



Promoting Success for Dual Language Learners The Essential Role of Early Childhood Education Programs

Early childhood education programs in California have a crucial role to play in preparing dual language learners to enter kindergarten with the skills they need to succeed in school and beyond.

The reason is simple: there are more dual language learners under the age of 5 in early childhood education programs in California than anywhere else in the country. This gives these programs—from infant care to preschool—an outsized opportunity to shape the futures of these children, with social and economic implications for the future of the state and the nation as well.

The issue is attracting increasing national attention. At a recent convening, the [White House](#) issued a new [federal policy statement](#) on the issue, along with a [Dual Language Learner Toolkit](#). [First 5 California](#) announced at the same time that it is developing a \$16 million pilot project to identify strategies to support young children who are dual language learners.

In recent years, California has taken the lead nationally in promoting a variety of strategies for how early learning programs can more effectively serve these children. But the state is now at a pivotal moment in the implementation of a range of reforms that are putting additional pressure on educators to ensure that dual language learners succeed and on state leaders to provide the necessary resources.

Most of the focus is on dual language learners and preschool, which primarily serves 3- and 4-year-olds. But attention also needs to be placed on the role of child care providers serving infants and toddlers, an equally important age for language development.

As a recent [PACE report](#) noted, it “is a moment of immense opportunity to examine and shape English learner policy and practice in the state.”

For that reason, it is essential to revisit strategies—and devise new ones—to strengthen the role of early education programs in promoting the greater success of dual language learners. We will identify key challenges facing these programs, and will describe some strategies to tackle them.

Authors

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Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the **Heising-Simons Foundation** for underwriting this report.

CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES: Early learners and early childhood education programs

Early childhood education programs face multiple challenges in serving dual language learners.

CHALLENGE #1: *Balancing home language support and promoting English proficiency*

The issue of what language is used to teach children “has been the most intensely debated aspect of the education of dual language learners,” according to researchers at the Migration Policy Institute.

At the same time, early childhood education programs have the advantage of not being burdened by the provisions of Proposition 227, the 1998 voter initiative that effectively outlawed bilingual education in California’s K-12 schools.

Besides the obvious benefits of being fluent in more than one language in an increasingly global economy, learning two languages as a young child offers other advantages.

Research indicates that children who speak only one language rely primarily on the left side of the brain, while dual language learners use both sides when processing language.



It is incumbent on all early childhood providers to learn strategies that both systematically expose dual language learners to English — effective English language development approaches — while also intentionally supporting their home language.

— LINDA ESPINOSA, UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI

A note on terminology

The terminology used to describe children becoming proficient in English is in flux. In this brief, we have chosen the following terms:

Dual language learners: Refers to children below the age of 5 whose native language is a language other than English, but who are also in the process of becoming proficient in English.

English learners: A term that is synonymous with dual language learners, but is now more commonly used to describe children in kindergarten through 12th grade.

Emergent bilingual children: A newer term that is sometimes used to emphasize that children who are simultaneously learning both their first language and English have the potential to be bilingual—a plus in today’s global economy.

Infant and toddler care: Generally includes children from birth through 2 years old.

Preschool programs: Typically serve 3- and 4-year olds.

Early childhood education programs: Generally refers to education programs for children from birth to age 5 before they begin kindergarten.

This results in improved cognitive functioning in several areas such as the ability to focus, reason and make sound decisions. These effects are more pronounced as experience in both languages increases.¹

It is also well established that fluency in a child’s home language makes it easier for young children to learn a second language. Research shows that oral proficiency in one language, such as Spanish, is a good predictor of improved academic performance in Spanish and English, and that becoming proficient in a child’s home language will help him or her become proficient in English as well.²

As the [Head Start manual](#) on “Multicultural Principles” states: “The continued development of the child’s home language—with an explicit emphasis upon the development of strong oral language skills—is a direct source of support for the child’s acquisition of English, and particularly for successful reading in English later on.”³

However, research shows that if a child starts kindergarten with no English language skills, he or she is unlikely to catch up academically.⁴ Other studies suggest that children who are not proficient in English are also unlikely to catch up with their peers.⁵

Therefore, early educators have to balance encouraging children to speak in their native language, while still moving them toward English proficiency.



Early education programs are “in a unique position to help dual language learner families use their cultural and linguistic resources in ways that help the dual language learner’s language and development.”

— CALIFORNIA’S BEST PRACTICES FOR YOUNG DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS, GOVERNOR’S STATE ADVISORY COUNCIL ON EARLY LEARNING AND CARE

New reforms focus attention—and resources—on English learners

Several reforms are in place in California’s K-12 schools that place a priority on dual language learners. Even kindergarten has become more academically oriented, putting pressure on early education programs to send students better prepared to meet the demands of the K-12 system.

- The Local Control Funding Formula identifies English learners as one of three categories of high-needs children in California deserving extra state support. Districts receive additional funds for every English learner they enroll, and some of those funds can be spent on early learning programs.
- The Common Core standards in English and math raise the bar for English learners by putting a greater emphasis on language and group conversations, including in math. Unless English learners become more English proficient, they could fall even further behind.
- The federal 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act raises the profile of English learners as a subgroup that schools will be held accountable for serving effectively.

CHALLENGE #2: *Recruiting a multilingual teaching force*

About half of California’s early childhood workers—including those in private homes and family-based child care settings, and those in child care centers and preschools—speak only English.

The good news is that the other half speak more than one language, including about 37 percent who speak some Spanish.

Yet the number of early education workers who speak other languages hasn’t kept pace with the large number of English learner children in early education programs.

“There is a mismatch between the growing diversity of languages spoken by immigrant children and families and the languages typically spoken by the early childhood education centers’ workforce,” according to a 2015 Migration Policy Institute [report](#).⁶

Compounding the problem is that many early childhood workers who do speak languages other than English are working with younger children in home and child care center jobs, rather than serving as preschool teachers or directors with older children. That means as children approach school age, they are less likely to benefit from preschool staff who can communicate with them—or their families—in their home languages.⁷

Many community colleges, such as Las Positas Community College in Livermore and Santa Rose Junior College, offer two to four core early childhood development courses with bilingual instruction in English and a second language, such as Spanish or Mandarin. The classes, aimed at students whose first language is not English, are being offered to increase the number of bilingual early education teachers and assistant teachers.

If more bilingual courses were available, early childhood education workers whose first language is not English would be able to simultaneously improve their skills through English as a Second Language courses and gain their teaching credentials—thus speeding up the process of getting bilingual teachers and assistant teachers into the classroom.

At Centro Vida, a pioneering bilingual preschool in Berkeley founded in 1975, Spanish-speaking staff—including cooks and custodians who have a chance to move into teaching positions—are encouraged to take these classes on evenings and weekends. Their tuition costs are covered by [First 5 CARES Plus](#).



Teachers of dual language learners “may support the home language at the same time as the school language through family involvement, bilingual materials, and activities and interactions in the home language with teachers, staff and peers who speak that language.”

— CALIFORNIA PRESCHOOL PROGRAM GUIDELINES,
PAPER 1 (NEUROSCIENCE RESEARCH), CALIFORNIA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The investment has paid off, said Beatriz Leyva-Cutler, the center’s director who is also president of Berkeley Unified School District’s Board of Education. “We have promoted cooks and custodians to be teachers,” she said. “It is a balancing act, but in the end they end up with an associate degree and even a bachelor’s degree.”

But another challenge is that colleges have difficulty finding faculty who are competent to teach the course content in both English and another language, said Yolanda Garcia, dean of Child Development & Teacher Education at Santa Rosa Junior College, which offers two Spanish/English bilingual classes in early childhood development.

“We need a cadre of (bilingual) instructors competent in early education and at the skill level needed to offer the courses,” she said.

CHALLENGE #3: Bolstering preparation of teachers and staff

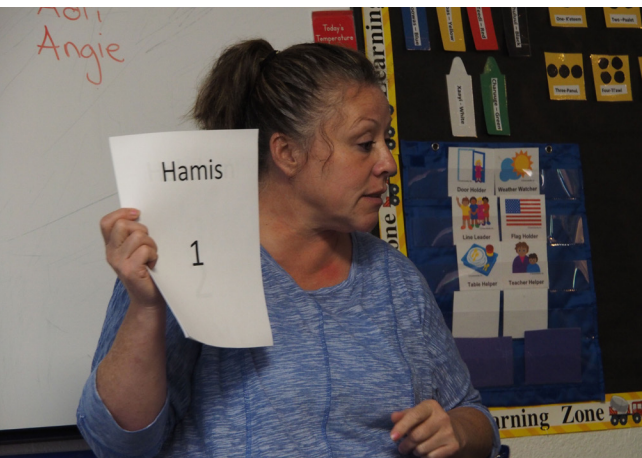
The shortage of bilingual staff makes the preparation and training they receive even more crucial—both before they begin working with children and the professional learning they engage in when they are in the workforce.

California’s new [Preschool Program Guidelines](#) lay out an approach that both systematically exposes dual language learners to English while intentionally supporting their home language abilities.⁸ But these guidelines are not always consistently followed or even well known on the large and diverse early education program landscape.

This makes providing ongoing professional development that emphasizes best strategies for dual language learners a key challenge. Professional development also needs to include how to provide linguistically and culturally appropriate assessments of children. These assessments need to be administered at regular intervals to measure the progress of a child toward meeting cognitive, emotional and other developmental goals.

Staff also need to be able to distinguish between genuine language delays and normal phases of dual language development. For example, some children may be placed in speech therapy when they are simply going through the typical “observational and listening phase” of learning a second language.

But training in best strategies and appropriate assessments does not appear to be happening on a wide scale in California.



Delivering the promise of high-quality early learning opportunities will also require identifying and mobilizing a sustainable, dedicated source of public funding to upgrade the compensation of those who care for and educate California’s young children.”

— “TEACHING THE TEACHERS OF OUR YOUNGEST CHILDREN,”
UC BERKELEY CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF CHILD CARE EMPLOYMENT

An October 2015 report by the UC Berkeley-based Center for the Study of Child Care Employment pointed to the inadequate training provided by the vast array of higher education programs that offer early childhood instruction and degrees. Faculty members in those programs often don't have the expertise they need to effectively teach early childhood educators, according to the report, titled "[Teaching the Teachers of Our Youngest Children.](#)"⁹

The report noted that only 20 percent of the faculty in those programs speak a language other than English.

For these and other reasons, the report called for "a major overhaul of California's current system for certifying teachers, administrators and other practitioners."

There has been some progress, however. During the past decade, early childhood teacher preparation programs in the two- and four-year colleges have expanded their coursework that is focused on dual language learners, according to the "Teaching the Teachers" report. It also noted that "resources needed to support students for whom English is a second language has increased for bachelor's degree programs over time."

Embedding how to support dual language learners in core courses is recommended in the state's guidelines for teaching early childhood education at community colleges, titled [California Early Childhood Educator Competencies.](#)¹⁰

Although most courses include a lecture or some information on teaching dual language learners, community colleges typically do not offer classes that focus exclusively on how to support students whose home language is not English. Occasional workshops are available through the [California Preschool Instructional Network](#), or CPIN, on how to teach dual language learners.

But these offerings don't come close to meeting the need.

CHALLENGE #4: *Engaging families*

Involving families is crucial to helping young children prepare academically for preschool, kindergarten and beyond.

But engaging families can be challenging, particularly for programs serving dual language learners, according to a [recent report](#) by harder+company and the LA Partnership for Early Childhood Investment.¹¹

"As newcomers to a region, immigrants often face isolation and lack connections to resources and supports in their communities," the report said. "Lack of family participation in programs is often not due to lack of interest, but rather a lack of accommodation of parent schedules."



"High impact family engagement is a shared responsibility among providers, caregivers and families in which organizations and institutions commit to working with families in meaningful and culturally respectful ways."

—"FAMILY AT THE CENTER," HARDER+COMPANY AND LA PARTNERSHIP FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD INVESTMENT

Young children of immigrants make up 47 percent of children ages 0 to 5 in California, with Hispanic immigrants representing the greatest proportion. Los Angeles County has the highest concentration of dual language learners in the state.

In Los Angeles, family engagement practices “do not adequately support and engage families as partners,” the report states. “Social connections, respecting and being responsive to cultural and linguistic assets, and meeting families where they are comprise the critical principles for authentic family engagement.”

A key part of engaging parents and family members in early childhood education programs is to encourage them to contribute to their children’s educational growth at home—and to use their native language to do so.

As the report pointed out, “strengthening dual language learner family engagement in preschool may be especially important, since the early years of development set the foundation for future learning, and since families who are engaged early on with schools are more likely to maintain engagement across future educational settings.”

Some notable programs focus on family involvement, including [Abriendo Puertas](#) and [Families in Schools](#) in Los Angeles and the [Latino Family Literacy Project](#) in South Pasadena. But they serve only a fraction of children who could benefit from them in the state.

CHALLENGE #5: *Coping with California’s language diversity*

Spanish is by far the dominant language of dual language learners in the state. But there are neighborhoods and regions of the state where other languages predominate.

A major challenge facing California is how to serve children effectively in a setting where they speak a variety of languages.

As Head Start’s Multicultural Principles frankly acknowledges: “It is clear that not all programs are able to hire staff fluent in all the different languages that children and families speak.”

Head Start tries to employ one person who can speak the language of every child enrolled in a Head Start Center, but that is typically an insurmountable task, said Keesha Woods, director of the Los Angeles County Office of Education’s Head Start- State Preschool Division. “There are always gaps,” she said.

Another major challenge is that students in any particular classroom may have widely different levels of proficiency in both English and in their home language, so that whatever support or instruction is provided must take into account these differences.

CHALLENGE #6: *Sustaining gains during key early education transitions*

A major challenge is to ensure that the gains are sustained when children make transitions from infant/toddler care to preschool, and from preschool to kindergarten.

But for a range of reasons, there is often little connection—or to use the term favored by educators “articulation”—between these programs.

The goal should be to “promote consistency in program curricula and expectations throughout a child’s movement from infant and toddler care to preschool and into the K-12 school system, recognizing a child’s expected developmental progress,” according to a [guide](#) prepared by the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities.¹²

As the California Department of Education’s [Preschool English Learners Resource Guide](#) states: “Knowing what comes next is essential for teachers, parents and administrators as they work to help young preschool dual language learners make a successful transition to school.”¹³

This is especially the case when children go from private preschools to kindergarten in a public school. The task is immeasurably more manageable when a preschool program is based at the school where the child will attend kindergarten. But even then, there are challenges.

Ideally, in the spring of a child’s last year of preschool, the staff at the preschool would meet with the kindergarten teacher the child will have in the fall. But typically, it is difficult to know which classroom teacher a child will be assigned to, particularly in schools where there is high staff turnover. That can make preparing children—and their families—for the transition doubly challenging.



CHALLENGE #7: *Increasing access and affordability*

The impact of early education programs is limited by the fact that many dual language learners aren’t enrolled in them.

Nearly 170,000 3- and 4-year olds in California who are eligible for publicly funded preschool based on their family incomes are not enrolled because of a shortage of slots, according to a [2016 report](#) by the American Institutes for Research.¹⁴ The shortage is far greater for infants and toddlers. An earlier Public Policy Institute of California [report](#) suggests that the shortage is far greater for infants and toddlers, with as few as 7 percent of these younger children receiving state subsidies.¹⁵

The evidence also suggests that dual language learners enroll in these programs at a lower rate than the general population. Without extensive outreach in their language, parents may be unaware of the programs available to them. And although the majority of Hispanic immigrant mothers work, they are more likely to stay home with their children and believe that is best for their kids, according to a [report](#) from the Pew Research Center. Some 44 percent of foreign-born Hispanic mothers stayed home in 2012 compared with 29 percent of mothers overall.¹⁶

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Addressing the challenges described in this brief will require multipronged strategies. The following are some of the strategies that can contribute to early childhood programs being more effective in serving dual language learners.

At a local level

Expand professional development opportunities for staff of early childhood education programs, taking advantage of existing models such as workshops developed by [First 5 CARES Plus](#), the [California Preschool Instructional Network \(CPIN\)](#) and [Guided Language Acquisition and Development \(GLAD\)](#).

Provide professional development specifically targeted at staff whose first language is not English. One model is [Project Vistas](#) at East Los Angeles College, which provides professional development to family child care providers.

Promote professional learning that enhances teachers' awareness of their own belief systems, promotes their understanding of the developmental sequence of second-language learning, and helps them become knowledgeable about cultural differences that affect learning at home and in the center.

The comprehensive [Sobrato Early Academic Language, or SEAL, program](#) emphasizes vocabulary, talking and role-playing among students, while their teachers undergo extensive training and parents are encouraged to get involved.

Community colleges could also make additional efforts to hire bilingual early childhood development faculty to expand the number of courses offered in other languages for students seeking their early education credentials. To accomplish this may require finding additional funds from the state, foundations or the business sector.

Strengthen family engagement programs so that children's family and caregivers are involved in meaningful ways.

Strategies from [Families in Schools](#) and researcher [Patton O. Tabors](#)¹⁷ include:

- Creating a climate that is open and responsive to parents' concerns.
- Providing translators and translations of printed materials, and offering child care and transportation for meetings and events.
- Allowing registration and orientation for enrollment to be completed online or by telephone and during either day or evening hours.
- Considering different family needs and preferences when scheduling meetings and school events—offering child care, transportation and refreshments for participating families.
- Encouraging parents to participate in the program by sharing something they like to do—such as quilting, cooking or gardening—and talking about these activities in their own languages.
- Having teachers modeling ways for parents to promote learning at home, through demonstrations at parent nights or through the use of videos.

Build on existing models and experience regarding family engagement. Models could include those developed by organizations such as [Families In Schools](#), [Abriendo Puertas](#) and [GLAD](#).

Expand home visiting programs that support dual language acquisition to include stressing to caregivers the importance of singing, talking and reading to their infants in their own language.

Encourage community organizations in areas with substantial populations of immigrant families to promote dual language activities to complement what early education programs are doing. For example, libraries could offer bilingual story times.

Encourage children, with the support of their parents, to use their home language while they are improving their proficiency in English. Emphasize that communication and instruction in a child's home language is an asset, rather than a deterrent to their future success. To help children develop language skills, teachers can read from books in a child's home language or create books in that language by putting together photos or illustrations with words to describe those pictures in the child's language. Teachers can also point out connections between words in English and a child's language.

Make additional efforts to recruit parent and community members fluent in other languages. These adults could work as teacher assistants or as volunteers to contribute to various aspects of a program's activities.



Implement strategies to create a smooth transition for children and their parents from infant and toddler care to preschool, and later from preschool to kindergarten.

- Whenever possible, pre-kindergarten children should meet their preschool or kindergarten teachers and visit the preschools or kindergarten programs they will be attending ahead of time.
- Even more important is helping non-English-speaking parents understand what is expected of their children in preschool and kindergarten, and how they can support their children.
- Develop opportunities for joint training of early childhood and elementary school teachers.

One useful resource is “[Family Engagement in Transitions: Transition to Kindergarten](#)” by the National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement in the Department of Health and Human Services.¹⁸

At a regional and state level

Distribute existing dual language learner guidelines for use by early education staff. Review California’s existing [Infant/Toddler Learning & Development Foundations](#)¹⁹ and [Preschool Learning Foundations](#)²⁰ and the state’s [Best Practices for Young Dual Language Learners](#)²¹ and summarize them so they can be effectively used by child care centers and preschools.

Do more aggressive outreach to ensure that non-English-proficient families are aware of their eligibility for early child care education programs. One example is [Help Me Grow](#), a program piloted in Orange County in 2005, which reaches out to physicians and community organizations to identify families with children 8 years old and under who are deemed at-risk. Help Me Grow has centralized information and referral centers that link families with programs and services and help identify gaps in service.

Increase child care and preschool slots and subsidies for dual language learners. During the past two years, the California Legislature has approved additional funds to increase available child care and preschool slots for low-income families, but there are still not enough openings. Early education advocates believe that the Legislature should provide dedicated funding to improve access for dual language learners. Such funding would have a ripple effect on students’ success far beyond their preschool years.

Build on recent progress in higher education preparation programs in focusing on the needs of dual language learners, using recommendations of UC Berkeley’s “[Teaching the Teachers](#)” report. Among its recommendations is reducing reliance on part-time faculty and increasing support for full-time faculty so they can spend more time with early education students.



Mount a public education campaign aimed at policymakers that focuses on raising the compensation of early childhood education workers and the importance of recruiting bilingual staff. The low wages received by these workers currently operate as a disincentive for them to seek out better preparation because their incomes are unlikely to improve commensurately with the effort or investment. State assistance that targets expenses—such as loan forgiveness or tax credits for enrollment in programs offering child development permits—could be a strong incentive for early childhood workers to take classes and get permits or degrees that improve their skills and career opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The test scores of English learners on the Smarter Balanced assessments that students took for the first time in the spring of 2015 underscore the urgency of the challenge facing California’s public schools. Two-thirds of English learners did not meet the standards measured by the new assessments. It is clear that it is in the interest of these students, and the state as a whole, that children begin kindergarten ready to learn—and to succeed.

To that end, child care centers and preschools are a critically important component of the education pipeline. The extent to which they can prepare dual language learners for kindergarten will have a profound impact on their academic success later on in school and, arguably, in life as well. It is not simply an issue of promoting fluency in English. The research is clear that promoting greater proficiency in a child’s home language is likely to lead to improved academic outcomes.

Supporting dual language learners also has ramifications for California’s future workforce in a global economy, where the ability to speak more than one language will be a key asset.

If a voter initiative on the Nov. 8, 2016 ballot that will allow school districts to once again freely offer bilingual and/or dual language programs is approved by California voters, children who enroll in kindergarten having mastered two languages should be far more prepared to take advantage of these programs.

Fortunately, much work has been done on what early childhood programs can do to promote the greater success of dual language learners. It makes sense to revisit what is known about how dual language learners learn best, and to implement successful strategies more widely across the state. Given that English learners make up almost a quarter of the K-12 students in the state, this is not a peripheral task, but one that is essential to California’s future.



RESOURCES

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