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# A FEDERAL POLICY AGENDA FOR ENGLISH LEARNER EDUCATION

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## About the Authors



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## About English Learners

Our team provides a sustained, policy-driven focus on language learners in the early childhood years through the PreK-12 education system. Specifically, we conduct research, develop policy recommendations, and disseminate new ideas to policymakers and broader audiences to improve educational access, quality, and outcomes for these children. Find out more at [newamerica.org/education-policy/english-learners](https://newamerica.org/education-policy/english-learners)

## Introduction

English learners<sup>1</sup> (ELs) represent a growing share of the student population in the United States, now making up 10 percent<sup>2</sup> of K–12 students and over 30 percent of the youngest children (birth to age eight).<sup>3</sup> Historically, ELs have been sidelined in federal education policy discussions, which has resulted in an inconsistent approach to supporting their language development and academic achievement.

Prior to 1968, the federal role in EL education was minimal. That changed with the passing of the Bilingual Education Act (Title VII), which outlined the U.S. government’s responsibility to ensure that EL students had equitable access to public education and programs designed to support their English language development.<sup>4</sup> Since that time we have seen policies across the country range from English-only policies focused on remedial and deficit-oriented approaches to bilingual/multilingual policies focused on strengthening and highlighting ELs’ considerable assets.

To be sure, these tensions are evident in the federal policies that govern EL education today. While the last two reauthorizations of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) pushed for increased standards and accountability—bringing increased attention to the needs of ELs and elevating the need for more robust EL policies—these laws have also focused on the perceived deficits of ELs, most notably through an imbalanced emphasis on English language acquisition at the expense of academic and home language development.

This year poses an important opportunity for our nation’s approach to English learners. With a new presidential administration comes the possibility to reassess the condition of federal EL education policy and identify areas of prioritization and improvement. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified and exacerbated existing education inequities. Recent studies suggest that ELs have been disproportionately impacted by the shift to distance learning, with school districts reporting lower attendance rates, a higher proportion of failing grades, and significant academic regression among EL students.<sup>5</sup> These negative impacts have been heightened by a lack of consistent access to the technology needed to engage in remote learning.<sup>6</sup> This paper takes stock of key areas in need of improvement in federal policy impacting ELs and dual language learners (DLLs), including data and accountability, assessment, teacher preparation and professional learning, and funding. It draws on expertise from EL experts across the country to offer recommendations aimed at improving their access to education services throughout the early education and PreK–12 continuum.

## Data Collection and Reporting

Between the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in late 2015, local, state, and federal data collection and reporting requirements evolved significantly. Today, schools collect a variety of background information on individual students, including ELs, such as eligibility and enrollment in special education and free and reduced-price lunch services, country of birth, and language spoken at home.<sup>7</sup> In addition, schools collect data on how current and former ELs perform on academic standardized tests, and whether ELs are making progress in achieving English proficiency. Thanks to this student-level data, we are able to see how ELs are performing across a variety of important indicators. Other aggregate data are often used to measure and compare the quality of opportunities provided to students across schools.<sup>8</sup> Some of these data are used for accountability, while others are simply reported, but they all provide invaluable insight into ELs and their educational opportunities.

Despite the proliferation of data, the image presented of ELs is still heavily framed from a deficit perspective. For example, ELs' academic achievement scores are frequently used to compare the EL subgroup to their non-EL peers. However, there is growing acknowledgment that comparing EL and non-EL achievement may not be the most appropriate comparison, as it views ELs through a deficit lens defining their capabilities by a lack of proficiency.<sup>9</sup> In addition, while the federal government collects statewide data on an annual basis, data hubs and sources maintained by the federal government often lag years behind the current reporting period. This means that the public is unable to access the plethora of data and information that currently exists in a timely and user-friendly manner.

To ensure data are not outdated by the time they are released to the public and that they represent the full range of ELs' potential, we offer the following data collection and reporting policy recommendations:

### **1. Improve federal data collection and reporting practices by:**

#### *I. Releasing data collected from states more frequently and in a timely manner.*

- For example, the last Consolidated State Performance Reports (CSPR) represents data from the 2015–16 school year.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the last Title III Biennial Report to Congress released was for school years 2014–16 and it was published four years after the reporting period ended.<sup>11</sup>

- Outdated accountability measures linked to NCLB are still reflected in EL state profiles published by the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) and the data sources used are from 2014.<sup>12</sup> These sources should be updated to reflect accountability changes under ESSA.

*II. Expanding and updating ED Facts Data Files that are publicly available for ELs.*

- The education field would benefit from having access to downloadable files for the wide range of EL data collected from states on an annual basis. Currently, the only file available for ELs on the ED Facts website is enrollment data from the 2012–13 school year.<sup>13</sup>

*III. Developing state capacity around how to complete the CSPR to improve data reliability and efficacy.*

*IV. Re-designing EL data stories and fact sheets published by the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) to reflect a more asset-based approach.<sup>14</sup>*

- Currently, OELA focuses on the growing gap between ELs and non-ELs as represented by NAEP data, which does not offer a complete picture of ELs' academic abilities, especially after they achieve English proficiency. These data stories and fact sheets could be complemented by information on how ELs perform once they reach English proficiency (i.e., former EL achievement).

**2. Collect and report data on the types of programs ELs and DLLs in preschool to 12th grade have access to/are enrolled in (i.e., English as a second language, dual language, etc.) through Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) general school and district reports, as well as their English learner reports.**

- I. The terminology used to describe this population throughout CRDC should also be updated to reflect current law (i.e., English learners, not limited English proficient (LEP)).*

**3. Increase transparency of data currently collected on former and long-term ELs by making these data publicly available across various data hubs and resources.**

- I. *Title III of ESSA requires states to report on the academic achievement of former ELs each year up to four years after they exit EL services, as well as on the number and percentage of long-term ELs.<sup>15</sup> ESSA also requires that data be collected on ELs' progress in reaching English proficiency, former ELs, and ELs who also are students with disabilities. To date, these data are not publicly available on NCELA's demographic and state data, ED Facts Data Files, or NCES.*
- II. *ED Data Express Title III data hub presents former EL performance in math and ELA, as well as EL proficiency and progress rates. This could serve as a starting point to disaggregate data for the various subcategories (long-term EL, dual-identified ELs, etc.) represented in the EL subgroup.<sup>16</sup>*

## Data Considerations and Recommendations for Dual Language Learners

While substantial resources have been devoted to developing data systems to track ELs' enrollment, access, progress, and achievement in K–12 education, the opposite is true in early education.<sup>17</sup> Dual language learners (DLLs), defined as children between the ages of birth to eight who are learning English in addition to their home language, are dispersed across a range of settings including Head Start, state pre-K, center-based child care, family child care, and family friend and neighbor care—all of which collect and report data in disparate ways, if at all. Combined with the lack of cohesion and investment in early education as a unified system, we currently lack accurate information on the number of DLLs being served across all early childhood settings, the services they receive and their learning outcomes.

At the federal level, Head Start requires grantees to report on the number of DLLs served, which has helped to shape the policies that guide the program. DLLs make up nearly 30 percent of children in Head Start and in 2016, Head Start's Performance Standards were updated to include a stronger focus on supporting DLLs' bilingualism and biliteracy. These standards emphasize the use of home language in instruction and assessment, elevate bilingualism and biliteracy as a strength, and outline the need for teachers to possess the requisite competencies and skills to support DLLs and their families.

By contrast, the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program, which provides funding to states for child care subsidies for low-income working families, currently fails to capture the extent to which DLLs and their families are being served and to provide strong standards related to DLLs, beyond having linguistically accessible websites for consumer information. States are required to report on the demographics of children being served, including the primary language spoken at home; however, these data are significantly lagged and of low quality due to the number of states reporting insufficient/invalid data.<sup>18</sup> These shortcomings, paired with the almost complete lack of standards specific to DLLs in CCDBG and in state child care systems, create a system that is inadequate in its services to DLLs.

These gaps in data reporting make it challenging for policymakers to focus the necessary resources towards ensuring that DLLs have access to early childhood education programs that support their linguistic, academic, and socioemotional development. To help close these data gaps and early education systems better serve DLLs, we recommend the following:

1. Ensure all early childhood programs that receive federal funding conduct home language surveys at program entry to better understand the number of DLLs in the ECE system and target resources and professional development requirements more effectively.
2. Provide guidance on best practices for identifying DLLs across all early childhood systems<sup>19</sup> and how to align those systems with K–12 to facilitate smoother transitions.
3. Strengthen CCDBG by amending data reporting requirements to ask about all of the languages spoken in the home, rather than only the primary language, and specifying that states develop standards for effectively serving DLLs.
4. Task the Government Accountability Office (GAO) with conducting a study on bilingual support and instruction in Head Start to better understand the implementation of the HS Performance Standards. This report would help increase transparency about federal monitoring of these standards and the support available to programs if they fall short of meeting expectations.



## Accountability Through Data

ELs have historically been excluded from state, district, and school accountability measures, and until NCLB there was minimal oversight for how ELs were performing academically.<sup>20</sup> NCLB raised the bar slightly by requiring that ELs take the same state academic tests as their non-EL counterparts, and requiring states receiving Title III funding to track whether ELs were making progress/attaining English language proficiency (ELP), among other changes.<sup>21</sup> However, as these measures were housed separately from the law's accountability provisions, ELs' academic and language progress were still not being considered in school quality evaluations. ESSA closed this loophole by requiring states to include not only their academic achievement, but also their progress towards attaining ELP in their systems used to rate and/or differentiate between schools.<sup>22</sup> Though the move to include these requirements in Title I of ESSA may seem minor, doing so holds a lot of promise for increasing transparency around the quality of education ELs are provided.

In March 2017 Congress revoked the federal regulations intended to assist states with the implementation of ESSA's accountability, school improvement, and reporting provisions.<sup>23</sup> As a result, EL accountability policies adopted pursuant to ESSA have been inconsistent and have varied in terms of depth and rigor. A comprehensive review of state ESSA education plans found that although all states were held to the same federal policy framework, EL accountability differed greatly from state to state.<sup>24</sup> This means that today, many ELs are not represented in accountability measures and are often held to different academic standards. The most underrepresented in accountability are ELs attending schools with low EL enrollment, former ELs, and other EL subcategories (e.g., students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), long-term ELs, ELs with disabilities, and newcomer ELs). Though changes to ESSA's accountability requirements must go through Congress, ESEA reauthorization efforts have been significantly delayed in the past,<sup>25</sup> often at the expense of generations of students.

Absent a comprehensive overhaul of the federal accountability framework, the federal government should, to the extent possible, work to address some of the EL accountability gaps by:

1. **Issuing non-regulatory guidance to improve Title I state accountability systems and make reporting pursuant to ESSA more consistent and transparent across states. Matters to address include:**
  - I. *Ensuring state compliance with ESSA's requirement that the EL subgroup be included in state systems of annual meaningful differentiation used to compare*

*school performance. At present, eight states fully incorporate ELs' academic performance in their accountability systems.<sup>26</sup>*

*II. Increasing accountability for EL students enrolled in schools/districts with small EL populations. Currently, the minimum number of students required to trigger ESSA's school-level accountability provisions (e.g. n size) range from 10 to 30, and schools that do not enroll enough ELs are often not supported by local and state education agencies, which means ELs' needs may go unmet. The guidance should call for an investigation of states' ELs included/excluded rates from due to their n size.*

**2. Improving transparency and accountability for the heterogeneity of EL subgroup by:**

*I. Requiring states to disaggregate the EL group to account for students with intersectional identities, including those with disabilities, students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), recently arrived ELs/newcomers, and long-term ELs.*

*II. Defining and incorporating a long-term EL subgroup into Title I reporting requirements, and requiring states to create early detection mechanisms to identify ELs at risk of becoming long-term ELs.*

- For example, California defines a long-term EL as well as those at-risk of falling into that category.<sup>27</sup> This means that the state now collects data for both of these EL subcategories which can be used to target services to those in need.<sup>28</sup>

**3. Increase state, district, and school accountability for former ELs. This can be done by:**

*I. Expanding the number of years former ELs are monitored from the current four years through the duration of their K-12 education, shifting former EL reporting requirements from Title III to Title I, and requiring states to include a separate former EL subgroup in their accountability systems.*

*II. States already collect key former EL metrics, including how many former ELs are enrolled in school and how these students are performing. As it currently stands, however, 25 states combine former and current EL performance data in the EL subgroup, which masks the performance of both groups of students.<sup>29</sup> If these data*

*are not visible, they cannot be used to evaluate how schools are serving ELs after they are reclassified.*

*III. Currently, Illinois is the only state that includes former ELs as its own subgroup in its accountability system. The state could provide useful information about how to craft a national requirement to collect data on former ELs and the implications for accountability.<sup>30</sup>*

## Assessment

Two types of assessments are typically associated with ELs: (1) academic achievement assessments that test content areas such as math, English language arts (ELA), and science; and (2) language assessments that measure proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In both categories, states must administer assessments aligned with content and language development standards.<sup>31</sup> States can develop these assessments on their own or with other states as part of a consortium.<sup>32</sup> ESSA created a sense of uniformity in how students are assessed within states by requiring that the same ELA and math tests be administered to all students in grades 3–8 and once in high school for purposes of the academic achievement indicator. Also, while each state can use the English language proficiency (ELP) assessment of its choice, each state is required to assess its ELs using the same test in each grade until they are reclassified as fluent in English.<sup>33</sup>

Progress has been made in ensuring ELs' language proficiency is assessed using valid and reliable tools, but the monolingual approach to assessments in the U.S. often prevents us from truly grasping how ELs are doing academically.<sup>34</sup> For example, content assessments given in English can end up being assessments of EL language proficiency rather than a measure of academic knowledge and skills. To bridge this gap between language and content, federal law allows states to assess ELs using tests in their home language—often referred to as native language assessments—using tools that range from full assessments in a language other than English to more targeted accommodations.<sup>35</sup> While some states offer native language assessments and accommodations, their use is often limited and not always appropriate.<sup>36</sup>

Standardized tests play an important role in ELs' education, but they do not necessarily tell us everything we need to know about ELs' capabilities and needs, both academically and linguistically. Moving forward, efforts to improve how ELs are assessed should focus on making academic assessments more accessible and responsive to their full range of knowledge and ensuring other measurement tools and methods are being used during the normal course of instruction.

Our recommendations focus on how to ensure consistency and standardization, to the extent possible, in how ELs' language growth is assessed when traditional methods are not available.<sup>37</sup> Recognizing the inherent link between language proficiency and the ability to access content assessments, our recommendations also focus on ensuring that schools and teachers are well equipped to assess ELs both academically and linguistically through authentic assessments embedded throughout the school year. To these aims, we offer the following assessment policy recommendations:

1. Invest in the development of alternative tools that can provide a summative understanding of ELs' progress in attaining ELP in cases when the annual ELP assessment cannot be administered.
2. Provide guidance to states on how to proceed without multiple years of ELP and/or academic growth assessment data, pulling from existing knowledge and best practices.<sup>38</sup>
3. Develop best practices and tools that can be scaled up and used to build educator capacity to measure ELs' academic and language needs throughout the school year. These tools should be available for teachers who work in English-dominant programs and those who work in bilingual programs. Tools, such as formative and interim assessments, should be aligned to the appropriate language development standards, and designed to assess ELs' academic and language strengths and areas in need of improvement.
  - I. *This can be done by leveraging Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) to develop and widely disseminate assessment practice guides tailored to ELs' needs through the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) What Works Clearinghouse. The last EL practice guide was published in 2014 and incorporates formative assessments under "Recommendation 4."*<sup>39</sup> *Future work can focus on updating this guide and providing ready-to-use tools for teachers to implement in the classroom.*
  - II. *Local education agencies should be provided more tools that can be embedded in the normal course of instruction to help teachers assess ELs' progress, both language and content, throughout the year. Tools and best practices should be designed to support teachers' ability to assess students for diagnostic and student growth purposes.*
4. Support states that want to develop native language assessments and accommodations for ELs, including standardized tests in a language other than English, when appropriate.<sup>40</sup>

## Assessment Considerations and Recommendations for DLLs

In early childhood, assessments provide teachers with information to guide instruction and to develop and implement appropriate interventions and supports. Screening tools help identify potential developmental delays and are a first step in linking families with appropriate services. States use a variety of approaches and tools to gauge DLLs' academic learning and language development. Head Start mandates both screening and assessment to help individualize instruction, including that DLLs be assessed in both their home language and English.<sup>41</sup> However, while these regulations are strong, little guidance is offered on how to meet the requirements and ensure effective implementation.

Indeed, this directive highlights a central challenge in assessing young dual language learners: ensuring that the full scope of their skills and knowledge can be captured. Consider: a teacher might ask a child if they can count to 10. The child replies by counting to 10 in their home language. The teacher marks that the child is not able to count to 10 because they did not count to 10 in English. As prominent DLL expert Linda Espinosa writes, “as children acquire a second language, one language may be more dominant because they use that language more often than the other at a particular point in time. If children are assessed only in their least-proficient language, their abilities will be underestimated.”<sup>42</sup> Currently, we often lack sufficient assessment tools in the home languages of DLLs which means educators are left with an incomplete picture of these children's capabilities and strengths.

In addition, while some early childhood assessments are available in multiple languages, there are many assessments that are not. That leaves little choice but to translate English assessments into other languages, which is rife with challenges. Some early literacy skills such as phonological awareness are not relevant in other languages. For example, Mandarin and Cantonese are character based and not connected to phonemes.<sup>43</sup> Other issues to consider are cultural relevance and context and regional variations in languages.<sup>44</sup> Without a consideration of these differences, translated assessments may produce inaccurate results.

To help strengthen the assessment of dual language learners, we recommend the following:

1. Provide guidance on assessment of DLLs, including a focus on methods for assessing knowledge and skills in the home language(s) and English, and linguistically competent methods for determining eligibility for special education and related services.
2. Fund the development of valid and age-appropriate bilingual assessment tools in home languages for children ages birth to five.
3. Encourage states to use child care quality dollars to offer teachers professional development and training on how to effectively assess DLLs and use that information to guide instruction. Consider allowing set-asides for the hiring of trained bilingual assessors to increase the capacity of early childhood education programs in assessing DLLs.

## Teacher Workforce

As a nation, we are facing a shortage of educators who are prepared to effectively tailor their instruction and assessment practices to the English learners in their classrooms. In 2019, 32 states and the District of Columbia reported shortages of English as a second language and/or bilingual teachers.<sup>45</sup> While these data present an overall picture of shortages, they do little to illuminate whether practicing teachers have the requisite competencies and knowledge needed to help ELs thrive. According to Patricia Gándara and Julie Maxwell-Jolly, “teachers must understand the challenges that EL students face in adapting to a new culture, learning a new language, and integrating both the linguistic and cognitive demands of schooling simultaneously. Teachers must also have the pedagogical skills and strategies to address these challenges. And...the skill to organize their instruction in a way that meets the needs of both English learners and English speakers at the same time.”<sup>46</sup> Just as we need for all teachers to receive EL-specific training, bilingual teachers must also receive specialized preparation and ongoing professional development focused on bilingual teaching methods that promote students’ bilingualism and biliteracy.

A handful of states have developed programs, created policies, and amended existing regulations to increase EL students’ access to qualified teachers. New York State, for example, updated its regulations in 2014 to specify that English language development strategies be integrated into content area instruction through the use of co-teaching models that pair general education teachers with EL specialists.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, in Washington State, the legislature has made investments in both the development of high school teacher academies focused on recruiting bilingual students into the teaching profession and in pathways for bilingual paraeducators to earn a teaching credential.<sup>48</sup> These pathways include job-embedded learning where bilingual teacher candidates are able to work closely with experienced bilingual teachers.

To be sure, these state-level efforts will help boost the supply of bilingual teachers and enhance the skills of all teachers. Complementary investments and initiatives will be needed at the federal level focused on recruiting and preparing teachers who will support EL students from early education through high school.

Current federal investments in teaching include Title II of the ESSA, which is dedicated to enhancing teacher quality, and Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA), which aims to strengthen teacher recruitment and preparation. Both lack a specific focus on preparing and supporting teachers to effectively serve ELs. The National Professional Development (NPD) grant program is the only federally funded program geared towards teachers of ELs. Part of Title III of ESSA, the NPD program provides competitive grants to institutions of



higher education (IHE) to partner with local school districts and community-based organizations to train teachers to better support English learners. The grant competition is run every five years on back-to-back cycles. For example, past competitions were run in 2016 and 2017 and in 2011 and 2012. Many of the programs funded under NPD are working to help general education teachers earn an additional certification in the area of EL instruction, provide certification in dual language education, or help bilingual paraeducators become licensed teachers.

The federal government should do more to support the development of a teacher workforce prepared to meet the needs of English learners. We propose the following actions:

1. Expand the National Professional Development grant program to serve more IHE and school district partnerships and to reach teachers in every state. The last round of the NPD competition, in 2017, served only 42 grantees out of thousands of teacher preparation programs and school districts across the country who are in need of teachers prepared to effectively serve ELs.
2. Promote and fund community-based Grow Your Own programs for bilingual educators across early education and K-12; promote related ways to train teachers including community college baccalaureate programs.<sup>49</sup>
3. Amend Title II of HEA to include a grant program that would support partnerships to improve teacher preparation for working with English learners.
4. Expand the National Teacher and Principal Survey to include items related to the bilingual education workforce. The current survey should be modified to disaggregate whether teachers work in bilingual education (versus English as a second language). Questions should be added to ask if they hold a bilingual credential and/or speak a language in addition to English, to provide a better understanding of the linguistic diversity of the workforce.
5. Provide guidance and resources to states and districts on how to leverage federal funding including Title I, Title II, and Title III of ESSA to provide general education teachers with professional development geared towards strategies for supporting ELs. These strategies should include integrating language development and academic content, increasing their knowledge of second language acquisition, and supporting students' home languages.

## Teacher Workforce Considerations and Recommendations for Dual Language Learners

Early childhood programs have an advantage over the K–12 education system in that they employ staff who are more racially and linguistically diverse, thus offering greater capacity to support DLLs’ home languages. Yet the early childhood workforce is highly stratified, with immigrant and racially and linguistically diverse providers taking on lower-paid and lower-skilled (e.g., teacher assistant) roles.<sup>50</sup> Coupled with the academic, bureaucratic, and linguistic barriers to obtaining academic degrees, these educators face challenges in earning the credentials needed to advance in the profession.<sup>51</sup>

Beyond the need to assist bilingual staff members in earning additional credentials, there is also a need to ensure that early educators receive ongoing professional development geared towards working effectively with DLLs and their families. States such as California have invested in evidence-based professional development and training to help teachers learn strategies and skills for supporting DLLs’ development, with a focus on how to support the home language.<sup>52</sup> Federal efforts like the Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership grant program have been leveraged to offer family child care providers professional development on how to be an effective bilingual teacher and target DLLs’ bilingualism.<sup>53</sup>

We recommend the following actions to support the early childhood educator workforce in meeting the needs of DLLs:

1. Expand the National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) to include teachers who work in pre-K and preschool programs that serve three- and four-year-old children and to include information on the linguistic diversity of the workforce.
2. Encourage states to use child care quality dollars (e.g., Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)) to incorporate DLL content in their professional development systems and to develop Grow Your Own programs that support bilingual teacher assistants in attaining credentials to become lead teachers.
3. Fund research to examine and highlight effective teacher preparation and professional development models focused on preparing early education teachers to work effectively with DLLs.

4. Provide guidance on early educator preparation and development, strongly encouraging states and workforce preparation systems to meaningfully incorporate content, training, and coaching on DLL-specific content as a requirement, not an optional add-on.

## Funding

English learner education is funded through a variety of federal programs, such as Title I and III of ESSA. The Biden administration has proposed tripling Title I funding in order to help close gaps between low-income and high-income school districts.<sup>54</sup> An influx of funding would no doubt benefit ELs, but states and districts would require guidance to ensure funds were being used to support these students.

The only federal appropriation targeted at English learners is Title III, which provides supplementary funding for a variety of services with the goal of helping ELs acquire English proficiency and increase their academic achievement. Title III funding has long been inadequate to meet the need,<sup>55</sup> and since 2008, has remained relatively flat despite increases in the EL student population.<sup>56</sup> In truth, Title III is stretched thin, as it is intended to cover a large number of activities—from teacher preparation and professional development to improving instructional programs to family engagement and outreach efforts. Moreover, Title III does not cover the ongoing costs of monitoring former ELs. .

While there is general consensus that the current Title III funding allocation is insufficient, the amount necessary to fully fund EL education remains understudied. A review in 2012 by Oscar Jimenez-Castellanos, a leading scholar on EL funding, and Amelia Topper revealed that only a handful of studies have examined the cost of providing ELs with an equitable education, and they offer limited insight, given differences in methodology.<sup>57</sup> As highlighted by Irina Okhremtchouk, an expert in school finance for ELs, that the prescriptive nature of Title III and its focus on accountability has meant that “the programs serving ELs are often designed to compensate for perceived student deficits, inabilities or inadequacies (e.g., selecting curricula that focus on remedial education) as compared to offering adequate services that would, indeed, address students’ actual educational needs.”<sup>58</sup> In addition, we lack information regarding the cost associated with different types of language instruction programs for ELs. More research is needed to determine both the cost of educating ELs and the cost of individual program models and school initiatives designed to meet their needs.

The federal government could help strengthen funding for English learners in the following ways:

1. Increase Title III funding to \$2.5 billion. This funding level is based on an analysis of estimates from research and advocacy organizations and an additional calculation of the increased need for EL supports and services to address the educational impact of

the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>59</sup>

2. Issue guidance to clarify how Title I funding could and should be used to serve ELs. Guidance should include examples of how existing Title I and Title III funding streams can be directed to meet specific EL needs and services.<sup>60</sup>
3. Evaluate the Title III funding formula to assess whether states are receiving the resources necessary to meet ELs' needs. Currently, a state's Title III funding allocation is determined by data from the American Community Survey, state data on the number of students being assessed for English language proficiency, or a combination of both. The data source used can result in significant differences in EL counts, as well as funding allocations.
4. Offer guidance that clearly defines the supplemental scope of Title III and stipulates and identifies states' funding responsibilities.
5. Invest in the development of a study to help policymakers at all levels better understand the cost of providing English learners with an adequate and equitable education. The cost study should examine funding frameworks for different EL instruction models. We currently do not have enough information to understand funding variables of different EL program models, and this information is needed to understand what "adequate funding" for ELs looks like in different contexts.

## Funding Considerations and Recommendations for DLLs

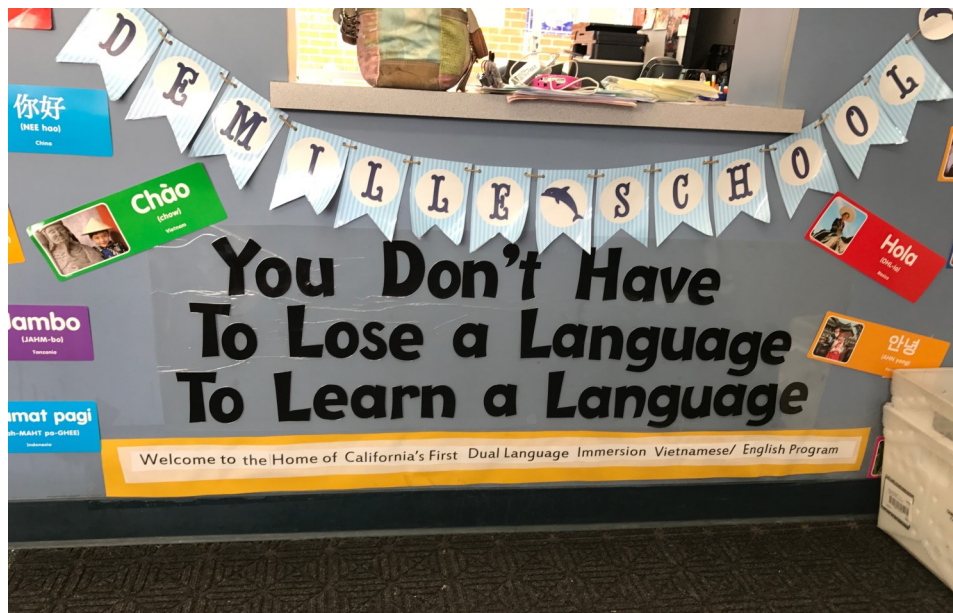
Early childhood education is funded through a variety of federal and state sources and mechanisms. According to the 2018 report *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education*, “the financing for early care and education in the United States is a layering of separate programs, with different funding streams, constituencies, eligibility requirements, and quality standards.”<sup>61</sup> As a result, families face disparate access to early childhood programs and they have to navigate costs based on where they live, the type of care, the level of subsidies provided, and other factors. Studies suggest that DLLs and children of immigrants have lower participation rates and that they must be targeted and prioritized in publicly funded early childhood programs.<sup>62</sup>

The Biden administration has signaled interest in supporting the expansion of public early education programs, including partnering with states to offer universal access for three- and four-year-old children.<sup>63</sup> In order for DLLs to thrive, they must have access to early education programs, including two-generation models such as Head Start and home visiting, and dual language immersion programs.<sup>64</sup> The federal government can play a key role in providing the funding necessary for these programs and the early education system as a whole:

1. Ensure that existing funding to support early care and education expansion includes dollars allocated to support DLLs, including the expansion of dual language immersion programs that prioritize DLLs.
2. Provide incentives for carving out classroom space at adult education facilities for on-site child care for enrolled students and employees, to help facilitate the development and expansion of two-generation models that support parents and children.
3. Increase funding for home visiting programs. DLLs are underserved by home visiting; data indicate that overall, home visiting programs are not reaching enough of the eligible population. Home visiting screening and referrals can help immigrant and DLL families access and navigate social and mental health services, and learn strategies for promoting their child’s home language development.<sup>65</sup>
4. Fully fund Head Start and Early Head Start to ensure that all eligible children have access to the program. At present, only 36 percent of eligible three-to-five-year-olds, 11 percent of children under age three, and 15 percent of migrant children under the age of five have access to Head Start.<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

The pandemic has disrupted the education of millions of students, with ELs and their families disproportionately exposed to the risk of being left behind. Because we have a history of exclusionary and deficit-based policies, we need to do more to ensure these students have access to equitable educational opportunities. Fortunately, incoming Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona is well versed in the challenges of going through the K–12 system as an EL—an experience that will undoubtedly aid in championing the issues set forth in this paper.<sup>67</sup> We hope that the recommendations outlined here will help guide a robust and asset-oriented policy agenda for English learners.



Front office of Demille Elementary School in Westminster, CA.

Photo by Amaya Garcia.

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## Notes

- 1 We use the term English learners (EL) throughout the paper as it is the term used in [federal policy](#). We recognize that there are many other terms used in the field, including emergent bilinguals, multilingual language learners, culturally and linguistically diverse students, and students who are classified as English learners. We use the term dual language learners (DLL) to mean children between the ages of birth to eight who are learning English in addition to their home language.
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