



# Bilingual Education Across the United States

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*This brief is the first of a four-part series that focuses on bilingual education, bilingual educators, and addressing the bilingual teacher shortage in contexts across the United States. This research was commissioned by the New Jersey State Department of Education, which is committed to providing quality bilingual education to its linguistically diverse student population.*

Multilingual learners and students classified as English learners (ELs), a growing population nationwide, come to school with tremendous assets, among which are proficiency in a language other than English and the potential to become bilingual. Yet without school-based opportunities to develop biliteracy—that is, literacy in both their home language and English—their linguistic potential can remain underdeveloped. Many states recognize these students’ multilingual potential and have prioritized bilingual education: Some states require bilingual education, while others encourage or allow it in certain contexts. **In this brief, we define some of the key terms in bilingual education and then provide an overview of the different state policies for the provision of bilingual education to English learners.**

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## Who are multilingual learners? Who are English learners?

Multilingual learners are students who are learning content while also learning the language of instruction; they are becoming – or already are – bilingual (proficient in two languages) or multilingual (proficient in two or more languages). The term English learner (EL) is the federal statutory classification for the subset of multilingual learners who have been identified as eligible for English language support, which public state and local education agencies are required to provide. English learner (EL) is thus a term that defines a student’s formal status in the educational setting, but it does not encompass all that a student brings to that educational setting. While we use the term ELs throughout this series of briefs to refer to students who are officially identified as English learners, it is important to note that this term highlights gaps in student’s language and does not account for the linguistic assets that these students bring to the classroom.

## What is bilingual education?

Bilingual education encompasses a variety of instructional models in which teachers and students engage in academic coursework using two languages, typically one of which is a student’s home language. Some [examples of bilingual instructional programs](#) include transitional (or early exit) bilingual education, with a goal of transitioning students to all-English instruction, and two-way dual language immersion, where both languages are equally prioritized and content is taught in both languages. One-way dual language programs include a majority of students who are dominant in the same primary language, while two-way dual language programs include both students whose primary language is not English and those for whom it is.

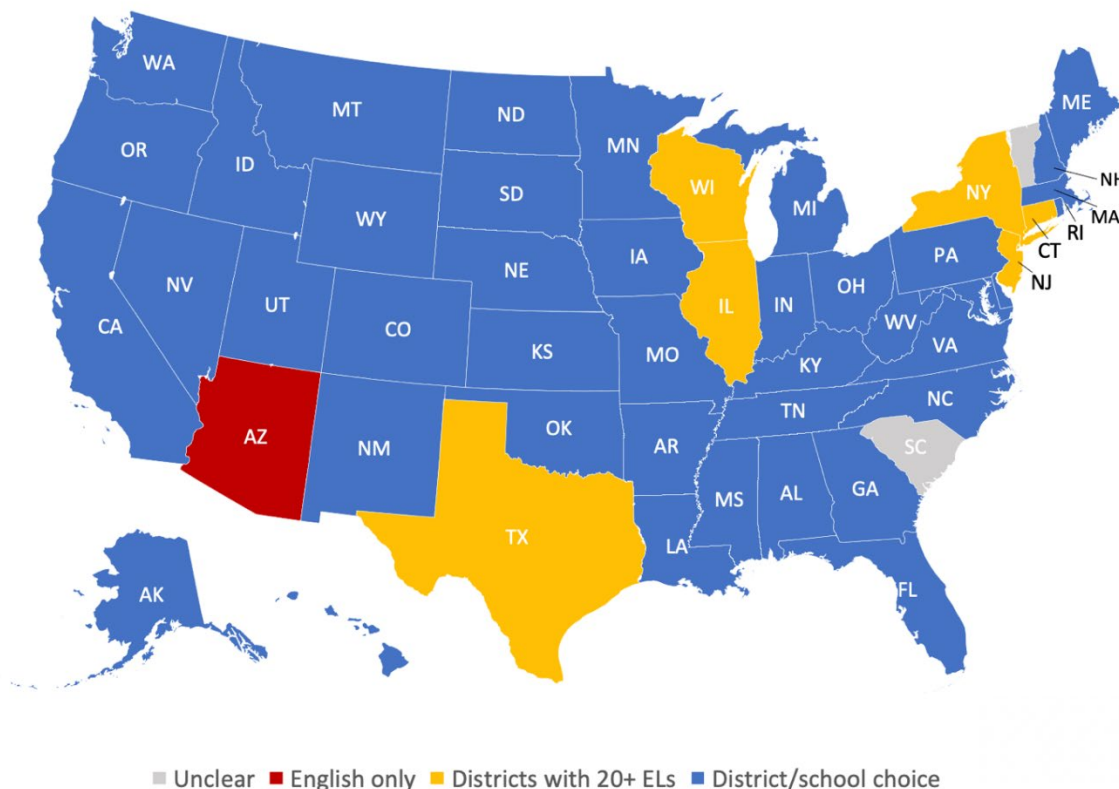
In contrast to bilingual education, English as a second language (ESL) and variants of this instructional program (e.g. Sheltered English Instruction, Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English) do not systematically use students’ home language during instruction. ESL programs provide instruction in English language development and the program’s goal is to achieve literacy in English, not biliteracy.

## Landscape of bilingual education

The states’ requirements for EL instructional models vary widely<sup>i</sup> (see Figure 1):

- Six states (Connecticut, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Wisconsin) require districts to provide bilingual education when a certain number of students (usually 20) from the same language group have enrolled in a district or school.
  - At least two states (CT and NJ) allow waivers for this requirement if there are not enough students in a grade band.
  - At least two states (CT and TX) allow districts to waive this requirement when there is not a sufficient number of bilingual teachers.
- One state (Arizona) prohibits bilingual education for ELs at the state level, and two states (Vermont and South Carolina) do not provide clear guidance in their publicly available state policy documents.
- The other 41 states and Washington, DC allow districts and/or schools to choose an educationally sound language instructional education program to serve ELs.<sup>ii</sup> In all but four of these states (Alabama, Arkansas, New Hampshire, Tennessee), allowable programs explicitly include bilingual education.

Exhibit 1. State policies related to bilingual education implementation



## Who are bilingual educators?

Bilingual educators are staff who work in a bilingual education setting and include, but are not limited to teachers, paraprofessionals, translators, counselors, and instructional coaches. Exhibit 2 describes the main responsibilities of teachers and paraprofessionals in bilingual settings.

Exhibit 2. Defining specialized bilingual educator roles across the United States

Role	Description
Certified Bilingual Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide instruction in primary language and/or English to ELs.</li> <li>Always have both a base teaching credential and an additional bilingual endorsement (also called a certification, authorization, credential, or extension).</li> <li>May have to demonstrate additional competencies and/or complete coursework or professional development related to bilingual education or teaching ESL (see below).</li> <li>In most cases, must demonstrate proficiency in the language they will be teaching.</li> </ul>
ESL Teachers in Bilingual Placements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide instruction in English or, in some cases, in the ELs' primary language.</li> <li>Nearly always have both a base teaching credential and an additional ESL certification.</li> <li>Typically have to demonstrate additional competencies and/or complete coursework or professional development related to teaching ESL.</li> </ul>

Role	Description
Bilingual Paraprofessionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Do not always have to demonstrate language proficiency on a state-designated exam.</li> <li>▪ Are required to have a high school diploma and, in some cases, an associate degree, 2 years of post-secondary training, and/or passing scores on a paraprofessional exam.</li> <li>▪ May serve as translators, both for individual ELs immersed in English classes and for events such as individualized education plan or parent meetings, as required by federal law.<sup>iii</sup></li> <li>▪ May provide small group or individual instruction to ELs under teacher supervision.</li> <li>▪ May perform non-instructional duties, e.g. supervising recess, lunch, and school transitions or interacting with parents.</li> <li>▪ In some cases, are required to demonstrate content area proficiency, including in English, a language other than English, or cultural competency.</li> </ul>

While the table above describes the job tasks and certifications generally required for bilingual teachers and paraprofessionals, the specific certification requirements for bilingual educator positions vary across the United States. More detail about state policies related to bilingual teacher and paraprofessionals are listed below.

*Teachers*

- At least 15 states<sup>1</sup> require teachers to hold a bilingual endorsement in order to teach in a bilingual classroom.
- At least 8 states<sup>2</sup> allow teachers with an ESL credential to teach in bilingual programs. In these states, districts or schools are responsible for assessing a teacher’s language proficiency because there is no state-required language proficiency exam.
- In the remaining states it is unclear from publicly available state policy documents what credentials are required of bilingual teachers.

*Paraprofessionals*

- A few states, including California, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin, have developed a formalized bilingual paraprofessional role and have provided clear requirements for that role.
- In most other states, there are no clear roles (beyond translation) or official requirements described in publicly available state policy documents for paraprofessionals working in a bilingual setting.
- Some states specify additional requirements for paraprofessionals working in special education settings, Title 1 schools, or for advanced paraprofessional roles.

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<sup>1</sup> These states are California, Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, and Wisconsin.

<sup>2</sup> These states are Alaska, Colorado, Georgia, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Oregon, and Washington.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> SEA, state legislation, and teacher credentials websites served as the primary sources for the landscape analysis. For this section, we reviewed policies in all 50 states and Washington, DC.
- <sup>ii</sup> In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education released guidance reminding states and districts of their responsibilities related to educating ELs, including that schools implement language education instructional programs that are “educationally sound in theory and effective in practice.” These programs include various English only and bilingual programs, such as: 1) English as a second language (ESL) or English language development (ELD); 2) structured English immersion (SEI); 3) transitional bilingual education; or 4) dual language or two-way immersion. See [https://ncela.ed.gov/files/english\\_learner\\_toolkit/2-OELA\\_2017\\_language\\_assist\\_508C.pdf](https://ncela.ed.gov/files/english_learner_toolkit/2-OELA_2017_language_assist_508C.pdf) for more detail.
- <sup>iii</sup> In accordance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and Title I Part A and Title III Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), schools must provide information for parents in a language they can understand and cannot charge parents or students for translation or interpretation services. See <http://www2.ed.gov/ocr/ellresources.html> for more detail.