

Meeting its Potential: A Call and Guide for Universal Access to Bilingual Education in California¹

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Executive Summary

California’s cultural and linguistic diversity are remarkable assets for the state. In particular, bilingualism is linked not only to economic growth, but also to improved health, social empathy, educational attainment, community cohesion, and civic engagement. Harnessing this potential depends upon the educational success of California’s more than one million students classified in K-12 schools as English learners (ELs). Abundant evidence illuminates not only the potential of this talented group of students, but also the danger of them being relegated to a second-class status in school. After nearly twenty years of English-only education, California has made significant strides in growing bilingual education programs, programs such as dual language immersion, maintenance bilingual, and heritage language revitalization, and in doing so has recognized bilingual education’s potential to improve academic and post-schooling outcomes for all students. State initiatives including Global California 2030 and the EL Roadmap both emphasize the importance of bilingual education in preparing California's diverse student population for a globalized and multilingual future.

However, the state's history with bilingual education has been complex, marked by periods of both progress and setbacks—and much remains to be done to deliver on these ambitious bilingual promises. This report explores the past and present of bilingual education in California, and

¹ Portions of this report were previously published in two different publications: (1) Williams, C. P., & Zabala, J. (2023). Moving from vision to reality: Establishing California as a national bilingual education and dual language immersion leader. The Century Foundation. (2) Porter, L., Vazquez Cano, M., & Umansky, I. (2023). Bilingual education and America's future: evidence and pathways. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles.

then outlines a series of recommendations for making bilingual education the universal standard of service in the state’s K–12 schools and California a national leader in bilingual education and multilingualism.

We organize our recommendations around three areas for growth:

- **Expand bilingual instruction in the state**, including creating high quality programs in districts across the state that currently do not have them, and supporting the growth and expansion of programs that already exist;
- **Invest in efforts to grow the state’s bilingual teacher pipelines** in both the long and short term through revitalizing the state’s bilingual teacher credentialing programs and creating and strengthening alternative pathways into the profession through grow-your-own and other programs; and
- **Prioritize access, quality, and relevance for the state’s ELs**, while also expanding access for other multilingual students and English-only speakers.

Bilingual education has wide-ranging benefits, both for individual students and society as a whole. Research consistently shows that the development of students’ bilingualism enhances cognitive skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity. Over time, bilingual students do as well or better than monolingual peers on standardized tests and gain access to more expansive post-secondary opportunities. Investing in bilingual education is therefore not only a social justice issue but also an economic, social, and political imperative for California.

While California has made strides in removing holdover policy obstacles from its recent English-only epoch, it has not made sufficient investments to actively regrow its bilingual education system. California enrolls a smaller percentage of its EL students in bilingual education than the U.S. as a whole. Texas, perhaps the only state whose linguistic diversity compares to California’s, enrolls

more than twice as many ELs in its bilingual programs. California must do more to expand bilingual learning opportunities for its ELs and other students at all levels of the preK-12 system, including bilingual preschools as well as middle and high schools.

This new bilingual push needs a workforce requirement. California’s many years running English-only public schools didn’t just strip hundreds of thousands of students of their emerging biliteracy: they also strangled most of the state’s bilingual teacher education programs. During the English-only period, demand for bilingual teachers dropped and institutions of higher education stopped training them. As such, when the state’s voters ended its English-only mandate in 2016, most districts didn’t—and still don’t—have enough available credentialed bilingual teachers to grow bilingual education in their communities. California must invest more in training a teaching workforce that meets its students’ needs.

As the state invests in expanding bilingual education programs—and more robust bilingual teacher education programs—it must prioritize EL-classified students’ access. While all students benefit from enrolling in bilingual schools, research is clear that EL-classified students garner unique benefits. What’s more, EL students outside of bilingual programs face numerous equity barriers to rigorous and relevant high-quality schooling. That’s why inadequate access to bilingual education leaves EL-classified students underserved with their core rights too often unmet and their multilingual assets overlooked. There are various ways to achieve this among them ensuring new programs go into communities with high numbers of ELs, weighting lotteries to preference EL-classified students, and reserving seats for native speakers of programs’ non-English partner languages.

Recommendation #1: Expand multilingual instruction in the state through the balanced use of requirements and supports.

- Pass legislation requiring districts to provide K-5 bilingual education if the district has at least 20 students in a given grade level that speak the same home language. This could be done through updated local control accountability plans as a strategy for closing academic gaps between ELs and non-ELs.
- Adopt a state funding formula that provides additional per pupil funding for every student enrolled in a bilingual program regardless of grade or language status.
- Publish annual updates on progress towards the state’s Global California 2030 goals, including
 - a list of bilingual programs with information on program model, grades served, and languages of instruction and
 - analysis of the demographics and EL status of students attending bilingual programs at the state and local level.
- Invest in greater CDE capacity for supporting and monitoring California’s bilingual education expansion efforts.

Recommendation #2: Invest short- and long-term resources in efforts to grow the state’s bilingual teacher pipelines.

- Create a task force including state leaders, university teacher education and credentialing program directors, and teacher representatives to create a blueprint for the expansion of bilingual teacher education and credentialing programs.
- Support the development of bilingual teacher education and credentialing programs through a combination of direct funding, scholarship or loan forgiveness programs, and grants for such programs.
- Consider accreditation or accountability standards for state bilingual teacher education and credentialing programs.

- Grow the Bilingual Teacher Professional Development Program by an order of magnitude, providing at least \$200 million in funding for the next round of grants.
- Commit at least half of future Bilingual Teacher Professional Development Program grants towards alternative teacher credentialing pathways, such as apprenticeships, residencies, and/or “grow-your-own” models.
- Prioritize the training of bilingual teachers in all subsequent rounds of California’s Teacher Residency Grant Program, Golden State Pathways Program, and Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program.
- Launch a statewide program to provide bilingual teacher candidates with stipend support during their student teaching experience.
- Grant additional credential flexibility and provide substantial resources for Seal of Biliteracy recipients interested in pursuing bilingual teaching roles in TK or the broader TK–12 education system.
- Provide matching funds for districts that implement research-based levers to retain bilingual teachers

Recommendation #3: Prioritize access to bilingual education for the state’s 1.1 million ELs, who gain unique linguistic and academic benefits from these programs.

- Develop state guidance for districts to design and develop bilingual programs focusing on ensuring:
 - Prioritized access to EL-classified students with regard to preferential placement in available bilingual program seats
 - Equitable access to educational opportunities within programs
 - Culturally-relevant, community-informed, asset-based instruction and curriculum within programs

- Minimized linguistic isolation for ELs either through dual language models or other means of integrating students
- High quality programs at the elementary, middle, and high school levels