



Bilingual Education: Lessons from Washington State

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This brief is the fourth 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.

In this brief, we describe Washington state’s approach to bilingual education and detail the ways in which state leaders have leveraged policy and funding to expand access to it. We also offer specific policy considerations for strengthening bilingual education and developing bilingual educators in states across the country.

Citation:

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Rutherford-Quach, S., Kelly, H., Torre Gibney, D., Ballen Riccards, J., & Parker, C. (2021). *Bilingual education: Lessons from Washington State*. CCNetwork.

The content of this brief was developed under a grant from the Department of Education through the Office of Program and Grantee Support Services (PGSS) within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE), by the Region 4 Comprehensive Center at Policy Studies Associates under Award #S S283B190047. This contains resources that are provided for the reader’s convenience. These materials may contain the views and recommendations of various subject matter experts as well as hypertext links, contact addresses, and websites to information created and maintained by other public and private organizations. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service, enterprise, curriculum, or program of instruction mentioned in this document is intended or should be inferred.

Washington State context

In the past 5 years, Washington state has taken significant steps to expand access to bilingual education and further develop their bilingual teacher pool. Several contextual conditions prompted these actions:

- **Changing demographics:** The English learner (EL) population in Washington has grown substantially in the last 2 decades,ⁱ with the most significant increases occurring since 2015.ⁱⁱ In 2004, 7% of Washington's total K–12 student population was classified as ELs (for more information on the term “English learner,” please refer to our previous brief, *Bilingual Education across the US*).ⁱⁱⁱ Today, the state's EL population is 12% of the school population,^{iv} making Washington the state with the fifth-highest percentage of ELs in the nation.^v
- **Changing public opinion:** The last decade saw a positive shift in public opinion toward bilingual education, exemplified by the 2016 passage of Washington's legislative bill 1541 that aimed to more equitably serve ELs and prioritize bilingual education.^{vi}
- **Changing policy priorities:** The Washington Superintendent of Public Instruction declared in 2016 that cultivating bilingual education was one of the state's top educational priorities, which set the wheels in motion for the expansion of bilingual education across the state.^{vii}

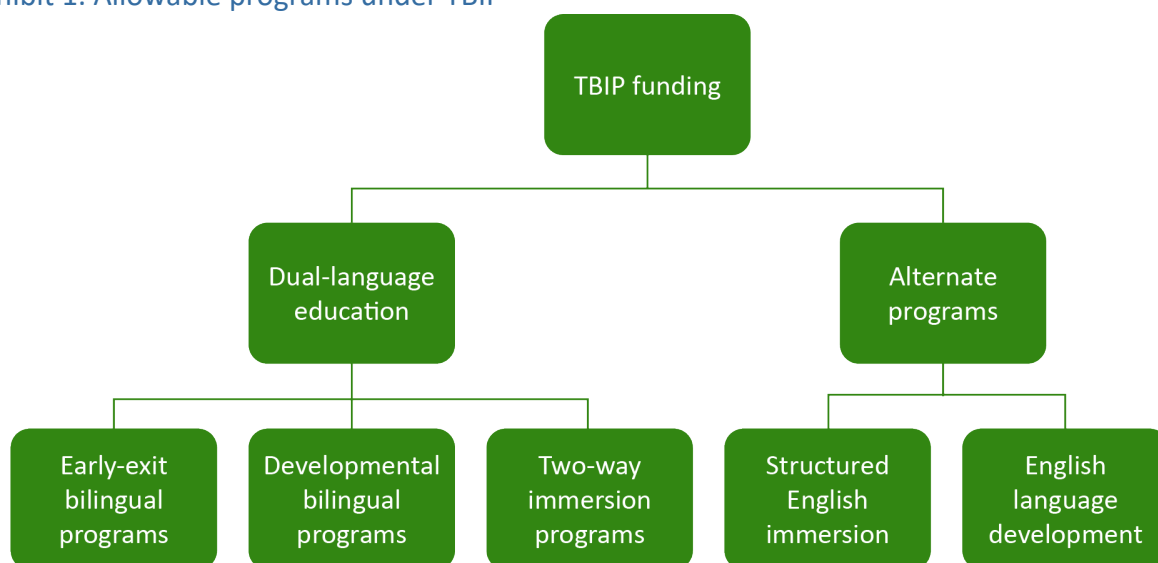
Bilingual education policy in Washington

Bilingual education is not new in Washington. In 1979, the state passed the Transitional Bilingual Instructional Program (TBIP) bill, which allows for the provision of bilingual education for all eligible ELs in the state¹ and is still enforced today.^{viii} TBIP authorizes the disbursement of state funds to districts for educating ELs.^{ix}

- To qualify for TBIP funding, each district submits an annual program plan that outlines how the district supports ELs, including how they communicate with students' families in their home language and ensure professional development for teachers of ELs.^x
- Districts with few ELs, shortages of bilingual teachers, or other barriers to implementing bilingual instruction, can apply for TBIP funding through an “alternative instructional program,” which typically involves English as a second language programming (see Exhibit 1). The inclusion of the alternative English-language option in this bill has been consequential and lasting: today, only 11% of ELs are educated in bilingual settings while the remaining 89% participate in English language instructional programs.^{xi}

¹ Washington is the only state that has no minimum threshold for the number of students who must speak a particular home language before the state requires a transitional bilingual education instructional program.

Exhibit 1. Allowable programs under TBIP



Washington strategies for expanding access to bilingual education and developing bilingual educators

Current leaders in Washington recognize that bilingual education is a powerful tool for equity. The changes in demographics, public opinion, and educational priorities have prompted a coordinated effort to increase the number of classrooms that provide bilingual education to ELs. Yet there remain significant barriers to expanding bilingual education that lead districts to instead choose “alternative instructional programs.” To address these barriers, the state is developing policies and programs that build on four key levers, which we outline below. Other state departments of education may consider exploring these four levers and applying them to their own contexts.

1. Make bilingual education an explicit priority for all students, especially ELs

Washington’s Superintendent of Public Instruction named the cultivation of bilingual education for all students, but specifically K–12 *dual language* instructional programs that serve ELs and Native American students, as a top educational priority (in Washington, *dual language* is a synonym for bilingual education and refers to any program where instruction is provided in the target language). With this declaration, the Superintendent provided justification for funding the expansion of bilingual programs and changed the vernacular surrounding bilingual education in Washington. This shifted perceptions of the purpose of bilingual education: Rather than being perceived as a transitional measure only relevant to ELs as they gain English proficiency, it was positioned as a means for all students to achieve the increasingly desired goal of bilingualism and biliteracy.

Research demonstrates that the opportunity to learn in more than one language provides educational benefits for ELs^{xii} and that students not classified as ELs also benefit from bilingual/dual language programs.^{xiii} State leaders can increase buy-in from educators and families by prioritizing bilingual education for ELs while promoting it as a beneficial educational program for all students. Reframing a state’s commitment in this way may also assuage political opposition to bilingual education. State education agencies implement the priorities of top state education leaders, so public commitment from key leaders is an essential lever for promoting bilingual education across a state.

2. Fund bilingual programs and initiatives

The Washington’s Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB), a state agency that oversees teacher credentialing and preparation programs, provides funding for a variety of bilingual teacher pipeline programs. Washington’s legislature and the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) provide PESB funding to distribute to districts and teacher preparation programs through a competitive Alternative Routes Block Grant (ARBG) program. The goal of the grant is to support alternative route programs engaging in “grow your own” teacher strategies to address district and teacher candidate needs. Some of this money is also directly distributed to bilingual teacher candidates through conditional loans. For the 2020–22 school years, the Washington legislature allocated \$600,000 and WSAC committed \$800,000 (only for use by conditional loan programs) for each year of the grant cycle. PESB has also taken steps to mitigate financial barriers to educator certificate testing by reducing the number of tests that prospective teachers need to take.

Committing state funding for bilingual education programs both provides necessary resources for educators and demonstrates commitment from the legislature and education agencies. Competitive grant programs incentivize schools and districts to create innovative policies and delivery mechanisms for bilingual education. These programs also allow a high degree of flexibility for schools and districts to take local context into account when planning instruction for ELs and other language learners.

3. Leverage relationships with district employment offices and institutions of higher education (IHEs)

The PESB proactively connects with educators in Washington districts through administrator newsletters and points of contact in human resources departments and other employment offices. These connections are vital for measuring teacher shortages and connecting administrators with IHEs that offer preparation programs in those shortage areas, including bilingual education. The PESB works with IHEs to approve alternative pathway programs, referred to as *routes*,^{xiv} for nontraditional teacher candidates who are seeking a teaching credential.^{xv}

Building relationships with district personnel is essential for states when monitoring statewide teacher shortages and allocating technical assistance resources where they are needed most. State education leaders should consider forming close relationships with district staff and IHEs outside of legal reporting requirements to learn more about local context. Leaders can make inter-district connections to help school systems work together to address common issues they face.

4. Encourage and elevate Grow Your Own programs

Washington local Grow-Your-Own (GYO) teacher programs are proving essential in broadening and maintaining the bilingual teacher workforce in Washington, particularly in more rural areas or areas with rapidly shifting demographics.^{xvi} Two types of GYO bilingual programs currently exist in Washington: high school academies and bilingual teacher pipeline programs.

The goals of bilingual high school academies are to identify, support, and prepare students, particularly underserved Latinx students, to become bilingual teachers.^{xvii} Most, if not all, of these academies have been supported by PESB’s Recruiting Washington Teachers (RWT): Bilingual Educators Initiative (RWT-BEI), a high school academy incubator program that was established in 2017 as an offshoot of the original RWT program.^{xviii} Like the original Recruiting Washington Teachers program, RWT-BEI academies^{xix} offer comprehensive support to enrolled students and provide them with opportunities to tutor and teach younger students.

The overall aim of the bilingual teacher pipeline programs, which typically involve a partnership between one or more districts and one or two IHEs, is to prepare community members – often

paraprofessionals – to earn a bilingual endorsement.^{xx} The Washington Parapipeline Conditional Loan,^{xxi} a loan program for paraprofessionals seeking teaching credentials, provides funding to candidates through scholarships that cover most of the tuition of teacher preparation programs. In several cases, high school academies feed directly into bilingual teacher pipeline programs, creating a continuous and comprehensive line of support.

Local educators are the best resources for developing local talent. High school educators and administrators can cultivate bilingual talent at a young age through their close connections with students. High school academies that feed into bilingual educator pipelines, including paraprofessional pathways, provide the most comprehensive support to potential teachers. Paraprofessionals who come from communities that are underrepresented in the teaching profession offer essential knowledge and skills that position them to be successful bilingual teachers. Successful grassroots programs can serve as models for other schools and districts interested in getting involved with bilingual teacher preparation.

Endnotes

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- ^x Washington State Legislature. (n.d.). School District Board of Directors Duties, Wash. WAC 392-160-010. <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=392-160-010>
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