

# *Bilingual Education and America's Future: Evidence and Pathways*

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## **Executive Summary**

As the U.S. looks towards a twenty-five-year vision for education and social policy, a critical goal is strengthening educational services and supports for students classified as English learners (EL). EL-classified students are a protected class of students building their bi- or multilingualism while receiving services to support their access to the general curriculum and English language development. EL-classified students bring expansive assets to their educational experiences yet enroll in schools that often do not provide full, equitable access to core content, nor the opportunity to develop bilingualism and biliteracy. Given strong evidence on the benefits of bilingual education, as well as a commitment to education policymaking that addresses barriers to opportunity experienced by EL-classified students and values students' assets, this paper makes the case that *now* is the opportune moment to be laying the policy foundation towards bilingual education as the standard service for EL-classified students, rather than the exception.

The call for more expansive access to bilingual education is grounded in a comprehensive synthesis of evidence on the benefits of bilingual education, bilingualism, and biliteracy for students and the larger social fabric. Many studies find that access to bilingual education programs has a medium to large positive impact on students' academic achievement, while also supporting a higher likelihood of being reclassified out of EL status to fluent English proficient. Importantly, the benefits of bilingual education and bilingualism go beyond academic and English language outcomes, with benefits for students' home language development, cognitive functioning, social-emotional and sociocultural outcomes, and students' future employment and earnings.

Our argument for bilingual education as the standard service for EL-classified students is also built on a recognition that the current policy and educational climate can support more

expansive access to bilingual education. States are reversing restrictive language policies towards policies that allow and support bilingual education, while communities, districts, and schools across the country are engaging in grassroots bilingual program development and expansion. As interest in bilingual education across audiences grows, the resources and knowledge available to support implementation has grown in parallel. There is a heightened awareness that bilingual programs can be compromised if they are implemented in ways that do not center the experiences of linguistically diverse and immigrant families, with critical guidance for implementing programs that do. There are also more expansive options for curricula, professional learning, and assessments that support bilingual, biliterate instruction. The policy agenda of today can build from this momentum, looking towards a future where bilingual education is the standard service for EL-classified students, when feasible.

In recognition of the challenges that stand between the current landscape of services for EL-classified students and more expansive bilingual education services, this piece also outlines incremental federal, state, and local policy actions to build towards bilingual education as the standard for EL-classified students, as well as critical considerations to support the policy goal. The federal government has the opportunity to invest in supporting and sustaining a multilingual educator workforce, as well as provide guidance on designing, implementing, and sustaining high-quality bilingual education programs focused on fully developing bilingualism and biliteracy while also providing resources to do so. State governments can also play a critical role in supporting multilingual educators, as well as supporting local education agencies in building strong, locally responsive bilingual education programs. Local education agencies can partner with other agencies to support multilingual educators on their pathway to teaching, as well as invest in developing programs that center linguistically diverse students and families in their community. Throughout, current policy examples and opportunities for replication, adaptation, and expansion are described.

We also outline key considerations for the implementation of bilingual education as the standard service for EL-classified students, recognizing that such a policy will come with complex negotiations between what can be, and what is. We outline how the policy can balance local flexibility to adapt programs to community assets with strong enough policy parameters to ensure students are provided with high-quality programs, while also recognizing that full bilingual, biliterate programs may not be feasible in all contexts. We outline challenges in sustaining bilingual programs through secondary school and ensuring sufficient resources are provided to sustain all bilingual programs. We raise critical issues around segregation of students, accountability, and a U.S. climate in which issues of language and immigration are heavily charged. For all considerations, we offer evidence, policy examples, and guideposts for navigating the implementation of more expansive bilingual education with these considerations in mind.

As EL-classified students continue to experience barriers to opportunity, the need to improve services and supports for EL-classified students becomes increasingly urgent. Despite a history characterized by swings towards and away from more expansive bilingual education, a federal policy that positions bilingual education as the standard service for EL-classified students when possible is a viable goal as we look twenty-five years into the future—if federal, state, and local policy begin taking steps towards this goal in the immediate.