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Educating Young Dual- and English-Language Learners

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For more than 20 years, English-language learners (ELLs) have underperformed in reading and mathematics when compared to their native English-speaking counterparts.¹ During this same time span, the population of ELLs has increased by 20 percent.² Accounting for 90 percent of the total ELL population, Spanish-speaking Hispanic/Latinos are expected to represent 40 percent of the U.S. population by 2050.^{3,4} California has already seen its Hispanic/Latino population exceed its white population by about 70,000.⁵ Additionally, families in Spanish-speaking households have a poverty rate of 33 percent compared to 19 percent of English-only households.⁶ The economic and social implications of these statistics have captured the attention of state legislators interested in raising the academic achievement of English-language learners.

This is the third in a series of briefs examining trends and issues in early education, the first two examined early mathematics education and engaging families in education. In this brief, research evidence, policy options and state examples are presented to provide legislators and legislative staff with a framework for enhancing the educational outcomes of ELLs. While there are many areas to tackle relating to ELLs such as valid assessment, digital technology instruction, testing exemptions, and state seals of biliteracy on high school graduation diplomas, this issue brief focuses on four policy options: language programming models, ELL task forces and committees, accountability procedures and monitoring and teacher professional development and credentialing.

How Can States Help Dual- and English-Language Learners?

Provide clear definitions. All language learners are simultaneously learning and developing their skills in their native and English languages throughout their entire lives. Often confused and subsumed under the same definition, dual- and English-language learners represent different groups. Dual-language learners (DLLs) are generally classified as students ages birth through age 8 who are developing basic skills in their native language and English, toward the goal of bilingualism. English-language learners (ELLs) are students who have reached a stable baseline level of proficiency in their native language and who are developing their English skills, often without a focus on preserving their native language.

Use evidence-based policies. Educational research suggests ELLs require four to seven years to develop academic English-language proficiency (ELP).^{7,8} This, however, does not mean that all ELLs require the same amount of time to reach proficiency, as variations in individual ability exists. Examples such as immigrant status, gender and parental education are important mediating factors. Researchers recommend using long-term achievement data to determine expectations for ELLs, examining district performance in meeting these expectations, and setting challenging but achievable goals to progressively raise the percentage of ELLs who are proficient in English.⁹

Align reclassification policies. Reclassification refers to moving an ELL student who has achieved an appropriate level of English proficiency (reading, writing, speaking and listening) into a mainstream English classroom where language support services are withdrawn, ideally in a systematic fashion. Federal regulations require that states must annually assess ELLs' English-language proficiency and monitor such students for two years after they exit a language support program. Otherwise, states are permitted to determine their own exit criteria. Variation in reclassification policy exists between and even within states; benchmark scores on measures of English language proficiency vary dramatically and some states require scoring as proficient on a standardized achievement test administered in English, while other states have more lax provisions.¹⁰ These reclassification policies and practices lead to variable academic and social outcomes for ELLs.

Policy Options

1. Language Programming Models for DLLs and ELLs

While the federal government requires states to have language programming models to serve and meet the needs of students whose native language is not English, the specifics of these models vary state to state and are generally set by the commissioner of education or state board of education. Several models of language programming exist with different goals and means of achieving those goals, and with varying

Policy Questions

- What are the options for language programming models?
- What kinds of innovative practices for ELLs and DLLs are happening in states?
- How can accountability policies be more accurate and equitable?
- How can my state develop a strong cadre of teachers with the requisite skills for instructing ELLs and DLLs?

Potential Answers

- Several models exist, including dual-immersion, transitional bilingual, structured English immersion and English as a second language
- ELL and DLL task forces and committees use research and stakeholders' input to guide policies and practices.
- States are using new accountability frameworks to provide clear monitoring of ELLs.
- States are offering bilingual teachers tuition assistance and other incentives.

Language Programming Models and Key Elements

Type of Language Programming Model	Key Program Elements
Heritage language/maintenance bilingual	ELLs take a separate class taught in their native language; the goal is for ELLs to maintain proficiency in their native language while learning a second language.
Dual immersion/two-way immersion (TWI)	ELLs learn content in both English and their native language; students in these programs normally spend 50 percent of their time in each language, although these percentages can vary.
Transitional bilingual education (TBE)	ELLs' native language is used for an initial period of time to build essential literacy and content knowledge, then they are transitioned to 100 percent English instruction, commonly within three years.
Structured English immersion (SEI)	Situates ELLs in mainstream classrooms with their English-speaking peers; teachers provide support in the form of native-language reinforcement in order for ELLs to learn content. These programs generally last one year.
English as a second language (ESL)	Requires a trained ESL teacher to work with ELLs to supplement and adjust content instruction in English-only classrooms and/or to work with ELLs in English language development (reading, writing, speaking and listening) outside of academic classes.

Source: Adapted from A. Simpson Baird, "Dual language learners reader post #5: Models of language instruction" (Washington, D.C.: New America EdCentral, 2015)

effectiveness. With regard to second-language acquisition and long-term achievement, researchers have demonstrated that bilingual education models are effective and that long-term models are generally more effective than short-term models.^{11, 12, 13} Structured English immersion models have also been shown to have benefits, including enhanced English language acquisition, additional training for teachers and providing increased attention to the needs of ELLs.¹⁴

Massachusetts House Bill 498 (pending) provides that "English language learners be educated through a comprehensive, research-based instructional program that includes a content component to ensure appropriate acquisition of subject matter content and a language acquisition component to ensure appropriate acquisition of the English language." Other policy examples from the 2015 legislative sessions include the following.

- **Washington HB 1783 (Pending-Carryover):** Establishes a cradle-to-career approach to support English language learners by creating grant programs to expand dual-language programs and bilingual education for early learners, elementary students, and secondary students; and creates a scholarship to meet the present and future demand for bilingual teachers.

- **Indiana SB 267 (Enacted):** Establishes a dual-language immersion pilot program fund to provide grants to school corporations and charter schools that establish dual-language immersion programs. The programs must use an instructional model that provides at least 50 percent of its instruction in English and 50 percent in either Spanish, Chinese, French or any other language approved by the department.

2. DLL and ELL Task Forces and Committees

Task forces and committees designed to study and understand the unique needs of DLLs and ELLs can gather useful data—such as variety of languages spoken by whom and where the largest concentrations of DLLs and ELLs live—to create effective policies. Committees consisting of various stakeholders including parents, students, researchers and members of public and private organizations allow for a variety of voices to be heard and considered. Here is a policy example from the 2015 legislative session.

- **Connecticut SB 1502a (Enacted):** Establishes an English-language learner pilot program responsible for developing language acquisition plans that are research-based and created in consultation with department officials and researchers with expertise in language ac-

quisition. These plans must acknowledge such things as the characteristics of the English language-learner student population, the geography and demography of the school district or region, the number of bilingual education teachers and the native languages of the student population.

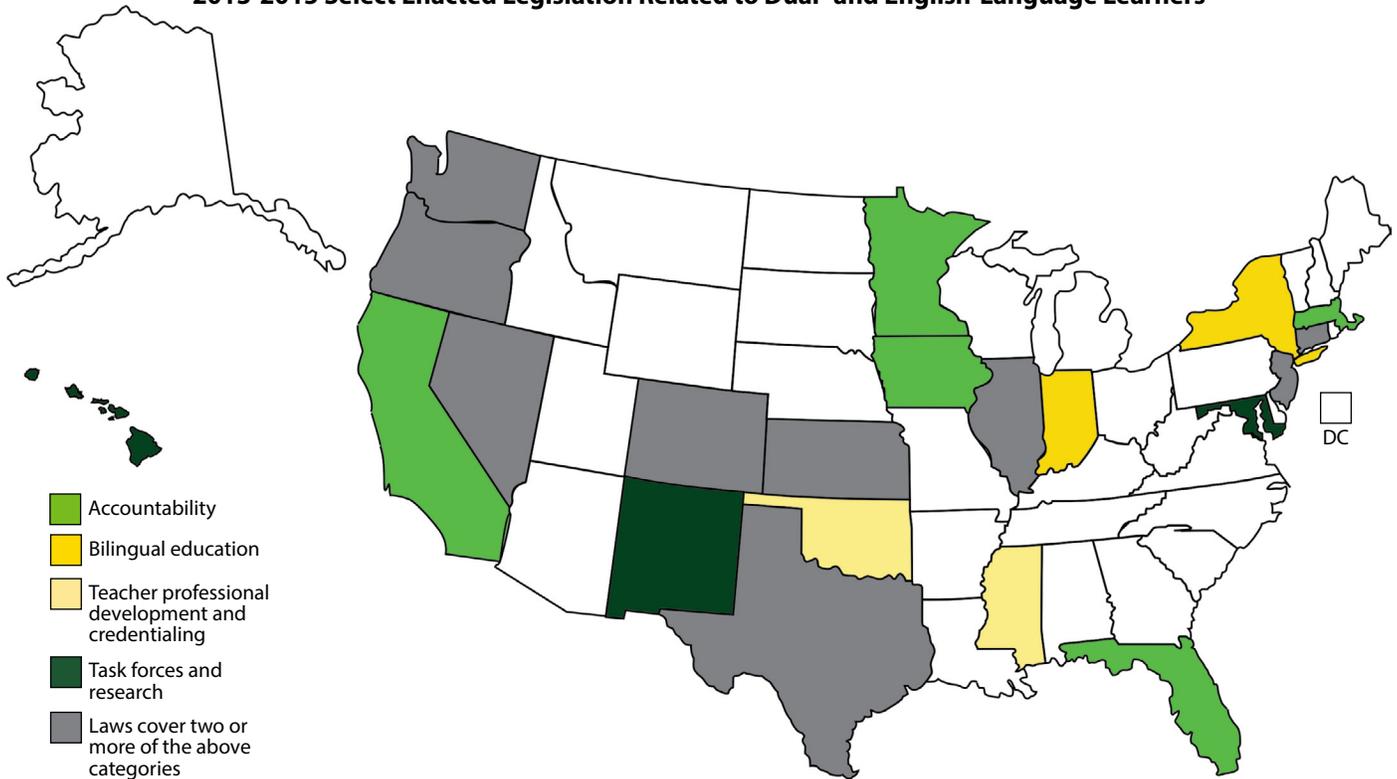
3. Accountability Procedures and Monitoring

Common concerns when discussing ELLs are the achievement gap, how best to monitor these students and how to hold teachers, schools and districts accountable for their performance. An often-unaddressed component of ELL accountability is the “revolving door” effect: As more proficient students exit (due to reclassification) and less proficient students enter, ELL group performance measurements appear to underestimate ELLs’ true achievement levels. To combat this, researchers have recommended establishing a Total English Learner (TEL) subgroup that includes all ELLs—those who are still receiving language support services and those who have been reclassified and exited.¹⁵ Creating a TEL subgroup improves the fairness and accuracy of the accountability system and paints a clearer picture of ELL

achievement and growth. Policy examples from the 2015 legislative sessions include the following.

- Iowa HB 658 (Enacted):** Requires the 25 districts with the largest number of students identified as limited English-proficient to submit a report to the department of education detailing the average number of years spent in English-language learner programming and to review the number and percentage of the total limited English-proficient students achieving English language proficiency over the previous five years.
- Washington HB 1541 (Pending-Carryover):** Develops a system to evaluate increases in the English and academic proficiency of students who are, or were, English-language learner-eligible pupils. This evaluation is to include students when they are in the program and after they exit the program until they finish their K-12 career or transfer from the school district. The purpose of the evaluation system is to inform schools, districts, parents and the state of the effectiveness of the transitional bilingual programs teaching these students English and other content areas.

2013-2015 Select Enacted Legislation Related to Dual- and English-Language Learners



Source: NCSL, 2015.

4. Teacher Professional Development and Credentialing

Just like specializing in science, technology, engineering or math, teaching ELLs and DLLs requires teachers to have specific knowledge, training and skills in English-language acquisition, assessment, differentiation and intervention, along with fluent bilingual abilities in speaking, listening, reading and writing. Several options exist in the form of financial incentives, certification, professional development and teacher preparation programs. Policy examples from the 2015 legislative sessions include the following.

- **New York SB 2867 (Pending):** Establishes the Bilingual Teachers of Tomorrow Teacher Recruitment and Retention Program to attract and retain bilingual, certified teachers in areas of the greatest need, especially schools under review. It provides for grants, procedures for applying for the grants, and eligibility requirements for fund distribution.

- **Texas HB 1 (Enacted):** Establishes a program to encourage certification to teach bilingual education; and provides tuition assistance to encourage students who enroll in an educator preparation program to become certified to teach bilingual education, English as a second language, or Spanish in school districts most in need.

Conclusion

As English-language learners continue to score significantly below their English-only counterparts academically, and as ELLs continue to grow in number, there is mounting concern about the associated economic and societal implications. State legislatures are uniquely positioned to consider policies and practices designed to close the achievement gap and improve long-term outcomes for this group.

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Resources

- Child Trends, Hispanic Institute, <http://www.childtrends.org/hispanic-institute/>
- iColorín Colorado!, <http://www.colorincolorado.org/index.php?langswitch=en>
- Education Commission of the States, State-Level English Language Learner Policies, <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/17/92/11792.pdf>
- Education Commission of the States, State Funding Mechanisms for English Language Learners, <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/16/94/11694.pdf>
- Edutopia, Strategies and Resources for Supporting English Language Learners, <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/strategies-and-resources-supporting-ell-todd-finley>
- National Clearinghouse for English Language Learners, <http://www.ncela.us/>
- National Education Association, English Language Learners, <http://www.nea.org/home/32346.htm>
- NCSL, Dual and English Language Learners, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/english-dual-language-learners.aspx>
- New America, Better Policies for Dual Language Learners, <http://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/better-policies-for-dual-language-learners/>
- New America, Dual Language Learner National Work Group, <http://www.edcentral.org/tag/dll-national-work-group/>
- Stanford University, Understanding Language: Language, Literacy and Learning in the Content Areas, <http://ell.stanford.edu/>
- WestEd, English Language Learners, http://www.wested.org/area_of_work/english-language-learners/

Notes

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