

CONOR P. WILLIAMS

PLURALISM ON THE PRAIRIE

Helping Minnesota's Dual Language
Learners Leap Forward

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About the Authors



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How New America Defines “Dual Language Learner:”

A dual language learner (DLL) is a child between zero and eight years old who is in the process of learning English in addition to his or her native language(s). This student may or may not be enrolled in a school where instruction is conducted in both languages. Our team uses DLLs to refer to these students for two reasons: 1) our research is focused on children in the PreK–3rd grades, where this term is generally the most accurate; and 2) to avoid confusion caused by labeling children based on words associated with specific interventions or strategies (such as “dual immersion” or “English as a Second Language”) rather than on language status.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Minnesota's demographics are changing rapidly. The past 25 years have seen a significant shift in the state's racial and ethnic makeup. There are around 230,000 school-aged children of immigrants in the state, a 60 percent increase since 2000.¹ That number includes 185,000 American-born children of immigrants.² One in six school-age Minnesotans has at least one immigrant parent.³ This trend is even more dramatic in the youngest years: one in five Minnesotans under five years old is a child of immigrants.⁴

In response to these numbers, in 2014, the Minnesota state legislature passed The Learning for English Academic Proficiency and Success Act (The LEAPS Act). The law attracted little attention at the time—it passed in the context of a broader overhaul of the state's primary education legislation. And yet, when the debates ended, the votes were counted, and the dust had settled, Minnesota's policies for supporting dual language learners' (DLLs') academic success were among the most comprehensive, research-based, and forward-thinking in the United States.⁵

Almost every effort to improve DLLs' educational opportunities and achievement aims to improve how DLLs are identified, target them for high-quality language services, and provide schools with the resources necessary to support their growth. The LEAPS Act addresses these challenges in a variety

of ways. The law's reforms fall into three general categories:

1. improving school, district, and state data on DLLs' languages, skills, and knowledge
2. improving teachers' and administrators' abilities to build on DLLs' strengths to support long-term academic success
3. improving schools' communication and engagement with DLLs' families

The law's specific provisions incorporate DLLs' needs into requirements for Minnesota's teacher and administrator education programs, new and renewing educator licensure requirements, district planning efforts, family engagement policies, and more. It also establishes a tiered system for awarding bilingual and multilingual seals—and college credit—to students who demonstrate full proficiency in more than one language.

However, the real value of any education reform is not determined by its passage, but how its implementation shifts classroom practices that drive better outcomes for students. Indeed, the mere existence of policies that prioritize DLLs is no guarantee that they will be carried out in ways that actually benefit students. The meaning of such policies depends on individuals and organizations

making conscious decisions to change how they operate. Serious reforms are about setting priorities, but also about building the necessary capacity to make them actionable.

In the two years since the LEAPS Act passed, policymakers and educators have made some initial moves to implement the law. However, Minnesota education observers, DLL advocates, and policymakers all note that considerable in-state enthusiasm for the law has not yet been matched by significant actions.

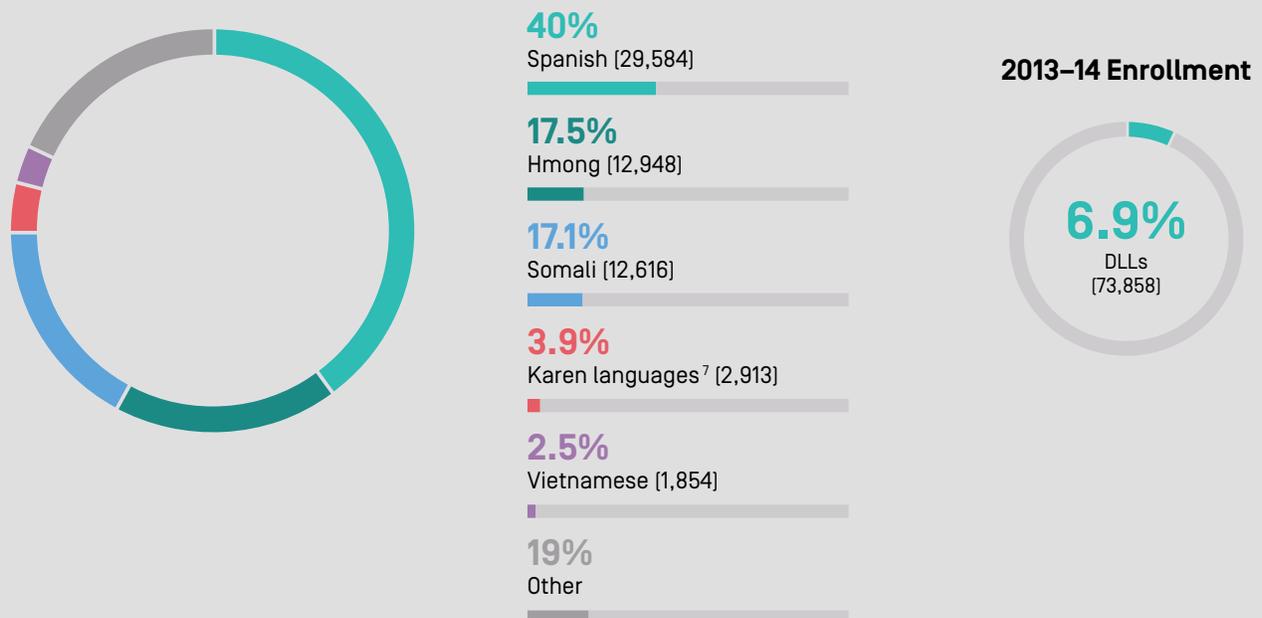
The obstacles to full and effective implementation of the LEAPS Act can be grouped into three categories. **First**, as is often the case, LEAPS’ many new priorities have yet to be backed with sufficient

resources. **Second**, the pace and fidelity of LEAPS implementation have been challenged by particular aspects of the law’s genesis and design. **Third**, there is little evidence that MDE is prepared to oversee and support districts’ work implementing the law.

Representative Carlos Mariani Rosa, one of the LEAPS Act’s co-authors, says that the law still needs advocates to see ensure that its reforms are implemented. He says,

by the time we got out into the grassroots, the bill was pretty much halfway or a third of the way through the process. Where [advocates] really helped out was to ensure that the bill continued to command the attention of legislators. There was one time when the bill

Figure 1 | Minnesota Dual Language Learner Statistics



The real value of any education reform is not determined by its passage, but how its implementation shifts classroom practices that drive better outcomes for students.

almost died, in the middle of a snowstorm, and about half a dozen Latino parents showed up and essentially shamed the committee into keeping it alive. We didn't translate that into a lasting advocacy presence. It's clear to me now that we need to have that kind of presence... to really pull together a strongly-informed, consistently-committed, very multiracial and multilingual group of folks....to really turn that into an effective advocacy presence for us and into a long-term agenda.⁸

The LEAPS Act is neither perfectly designed nor fully implemented. But, notes Mariani Rosa, neither of these is the appropriate standard for judging the law. He says, "as a politician, the answer to that [challenge] is often: I'll settle for something, because we're dealt the cards we're dealt. Obviously, I want to have good research that supports new approaches and new investments, but what I do know, what I feel strongly, is that the current status quo isn't serving kids well."⁹

The LEAPS Act's passage was an important step towards extending better educational opportunities to DLLs in classrooms across Minnesota. The state has considerable interest in improving its educational status quo: the multilingual children in schools today will make up increasingly large sections of the state's future labor force. The state's economic competitiveness is linked to their prospects, and their future success is inextricably tied to the education they get today.

Full implementation of the LEAPS Act would make it more likely that these DLLs will reach full English proficiency while retaining their native language abilities as well. Furthermore, these students would be more likely to succeed throughout their academic careers, and would provide the state with a highly-skilled workforce that also happens to be multilingual and multicultural. In a region of the country with sluggish growth rates and aging populations, this would be a considerable advantage indeed.

INTRODUCTION: HOMOGENEITY AND DIVERSITY ON THE PRAIRIE

In 2014, the Minnesota state legislature passed The Learning for English Academic Proficiency and Success Act. The LEAPS Act attracted little attention at the time, since it passed in the context of a broader overhaul of the state's education legislation. And yet, when the debates ended, the votes were counted, and the dust had settled, Minnesota's policies for supporting dual language learners' (DLLs') academic success were amongst the most comprehensive, research-based, and forward-thinking in the United States.¹⁰

If this seems surprising, it may be because of the state's particular place in the nation's zeitgeist. In popular culture, Minnesota is best known as the source of *A Prairie Home Companion*, the setting of *Little House on the Prairie*, and home to about one-third of the U.S. men's national hockey team (and almost one-fifth of American-born players in the National Hockey league).¹¹ To many, Minnesota is emblematic of Middle America, the most homespun state in the American heartland.

This generalization has a long history. In 1920, native Minnesotan Sinclair Lewis published *Main Street*, a scorching examination of his state's supposed cultural insularity. In one passage, his lead character describes an aura of

universal similarity; of flimsiness of construction, so that the towns resemble frontier camps; of neglect of natural advantages, so that the hills are covered with brush, the lakes shut off by railroads, and the creeks lined with dumping-grounds; of depressing sobriety of color; rectangularity of buildings; and excessive breadth and straightness of the gashed streets...The new, more conscious houses are alike in their very attempts at diversity: the same bungalows, the same square houses of stucco or tapestry brick.¹²

And yet, the state's apparent homogeneity is more complicated than its reputation. For instance, in 1860, fully one-third of Minnesota's 172,000 residents were born outside the U.S. Census data from 1910 show that more than 25 percent of the state's two million residents were foreign-born. Nearly two-thirds of these new Americans were from Sweden, Germany, or Norway.¹³ In 1917, 100 of Minnesota's public schools and 195 of its 307 private schools used German as their main language of instruction. Still, the state's early increases in diversity were largely limited to language and ancestry: 99 percent of the state's two million residents were white in 1910.¹⁴

The past 25 years have seen a significant shift in the state's racial and ethnic makeup. Minnesota is in the midst of another wave of immigration, which is expanding the state's definition of diversity. The most recent census data show that over 400,000 of the state's 5.4 million residents were born outside of the U.S. (about 7 percent of all Minnesotans).¹⁵ Since 1979, the state has welcomed around 100,000 refugees from a variety of homelands, including Somalia, Vietnam, Liberia, Laos, and Thailand.¹⁶

As it did a century ago, this round of immigration is driving cultural and linguistic diversity among Minnesotan children. There are around 230,000 school-aged children of immigrants in the state, a 60 percent increase since 2000.¹⁷ That number includes 185,000 U.S.-born children of immigrants.¹⁸ About one in six school-age Minnesotans has at least one immigrant parent.¹⁹ This trend is even more dramatic in the youngest years: one in five Minnesotans under five years old is a child of immigrants.²⁰

In many ways, this resembles national trends; the U.S. population of children of immigrants increased by nearly 30 percent since 2000.²¹ However, Minnesota's immigrant demographics significantly differ from the national numbers. **Figure 3** illustrates this breakdown. In 2014, 61 percent of U.S. children of immigrants were of Latin American descent. In Minnesota, just 28 percent were. Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) children make up a plurality of the state's children of immigrants. Note that approximately eight in ten of Minnesota's children of immigrants are native-born American citizens.²²

These trends are driving new racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic pluralism in Minnesota's schools. Around 15 percent of students speak a language other than English at home and 7 percent are formally classified as DLLs. The state reports that its DLL population is three times larger than it was in the mid-1990s.²⁵ Nearly one-quarter of Minneapolis Public Schools students and one-third of St. Paul Public Schools students are DLLs.²⁶ As **Table 1** shows, Minnesota's immigration demographics lead to unique linguistic diversity. In the 2013–14

school year, one in three Hmong-speaking DLLs in American schools was enrolled in Minnesota. The state also boasted approximately one in three of the Somali-speaking DLLs in the U.S. In sum, Minnesota's demographic patterns are not just changing how the state's schools *look*—they are changing how they *sound*.

Fortunately for the state's increasingly-diverse student body, its schools regularly score high in comparison to other states' public education systems. Where better for young, multilingual students to begin their schooling and integrate into American society?

The state's immigrant communities also contain a diverse range of educational experiences. In 2013, 14.7 percent of the state's foreign-born residents had a graduate or professional degree. In contrast, just 10.5 of U.S.-born Minnesotans did. On the other hand, 43.8 percent of foreign-born residents had a high school degree or less, compared to 32.3 percent of U.S.-born Minnesotans.³⁰ In Minnesota, and across the country, this diversity of skills and credentials can make it difficult for policymakers and educators to accurately gauge and adequately meet immigrant families' needs.

Fortunately for the state's increasingly-diverse student body, its schools regularly score high in comparison to other states' public education systems.³¹ On average, Minnesota fourth and eighth graders score better than students from nearly every state on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in both math and reading.³² The state's education funding mechanisms rank high on equity metrics for allocating additional resources to districts with high poverty rates and those that are serving large numbers of students of color.³³ Where better for young, multilingual students to begin their schooling and integrate into American society?

Figure 2 | Minnesota's Children of Immigrants: Foreign- or Native-Born, 2014²³

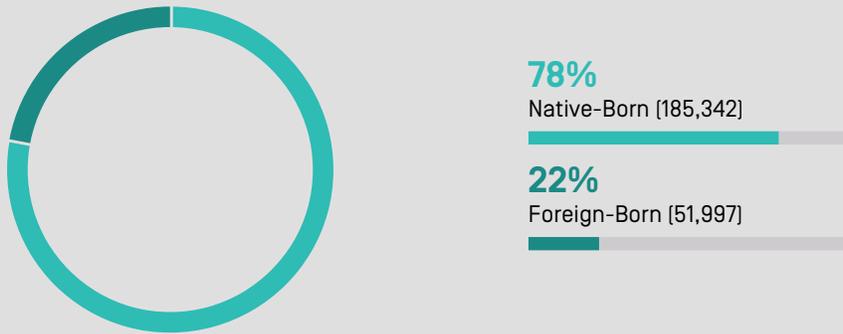
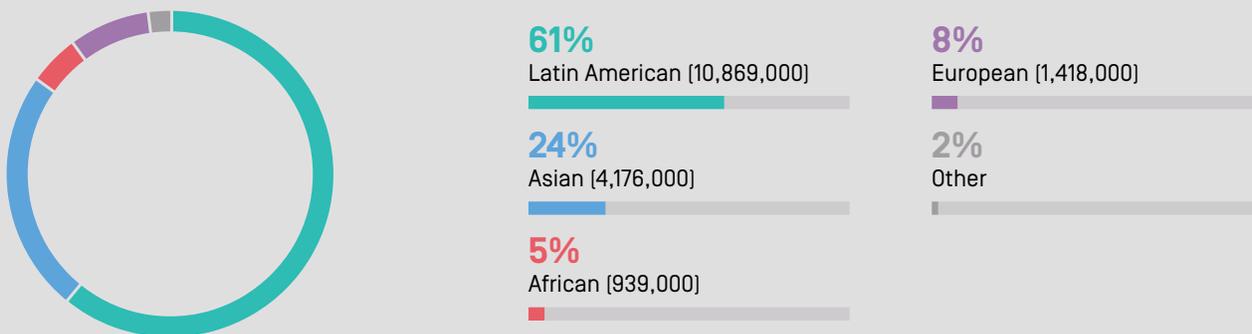


Figure 3 | Children of Immigrants by Parent Region of Origin, 2014²⁴

United States



Minnesota

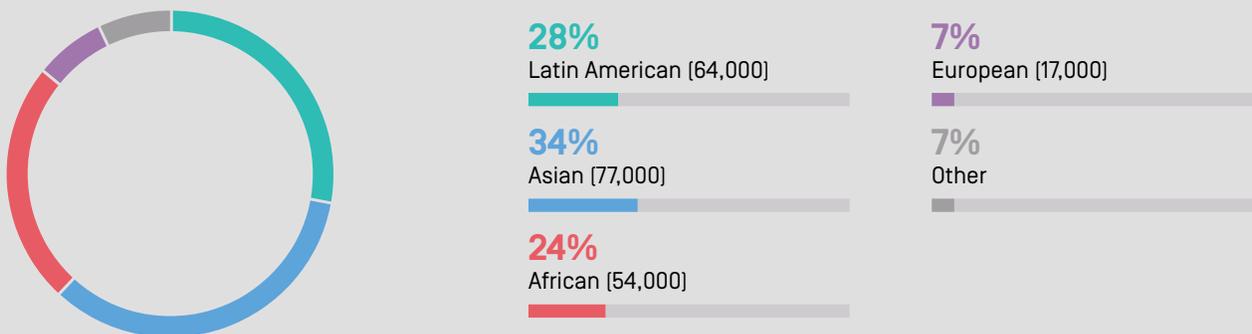


Table 1 | Dual Language Learners, 2013–14 School Year

	U.S. ²⁷	Minnesota ²⁸
Total DLL population	4,929,989	73,858
Spanish	76.5% [3,770,816]	40.4% [29,854]
Hmong	0.8% [39,860]	17.5% [12,948]
Somali	0.7% [37,371]	17.1% [12,616]
Karen languages ²⁹	0.3% [12,607]	3.9% [2,913]
Vietnamese	1.8% [89,705]	2.5% [1,854]

However, these averages leave large parts of the story untold. Minnesota schools continue to produce significant achievement gaps between white students and students from all other racial and ethnic groups.³⁴ On the 2015 NAEP, the White-Hispanic achievement gap was 25 points in math and 33 points in reading. On the same test, the White-AAPI achievement gap was 14 points in math and 10 points in reading.³⁵ Perhaps worse, Minnesota’s Hispanic students score worse on the NAEP than every state except Alabama.³⁶ Minnesota’s own math and reading assessments tell a similar story: in 2016, considerably higher percentages of White students met or exceeded third grade math and reading standards than Hispanic, AAPI, African American, or Native American students.³⁷

These gaps are also visible for AAPI students. A 2016 report from The Minnesota Campaign for Achievement Now (MinnCAN) found that state schools produced “the third largest proficiency gap on fourth-grade reading between white and AAPI students” on the NAEP exam. That is, out of the 29 states that had a sufficient number of AAPI students to allow for calculation of achievement gaps, Minnesota landed 27th. On the 2015 NAEP, Minnesota fourth-grade AAPI students scored better than AAPI

students in just four other states.³⁸ MinnCAN further found that the state’s high school graduation rate for AAPI students was 46th in the country.³⁹ On Minnesota’s math and reading tests, just 28 percent of AAPI students who were also classified as DLLs met or exceeded state standards, compared to 68 percent of white students.⁴⁰

These gaps may reflect diversity within the Minnesota AAPI community, which encompasses many distinct groups with different reasons for immigrating to the U.S., different native languages, and different countries of origin.⁴¹ Furthermore, while a greater share of the state’s AAPI adults have at least a B.A. (42.7 percent) than the state average (31.6 percent), a greater share of AAPI adults also have less than a high school degree (19.6 percent) than the state average (8.5 percent).⁴² Other factors—linguistic backgrounds, refugee status, country of origin, and more—can influence AAPI DLLs’ skills and challenges at school. In 2016, in order to get a clearer view of AAPI students’ achievement in the state, the state passed legislation requiring the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) to disaggregate student achievement data by home language, refugee status, and a number of other variables.⁴³

Minnesota is going to need these multilingual kids. Census estimates suggest the state's population has grown 3.5 percent since 2010. While this lags behind the national rate of 4.1 percent, it ranks ahead of all other Midwestern states.⁴⁴ Nearly one-third of Minnesota's population growth since 2000 consists of increases in foreign-born residents, and that does not take into account the U.S.-born children of these new Minnesotans.⁴⁵ In a region where slow population growth rates (and, in some places, population declines) are limiting economic growth and tax revenue, this is a competitive advantage, albeit a fragile one. Minnesota's future is much brighter if it extends high-quality educational opportunities to all of its students, including DLLs.

It's just hugely impressive that we have legislation like that in the state, but it needs to be implemented. We don't feel, as DLL teachers and DLL pre-service educators, that that is being done...A lot of the pre-service educators that I know have never heard of the LEAPS Act, have no idea what it is.

*— Amy Marie Hewett-Olatunde,
Award-winning Minnesota DLL teacher and
Hamline University professor*

In sum, Minnesota's story is complicated. On the one hand, the state has considerable advantages: it has strong schools full of a growing, young population of diverse students. It has a history of welcoming and integrating immigrants and refugees, and a longstanding commitment to equitable funding of public education. On the other, Minnesota's growing diversity is challenging the state's education leaders to think differently about teacher training, assessment, instructional strategies, and much more. What is more, Minnesota's strong educational

reputation (and above-average aggregate academic performance) can make it hard for advocates to raise these concerns in public discourse. Depending on one's perspective, this situation is a hidden crisis—or an opportunity.

For these reasons, it has taken policymakers years to make changes to Minnesota's DLL policies and practices. This may also reflect the fact that Minnesota state legislators are a far less diverse group than the students in the state's schools. In 2016, out of 201 representatives and senators, only three are African American, five Hispanic, two Native American, and one Asian American.⁴⁶

And yet, an even less diverse 2014 Minnesota legislature passed the LEAPS Act, a law that, in many ways, is model legislation for state policymakers across the country. The law enshrines key educational strategies for supporting DLLs' linguistic and academic development. It improves schools' data on DLLs' achievement, makes DLLs' development a priority for teacher and administrator preparation, establishes DLLs' families as important partners for schools, and weaves DLLs into the state's existing systems for raising educational achievement.

Work remains. Many of the LEAPS Act's core provisions have not yet been implemented. Award-winning Minnesota DLL teacher and Hamline University professor Amy Marie Hewett-Olatunde says, "it's just hugely impressive that we have legislation like that in the state, but it needs to be implemented. We don't feel, as DLL teachers and DLL pre-service educators, that that is being done...A lot of the pre-service educators that I know have never heard of the LEAPS Act, have no idea what it is."⁴⁷

Still, the LEAPS Act remains a considerable achievement. This paper explores the law's genesis, design, and implementation with an eye to supporting that work, and sharing lessons with policymakers around the country.

DESIGNING AND PASSING LEAPS: TWO LEGISLATORS “SEIZE THE OPPORTUNITY”

When asked about LEAPS’ genesis, Minnesota State Senator Patricia Torres Ray speaks with a mixture of pride, expertise, and—even still—a bit of astonishment. “We got away with it,” she says, because “we just took it on. We knew people and had a network. We had been having these conversations for so long.”⁴⁸ In the 2013–14 legislative session, Torres Ray joined with Minnesota House Representative Carlos Mariani Rosa to “seize the opportunity” to significantly shift how DLLs are educated in Minnesota schools. Both recognized DLLs as a quickly-growing and critically-underserved population. It was “the perfect issue” for them, she said, and it came at precisely the right time. There were a number of reasons to move at that particular moment, but both Torres Ray and Mariani Rosa identify one variable in the political calculus as critical: that session, they each wound up as the respective education committee chairs in the Minnesota Senate and House of Representatives.⁴⁹

Both Mariani Rosa and Torres Ray credit educators for helping shape the LEAPS Act. Torres Ray says that the state’s policies and funding were “very outdated,” despite rapid growth in Minnesota’s DLL population (in urban and rural areas alike).⁵⁰ So, as they developed the bill’s content, Torres Ray

and Mariani Rosa “asked around,” says Mariani Rosa, speaking with “an ever-widening circle of experts, advocates, and parent groups, including the Latino, Asian, and East African communities.”⁵¹ They also reached out to interest groups in the state, including the teachers union and reform-minded organizations such as the Minnesota Campaign for Achievement Now (MinnCAN).⁵²

That was not all. While many of the LEAPS Act’s provisions were designed to provide opportunities for DLLs, Torres Ray and Mariani Rosa also included provisions to extend multilingual opportunities to Minnesota’s native English-speaking students. “We coupled the interests of [DLLs] with the interests of young native-English speaking Minnesotans,” says Mariani Rosa.⁵³ In the months of drafting, negotiating, and shepherding the bill through the legislature, he made a point of stressing that the bill provided more equitable opportunities for DLLs *and* offered long-term advantages to *all* students, whatever their native languages.⁵⁴

Torres Ray and Mariani Rosa started from a simple, guiding principle: DLLs’ native languages are key assets in any effort to raise their academic achievement. The law applies this principle to

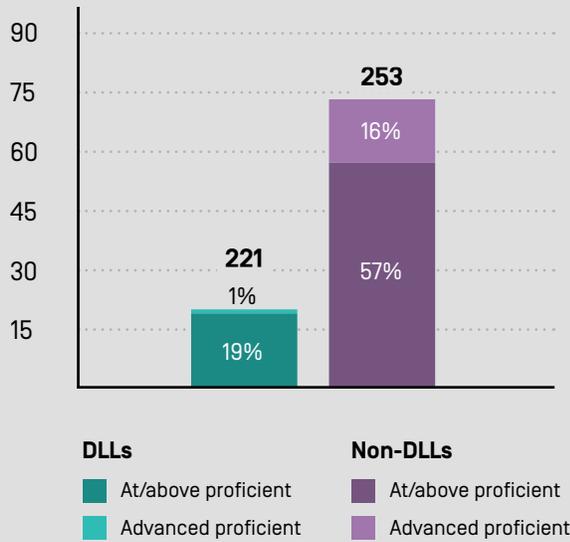
reform multiple elements of the state's education system, from teacher and administrator training to assessments, accountability, strategic planning, professional development, and family engagement rules and resources. Above all, Torres Ray noted, it moved Minnesota closer to requiring that state funds for DLLs support educational practices that are actually effective for these students.⁵⁵

By the time the bill passed in May 2014, it had bipartisan support. And yet Torres Ray and Mariani Rosa both note that the legislative victory was less a victorious culmination than a substantive setting of the stage for the much more consequential implementation process.⁵⁶ The law's many new provisions require significant decisions and actions by organizations and individuals working at all levels of Minnesota's education system. The success of the LEAPS Act will hinge on how these different pieces come together, and whether resources are made available to support the changes. Estimates suggest that full implementation of the law would take around \$6 million in annual funding.⁵⁷ It has not yet received any significant material support.

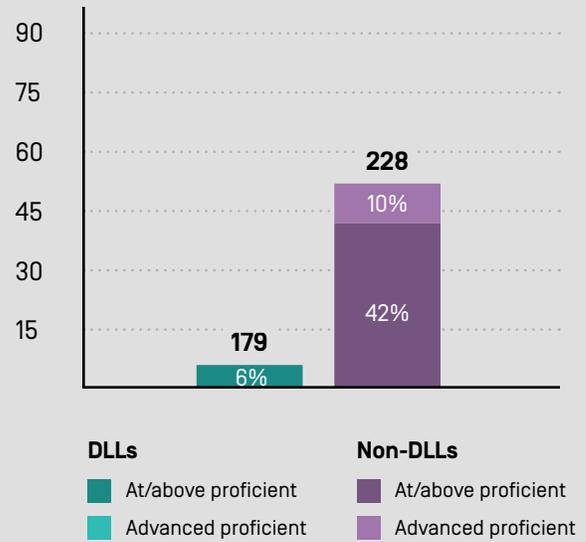
As is often the case in policymaking, there is considerable distance between LEAPS' priorities and the ensuing series of steps (and resources) it takes to make those priorities matter for children in classrooms. For instance, the LEAPS Act asks the Minnesota Board of Teaching to require that teachers renewing their licenses have "further preparation in English language development and specially designed content instruction in English for [DLLs]."⁵⁸ Nearly a year after LEAPS became law, the board published their version of the new requirement, noting that, since the state's "electronic reporting system" for tracking teachers' in-service training was not set up to track professional development related to DLLs, renewing candidates would be required to provide "their own assessment of professional growth" in these areas.⁵⁹ It will not be clear for some years whether this approach will be sufficiently consequential to ensure that teachers continue to grow new expertise for helping DLLs succeed. For now, it is simply evidence that the LEAPS Act's real impact on DLLs' opportunities is still very much to be decided.⁶⁰

Figure 4 | Minnesota DLL Statistics

Average 2015 NAEP Math Performance⁶¹



Average 2015 NAEP Reading Performance⁶¹



Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) Results, 2016⁶²

	Meets/Exceeds 3rd Grade Math	Meets/Exceeds 3rd Grade Reading
White	79.4%	66.7%
Hispanic	47.1%	35.0%
Asian American/Pacific Islander	63.1%	51.9%
African American	42.9%	34.1%
Native American	50.5%	37.1%
Dual Language Learners	37.2%	24.0%

Note: Students formally classified as DLLs are, by definition, those students whose English language abilities are not yet sufficient to allow them to demonstrate their full skills and knowledge on assessments in that language. When a DLL reaches her state's definition of English proficiency, she exits the DLL group. At that point—as her English abilities should cease to impede her ability to score well on these assessments—her math and reading test scores no longer count towards the average performance of her state's DLL group. Achievement gaps between DLLs and non-DLLs offer useful information, but should always be approached with that fact in mind. For more on this issue—and Minnesota's policy reforms—see the "Ongoing DLL Reform in Minnesota: Total English Learners Policies" sidebar on page 22.

THE DESIGN OF THE LEAPS ACT: A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO DLLS' EDUCATION

The gap between Minnesota's supposed homogeneity and the real, growing diversity in its schools is certainly a function of the lag time involved in changing public awareness. However, it is also the result of limited data on linguistically diverse students in the state. In Minnesota communities without much experience serving DLLs, many educators struggle to recognize these students, their skills, and their unique needs.⁶³

This knowledge gap has challenged American educators for decades. In some states, students with "Spanish surnames" were routinely assigned to segregated schools well into the 20th century, regardless of their actual language backgrounds or educational needs.⁶⁴ Variations on this practice have continued for years. DLLs in "English-only" states (such as Arizona and Massachusetts) are regularly removed from academic instruction to learn English in so-called "ESL pullout" courses. Families in communities across the country report being pressured by educators and administrators to turn down their students' rights to language services. In other situations, families recognize their schools' language services as so resoundingly ineffective that they actively try to hide their children's native languages from schools.⁶⁵

Today, almost every effort to improve DLLs' educational opportunities and achievement aims to improve how DLLs are: identified in schools, targeted for high-quality language services, and supported with resources adequate to support their growth. The LEAPS Act addresses these challenges in a variety of ways. The law's reforms fall into three general categories:

1. improving school, district, and state data on DLLs' languages, skills, and knowledge
2. improving teachers' and administrators' abilities to build on DLLs' strengths to support long-term academic success
3. improving schools' communication and engagement with DLLs' families

A Better View: Improving the System by Broadening the Data

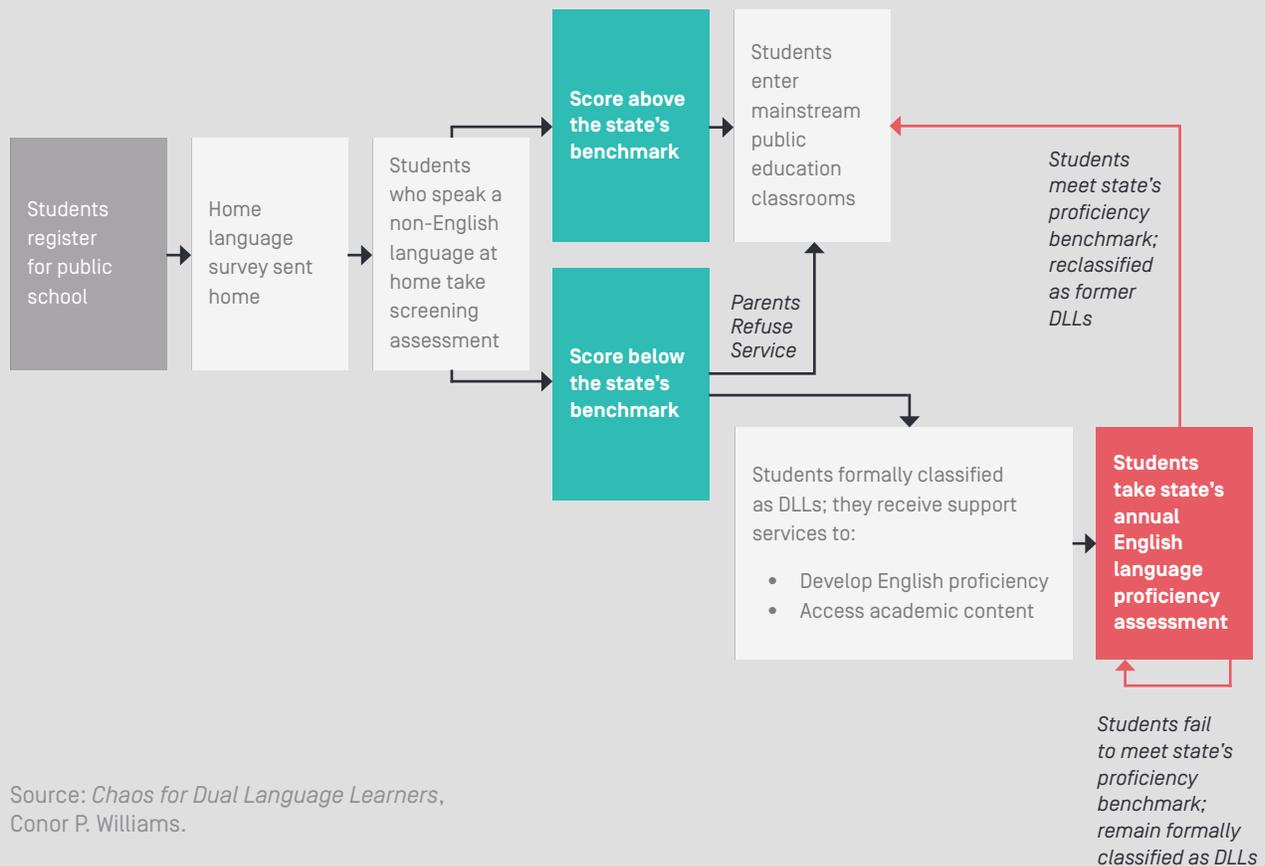
Policy reforms to better serve DLLs generally begin with a central tension: figuring out how to meet the needs of DLLs with *many* linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds in order to raise

their achievement as measured against *common* academic standards. That is, these reforms begin with standardized, universal achievement objectives and then seek to differentiate supports for DLLs' non-standard linguistic backgrounds. It can be difficult to design policies that hold consistently rigorous standards for such a diverse subgroup. For instance, a newly-arrived, seven-year-old native Spanish speaker with strong Spanish literacy skills and two parents who have obtained advanced post-secondary degrees will have different educational skills and needs than an American-born eight-year-old who speaks a Somali Bantu language at home,

has limited early literacy skills, and lives with a single parent who is a first-generation immigrant refugee in the U.S.

It can be difficult to design policies that support DLLs' diverse needs and establish fair oversight of their ongoing progress and achievement. Any fair allocation of resources and accountability for outcomes will need to take a fine-grained, differentiated approach to the DLL subgroup. And these sorts of nuanced, detailed policies are impossible to design—let alone implement—without good, comprehensive data on DLLs.

Figure 5 | The Reclassification Process for Dual Language Learners



All states are collecting *some* data on DLLs’ linguistic and academic trajectories. Since Congress’ 2002 passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), states have been required to screen all students’ language backgrounds in order to identify those that may need extra support to become proficient in English. In most states, the resulting process generally begins with a survey asking families to report what languages they speak at home. Students whose families report that they speak a language other than English then take an English language screener, such as the WIDA-ACCESS Placement Test (W-APT). Those who score below a state-defined benchmark are formally “classified” as DLLs (though state terms vary from “Limited English Proficient” to “English Learner,” “English Language Learner,” “English as a Second Language,” or “Emergent Bilingual Learner”).

Students classified as DLLs then generate additional federal and (usually) state resources for their schools and/or districts; these dollars are intended to fund language support services that help them to learn English and access academic content. Each year, DLLs take an assessment to measure their English language proficiency levels. When they score proficient on this assessment (as defined by their state), they are generally “reclassified” as former DLLs and they cease to receive formal language support services. States generally monitor former DLLs’ performance for two years to gauge whether they are truly prepared to leave language support services.

The 2015 replacement of NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) essentially maintains this structure (see **Figure 5**). (Note that some states require DLLs to meet other expectations in addition to demonstrating proficiency on an English language proficiency assessment before they can be reclassified. For more on this specific issue, see New America’s 2014 paper, [Chaos for Dual Language Learners: An Examination of State Policies for Exiting Children from Language Services in the PreK–3rd Grades](#).)

This system of classification was a considerable improvement on the data-light status quo that prevailed in American schools before NCLB, but it has a glaring flaw: it provides schools with little to no information on DLLs’ native language abilities. In this system, a seven-year-old native Vietnamese speaker with no previous formal education and limited literacy skills may well appear to have the same needs as a seven-year-old native Mandarin Chinese speaker with extensive reading experience and advanced literacy skills in her native language.

The LEAPS Act reforms many portions of Minnesota’s education system to improve this basic classification-support-reclassification process for DLLs. It requires that districts collect better and more comprehensive data on what DLLs know and can do in all of their languages, and that they use that information to guide local literacy plans, family engagement strategies, professional development opportunities, and resource allocation. DLL advocates frequently talk about viewing students’ native languages as assets, but it is not always clear what concrete actions they want schools to take to make that a reality. By contrast, LEAPS asks districts to annually assess DLLs’ literacy progress in their native languages—as well as in English—as part of Minnesota’s goal of getting all students proficient in reading by third grade.⁶⁶

This reflects the growing research consensus that DLLs have unique language acquisition patterns. The Center for Early Care and Education Research recently summarized the state of the field, writing, “strong evidence indicates DLLs have two separate language systems from very early in life [and] the two languages influence each other.”⁶⁷ These parallel systems interact, overlap, and reinforce one another in different ways—and these patterns appear to vary depending on the structures, similarities, and dissimilarities of the multiple languages in a student’s life. That is, a native Hmong speaker who is developing in that language while learning English will probably have different advantages and challenges in her second language acquisition process than a native French speaker who is doing the same thing.⁶⁸

In other words, DLLs' literacy skills in their native languages can help them to develop strong literacy skills in English.⁶⁹ Thus, knowledge of these native language skills could be useful for educators and administrators making instructional choices for these students. Since schools rarely have information about DLLs' abilities in languages other than English, LEAPS asks districts to begin annually collecting these data "where practicable."⁷⁰

These annual literacy assessments are a tangible way of raising the prominence of DLLs' native languages in Minnesota schools. What is more, LEAPS builds native languages into a number of state oversight mechanisms. For instance, Minnesota requires all districts to develop literacy plans "to have every child reading at or above grade level no later than the end of grade three," as well as a comprehensive, long-term strategic plan to create "the world's best workforce."⁷¹ LEAPS specifically

Minnesota's Multilingual Seals

LEAPS also established and refined PreK–12 incentives that raise the value of multilingualism in Minnesota schools. Since 2009, the state has offered "world language proficiency certificates" to students who demonstrate intermediate proficiency in a non-English language at the end of their schooling.⁷⁷ In 2014, LEAPS expanded the program to recognize students who reach "functional native proficiency" in one or more languages "in addition to English."⁷⁸ Students who demonstrate full proficiency by their high school graduation—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—in both English and another language receive a "Seal of Bilingualism" with their diplomas. Students who reach this level in English and two (or more) other languages are awarded a "Seal of Multilingualism." Students who receive these seals are also eligible to receive college credit at Minnesota colleges and universities for their demonstrated multilingualism.⁷⁹

These changes aligned the state's multilingual incentives with the national "Seal of Biliteracy" movement.⁸⁰ These seals push reforms through several theories of change. First, they can motivate students to learn and develop proficiency in multiple languages. In Minnesota, and about half of U.S. states, these seals offer recognition and tangible rewards for multilingualism.⁸¹ Second, they provide an end-of-course objective that encourages PreK–12 education systems to see their DLLs' native languages as possible assets and to incorporate access to multilingual instruction throughout the elementary and secondary years. Third, the seals provide a positive reinforcement mechanism to align the interests of students whose first language is not English and students who are native English speakers. The seals recognize proficiency in every language—including English—which can help students, teachers, administrators, and policymakers to treat DLLs' native languages as valuable assets.

The state's rewards for multilingual students have continued to attract legislative attention: a year after LEAPS was passed, the Minnesota legislature expanded the seal's tier system: lower levels of intermediate proficiency earn the world language proficiency certificate, higher levels of intermediate proficiency earn a "Gold" seal, and advanced proficiency levels earn a "Platinum" seal. Each tier can earn a student college credits, up to four semesters worth for those earning the Platinum seal. The program is popular—and prestigious. To date, Minnesota has awarded over 200 of the seals, about half of which were "Gold," and half "Platinum."⁸²

directs districts to collect, monitor, and improve DLLs' achievement and native language literacy data in these plans. It also requires that districts share data from these native language assessments with Minnesota's Department of Education (MDE).⁷²

LEAPS also sets new data requirements at the state level. It asks the MDE to publish a wider array of growth measures for DLLs, including both English and native language metrics (when available).⁷³ It further requires MDE leadership to build a fuller, more accurate picture of DLLs' achievement by developing better metrics and measurement tools beyond those currently in use.⁷⁴

In addition, LEAPS raises the profile of DLLs' language development in Minnesota's early learning programs. Specifically, it requires that early education programs provide evidence that they offer—and share—data that will allow families “to monitor the program's impact” on students' development and proficiency in both English and their native languages.⁷⁵ Programs cannot give parents these data unless they collect it, of course, so LEAPS also requires pre-K providers to screen all students' “language skills” when they enter and exit these programs.⁷⁶

From Vision to Action: Improving System Capacity

Of course, difficult as it will be to implement, the collection of clearer, more comprehensive data on DLLs' linguistic and academic development is still only a first step towards better outcomes for these students. This new information is functionally impotent unless educators and administrators are prepared—and empowered—to respond constructively to what they learn. That is, data can illuminate the contours of present challenges and opportunities, but they are silent on the question of “what is to be done in the future?” In the hands of educators whose professional expertise has been developed primarily through work with monolingual, native English-speaking students, new DLL data are likely to be confusing. Two “problems

for having full implementation of [the LEAPS] Act,” Amy Marie Hewett-Olatunde told us, are Minnesota's “very few teachers of color and very low cultural competence across the education system.”⁸³

Much of the state's language diversity growth is in the early years, not because of a rush of non-English-speaking teenagers moving into the state. The adults working in Minnesota's classrooms and administrative offices are much more likely to be white, native English speakers than their students. Approximately one in three Minnesota students is from an AAPI, Hispanic, African American, or Native American background. For teachers, that number is around one in *twenty-five*.⁸⁴

Furthermore, many Minnesota educators' pre-service preparation is far in the past. Over 85 percent of the state's teachers are over 30 years old.⁸⁵ This means that a significant number of teachers completed the bulk of their training years, or even decades, ago. Given the pace of research on language acquisition patterns (and on educational strategies for supporting DLLs), even if teachers received DLL-specific preparation, much of this training may now be out of date.⁸⁶

Any effort to shift how DLLs are educated must include changes to the initial and ongoing training that teachers receive. In polls, high numbers of teachers report feeling underprepared to effectively teach DLLs.⁸⁷ National data suggest that teachers are considerably less likely to have professional development opportunities related to DLLs. A survey by the U.S. Department of Education found that just 26.8 percent of teachers participated in professional development on teaching DLLs during the 2011–12 school year. By comparison, 67.2 percent received training on using computers for teaching, and 42.5 percent had sessions on student discipline.⁸⁸ Few states require that teachers get specific training on DLLs' development in their initial preparation or during their classroom careers.⁸⁹ Research also suggests that a large majority of teacher training programs do not devote significant time or resources to preparing teachers to support DLLs' literacy skills.⁹⁰

The LEAPS Act approaches these challenges through several reforms. It identifies DLLs' needs as non-negotiable priorities for teacher training programs and professional development providers. It does the same for administrator training. LEAPS also raises the importance of DLLs' development in Minnesota's accountability systems. Specifically, LEAPS incorporates these students' needs into Minnesota's teacher and administrator licensure systems. The law requires that the state's Board of Teaching set new licensure requirements: "all teacher candidates must have preparation in English language development and content instruction for [DLLs]."91

Of course, teacher candidates cannot prepare to meet DLLs' needs if their training programs do not incorporate this into their coursework. So, in keeping with the new requirements, LEAPS sets new expectations for the state's teacher education programs. The law charges them with preparing their graduates "to support and accelerate [DLLs'] academic literacy, including oral academic language, and achievement in content areas in a regular classroom setting."92 The law also calls out several other priorities for state teacher licensure: training in "linguistic and cultural competencies" and strategies for using DLLs' native language abilities in literacy instruction.93

Since Minnesota schools are already full of teachers and DLLs, however, LEAPS also makes changes to Minnesota's professional development policies and systems. The law requires teachers to show evidence that they have developed additional knowledge and skills to support DLLs' growth as a condition for renewing their teaching licenses.94 LEAPS also requires local leaders to use state professional development money to help teachers—and administrators—develop "differentiated instructional strategies critical for ensuring students' long-term academic success; the means to effectively use assessment data on the academic literacy, oral academic language, and English language development of [DLLs]; and skills to support native and English language development across the curriculum."95 That is,

LEAPS makes it easier to use state professional development resources to help Minnesota educators meet the law's new requirements for license renewal.

LEAPS does not stop at incorporating DLLs' needs into teacher licensure. It makes similar changes to Minnesota's training, licensure, and professional development systems for school administrators. In order to get licensed, principal candidates must have training on "meeting the varied needs of [DLLs]...in English and, where practicable, in students' native language[s]."96 The law also updates Minnesota's continuing education requirements for principals renewing their licenses; it focuses on training administrators to build aligned schoolwide education systems that support DLLs' development.97 In order to make sure that these new training requirements show up in classrooms, the law also requires district leaders to take principals' DLL-related efforts into account at their annual performance reviews.98

LEAPS requires local leaders to incorporate DLLs' needs into local strategic thinking and planning around grade-level reading and workforce readiness.99 This helps elevate DLLs' importance for local policymakers and administrators throughout the education system. It establishes a baseline expectation that these students' needs should be a central concern in any efforts to change a district's curricula, assessments, resource distribution strategies, or instructional models.

These changes come with accountability attached. Minnesota's Department of Education is responsible for tracking the efficacy of these local plans and, in general, for monitoring local progress in improving student achievement levels. LEAPS calls out DLLs' achievement as a specific priority for districts, and weaves this achievement into Minnesota's state accountability system. That is, the state must consider a district's success with DLLs when identifying "those districts in any consecutive three-year period not making sufficient progress toward improving teaching and learning."100

Appropriately, as with the changes it makes to licensure expectations for teachers and administrators, LEAPS backs the new accountability expectations with additional resources and supports. If MDE determines that a district is struggling to meet DLLs' needs over a period of time, it can direct some of the district's state funding towards specific "strategies and practices" designed to address those.¹⁰¹ Ideally, this policy lever works in a number of ways. Obviously, it provides the state with a means to encourage better, more effective local policies and practices related to DLLs. However, it also obliges MDE to include DLLs in its mandate to "identify effective strategies, practices, and use of resources" that districts can—and should—use.¹⁰² By elevating DLLs as a specific priority for district accountability, LEAPS may prompt state education leaders to increase their department's expertise on what these students need to succeed.

Along those lines, LEAPS specifically identifies culturally-responsive teaching as a key strategy for the MDE to include in its efforts to support local districts and policymakers.¹⁰³ Culturally-responsive instructional methods are designed to support DLLs' achievement by integrating students' cultural backgrounds into linguistic and academic instruction.

Building Partners, Building on Strengths: Incorporating Families in DLL Reforms

The LEAPS Act establishes a series of measures designed to raise the profile of DLLs throughout Minnesota's education system. It creates better data metrics, prioritizes DLLs' achievement in existing accountability systems, makes training for instructing DLLs a priority for educators, and provides support mechanisms to help all levels of the system to adjust. In other words, the law builds DLLs into the education system at almost every level, from the classroom right up to the offices of the Minnesota Department of Education.

There is one big piece missing from this picture: families. So LEAPS includes a number of measures

to improve how schools communicate and engage with them.

This is a critical element in any effort to improve academic achievement. If many American educators are unaccustomed to working with DLLs, it is also true that many families of DLLs can find U.S. educational institutions difficult to understand. Families can face a number of linguistic, cultural, and logistical barriers to engaging with schools, which can make it difficult for them to work with teachers as partners supporting their children. Many DLLs come from homes where English is rarely spoken.¹⁰⁴ This can be a major stumbling block for monolingual English-speaking educators and multilingual families in communicating concerns and sharing ideas. What is more, many parents and caregivers of DLLs are immigrants who can lack experience navigating American public institutions, including school.¹⁰⁵ Finally, DLLs are more likely than their native English-speaking peers to come from households with incomes below the poverty line. This sometimes translates into unpredictable work schedules, which can make it difficult for adults to participate in outreach programming.¹⁰⁶ These hurdles can be consequential. Research suggests that DLLs with engaged, supportive parents are more successful in school.¹⁰⁷

LEAPS addresses family engagement in several ways related to DLLs. It asks districts to maintain "oral and written communication between home and school that is regular, two-way, meaningful, and in families' native language[s]."¹⁰⁸ It also pushes them to conduct school satisfaction surveys in those languages whenever possible.¹⁰⁹ In order to ensure that DLLs' families are able to participate in key education-related decisions, LEAPS also asks districts to translate community planning meetings.¹¹⁰

But this level of involvement is relatively basic. It allows greater access, but does not necessarily empower families to advocate for their children. So, as in many other sections, the law calls out DLLs' needs as a key priority. Specifically, it asks districts to "pursue community support to accelerate the academic and native literacy and achievement of

[DLLs]” as part of these workforce development plans.¹¹¹ It highlights families’ linguistic diversity as an asset in children’s linguistic and academic development, and it requires districts’ planning processes to treat it that way. It is one thing to suggest that districts should try to offer

instructional programs to support DLLs’ literacy growth in both English and their native languages (which LEAPS does), but it is quite another to insist that they recognize families’ language skills as a means of doing so.¹¹²

TODAY AND TOMORROW: EARLY IMPLEMENTATION RESULTS AND NEXT STEPS

The LEAPS Act presents a comprehensive slate of reforms to Minnesota’s education system, all in the service of improving opportunities and outcomes for dual language learners. It enshrines DLLs’ linguistic and academic development as priorities for teacher and administrator training programs, prospective teachers and administrators, district leadership, state policymakers, and educators working throughout the state. Its passage was a significant victory for Minnesota’s DLL students, multilingual families, and advocates. The law establishes Minnesota’s education policies as some of the nation’s best for multilingual students and their families.

However, the real value of any education policy reform is not determined by its passage, but by how its implementation shifts classroom practices

that drive better outcomes for students. Indeed, the mere existence of policies that prioritize DLLs is no guarantee that they will be carried out in ways that actually benefit students. The meaning of such policies depends on individuals and organizations making conscious decisions to change how they operate. Serious reforms are about setting priorities, but also about building the necessary capacity to make them actionable, as noted in our 2014 brief exploring the law’s potential implementation obstacles, [The Learning for English Academic Proficiency and Success \(LEAPS\) Act: Ensuring Faithful and Timely Implementation](#).¹¹³

For instance, a recent study found that state policies requiring all teachers to “have training to teach [DLLs]” were correlated with *lower* math and reading achievement scores for Hispanic DLLs on

the NAEP.¹¹⁴ Does this mean that teachers should not get specific preparation for supporting DLLs? Probably not. Rather, it illustrates the limits of policymaking. Prospective teachers can only get specific preparation for instructing DLLs if training programs offer these courses, and their instructional abilities will only improve if the courses available to them are focused and of high quality. Those courses will only meet that standard if they are taught by experts who can bridge cutting-edge language acquisition research and classroom strategies. Finally, theory-driven strategies will only drive better achievement outcomes for DLLs if teachers deploy them intentionally and consistently.

Teachers should be trained to work with DLLs, but improvements will only come as a consequence of *high-quality* training.

In the two years since the LEAPS Act passed, Minnesota policymakers and educators have made some initial moves to implement the law. However, education observers, DLL advocates, and policymakers all note that considerable in-state enthusiasm for the law has not yet been matched by significant actions.

Representative Sondra Erickson, who succeeded Rep. Mariani Rosa as the chair of the Minnesota

Ongoing DLL Reform in Minnesota: Total English Learners Policies

Policymakers often hear about achievement gaps between students classified as DLLs and students who are not classified (i.e., non-DLLs). But there is a problem with that framing. Once a DLL develops her English language skills to a point where she begins to perform well on math and literacy assessments, she leaves the DLL subgroup. That creates two problems with efforts to interpret achievement data. First of all, each time educators assess their DLLs, they are surveying a meaningfully different subgroup of students. Second, since students leave the DLL subgroup just as their English skills reach proficiency, the DLL subgroup's achievement scores generally remain low.

Not only does this contribute to an unfair and inaccurate narrative about language learners—i.e., that DLLs are supposedly slow to succeed and/or a drag on schools' academic performance—but it makes accountability systems problematic. Further, it makes it hard to build data-driven, rigorous expectations for students, teachers, schools, or districts.

Fortunately, there is a straightforward policy fix to this problem, and Minnesota is trying it. In 2016, the state joined Oregon, Washington, New York, and a handful of school districts in establishing a “Total English Learner” policy. The law requires the Minnesota Department of Education to collect and monitor former-DLLs' academic achievement throughout their academic careers. The new category allows for the disaggregation of achievement data of current and former DLLs. This makes it possible to see DLLs' academic performance as students move through grade levels. The law is slated to be implemented for the 2017–18 school year.¹¹⁵

Note: Portions of this sidebar were published on New America's blog, EdCentral. For the original, see Conor P. Williams, “How to Measure English Learners' Development More Accurately,” March 27, 2015, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/totalenglishlearners/>.

House of Representatives' education committee, expresses concern. She says, "we pass a lot of laws in this state that just sit on the books. They don't get honored." Comprehensive reforms are relatively easy to imagine, she says, but they are much more difficult to implement. Erickson believes that the educators and organizations most affected by the LEAPS Act are "ignoring it" so far—partly because we have "heaped so much on the plates of our teachers" over the last decade.¹¹⁶

Others agree that progress has been slow. MinnCAN's Joshua Crosson says that many people in Minnesota's education system are "eager" about LEAPS, but also "a little hesitant to put it at the top of their priority lists." He thinks that the reason the law has not yet translated into significant movement is straightforward: "The school boards, the superintendents' offices tell me, 'Yeah, LEAPS is a really good program, but without funding, we're not gonna do anything.'"¹¹⁷ Crosson and others note that the MDE has limited capacity for supporting DLLs in general and the LEAPS Act in particular.¹¹⁸ Finally, and perhaps most critically, the law imposes few consequences for inaction.

The obstacles to full and effective implementation of the LEAPS Act can be grouped into three categories.

First, as is often the case, LEAPS' many new priorities have yet to be backed with sufficient resources. While the law contains multiple provisions charging *existing* training and funding sources with the task of supporting its new DLL-driven priorities—e.g., requiring training programs to prepare teacher candidates to work with DLLs so that they will be able to meet new licensure requirements that mandate such training—state leaders have not yet dedicated significant *new* resources or policy clarifications that could help spark these changes.

Some resource needs are simple—and general. For instance, it takes money to pay for additional personnel to provide extra implementation capacity at the state and district levels. New funding can be difficult to come by in constrained state budgets, but

it is exceedingly difficult to convert new policies into significant new educational practices without it.

Other resource needs are more specific. While LEAPS pushes DLLs' native language literacy as a key priority, it generally leaves districts with leeway contingent upon available resources. For instance, it asks districts to measure students' literacy skills in their native languages as well as in English, but only "where practicable."¹¹⁹ On the one hand, this approach is clearly reasonable; policies that impose inflexible, impossible mandates do no good for students. But on the other hand, Minnesota's particular spread of linguistic diversity means that the introduction of "practicability" considerations could undercut the provision entirely. As our 2014 implementation study noted, while viable assessment vehicles for this purpose "have recently been developed and field-tested for native Spanish-speaking [DLLs]... it will be more difficult to find reliable and valid assessments for [DLLs] with native languages that are underrepresented nationally, such as Somali or Hmong."¹²⁰ Just 40 percent of Minnesota's DLLs speak Spanish. This means that most Minnesota districts have significant proportions of DLLs with native languages that are decidedly impractical to monitor with existing assessment mechanisms. This is not just a matter of developing assessments to measure literacy for each language. Some of the most prevalent languages of Minnesota's DLLs have no standardized writing system.

Second, the pace and fidelity of LEAPS implementation have been challenged by particular aspects of the law's genesis and design. The law routes its core theory of action—more effective instruction for DLLs through better preparation and professional development for teachers—through the state's licensure system. This strategy has considerable merits: it seeks to build DLLs' needs into the core work of strong, existing, well-resourced elements of the state's education systems. If this method works, Minnesota's licensure expectations, educator training programs, and professional development sector would eventually integrate DLLs into everything that happens in the public schools.

Indeed, the law’s design bears the marks of the process that led to its passage: Rep. Mariani Rosa and Sen. Torres Ray sought input from districts, DLL advocates, union leaders, and others while drafting the bill. This is why LEAPS’ policy changes touch so many parts of the *current* system. But it also may be why the law works so thoroughly within the system; a law developed through conversations with existing participants in the system is more likely to reflect their concerns, needs, and ideas. This is not necessarily a problem. Changes that emphasize consensus building within existing stakeholder communities are often more stable, effective reforms than efforts that seek to disrupt these communities from the outside.¹²¹

But this approach also has downsides. Reforms that rely heavily on stakeholder input from within an educational system can be diluted by the process. Organizations and individuals with long experience working within that system are not always prepared to suggest or pursue aggressive new ideas that would upend the status quo. Policies developed in this way rarely include significant new external pressures to challenge the current system, since established groups generally have limited interest in submitting to new, mandatory requirements. In addition, the pursuit of consensus within the stakeholder community—and within the state legislature—can reduce the potential impact of reform proposals. Ideas favored by one constituency can be inconsistent with ideas favored by other groups, which can ultimately water down final proposals that need to satisfy all participants.

Furthermore, the institutional inertia of established educational organizations frequently slows the pace of state policy reforms. For instance, the requirement that all teacher preparation programs provide candidates with DLL-driven training depends heavily on those programs’ ability to actually provide such preparation. Some programs may lack faculty with sufficient expertise in the subject. They may lack relevant course materials and/or struggle to develop these materials in the context of their own internal bureaucracies governing graduation requirements and course

syllabi; indeed, some have suggested that this has been a key challenge for the LEAPS Act to date.¹²² In other words, new state mandates for existing training programs can be tenuous.¹²³

Thus far, observers report that LEAPS has not produced significant changes in what teachers must do to obtain initial or renewed licenses to work in Minnesota’s classrooms. Amy Marie Hewett-Olatunde is direct on this point: “I think that if it’s not explicitly written into the requirements for initial licensure, then teacher educators are not going to implement it.”¹²⁴ Nor has there been a major shift in how the state’s training programs prepare candidates for licensure.¹²⁵ It goes without saying that this renders it unlikely that LEAPS has yet produced significant changes in how teachers instruct DLLs.

With time, and—perhaps—with more resources, these changes may yet materialize. But it is not yet clear that the LEAPS Act’s mandates and accountability mechanisms are adequate to drive changes in teachers’ behavior—or in the behavior of the organizations that prepare them for the classroom. There are similar challenges throughout the law.

Third, there is little evidence that the MDE is prepared to oversee and support districts’ work implementing the law. The department has limited capacity for overseeing local professional development choices, family engagement efforts, and strategic planning.¹²⁶ In sum, LEAPS sets expectations for teachers, administrators, districts, and others in the education system, but does not necessarily provide mechanisms to ensure that they meet them.

Representative Mariani Rosa told us that the MDE has added staff capacity to support DLLs’ needs, “but [the] approach is to have that team consistently embedded across the department’s accountability and oversight functions.”¹²⁷ This organizational approach has merits; it may help MDE ensure that DLLs’ needs are taken into account in discussions about assessments, data, and other major elements of the education system. However, it is less clear

how this arrangement will lead to the effective launching and support of LEAPS' initiatives. It seems more likely that they will be lost in the shuffle. "This is the lifelong story of [DLL] education in general," says Hewett-Olatunde. "If you look at all of the issues that a lot of states face in terms of just educating students of color, the most marginalized and underserved, the ones that are gonna be left out, if someone needs to be left out, are [DLLs]."¹²⁸

What is more, LEAPS implementation began in the context of shifting federal education legislation. Just a year and a half after LEAPS became law in Minnesota, Congress replaced No Child Left Behind (NCLB) with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The new law gives states significant new freedom on data, assessment, and accountability policies related to DLLs. For instance, states are no longer required to incorporate DLLs' English language acquisition progress in their accountability systems until these students reach third grade.¹²⁹ Provisions like this are likely to give states room to rethink (for better or worse) how they educate DLLs.

However, ESSA, passed in December 2015, will not be fully implemented for some years yet. "We're still trying to sort out where ESSA's limits interact with LEAPS," says Representative Mariani Rosa.¹³⁰ Indeed, the U.S. Department of Education is still making final determinations as to how it will regulate and interpret the law's provisions. Some of these decisions could be consequential for LEAPS implementation; federal decisions could make it easier—or harder—for Minnesota's Department of Education to align LEAPS' priorities with federal efforts.

Hamline University professor Michelle Benegas suggests that Minnesota should see ESSA as

an opportunity. She told us, "recent discussion about ESSA's potential impact on our state's DLLs has largely focused on increased state control... Minnesota's education stakeholders are largely confident about how we educate DLLs, resulting in an assumption that there is little room for change under the reauthorization. This could be a missed opportunity, as we still have considerable room for improvement."¹³¹

Conversations with district leaders echo these concerns. As representatives of Minnesota's most linguistically-diverse district, administrators in St. Paul Public Schools proudly note that they worked with Mariani Rosa and Torres Ray during the design and drafting of the LEAPS Act, and appreciate that it has raised the profile of multilingualism in schools across the state. The district's 38,228 students include 12,491 DLLs, who speak 129 different languages. Fully 35 percent of St. Paul's DLLs are native Hmong-speakers and another 18 percent speak Karen as their native language.¹³²

District leaders say that DLLs are a priority in their decision-making.¹³³ All St. Paul teachers are already required to take professional development courses on language acquisition and development, and all district staff are trained on the state's English language proficiency standards. Cultural competence training is regularly made available to teachers and administrators. These sorts of commitments are likely to continue in St. Paul, regardless of how the MDE implements LEAPS. But this is not the status quo in other Minnesota districts with lower DLL enrollments—those districts that might need to make significant changes to comply with LEAPS. LEAPS implementation—or its absence—will be of major import for their students, families, and educators.¹³⁴

CONCLUSION: MINNESOTA DLLS IN MID-LEAP

The LEAPS Act's existence is the result of the intersection of a variety of factors. First, it is a response to recent, current, and future trends in the demographic makeup of Minnesota schoolhouses. Second, LEAPS took shape in response to a specific, narrow political opportunity. Third, the law reflects the concerns and interests of a broad group of Minnesota education stakeholders.

When it passed, the LEAPS Act was a major advance for Minnesota, the DLLs in its schools, and the DLL policymaking field. It made these students central to a number of the key elements of the education system, from instructional choices to graduation incentives. LEAPS prioritizes DLLs' linguistic and academic development in assessment and data systems, efforts to update teacher training programs, local and state accountability systems, and family engagement policies.

But while LEAPS lays down a number of markers showing that DLLs matter a great deal, the law's implementation is still incomplete. While the aforementioned "broad group of Minnesota education stakeholders" remains generally enthusiastic about the law, the state has yet to deliver concrete actions on most of its key provisions. Unsurprisingly, districts, administrators, teacher education programs, and teachers themselves have

generally followed the state's lead. As yet, there are limited incentives, consequences, or resources in place that would be likely to prompt them to make significant changes in how they serve DLLs.

Representative Mariani Rosa reviews says that the law, even after its passage, still needs its strong group of advocates to see the reforms through. He says,

by the time we got out into the grassroots, the bill was pretty much halfway or a third of the way through the process. Where they really helped out was to ensure that the bill continued to command the attention of legislators. There was one time when the bill almost died, in the middle of a snowstorm, and about half a dozen Latino parents showed up and essentially shamed the committee into keeping it alive. We didn't translate that into a lasting advocacy presence. It's clear to me now that we need to have that kind of presence...to really pull together a strongly-informed, consistently-committed, very multiracial and multilingual group of folks....to really turn that into an effective advocacy presence for us and into a long-term agenda.¹³⁵

The LEAPS Act is neither perfectly designed nor fully implemented. But, notes Mariani Rosa, neither

of these is the appropriate standard for judging the law. He says, “as a politician, the answer to that [challenge] is often: I’ll settle for something, because we’re dealt the cards we’re dealt. Obviously, I want to have good research that supports new approaches and new investments, but what I do know, what I feel strongly, is that the current status quo isn’t serving kids well.”¹³⁶

The LEAPS Act’s passage was an important step towards extending better educational opportunities to dual language learners in classrooms across the state. While some may see full implementation of the act as a difficult challenge, or as a solution to schools’ failures, LEAPS is better understood as a key part of retaining Minnesota’s demographic advantages in the Midwest. While other states in the region are struggling with sluggish growth rates and aging populations, Minnesota’s population trends are a considerable resource. From 2010 to 2015, Minnesota’s population grew 17.5 times faster than Illinois’, 8.75 times faster than Michigan’s, 5 times faster than Ohio’s, and more than twice as fast as Wisconsin’s.¹³⁷ Minnesota’s demographic strength here is partly due to its ability to attract and retain immigrants better than its neighbors do. Their children present an important opportunity for the state.¹³⁸

The multilingual children in Minnesota classrooms today will make up increasingly large sections of the state’s future labor force. The state’s economic competitiveness is linked to their prospects, and their future success is inextricably tied to the education they get today. Full implementation of the LEAPS Act would make it more likely that these DLLs will reach full English proficiency while retaining their native language abilities as well. These students will be more likely to succeed throughout their academic careers, and will provide the state with a highly-skilled workforce that also happens to be multilingual and multicultural.

Full LEAPS implementation would also help Minnesota provide a measure of continuity with its past. That is, it would offer a welcoming, plural community for these students today, just as it did for the German Americans, Norwegian Americans,

Swedish Americans, and others who arrived in the state many decades ago. What could be more homespun, more American, and more Minnesotan than that?

Lessons Learned

Like all pieces of legislation, the Learning for English Academic Proficiency and Success Act provides both useful guidance—and cautions—for state policymakers. Here are some recommendations to highlight effective elements of the LEAPS Act’s design, but also to indicate potential pitfalls:

- 1. Implementation matters at least as much as policy design, but implementation is always a function of time—and resources.** More than two years after the LEAPS Act’s passage, many of its provisions are still being worked out in Minnesota’s regulatory bodies. Progress has been slowed by limited state capacity and limited resources to support changes throughout the state’s education system. While some of these limitations will be overcome if the state continues working on rolling out the law for an extended period of time, it is likely that full, effective implementation will require a serious commitment of LEAPS-dedicated resources.
- 2. Better, more comprehensive DLL data are a prerequisite for better DLL instruction and better policies.** It is impossible to improve opportunities and achievement for DLLs without getting a clear view of these students’ needs and abilities. Better data on DLLs’ native language skills are particularly valuable for informing instruction and for raising the value of multilingualism. Minnesota’s new “Total English Learners” policy should help in this regard.

Caution: Some of the LEAPS Act’s key provisions—such as requiring districts to collect data on DLL native language literacy skills—appear to be too difficult for many districts to meaningfully implement with current resources.

3. Better DLL instruction requires systemic shifts in expectations for educators. Shifts in expectations must be matched by roughly-commensurate levels of support. Many teachers need effective training on how to best support DLLs' learning. The LEAPS Act builds training on teaching DLLs into initial and ongoing training, and reassigns some current resources to ensure that these new expectations are meaningful.

Caution: The LEAPS Act aims to give these new expectations teeth by incorporating them into Minnesota's teacher licensure requirements, but the legislative text has not yet been converted into specific, actionable regulations that will drive changes in the substance of training programs, let alone the details of teachers' behavior.

4. New state policies should reflect the fact that DLLs' native languages are key to their long-term success. Research strongly suggests that native language abilities can be valuable for long-term academic success, including in the acquisition of English. LEAPS aims to make these languages more visible—and important—to educators and schools.

Caution: While LEAPS incorporates DLLs' native languages into many parts of Minnesota's education system, many of its changes are limited to cases where measurement of this proficiency is "practicable." In many cases, these changes are being interpreted as optional.

5. Positive incentives—like Minnesota's bilingual and multilingual seals—can help DLLs by encouraging more multilingualism in schools. Policies that provide recognition for students who can demonstrate proficient multilingualism can link DLLs' needs with the interests of native English-speakers. To that end, LEAPS establishes voluntary seals of bilingualism and multilingualism. These aim to enhance the diplomas of multilingual high school graduates (and even provide free college credits), whether their native tongue is English or a different

language. Observers note that this appears to be the most popular and fully-implemented portion of the LEAPS Act.

6. Reforms to extend better opportunities to DLLs should include efforts to engage their families. Families are critical to DLLs' academic success, but policy reforms do not always include them. By contrast, the LEAPS Act requires districts to include DLLs' families in communications and planning processes.

Caution: While LEAPS sets new DLL family engagement priorities for districts, it does not provide particularly clear mechanisms for ensuring that districts undertake these new tasks. Furthermore, the state has limited capacity for monitoring compliance.

7. Policymaking is always a function of politics. The LEAPS Act was a result of a combination of political opportunity and substantive effort. That is, it was partly the product of many discussions and significant stakeholder involvement, and partly the good fortune of having the legislature's education committees simultaneously chaired by two policymakers with strong interest in the issue. Furthermore, LEAPS garnered support because it worked within existing elements of Minnesota's education system and connected the interests of multiple constituencies (e.g. DLLs and native English-speaking students). While political choices (and political limits) shape policymaking, they can also undermine its efficacy. The LEAPS Act reforms many parts of Minnesota's education system, but most of its provisions are general, partly as a result of the consensus-building strategy that led to its passage. Many of these request (or imply a request for) actions on the part of different organizations in that system. To date, Minnesota's Department of Education and Board of Teaching have not yet made the LEAPS Act's broad, general language specific or consequential enough to get teachers, administrators, districts, and training programs to make changes.

Appendix: Key LEAPS Act Provisions

Improving school, district, and state data on DLLs' languages, skills, and knowledge.	Improving teachers' and administrators' abilities to build on DLLs' strengths to support long-term academic success.	Improving schools' communication and engagement with DLLs' families.
<p>Requires early education programs to conduct comprehensive screenings on kids' language skills. [Sec. 124D.15, Subd. 3]</p>	<p>Requires districts to use assessment data to inform professional development choices, with an eye to helping elementary teachers implement literacy and oral language development strategies that support DLL growing bilingualism. [Sec. 120B.12, Subd. 4]</p>	<p>Requires early literacy programs to communicate with families in ways that allow them to see how their programs help DLL students acquire English and (ideally) develop in their native languages. [Sec. 119A.50, Subd. 3]</p>
<p>Incorporates regular literacy assessments in DLLs' native languages (where practicable) into the state's third grade reading law. Requires that districts report these data to the state. [Sec. 120B.12, Subd. 2]</p>	<p>Requires Minnesota's regional centers of excellence to incorporate culturally-responsive training into their English language proficiency and academic instruction technical assistance programs for districts. [Sec. 120B.115]</p>	<p>Requires districts to annually send literacy strategies to families with DLLs reading below grade level. These strategies should be tailored to getting DLLs proficient in reading in all languages they speak. [Sec. 120B.12, Subd. 2a]</p>
<p>Requires the state to report English language growth, academic growth, and native language growth for DLLs in multilingual instruction programs. [Sec. 120B.35, Subd. 3(b)(2)]</p>	<p>Requires the Minnesota Board of Teaching to set new requirements that ensure that all new and renewing candidates for teacher licensure have DLL-specific preparation in English language development and academic instruction. Also requires training in cultural competency. [Sec. 122A.09 (g)]</p>	<p>Encourages districts to set family engagement policies that require communication in families' native languages. [Sec. 124D.8955 (a)(1)]</p>
<p>Requires the state to consult with experts to improve assessments in use, assessment policies, data metrics, and data policies related to DLLs. [Sec. 120B.35, Subd. 3 (f)]</p>	<p>Requires administrator preparation programs to incorporate training on meeting DLLs' needs in both native languages and English. [Sec. 122A.14, Subd. 2]</p>	<p>Requires local committees advising districts on their grade-level reading and college- and career-readiness plans to translate community meetings when practicable. [Sec. 120B.11, Subd. 3]</p>
<p>Updates Minnesota's school report cards to include native language academic literacy and oral language proficiency where practicable. [Sec. 120B.36, Subd. 1 (e)].</p>	<p>Requires ongoing school administrator training courses to include information on building schoolwide systems for supporting DLLs. [Sec. 122A.14, Subd. 3]</p>	<p>Requires local committees advising districts on their grade-level reading and college- and career-readiness plans to engage the community to support DLLs' academic success and growth in both languages. [Sec. 120B.11, Subd. 3] [Cf. Sec. 124D.59, Subd. 2 and 2a]</p>

Improving school, district, and state data on DLLs' languages, skills, and knowledge.	Improving teachers' and administrators' abilities to build on DLLs' strengths to support long-term academic success.	Improving schools' communication and engagement with DLLs' families.
Establishes DLLs with interrupted formal education as a subgroup for data collection purposes. [Sec. 124D.59, Subd. 2a]	Requires teacher education programs to prepare all teacher candidates to foster DLLs' academic and linguistic development in mainstream classrooms. [Sec. 122A.18, Subd. 2 (d)]	Requires districts to conduct community satisfaction surveys in the native languages of DLLs' families when practicable. [Sec. 120B.11, Subd. 7]
Strengthens commissioner's authority to direct districts chronically struggling with DLL performance to use state funds to address these challenges. [Sec. 120B.11, Subd. 9]	Requires teacher education programs to prepare all teacher candidates to use DLLs' native languages as resources "in creating effective differentiated instructional strategies for [DLLs'] developing literacy skills." [Sec. 122A.18, Subd. 2a (a)]	Enhances the Minnesota World Language Proficiency Certificates program and establishes state seals of bilingualism and multilingualism. [Sec. 120B.022, Subd. 1a, Sec. 120B.022, Subd. 1b]
Defines "cultural competence" as "the ability and will to interact effectively with people of different cultures, native languages, and socioeconomic backgrounds." [Sec. 120B.30, Subd. 1(l)].	Repeals state law preventing bilingual/ESL teachers from being hired to establish a new bilingual/ESL program if their hiring would result in replacement of currently-employed teachers. [Sec. 122A.19, Subd. 3].	
	Requires school boards to use state professional development resources to help DLLs' teachers support student academic development, build DLLs' skills in both English and their home languages, and analyze assessment data to drive instruction. [Sec. 122A.60, Subd. 1a (8)]	
	Requires districts to include principals' roles in supporting better DLL instruction into principal evaluations. [Sec. 123B.147, Subd. 3 (b)]	
	Encourages districts to implement multilingual instructional approaches for DLLs. [Sec. 122A.06, Subd. 4]	
	Incorporates DLLs' academic progress, English language development, and—when practicable—DLLs' native language development into local plans for preparing students for college and careers. [Sec. 120B.11, Subd. 2 (4)]	

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