

*Transforming Early Childhood Education for Dual Language Learners:*

# A Theory of Change

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## DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Despite increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in our communities, our education system and workforce is under-prepared to serve dual language learners (DLLs), resulting in inequitable educational experiences for children. In early childhood education, this can contribute towards a readiness gap at kindergarten entry. This gap widens as children grow, yielding vastly different life and learning outcomes for DLL students.

In response to this challenge, San Mateo County's Early Childhood Language Development Institute (ECLDI) aims to ensure that early learning professionals are skilled in and committed to...

- preserving and encouraging children's home languages and cultures,
- developing teaching and learning supports for dual language learning,
- creating early learning experiences, practices, and policies that are culturally and linguistically relevant, and

- cultivating meaningful connections with families of DLLs

... in order to promote quality early learning experiences that lay the foundation for DLLs' academic and life success.

## RESOURCES

ECLDI draws on its location within the San Mateo County Office of Education for structural support and access to local early childhood education programs, leaders, and initiatives. ECLDI's skilled bilingual and bicultural staff also bring deep knowledge of the San Mateo County early childhood education field and dual language learner community.

## STRATEGIES

ECLDI engages multi-tiered strategies that work together to transform early childhood education in San Mateo County. These strategies reflect an understanding of the child as embedded within an ecosystem of family, school, and community contexts. Effecting quality educational experiences for DLL children requires strategic efforts across all levels.



### ► System Level Strategies (County and Institute)

ECLDI strategically engages in efforts to shift the county-wide culture and policy context to support DLLs.

#### ***This includes:***

- advocating for integrating culturally and linguistically responsive practices and transformational family engagement strategies into early learning policies and planning, and
- facilitating county-wide professional learning and development related to DLL practices and strategies.<sup>1</sup>
- Additionally, ECLDI engages with field research to ensure consistently relevant content and to support organizational learning.

### ► Setting Level Strategies (Program and Teacher)

ECLDI partners with program leaders and teachers to integrate new policies, strategies, and practices into the classroom.

#### ***This includes:***

- coaching for program leaders to reflect on current practices and opportunities to grow, and
- facilitating trainings and professional learning communities for teaching teams to introduce new strategies and practices.

By partnering with programs to identify needs, introduce new resources, and structure time for team discussions, ECLDI provides ongoing, collaborative, and content-focused professional development.

### ► Individual Level Strategies (Family and Child)

In tandem with the professional development offered to teaching staff, ECLDI also offers opportunities for learning and leadership for families.

#### ***This includes:***

- a training series for families on dual language learning, and family-school partnerships, and
- support for program sites to offer Parent/Family Cafés, a strength-based initiative to facilitate community-building, support family leadership skills, and enhance school-family connections.

These strategies reflect an understanding of the child as **embedded within an ecosystem** of family, school, and community. Changes in one context directly connect to the others.

Outcomes at each level flow together to drive change for DLL children and their families. Over time, they **deepen and multiply** to foster equitable, high-quality early learning experiences.

## OUTCOMES

These strategies work together and can have a cascading effect across levels and over time to drive change for DLL children and their families. Shifts at the system level can affect changes in program policy. Program policy and support for new practices and strategies can affect teacher knowledge and skills. Teacher knowledge and skills are critical to providing quality early learning experiences for DLL children and their families.

### ◆ County and Institute Level

**ECLDI aims to effect system-level change at the county and Institute level.**

#### ***ECLDI works to achieve:***

- local accountability frameworks and initiatives that include DLL goals, practices, and strategies,
- county educational leadership that become champions of DLL practices and strategies, and
- institute content and strategies that align with broader early learning initiatives and frameworks.

#### ***Leading to:***

- a shared understanding of and commitment to DLL practices, strategies, and policies among early learning professionals and leaders in San Mateo County, and
- continually relevant content and increasingly effective mechanisms to support DLL practices and strategies.

### ◆ Program and Teacher Level

**At the program and classroom level, ECLDI aims to effect outcomes for program leadership and teaching staff.**

#### ***ECLDI supports Program Leadership to:***

- increase understanding of program strengths and needs in relation to DLL practices and strategies,
- create or enhance planning and reflection time for teaching teams, and
- develop program-wide vision and plan for DLL practices and strategies.

#### ***Leading to:***

- implementation of a program-wide vision and plan for DLL practices and strategies.



**ECLDI supports Teaching Staff to:**

- develop foundational skills, attitudes, and beliefs to support dual language learning.
- actively learn about the families in their program (e.g., language, culture, background, interests, strengths, etc.),
- incorporate materials and experiences into the classroom that reflect the languages and cultures of children and families served,
- encourage children and families to develop and preserve home languages,
- consider adapting practices that respond to different cultural norms and values, and
- begin to refer families to relevant opportunities for enrichment, development, and leadership at the school/community.

**Leading to:**

- deeper understanding of how culture matters to and manifests in early learning experiences,
- early learning experiences and practices that are more reflective of the languages and cultures of children and families served,
- stronger teacher-child and teacher-family interactions, and
- an active role in cultivating family leadership.

**► Family and Child Level**

**Together, these shifts in school, classroom, and county context work to support the following outcomes for families and children.**

**When children are in Pre-K,**

**Families:**

- feel an increased sense of their own cultural identity, value, and pride,
- are inspired to actively participate in classroom and school activities, and
- have access to opportunities to build leadership and advocacy skills.

**When children are in Pre-K,**

**Children:**

- are encouraged and motivated to speak their native language without reservation,
- experience stronger connections with their peers, teachers, and school, and
- are more engaged with learning.

**When children enter elementary school,**

**Families:**

- have an increased sense of belonging in their child's classroom and school community,
- are more skilled in fostering positive relationships with teachers, and
- are better poised to be leaders and advocates in their children's education.

**When children enter elementary school,**

**Children:**

- enter kindergarten better poised for future academic success, having had quality early learning experiences,
- experience deeper connection to family and community, contributing to a stronger sense of identity and greater resilience,
- are more likely to preserve home language and remain bilingual, and
- are more likely to embrace diversity.





## NECESSARY CONDITIONS

For ECLDI strategies and activities to yield the desired outcomes, there are a number of critical conditions that must be met.

1. Program directors view ECLDI as important (e.g., as an intentional strategy for enhancing DLL practices and strategies). Program directors offer ECLDI activities for staff and families.
2. Program staff and families actively participate in ECLDI offerings.
3. Program staff provide active and effective outreach to families.
4. Program infrastructure exists to support ongoing shared planning and reflection time for teaching teams.
5. Program leadership ensures resources are sufficient and sustainable to implement ECLDI offerings and strategies on site.

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6. ECLDI offerings and strategies are relevant, responsive, and aligned with host program needs and priorities.
7. ECLDI efforts align with existing county and state initiatives and frameworks.

## LONG-TERM EFFECTS

This theory of change reflects an ecological view of the child. The strategies described aim to transform early childhood education to foster quality early learning experiences for DLL children, their families, and the educators who surround them.

***In the long term, these shifts at the system, setting, and individual level work together to ensure that:***

- San Mateo County is a bright spot for early learning for DLLs and their families.
- Early learning programs and professionals have the support they need to create engaging and culturally and linguistically responsive early childhood experiences for DLLs and their families.
- Family-school partnerships are enhanced in the early years.
- DLLs are engaged in equitable early learning experiences.

1 Culturally and linguistically responsive practices and transformational family engagement strategies are hereto after referred to as “DLL practices and strategies.”

This three-part series shares findings from a research collaboration between the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University and Early Childhood Language Development Institute (ECLDI), a program of the San Mateo County Office of Education, developed to enhance quality early learning experiences for Dual Language Learners. The Theory of Change was co-developed by Soodi Ansari of ECLDI with Kendra Fehrer and Nikki Tognozzi of the Gardner Center.

The Gardner Center would like to thank our ECLDI partners and acknowledge the generous support of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Our thanks as well to First 5 San Mateo County for their contributions to this project. We also thank the children, families, and staff at Belle Air Preschool for allowing us to photograph their program for these briefs.