



CONOR P. WILLIAMS

# Better Policies for Dual Language Learners

**Bridging Research, Policy, Implementation, and Classroom Practice**



## About the Author



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# CONTEXT

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On December 11, 2014, New America convened a group of leading experts on dual language learners (DLLs) to launch its new Dual Language Learners National Work Group. Attendees included educators, administrators, researchers, policymakers, advocates, and representatives from the philanthropy community. Participants heard from a variety of presenters and engaged in dynamic small-group discussions throughout the day to consider how American schools could better support these students. Specifically, the convening aimed to address three questions:

1. What are the **key best practices** for dual language learner instruction, policy, and research?
2. What are the **areas of substantive agreement** on best practices? How can we convert this into meaningful policy reform?
3. Are there **areas where dual language learner stakeholders** substantively disagree to such a degree that it impedes progress?

Throughout the day, there was broad agreement that it is high time to raise the quality, tenor, and breadth of conversations about how to best support DLLs.<sup>1</sup> The linguistic, ethnic, and racial profiles of American schools are changing rapidly. Around [one in ten American students](#) is formally classified as a language learner, and almost [one in four American children speaks a language other than English](#) at home. Children of immigrants [have constituted all population growth](#) in the United States under the age of five since 1990. And while immigration patterns are related to the growth of DLLs in American schools, they are not the whole story: [over 75 percent of DLLs \(and older English language learners\)](#) were born in the United States.

Policymakers and schools have not responded quickly to these trends. Indeed, DLLs have long been ignored in education policy debates—except when they can be raised as an explanation for schools’ weak academic performance. In response, New America’s Work Group announced three primary tasks for its inaugural year:

1. **Translation** of cutting edge research on DLLs to ensure that policymakers and the public are well-informed about what these students need;
2. **Spotlighting** classrooms, schools, and districts that are innovating to serve DLLs better; and
3. **Convening** and connecting DLL stakeholders throughout the country to build consensus within that community and bring new voices into that conversation.

This brief offers both a summary of the Work Group’s founding event and a rough synthesis of the core messages from the day’s discussions.

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1. New America uses the term DLL to denote students who are learning English even as they continue to develop basic proficiency in their home language. These students are generally eight years old or younger. We generally use the term ELL to refer to older students who are learning English at school but have developed basic proficiency in their home language.

# RESEARCH

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Recent studies have expanded and refined our knowledge of DLLs' linguistic and academic development. With that in mind, the day's presentations opened with a survey of the research from Temple University professor **Carol Scheffner Hammer** and presentations from the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance's **Liz Eisner** and the National Center for Education Research's **Karen Douglas**.

Hammer explained that there are more than 11 million language learners in American schools today—though less than half of those are currently classified as such by their schools. Furthermore, Eisner noted, while 80 percent of American DLLs speak Spanish as their first language, there is considerable linguistic, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity throughout the DLL subgroup.

Hammer cited research that DLLs' bilingualism influences their brain development early in life. When acquiring both languages, these students develop two parallel language systems. To illustrate how these systems interact with one another, Hammer paraphrased an analogy from Belgian linguist Annick De Houwer: just as someone who can play the violin can build on their (musical) background knowledge to learn to play the piano, children who are strong in their native language can build on their (linguistic) background knowledge to learn a second language.

*Just as someone who can play the violin can build on their [musical] background knowledge to learn to play the piano, children who are strong in their native language can build on their [linguistic] background knowledge to learn a second language*

While it may take a bit longer to develop these two language systems, there are important benefits to the process. Very young DLLs appear to have more cognitive flexibility and stronger conflict resolution skills than their monolingual peers. Indeed, DLLs perform as well or better than monolinguals on many measures of social-emotional development.

On average, Hammer noted, the research suggests that DLLs can develop conversational English proficiency in two to three years and academic English proficiency in five to seven years. [State, district, and school policies](#) rarely reflect—or respect—these timelines. Furthermore, Hammer explained, at the classroom level, young DLLs rarely get the targeted oral language instruction that they need to help develop proficiency in both languages. And Eisner pointed out that fewer than half of the American school districts that receive Title III funds offer any home language support programs to any of their DLLs.

Douglas summarized research supported by the Institute of Education Sciences exploring how schools can better support DLLs' literacy development. Above all, high-quality instruction for DLLs usually means adding strategic scaffolds to high-quality instruction that works well for all students. Successful teachers build on DLLs' home language and culture in their instruction, and use achievement data mindfully—given that most current assessments are designed to measure monolingual students' academic progress.

While the research on DLLs has advanced, Hammer also stressed caution. Researchers have struggled to isolate the effects of DLLs' bilingualism on their academic trajectory because of other confounding variables, especially socioeconomic status. Eisner noted that DLLs are almost twice as likely as non-DLLs to be classified as “low-income.” As a result, there are still very few studies that have separated out the effects of being low-income on DLLs' development. Furthermore, the linguistic diversity of the DLL demographic means that, for instance, lessons drawn from studies of older Spanish-English language learners may have limited applicability to younger language learners who speak, say, Somali at home.

# DISTRICTS AND STATES

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If policy has lagged behind the research on DLLs for some time now, this is partly because new and exciting ideas for serving DLLs can be difficult to implement. To that end, attendees heard from policymakers, administrators, and advocates reforming and/or implementing better DLL policies in states and districts across the country.

Attendees first heard from **Veronica Alvarez**, the bilingual coordinator for Harlandale Independent School District. The district enrolls over 15,000 students, 17 percent of whom are classified as language learners. Fully 98 percent of Harlandale's students are Hispanic and nearly 90 percent of the district's families are "economically disadvantaged." In 2008, the district began converting its transitional bilingual education classrooms into dual immersion classrooms. That is, the district switched from a model focused on rapidly transitioning DLLs to English-only instruction to a model that integrates monolingual English speakers into bilingual classrooms with native Spanish-speaking DLLs.

Alvarez cited the aforementioned DLL research highlighting the positive cognitive benefits of bilingualism as part of the justification for the district's move. She also said that assessment data from the 3rd–8th Grade STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) show that students enrolled in the district's dual immersion classrooms "surpassed everyone"—including peers whose families opted out of the program.

The success of Harlandale's dual immersion program is no simple matter of matching good research to DLLs, however. Alvarez explained that the district spent two years planning the change. In addition to reviewing the research, they spoke with teachers, parents, and administrators about how the new program would work. They decided which content areas would be offered in which languages—and planned the schedule down to the minute. And as the program has expanded into all 13 elementary schools (and one middle school so far), district stakeholders have worked to maintain year-to-year program alignment. The district has also built on a partnership with Texas A&M-San Antonio to train—and often hire—dual immersion teacher candidates in Harlandale classrooms.

Harlandale's focus on implementation was not misplaced, as Minnesota House **Representative Carlos Mariani Rosa**'s presentation made clear. Rep. Mariani Rosa reflected on his role in authoring and passing Minnesota's new language learning reform law, the Learning for English Academic Proficiency and Success (LEAPS) Act. But he also discussed the [considerable implementation challenges](#) ahead.

The LEAPS Act substantially raised Minnesota's support for DLLs' development of their home languages. It requires districts to assess these students' native language proficiency in order to develop a fuller picture of their overall linguistic development. It also asks districts to offer targeted professional development on how teachers can support DLLs' academic success. In addition, it requires the state's teacher training programs to specifically prepare all teacher candidates for instructing DLLs. It also established a seal of biliteracy to reward high school graduates who demonstrate full proficiency in English and another language.

Rep. Mariani Rosa explained that the law passed because he and his colleagues broadened their coalition—they worked with teachers unions, education reformers, and monolingual English-speaking families to build political will. The challenge now, he told the convening, is to make the law's priorities meaningful by building capacity at the state and district levels.

By contrast, the challenge for the advocates on the day's next panel was not about consolidating strong state priorities for DLLs—but about reforming the English-only status quo in California's schools. **Patricia Gándara**, co-director of UCLA's Civil Rights Project, and **Laurie Olsen**, former director of Californians Together, discussed that status quo and its immediate future.

California became an "English-only" state for language learners with the passage of Proposition 227 in 1998. The law made English immersion the default instructional model for supporting DLLs' linguistic development. While nearly one-third of California language learners were in bilingual classrooms before Proposition 227, today that ratio is down to one-in-twenty. The state was a bellwether: within four years, Arizona and

Massachusetts voters passed similar referenda in their states. But California’s policy change was certainly the most consequential—[the state enrolls](#) nearly one in three American language learners.

Olsen and Gándara noted that the referendum passed partly in response to growth in the immigrant population—not comprehensive concerns with bilingual education. But the educational effects have been considerable. Research suggests that the law did not lead to better academic achievement for language learners. Furthermore, the loss of bilingual classrooms significantly reduced the state’s production of bilingual teachers.

Last year, however, things began to change. The California legislatures passed—and Governor Jerry Brown signed—[the Multilingual Education for a 21st Century Economy Act](#). As a result, California voters will have an opportunity to expand bilingual and dual-immersion programs for all students, DLLs and native English speakers alike. This time, rather than presenting bilingual programs as critical for rectifying DLLs’ English deficits, [advocates are arguing that](#) bilingualism and biliteracy are advantages that should be broadly accessible within public schools. California enshrined this approach in state law when it established its [seal of biliteracy program in 2011](#).

In the final presentation of the day, Hunter College’s **Luis O. Reyes** offered New York’s recent DLL reforms as evidence of state codifying a similar attitudinal shift

around these students. In its first paragraph, the state’s new “[Blueprint for English Language Learners Success](#)” announces, “All teachers are teachers of [DLLs].” That is, these students are not simply the responsibility of specialized staff in segregated schools in particular neighborhoods.

New York’s new Blueprint incorporates cultural and linguistic diversity throughout the state’s education system. It frames bilingualism and biliteracy as assets for schools, communities, the state, and the broader economy. As such, it calls upon schools and districts to engage with DLLs’ families in constructive, culturally sensitive ways. It further asks that they commit considerable portions of their professional development resources to training around issues related to language and culture. Finally, New York is also [developing a seal of biliteracy](#), a process which it began in 2012.

While the document represents a change in mindset, Reyes noted, there is much yet to do. Advocates in New York are focused on educating leaders about DLLs’ needs and assets. For instance, he noted that these changes only apply to K-12, which means that they do not apply to [New York City’s recent, rapid pre-K expansion](#). Reyes told attendees that there is currently little recognition of DLLs’ bilingualism either as a matter of screening or instructional practice in these pre-K classrooms. In response, efforts are underway to reform the state’s early education regulations to align them to the new Blueprint.



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# BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Convening participants broke into groups to discuss three questions in response to the presentations:

## 1. How does this research align with what happens in American schools each day?

Attendees responded that most American schools have not changed their instructional approach to DLLs in several decades. Most use a “deficit mindset” when considering the abilities and needs of language learners. That is, they follow federal (and many states’) laws that frame DLLs in terms of their “limited English proficiency” and academic shortcomings. Educators, administrators, and policymakers are rarely aware that strong development of DLLs’ home languages can support their English development. The deficits shaping DLLs’ education are not only conceptual: [Title III funding through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act \(ESEA\)](#) has never been adequate to the need, and remains below the \$750 million authorized in that law over a decade ago.

Insofar as there is innovative, excellent instruction for DLLs, it happens in isolated pockets. Sometimes this takes the form of schools that have developed effective programs for DLLs, but generally it is siloed at the classroom level. Participants reported that these efforts have been difficult to replicate in part because general education staff and the bilingual, dual language, and ESL teachers who provide DLLs with language supports often work isolated from one another.

## 2. What does this tell us about efforts to improve public education for DLLs?

Attendees expressed concern that in an era when assessments—and accountability systems connected to them—are shaping instructional decisions, there is a danger of trying to squeeze DLLs into policy systems designed for monolingual students. The standards-based accountability movement hasn’t always been savvy to incorporating DLLs’ linguistic development into their reforms. Participants reported concerns that recent reforms weren’t suited to differentiating instruction to meet individual DLLs’ needs, especially given the paucity of well-designed assessments.

However, attendees also expressed near-universal concern with disjointed, inconsistent state and local policies governing DLLs’ education. Districts, states, and teacher preparation programs have extremely limited capacity for designing and implementing aligned educational programs for serving DLLs (and their teachers). Many groups identified a key tension: centralization of expectations and oversight can support educational equity for DLLs, but can also imperil local flexibility.

Finally, some participants touted the Common Core State Standards as a promising resource for helping DLLs develop stronger English proficiency. The standards incorporate oral language instruction with challenging academic content in ways that could be particularly helpful for DLLs. However, “implementation has been uneven,” and “some teachers are too overwhelmed to take advantage” of the opportunity for DLLs.



### 3. What can states, districts, and schools do to respond to new research?

Groups found broad common ground when answering this question. Almost all discussions mentioned the need for better sharing of best practices in DLL program design and instruction. There was also considerable interest in reworking federal law and regulations to move from antiquated, deficit-focused terms and policies—such as “Limited English Proficient.” There was some consensus that the federal government should continue and even expand its efforts to harmonize states’ various definitions and policies governing DLLs.

Most participants identified better instruction, home language supports, and alignment in the PreK–3rd grades as particularly critical for DLLs. Further, participants agreed that better assessments, thoughtful use of data in guiding instruction, and better research will be critical to any effective reform. Several expressed concern that this sort of agenda will be much more difficult in an era where regular assessments are politically unpopular.

Finally, most participants indicated that better policies for DLLs would only come when the public was better educated about bilingualism. This was expressed both in terms of the broader public and in regards to culturally-sensitive family engagement efforts at the school and district levels. Some suggested that this should build off the existing “[Seal of Biliteracy](#)” campaign—with an eye to “making everyone bilingual.” Several groups suggested that DLL stakeholders should take a multigenerational approach: better support for today’s DLLs may help to make the teacher workforce of tomorrow more linguistically, culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse.

# PRIORITIES

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The day ended with rotating small group discussions around a series of core topics. These conversations are summarized below.

## **What are the biggest challenges for educators serving DLLs? How could they be addressed?**

- Low effectiveness of most teacher preparation programs
- Getting administrative support
- Inadequate resources
- Implementing new programs well
- Seeing connections, alignment between classroom efforts and big picture
- Competing demands and expectations
- Recruiting, training enough linguistically- and culturally-aware educators
- Assessment systems designed for monolingual students

## **What information do policymakers need?**

- Longitudinal, cost-benefit analysis on DLLs' potential
  - Focused on their districts and communities
  - Including the economic values of DLLs' linguistic and cognitive assets
- Detailed demographic data related to DLLs
  - DLLs are a linguistically, ethnically, culturally, racially, and economically diverse subgroup
  - The USA will be majority-minority by 2042
- Comparisons of various program options for DLLs
- Employers' perspective on globally competitive U.S. workforce
- Model legislation from successful states

## **What are the top three policy priorities for DLL advocates?**

- Funding
- Meaningful, valid assessment and accountability focused on DLLs
- Teacher Preparation

## **What are the political impediments to progress on DLL priorities?**

- Funding
- Lack of national leadership, advocacy on DLL issues
- Racism, bigotry, American exceptionalism, the "Melting Pot" gone wrong
- Codification of English-only laws
- Polarized education politics
- Segregated school zoning
- Federalism:
  - Equity efforts are federal, but the federal government has limited leverage and capacity to keep states and districts in line

## Where should DLL stakeholders focus reform efforts?

- Teacher and administrator training programs
- Better assessments designed with DLLs' needs in mind
- Strong implementation of DLL programs
- Public awareness, myth-dispelling
  - Broadening appeal to conservative audiences w/economic arguments
  - Translating research on bilingualism and biliteracy for the public
  - Build grassroots demand for dual language programs
  - Chronicle examples of success
- Build networks for teachers to share ideas and discuss their work
- Fix the Elementary and Secondary Education Act's Title III
  - Set high expectations
  - Make it more adaptable to diverse populations
- Align philanthropic efforts to support clear messaging around DLLs

As the day drew to a close, attendees came together for a conversation about key takeaways. Participants suggested a variety of important messages for the broader community of DLL stakeholders. Many agreed on the value of re-mobilizing the DLL conversation around bilingualism as an economic asset, though some insisted that this shift should complement—not surrender—DLL advocates' civil rights arguments.

This tension came up more than once; most attendees agreed that future efforts to improve DLLs' educational opportunities would be easier in the context of a broader push for bilingualism and biliteracy for all students. In response, some worried that broadening access to bilingual instruction would require districts to use scarce DLL-support funds on monolingual students.



# WHAT'S NEXT

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Several weeks after the convening, on January 5, 2015, New America publicly launched the Dual Language Learners National Work Group. In response to the convening conversations, the Work Group's first year of translating, spotlighting, and convening around DLL issues will involve three primary tracks of work. [As Work Group founder Conor Williams wrote in a blog post that day](#), the Work Group will:

1. **conduct** case studies of districts implementing innovative policies for supporting DLLs;
2. **convene** meetings of leading DLL advocates, researchers, and policy thinkers; and
3. **provide** a steady stream of coverage around how education reforms affect language learners in the PreK-3rd years.

Most importantly, the Work Group will be exploring ways to partner with other DLL stakeholders and organizations. As last month's convening made clear, it's high time for a better conversation around DLLs' needs—but meaningfully improving that conversation will require engaging with as many interlocutors as possible.





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