Bill: Education,” 2007).
7 Hill, Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Issues and Policy Recommendations

Issue 1: DLL students in ECE most often do not have access to dual language programs. In addition, early learning dual language programs, such as in preschool and transitional kindergarten, are left out of program expansion initiatives.

Ensuring ECE programs are a part of the expansion of dual language programs is critical to addressing and preventing opportunity gaps. ECE programs prepare our children for success in the K–12 system and help prevent the opportunity gap from forming. A vast body of research shows that children who attend high-quality preschool programs perform better on standardized tests in reading and math; are less likely to be placed in special education or held back a grade; and are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college. These outcomes can lead to substantial cost savings for school districts. While early learning addresses the educational opportunity gaps present prior to school entrance for all students, DLLs may benefit more from high-quality ECE programs relative to their monolingual peers, as they begin with lower levels of academic English comprehension.

Research shows tremendous benefits to learning multiple languages, and the brain is most receptive to language learning in the earliest years of life. Research over the past two decades has provided tremendous insight into the brain, the language development process of young children, and the critical period of the first five years of life. Studies show that the brain is most receptive to language learning in the earliest years of life, children are not confused by learning multiple languages, rather, the brain is wired to learn any language in the world and is able to process multiple languages. And for young DLLs, home language is central to developing proficiency in English and other languages, as well as cognitive and socio-emotional development, evolving sense of self, and overall academic achievement. Furthermore, studies show that as bilingual children and adults switch between two languages, their brains are very active and flexible. This helps them learn more easily, focus, and strengthens their memory, problem solving, and thinking skills, which are all important factors for college and career success.

Issue 1 Policy Recommendations

The State’s implementation of Proposition 58 should increase access to bilingual and dual immersion programs beginning in early childhood education. Dual language learners who receive

15 V.P. Collier and W. P. Thomas, Educating English Learners for a Transformed World (Albuquerque, NM: Fuente Press, 2009). In particular, studies examining dual immersion models in preschool programs indicate that DLL children in such programs do as well or better on English language skills and significantly better on home language skills, than their peers in English-only settings. See V. Vitello, J. Downer, and A. Williford, “Preschool Classroom Experiences of Dual Language Learners: Summary Findings from Publicly Funded Programs in 11 States,” in Dual Language Learners in the Early Childhood Classroom, ed. C. Howes, J. Downer, and R. Pianta (Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing, 2011), pp. 45-68.


19 Center for the Study of Child Care Employment and California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, “California Early Care and Education Workforce Study: Licensed Child Care Centers and Family Care Providers, Los Angeles County” (Berkeley, CA: University of California at Berkeley, 2006).


native language instruction in Early Learning programs consistently outperform children who attend English-only programs on academic achievement measures as they get older.\(^{22}\) Children learning English advance more quickly in both English and their native language when teachers use both languages in Early Learning settings.\(^{23}\) They also do better in reading and math than their DLL peers who receive less native language support.\(^{24}\) Conversely, research shows that PreK settings that do not support home language maintenance and development can have a negative impact on DLLs.\(^{25}\) The state should expand bilingual programs for all young children in publicly funded Early Learning settings.

**School districts offering dual immersion and bilingual programs at the K-12 level should expand these programs into the early learning years.** Many school districts in California offer dual language immersion and bilingual programs at the K-12 level but fail to begin the programs in the Early Learning years, missing an important language acquisition window. Building on the research highlighting the importance of early language development, education leaders should build articulated preschool, Expanded TK, and TK in new and existing K–12 dual language programs.

**English-only instruction is not recommended for young DLLs.**\(^{26}\) Research shows that there are developmental risks related to home language loss, which can have negative long-term consequences for a child’s academic, social, and emotional development, and family connection. **There are two language instructional approaches recommended for DLL students.** (1) Dual Language Approach: Instruction with varying proportions in the home language and English to support simultaneous development of both languages and promote bilingualism and biliteracy (e.g. 50 percent Mandarin and 50 percent English; 90 percent Spanish and 10 percent English, etc.). (2) English with Home Language Support: English is the main language of instruction with strategies to support DLLs’ home languages while they are learning English.

**Issue 2: The Early Learning Workforce is not adequately prepared to serve the growing population of DLLs and their families, nor are they able to support all children in becoming bilingual and biliterate.**

California’s institutions of higher education, the state’s primary source of early educator preparation, are not currently preparing the early care and education (ECE) workforce to meet the needs of the state’s linguistically and culturally diverse population of young children.\(^{27}\) Fewer higher education institutions in California include DLL–specific courses as part of their early childhood course offerings. The Child Development Permit does not mandate any DLL–specific coursework for Early Learning teachers. In addition, only a few higher education institutions support the needs of students who


\(^{23}\) V. P. Collier and W. P. Thomas, Educating English Learners for a Transformed World (Albuquerque, NM: Fuente Press, 2009). In particular, studies examining dual immersion models in preschool programs indicate that DLL children in such programs do as well or better on English language skills and significantly better on home language skills, than their peers in English-only settings. See V. Vitello, J. Downer, and A. Williford, “Preschool Classroom Experiences of Dual Language Learners: Summary Findings from Publicly Funded Programs in 11 States,” in Dual Language Learners in the Early Childhood Classroom, ed. C. Howes, J. Downer, and R. Pianta (Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing, 2011), pp. 45-68.


are non–English speakers by offering courses in languages other than English. This limits the opportunities for individuals who could support children’s home language in early childhood classrooms. While the Child Development Permit does not require any competencies, training, or coursework for supporting DLLs, teaching in elementary school and beyond requires that teachers have some special training in how to teach bilingual students. As a result, the knowledge gap is striking between teachers who work in Early Learning settings and those who work in the TK-12 system. The two must be better aligned.

**Most Early Learning teachers have not received DLL–specific professional development, and research shows that without specific training, teachers are not adequately prepared to teach DLL children.** Funding is needed for teachers to learn DLL–specific best practices by participating in off-site professional development and onsite coaching and training. The 2018 state budget included a $5 million allocation—using federal Child Care Development Fund quality dollars—for Early Learning teachers and caregivers to participate in DLL–specific professional development. Although an important first step, this one-time allocation of funds is insufficient to meet the needs in the state.

**Issue 2 Policy Recommendations**

**Increase DLL–Specific Higher Education Coursework in Early Educator Programs.** In order to better prepare the incoming Early Learning workforce to meet the needs of DLLs and their families, the state should create incentives for colleges and universities to include research-based DLL course content in the early childhood curriculum. This coursework should include a strong emphasis on first- and second-language acquisition, linguistically and culturally relevant child assessment practices, and other best practices to support DLLs. In addition, the new California Online Community College should include DLL–specific ECE coursework as a flexible and affordable option for the workforce.

**Add DLL competencies around the importance of supporting home language development, diversity, culture, and equity to California’s Early Learning Workforce Qualification Requirements.** The Child Development Permit is currently under review. Any revisions must include an explicit focus on competencies for dual language teaching and learning, including the importance of supporting home language development, diversity, culture, and equity. This will signal to the early childhood field that DLL knowledge and practice are core components of Early Learning. All ECE teachers and administrators should have a strong understanding of DLL research and best practices and, as they advance in their careers, they should have increasing levels of DLL knowledge.

**Strengthen the Capacity of the Early Learning Workforce to Support DLLs.** We recommend an ongoing and dedicated state funding stream to develop an effective DLL professional development system for the Early Learning Workforce. The system should be based on the latest research and embedded in Early Learning programs, with ongoing coaching and additional supports for Early Learning teachers. This funding stream should be connected to the TK–12 system so all teachers have the opportunity to benefit from DLL–specific training. Professional development should be focused on early childhood developmental stages, appropriate practices, and first- and second-language acquisition.

---

28 Center for the Study of Child Care Employment and California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, “California Early Care and Education Workforce Study: Licensed Child Care Centers and Family Care Providers, Los Angeles County” (Berkeley, CA: University of California at Berkeley, 2006).