Resourcing Supports for Young Multilingual Learners with Suspected Disabilities in California: Learning Collaborative Recommendations

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Background

Young multilingual learners are a highly diverse group who bring a wealth of assets that enrich California's schools. These assets include their home languages, cultures, strategies for navigating various roles and identities, and cognitive agility in processing multiple languages and making connections across language and culture. High-quality, culturally and linguistically sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2014) learning opportunities in prekindergarten (preK) and the early elementary years must build on multilingual learners' many assets to promote their academic success.

However, some multilingual learners will experience academic difficulties even with robust support. It can be challenging for educators to discern the nature of the student's learning needs because learning behaviors associated with the natural process of learning multiple languages can be similar to those associated with a disability. Further, in some cases, multilingual learners' learning behaviors can even represent the complex interaction of typical language development and disability (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2017). Whole-child factors, such as physical, psychological, and personal needs, may also impact academic progress. Multilingual learners with suspected disabilities present unique, intersecting needs (Crenshaw, 1991) and have received increased attention among scholars, policymakers, and educators in recent years (see, for example, NASEM, 2017).

Although multilingual learners have a range of needs, language development and special education systems at the local and state levels have traditionally operated in silos. These siloed systems are not currently designed to facilitate collaboration among general education, English language development (ELD), and special education teachers, which impedes a whole-child approach to instruction and assessment.

Owing to these challenges, multilingual learners can be inaccurately identified as having learning disabilities, leading to their disproportionate representation in special education in comparison with their nonmultilingual peers. In the 2018/19 school year, multilingual learners in California accounted for less than 20 percent of the total student population but made up nearly 30 percent of students with disabilities (Willis et al., 2020). Notably, this pattern of overrepresentation was most visible in the category of Specific Learning Disability (SLD), which involves difficulty with language processing. Over 50 percent of multilingual learners with disabilities were identified with SLD, compared with only 37 percent of their nonmultilingual

peers. When multilingual learners are inaccurately referred for special education or when multilingual learners are *not* identified for the special education services that they do need, they are denied critical opportunities to learn.

When multilingual learners receive robust general education instruction that includes rich language and literacy development opportunities, learning difficulties and inaccurate special education referrals can potentially be avoided. In California's Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) instructional framework, schools are charged with providing high-quality general education instruction to all students under "Tier 1 Core Instruction." Integrated ELD instruction is a component of Tier 1 Core Instruction for all multilingual learners. The successful integration of ELD requires dynamic and meaningful collaboration among educators with different areas of expertise. Integral to educators' collaboration is their authentic partnership with families who know the most about their children's strengths, interests, language background, and developmental history. With a more collaborative, comprehensive, and thoughtful approach, California's schools can offer multilingual learners the targeted learning opportunities they need.

Addressing a Critical Need

In the fall of 2021, with funding from the Sobrato Foundation, WestEd launched a short-term, cross-sector Learning Collaborative to build knowledge and awareness of practices that support the learning trajectories of young (preK through grade 2) multilingual learners in order to prevent the inaccurate referral of these students to special education. WestEd invited experts from across California to join the Learning Collaborative, including state and local administrators, practitioners, advocates, researchers, and philanthropists.[1] Learning Collaborative members are champions of multilingualism and multiliteracy who promote the value of all children and families for their talents and cultural and linguistic strengths.

The Learning Collaborative met three times between September 2021 and January 2022 to review current research and practice and to develop strategic, actionable recommendations to inform new resource investments. Collaborative members noted that, while there are useful practitioner guides that reflect state-of-the-art research in supporting young multilingual learners—such as the *California Practitioners' Guide for Educating English Learners with Disabilities* (California Department of Education [CDE], 2019)[2]—there is not currently widespread implementation of the strategies and practices reflected in that guide. Proper funding and resourcing are needed to support sustainable statewide implementation of the research-based strategies and practices reflected in the CDE guide and other similar resources.

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[1] See a list of Learning Collaborative members in Appendix C.

[2] This guide was informed by earlier practitioner manuals, such as the San Diego Unified School District's *CEP-EL: A Comprehensive Evaluation Process for English Learners* (Gaviria & Tipton, 2016) and the SELPA Administrators of California Association's *Meeting the Needs of English Learners with Disabilities Resource Book* (Butterfield et al., 2017).

The recommendations in this report can inform the funding and resourcing decisions of policymakers, education leaders, and philanthropists.

This report offers resourcing recommendations in the following three areas:

1. learning opportunities for multilingual learners in preK;

2. high-quality Tier 1 Core Instruction in elementary settings;

3. and pre-referral supports, assessment, and special education referral.[3]

Each of the three areas of this report includes a summary of the related research to provide context for the recommendations, a list of recommendations, and a table with information on potential funding streams to support and sustain implementation of the recommendations. Through lines in each of these areas are the importance of family engagement and collaboration among educators. The report concludes with three appendices: (a) examples of promising local models for supporting young multilingual learners, (b) key California practitioner guides and resources, and (c) Learning Collaborative members and affiliations.

Through strategic funding, California leaders can help ensure that young multilingual learners thrive in school.

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[3] The three subtopics in the third area (pre-referral, assessment, and special education referral) are intentionally combined because they are linked by a formal multidisciplinary team, whose collaboration is essential for comprehensive assessment and instruction.

Recommendations

This report focuses on recommendations for providing funding and resources to implement research-based strategies and practices that provide high-quality, language-rich, culturally and linguistically sustaining instruction to young multilingual learners and that prevent inaccurate special education referrals. Learning Collaborative members contributed recommendations based on research reviews and their practical knowledge from their experience in the field. The report focuses on the early years (preK through grade 2) of multilingual children's education because research has shown that when children develop competence in two or more languages at an early age, they may show benefits in cognitive, social, and emotional skills, as well as improved school readiness and academic outcomes (August & Shanahan, 2006; Halle et al., 2012). Additionally, there is evidence that systematically incorporating elements of young multilingual learners' home culture and home language can increase their engagement and interest in school (Goldenberg et al., 2008). As described in the following sections, high-quality instruction can advance equity as well as the distribution of supports.

1. Learning Opportunities for Multilingual Learners in PreK

Research and Context

An emerging body of research focuses on effective instruction for young multilingual learners, including evidence demonstrating that these learners benefit strongly from participating in high-quality preK (Nores et al., 2018). Though further research is needed to understand best practices for young multilingual learners, scholars point to the positive benefits of using a bilingual and asset-based approach to facilitate language development, as well as a collaborative approach to provide coordinated and comprehensive supports (Chen & Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2013).

Benefits of learning more than one language

Researchers have demonstrated that significant linguistic, academic, social, and cognitive advantages arise when young children learn more than one language during the early years (NASEM, 2017). Professional learning can help teachers understand the importance of home language development as well as nuanced learning patterns associated with dual language

learning. Teachers can apply this learning to design effective instructional strategies and thus improve early learning outcomes in oral language fluency and preliteracy for young multilingual learners (Castro et al., 2013; Center for Equity for English Learners, Loyola Marymount University and Wexford Institute, 2020). Encouraging home language development

To encourage home language development, teachers can meaningfully engage with families (Center for Equity for English Learners, 2020; NASEM, 2017). When teachers partner with families, teachers are empowered to learn about young multilingual children in context, celebrate the benefits of multilingualism, and facilitate two-way communication with families in their home language through interpreters and translators (Espinosa & Crandell, 2020). Teachers can invite families into their classroom to share their funds of knowledge; reflect the families' languages and cultures in the content of their teaching; and empower families to support their children's language development in everyday interactions, such as storytelling, songs, and book readings (Espinosa & Crandell, 2020).

Importance of an instructional focus on oral language

In the simultaneous development of students' home languages and English, oral language instruction is key to the preliteracy and academic learning of young multilingual learners (Espinosa, 2015). Bilingual and bicultural teachers, and teachers with knowledge of the language learning needs of multilingual learners, can promote frequent, responsive, and varied oral interactions that include opportunities to use complex language in authentic and meaningful ways. It is also important for teachers to understand the oral language development of young multilingual learners and how the nuances of that development vary by home language (NASEM, 2017).

In California, the Fresno Language Learning Project and the Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) model offer exemplars of an instructional focus on oral language (see Appendix A for more information on these two models).

Assessment, identification, and referral

Even in high-quality preK, some young multilingual learners will struggle with learning and reaching developmental milestones in ways that may be unrelated to language development or in ways that interact with language development. In these cases, a disability may be at the root. A wide body of research demonstrates the need for early detection of disabilities in all students, including multilingual learners, for successful long-term outcomes (NASEM, 2017).

Conducting valid and accurate assessments of young children who are learning two languages is enormously complex, and assessment measures must be sensitive to both maturational processes as well as the trajectory of second language development (Ballantyne et al., 2008). Many of the current assessments available for young multilingual children are basic translations or adaptations of English language versions of measures (Wolf et al., 2008). There is a dearth of

valid assessments with appropriate accommodations that are designed for young multilingual learners to measure their progress and prevent unnecessary referrals to early intervention. However, work is underway to update tools to account for linguistic and cultural diversity (NASEM, 2017). In addition to traditional measures, holistic observations across multiple contexts (e.g., home and school settings) can offer critical qualitative evidence for discerning the nature of a child's learning needs (Gaviria & Tipton, 2016).

Families can also provide key information for the purpose of assessment, including their child's developmental context, such as family culture and practices, early exposure to language(s), previous early childhood education experiences and opportunities to learn (e.g., participation in a bilingual program, participation in monolingual English, preK), and prior knowledge and skills in each language. This sort of information can help teachers design instruction to meet individual children's learning needs (NASEM, 2017). It is also critical for preK educators to have in-depth conversations with families about their child's strengths, special interests, and preferences. By triangulating data from multiple perspectives, contexts, and tools, educators can discover patterns in the data and make informed decisions.

Alignment of preK and K–12 systems

Finally, with California's implementation of universal preK and transitional kindergarten (TK) policies, it is more important than ever to achieve alignment among preK and TK programs and the K–12 system, which have been notoriously divided. Seamless grade-level transitions require educators to share information about children's programs, curriculum, and early learning experiences in order to inform future teachers' understanding of multilingual learners and their subsequent instruction and support (Bornfreund et al., 2021). A focus on coherent transition also reduces the fragmentation between these sectors.

Resourcing Recommendations

The following are recommendations for high-leverage funding and resourcing needed to implement the strategies and practices described in the research above.

1a. Target funding for full-day preK for children who need services the most, including multilingual learners with disabilities and those without disabilities.

1b. Support the development of innovative teacher preparation programs that promote collaboration among teacher educators and teacher candidates across curriculum areas, special education, multicultural education, and bilingual education.

1c. Provide funds for preparing, hiring, and retaining a bilingual early childhood workforce as well as for preparing language specialists and special education professionals who can serve as consultants to teachers and aides.

1d. Allocate funding for interpreters who are trained in early childhood education and the special education referral, evaluation, and placement process.

1e. Develop well-designed, valid, reliable, and linguistically appropriate assessments, and provide the funds to train assessment administrators on interpreting the results.

1f. Provide professional learning opportunities for

    i.   supporting all preK and early elementary educators to

        a.   learn about the multilingual learners entering their classrooms,

        b.   provide a culturally and linguistically sustaining learning environment,

        c.   promote continued home language and oral language development,

        d.   provide rich learning experiences in all domains of learning,

        e.   prepare multilingual learners for kindergarten, and

        f.   engage with families in culturally sustaining ways.

    ii.   supporting preK administrators and elementary school principals to

        a.   build their knowledge of multilingual learners with disabilities,

        b.   develop their capacity to support and monitor the implementation of high-quality core instruction that advances oracy and literacy development for all learners,

        c.   foster regular and meaningful opportunities for collaboration among educators and related service providers, and

        d.   foster regular and meaningful opportunities for educators to engage with families.

1g. Scale up models of effective collaborations between preK programs and local education agencies (LEAs) (see, for example, the Fresno Language Learning Project and SEAL in Appendix A).

1h. Create the infrastructure for the alignment, continuity, and coherence of practices, materials, and resources between preK and elementary school.

Table 1 lists the recommendations made in this section, indicates the agent responsible for implementing the recommendation—either state education agency (SEA) or LEA—and offers corresponding suggestions for funding streams.

Table 1. Potential Funding Streams for Implementing the Recommendations for Learning Opportunities for Multilingual Learners in PreK

Recommendation	Actions for SEA Leaders	Actions for LEA Leaders	Potential Funding Streams*
1a. Target funding for full-day preK for children who need services the most, including multilingual learners with disabilities	Yes	No	• California Preschool, Transitional Kindergarten (TK), and Full-Day Kindergarten Facilities Grant Program (*one-time funds for construction of facilities; local matching funds required*) • Early Head Start (EHS) • Head Start • California State Preschool Program (CSPP) • Title I Preschool • AB 602, Special Education Program • IDEA • Child Care & Development Fund (CCDF) • Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Apportionment (*one-time funds through June 30, 2026*)
1b. Support development of innovative, multidisciplinary teacher preparation programs	Yes	Yes	• Teacher Residency Program (TRP) grants (*one-time Prop. 98 funds to launch and expand teacher residencies. LEAs and universities partnering through TRP programs may leverage funds to support culturally sustaining teacher recruitment and preparation*) • Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) (*Additional LCFF contributions may support TRPs*) • Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Titles I, II, and III (*ESSA funds [ongoing] are typically 7% of an LEA budget*) • National Professional Development (NPD) grant (*institutions of higher education, in consortia with SEAs or LEAs, are eligible applicants for NPD grants*)

Recommendation	Actions for SEA Leaders	Actions for LEA Leaders	Potential Funding Streams*
1c. Invest in training, hiring, and retaining bilingual early childhood workforce and in preparing language specialists and special education professionals	Yes	Yes	• Classified School Employee Teacher Credential Program (CSETCP) (*one-time Prop. 98 funds through 2026 to support classified staff to become credentialed teachers*) • Early Educator Development Grant (EEDG) (*one-time funds through June 30, 2024, to increase the number of preschool and TK teachers*) • ESSA Titles I,II, and III • Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds (*these one-time funds may range from between 2% and 40% of an LEA budget based on student need*) • TRP (*these funds are less than 1% of an LEA budget for a 2-to-3-year period*)
1d. Allocate funding for interpreters trained in early childhood education and special education referral, evaluation, and placement	Yes	Yes	• ESSA Title III • ESSER • TRP
1e. Develop well-designed, valid, reliable, and linguistically appropriate assessments; provide funds to train assessment administrators	Yes	Yes	• Education Innovation and Research Grants

1f. Provide professional learning opportunities to support preK teachers and early elementary educators preK administrators and elementary school principals	Yes	Yes	i.
			     • ESSA Titles I, II, and III
			     • ESSER
			     • TRP capacity grants
			 ii.
			     • ESSA Titles I, II, and III
			     • ESSER
			     • Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)
			     • Head Start
			     • IDEA

Recommendation	Actions for SEA Leaders	Actions for LEA Leaders	Potential Funding Streams*
1g. Scale up models of effective collaborations between preK programs and LEAs	Yes	Yes	• CSPP (*one-time funds to expand partnerships between LEAs and community-based providers*) • Dual Language Immersion Grant Program (DLIGP) (*one-time funds through June 1, 2026, to establish new immersion programs*) • ESSA Title I • ESSER • CCDF • IDEA
1h. Create infrastructure to align preK and elementary school	Yes	Yes	• Special Education Early Intervention Grants • Universal TK • Head Start • ESSA Title I

* These examples do not represent an exhaustive list. Each funding source has specific, detailed requirements.

2. High-Quality Tier 1 Core Instruction in Elementary Settings

Research and Context

Tier 1 Core Instruction

As with high-quality preK, high-quality Tier 1 Core Instruction in the elementary setting ensures that *all* students, including multilingual learners, receive adequate opportunity to learn (CDE, 2019; Butterfield et al., 2017). Robust Tier 1 Core Instruction incorporates language-rich instruction and language development opportunities integrated with content learning and is culturally and linguistically sustaining, asset-oriented, and differentiated by language proficiency levels (Park, 2019). When students consistently receive this level of learning support, educators can rule out poor instruction as the source of a multilingual student's learning difficulties. Thus, future inaccurate special education referrals can potentially be avoided.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy

Yet, there is work to be done to ensure the presence of effective, research-based, and appropriate instruction that employs multilingual education principles and culturally sustaining pedagogy in the general education classroom. Research has found that some general education

teachers lack both the capacity and the will to effectively provide multilingual learners with language-rich, multilingual instruction (Park, 2019). Additional support is needed for teachers to gain expertise and experience in teaching reading and other subjects to multilingual learners as well as to increase teachers' cultural competencies and understanding of the value of cultural and linguistic diversity (Park, 2019). In a survey administered in spring 2021, fewer than half of California K–12 English language arts (ELA) and math teachers reported that it is "extremely important" that materials include culturally sustaining content and approaches (Burr & Lewis, 2022). With additional training on how language, culture, family, and other background characteristics have an important influence on children's learning, teachers could be empowered to build on these characteristics to develop instruction that is relevant to students' lived experiences (Park, 2019) (see Appendix A for information on how Imperial County Special Education Local Plan Area [SELPA] is offering such support).

California's *English Lanugage Arts/English Language Development (ELA/ELD) Framework* and other content curriculum frameworks are the primary resources for Tier I instructional approaches, including specific strategies for integrating ELA and ELD learning standards (CDE, 2019).[4] The *ELA/ELD Framework* explicitly emphasizes culturally responsive teaching, access and equity for all students, and an assets-based approach to providing a robust and comprehensive instructional program for English Learner (EL) students (CDE, 2014; Yopp et al., 2016). The only framework in the nation to do so, California's *ELA/ELD Framework* intentionally integrates both ELA (including reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and ELD across the disciplines. The *ELA/ELD Framework* includes vignettes of instructional practice, by grade level, that illustrate how the ELA standards, the ELD standards, and content area instruction can be woven together so that multilingual learners can successfully engage with, and achieve success in, grade-level academic content (CDE, 2014).

Professional learning for teachers is important but not sufficient. The responsibility for providing high-quality Tier 1 Core Instruction cannot fall to teachers alone. School administrators can help prevent inaccurate special education referrals by (a) creating the conditions and offering the supports needed to sustain such instruction for multilingual learners and (b) by providing general education teachers and ELD professionals with the time and space for sharing expertise and information on children's strengths and needs (Bornfreund et al., 2021). Relevant administrator practices include the following:

- building an asset-based view of linguistic diversity and an understanding of developing multiple languages
- learning how to support teachers in implementing strategies in the classroom (e.g., providing job-embedded professional learning, coaching, access to additional certifications)

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[4] There are six themes within the comprehensive integrated ELD described in the *ELA/ELD Framework*: meaning making, effective expression, language development, content knowledge, foundational skills, and English Learner support.

- providing teachers with structural supports such as time for reflection, planning, collaboration, and peer learning

- creating a sitewide culture that values dual-language learning and engages families to support dual-language learning

- articulating the site's language and learning goals for multilingual learners

- establishing a schoolwide approach to meet language and learning goals for multilingual learners and ensuring there is clarity among all staff and other school partners

- giving teachers access to coaches to help them plan and use new teaching strategies

- ensuring that system-level approaches and instructional practices align with statewide policies that support multilingual children (e.g., guiding principles of the *California English Learner Roadmap* (CDE, 2018)

- offering teachers additional supports, such as the following:

  - professional learning (e.g., paid time for professional learning outside of the classroom, substitute support, embedded support)

  - teaching assistants and paraprofessionals

  - classroom materials connected to the content in a variety of languages

  - translation and interpretation support, such as community members, family liaisons, and advocates

Resourcing Recommendations

The following are recommendations for high-leverage funding and resourcing needed to implement the strategies and practices described in the research above.

2a. Provide funds for training and retaining a bilingual educator workforce, including paraprofessionals.

2b. Offer professional learning for educators that includes the following topics:

- asset-based approaches that promote culturally and linguistically sustaining instruction

- integration of language development and content instruction, including the provision of primary language support and embedded ELD across the content areas

- development of processes for ongoing review of academic progress through a whole-child lens

- implementation of MTSS, Universal Design for Learning, and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

2c. Provide professional learning/coaching for district and school site administrators on how to develop or improve continual monitoring and accountability for quality instruction.

Table 2 lists the recommendations made in this section, indicates the agent responsible for implementing the recommendation (either SEA or LEA), and offers corresponding suggestions for funding streams.

Table 2. Potential Funding Streams for Implementing the Recommendations for High-Quality Tier 1 Core Instruction in Elementary Settings

Recommendation	Actions for SEA Leaders	Actions for LEA Leaders	Potential Funding Streams*
2a. Provide funds for training and retaining a bilingual educator workforce, including paraprofessionals	Yes	Yes	• ESSA Titles I, II, and III • ESSER • CSETCP • ESSER • TRP
2b. Offer professional learning for educators	Yes	Yes	• Educator Effectiveness Block Grants (EEBG) (*one-time Prop. 98 funds through 2026 for professional learning for teachers, administrators, and staff who work directly with students*) • ESSA Titles I and II • ESSER • CCDBG • Head Start
2c. Provide professional learning for district and school administrators on continual monitoring and accountability for quality instruction	Yes	Yes	• ESSA Titles I and II • ESSER • Scaling Up Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (SUMS) (*one-time funds through June 2026*)

* These examples do not represent an exhaustive list. Each funding source has specific, detailed requirements.

3. Pre-Referral Supports, Assessment, and Special Education Referral

Teachers often struggle to understand the nature of multilingual learners' academic difficulties (Burr et al., 2015). Behaviors associated with language development have highly similar manifestations as language-based disabilities, such as an SLD and a Speech and Language Impairment (Case & Taylor, 2005; Chu & Flores, 2011; NEA, 2007). However, scant research has explored manifestations of their interaction (NASEM, 2017). Multidisciplinary teams—comprising special education, ELD, and general education professionals, along with families—can help address this intersectional challenge. These teams can bring multiple perspectives and types of expertise to help understand the nature of a multilingual student's difficulty and how to support the student within the general education setting before the point of a special education referral. A review of research on supports for multilingual learners with suspected disabilities found the need for collaboration among various professionals and family members to be the most prominent theme running across the studies (Park et al., 2016). As the authors of an innovative and comprehensive guide for assessing multilingual learners in San Diego Unified School District point out, "It is this collaboration and its inherent sharing of responsibilities that gives the [multidisciplinary] process the strength it requires to support our students with diverse backgrounds and needs" (Gaviria & Tipton, 2016, p. 7).

The following sections describe research evidence for supporting multilingual learners at the point of pre-referral supports, assessment, and special education referral. These three topics are discussed together because they are linked by the work of a multidisciplinary team whose collaboration is essential for supporting multilingual learners in these complex, high-stakes decision-making processes.

Research and Context

Pre-Referral: Tier 2 Supplemental Academic Instruction and Tier 3 Intensified Academic Support

In California, MTSS provides a tiered instructional approach *within* the general education setting for ensuring a child has received all reasonable pre-referral supports before being referred for special education. When students continue to have difficulties with robust Tier 1 Core Instruction, they begin to receive comprehensive Tier 2 Supplemental Academic Instruction and Tier 3 Intensified Academic Support. As outlined in the NASEM report (2017), multidisciplinary teams (as described above) regularly review data regarding students' progress in the MTSS tiers and identify needed supports based on those data. Ideally, a strong pre-referral process prevents both under- and over-referral of multilingual learners to special education.

While families are critical members of pre-referral teams, research indicates they are rarely meaningfully included (e.g., Klingner & Harry, 2006). Regarding collaboration among the professionals on the team, partnerships across the special education and ELD disciplines are relatively new (Kangas, 2018), and there is limited research on professional collaboration during pre-referral processes on behalf of multilingual learners. However, studies that examine the schooling experiences of multilingual learners more broadly point to the promise of collaboration between general education and ELD teachers (e.g., Fu et al., 2007; Martin-Beltran & Peercy, 2014; Meskill & Oliveira, 2019; York-Barr et al., 2007). Unfortunately, this collaboration is often beset by (a) logistical and ideological barriers (e.g., Bell & Baecher, 2012; Liggett, 2010; McClure & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010), (b) teachers' lack of preparation for effective collaboration (Kangas, 2017a; Strogilos & Stefandis, 2015), and (c) lack of coplanning time (Bell & Baecher, 2012; Peercy et al., 2015). Specialists often work in silos according to their discipline, which can lead to compartmentalizing students' needs and delivering fragmented, uncoordinated services that inhibit a whole-child approach (Kangas, 2017a, 2017b, 2018).

Under MTSS, targeted supports must be thoughtfully designed and implemented and respond to multilingual learners' cultural and linguistic strengths and learning needs. Practitioners and researchers alike are conflicted about which targeted supports are most effective for multilingual learners. Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions are normed for monolingual English-speaking students and often fail to integrate ELD or principles of culturally and linguistically sustaining practice (NASEM, 2017). Evidence suggests that pre-referral supports that are individually tailored to students' strengths and learning needs can have greater impact than those that rely on a standardized protocol (Richards-Tutor et al., 2012). Research also demonstrates that educators need training for implementing culturally and linguistically sustaining Tiers 2 and 3 instructional supports (Antony & Banks-Joseph, 2010).

Assessment and special education referral

In the case that a multilingual learner still does not show expected academic progress after receiving carefully designed and implemented Tier 2 Supplemental Academic Instruction and Tier 3 Intensified Academic Supports, the student may be referred for a comprehensive initial special education assessment. In this process, the multidisplinary team expands to include additional relevant professionals (e.g., school psychologists, bilingual assessors, administrators, related service providers). This team reviews data from a variety of sources to better understand the nature of a child's learning difficulty. According to the IDEA (2015) "exclusionary clause," the multidisciplinary team must rule out a number of exclusionary criteria for determining an intrinsic disability. To that end, they must ensure that a child's academic difficulties are not a result of environmental, cultural, or economic factors; English proficiency status; or previous poor instruction. To this end, the team reviews a variety of data sources, including previous learning opportunities and supports provided; proficiency levels in the home language and in English; observations across multiple contexts; and physical, mental

and emotional health. Considering the importance of these background factors, it is critical for multidisciplinary teams to engage multilingual learners' families in the assessment process at regular and possibly more frequent intervals than for English-speaking monolingual populations (NASEM, 2017).

Regarding the types of assessment used, research widely recommends the use of nonstandardized assessments, such as portfolios, language samples, holistic classroom observations, narrative analysis, curriculum-based assessments, and authentic performance-based assessments (Farnsworth, 2018). Ideally, these assessments should be conducted across a variety of content areas and contexts (i.e., classroom, social contexts, and the home) and are culturally and linguistically sensitive to multilingual learners' strengths and needs (Hoover et al., 2018).

A body of literature indicates that educators encounter many challenges during the assessment and referral processes. Historically, there has been a push toward testing multilingual learners for special education, and the quality of eligibility procedures has varied widely, with educators often lacking critical knowledge about language development (Figueroa & Newsome, 2006; Klingner & Harry, 2006). Some educators' underlying erroneous and deficit-oriented beliefs can come to bear on teachers' referral decisions, a phenomenon that can lead to inappropriate special education eligibility decisions (Park, 2020). Scholars have also widely critiqued the lack of valid and reliable assessment measures for multilingual learners (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Huang et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2008; Shore & Sabatini, 2009) as well as the use of inconsistent and biased approaches to assessment (Hoover et al., 2018; Ortiz, 2002). IDEA (2015) requires that all assessments be administered by bilingual personnel and trained interpreters unless doing so is not possible. However, schools often lack bilingual assessments and skilled bilingual assessors (Hardin et al., 2009). Despite the IDEA (2015) provision that assessments "are provided and administered in the language and form most likely to yield accurate information," the Department of Justice and Office for Civil Rights (2015) have found that multilingual learners are often assessed only in English, even when English is not their primary language. Adding to this challenge, there is a dearth of validated assessments with appropriate *disability*-related accommodations for determining whether a child with a disability qualifies as a multilingual learner.

Meaningful family engagement is foundational to the special education referral process (IDEA, 2015). As discussed in a previous section (Learning Opportunities for Multilingual Learners in PreK), families hold information that is critical to the assessment process, including languages spoken at home; students' strengths, interests, and motivations; schooling history and past achievement; and achievement of developmental milestones in early childhood (González et al., 2005). Unfortunately, however, research indicates that families of culturally and linguistically diverse students, including multilingual learners, are not always respected during the assessment process and are not valued for their intuition and deep knowledge of their children (Cioè-Peña, 2020; Trainor, 2010). In multidisciplinary referral meetings, families often

face language barriers (when interpretation services are unavailable) and discrimination, and information is often delivered in fragmented or otherwise inaccessible ways (Baker et al., 2010; Burke & Goldman, 2018; Cobb, 2014; Harry, 2008; Wolfe & Durán, 2013). Further disenfranchising these parents, educators tend to overuse jargon that silences parents and approach parent engagement as a formality rather than a meaningful part of the meeting (Schoorman et al., 2011). Educators, administrators, and families working together help to ensure that the spirit, and not just the letter, of special education law is fulfilled.

Resourcing Recommendations

The following are recommendations for high-leverage funding and resourcing needed to implement the strategies and practices described in the research above.

3a. Provide practitioners with scheduled and consistent coplanning time to effectively collaborate on behalf of multilingual learners with suspected disabilities. Ensure that multidisciplinary teams include a range of expertise (e.g., special education teachers, ELD teachers, bilingual assessors, general education teachers, related service providers, administrators).

3b. Provide professional learning for educators in the following areas:

- developing relationship-based services to build close and trusting relationships with families
- implementing processes described in the *California Practitioners' Guide* (CDE, 2019) (see a promising model, Imperial County SELPA's Improving Outcomes for English Learners with Disabilities in Appendix A)
- implementing culturally and linguistically sustaining Tier 2 Supplemental Academic Instruction and Tier 3 Intensified Academic Support
- implementing authentic, unbiased, and culturally and linguistically sensitive assessment
- engaging in proactive, reciprocal, and culturally and linguistically sensitive communication with families

3c. Hire bilingual, highly trained assessors to conduct and interpret bilingual assessments.

3d. Hire bilingual family liaisons to provide interpretation and facilitate meaningful family engagement.

3e. Provide resources in families' home languages.

Table 3 lists the recommendations made in this section, indicates the agent responsible for implementing the recommendation (either the SEA or LEA), and offers corresponding suggestions for funding streams.

Table 3. Potential Funding Streams for Implementing the Recommendations for Pre-referral Supports, Assessment, and Special Education Referral

Recommendation	Actions for SEA Leaders	Actions for LEA Leaders	Potential Funding Streams*
3a. Provide scheduled and consistent coplanning time for multidisciplinary teams to collaborate on behalf of multilingual learners with suspected disabilities	Yes	Yes	- ESSA Titles I and II - ESSER - CCDBG - Head Start - IDEA
3b. Provide professional learning opportunities for educators	Yes	Yes	- ESSA Titles I, II, and III - Early Intervention Services (*funded on an ongoing basis through the California General Fund, AB130, to provide early interventions and professional learning*) - Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Awards - LCFF Supplemental and Concentration Grants
3c. Hire bilingual, highly trained assessors	Yes	Yes	- ESSA - ESSER - CCDBG - Head Start - IDEA
3d. Hire bilingual family liaisons to provide interpretation and facilitate meaningful family engagement	No	Yes	- ESSA Titles I and III - ESSER - WIOA Title II - CCDBG - Head Start - LCFF Supplemental and Concentration Grants
3e. Provide resources in families' home languages	Yes	Yes	- ESSA Title I - ESSER - LCFF Supplemental and Concentration Grants

* These examples do not represent an exhaustive list. Each funding source has specific, detailed requirements.

Conclusion

Findings from recent research suggest promising practices for young multilingual learners, including those with suspected disabilities. Guides for California educators, such as the *California Practitioners' Guide for Educating English Learners with Disabilities* (CDE, 2019) incorporate these promising practices and offer guidance for implementing them. However, many districts and schools are not implementing best practices for supporting young multilingual learners. What is preventing statewide uptake of this guidance?

According to several Learning Collaborative members, there is neither uniform awareness of the guidance that exists nor access to professional learning to inform implementation. There are also various systemic barriers that inhibit coordinated and collaborative approaches to instruction and support. These barriers include structural silos between general education, special education, and ELD in the preparation of teachers and specialists, in the delivery of services in preK and K–12 schools, and in governance and finance structures. Currently, the critical needs at this stage are for leaders to strategically disseminate guidance from the *California Practitioners' Guide for Educating English Learners with Disabilities* (and other relevant guides, such as those listed in Appendix B), fund professional learning for consistent and widespread implementation of the practices in the Guide, and dismantle silos at every level of policy and practice.

When earmarking resources, it is important to consider the sustainability of the funding (Willis et al., 2021). For example, while one-time COVID-19 relief funds and the current positive budget picture in California present opportunities for increased hiring, professional learning, and infrastructure development, they are not long-term solutions.

Blending and braiding one-time funds with ongoing funds in a coordinated way creates efficiencies of resource use. By projecting how the one-time funds will be used while they are available (*before* these funds expire), education leaders can also plan when and how to braid in ongoing funding to meet the needs of students, families, staff, and the whole system.

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Appendix A: Examples of Promising Local Models for Supporting Young Multilingual Learners

This appendix includes information on three promising research-based models for supporting young multilingual learners. These models, identified by members of the Learning Collaborative, can serve as reference points for other districts and regions looking to modify or expand their support for multilingual learners. The Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) model is an intructional model, Improving Outcomes for English Learners with Disabilities is a professional learning model, and the Fresno Language Learning Project is both an instructional and a professional learning model.

Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL): A PreK–Grade 3 Model

https://seal.org/

From the website:

> SEAL is a preschool through third grade program of the Sobrato Family Foundation. SEAL is designed to build the capacity of preschools and elementary schools to powerfully develop the language and literacy skills of young Dual Language/English Learner children, to support development, and to close the academic achievement gap by fourth grade. It is also a model of language-rich, joyful, and rigorous education for all children. SEAL develops rich, powerful language and literacy in the context of delivering a full curriculum. SEAL classrooms are alive with language! Language and literacy education is woven into all aspects of the school day. Children use high-level, complex language to talk about what they are learning, express their feelings and thoughts, ask questions, make predictions, and think through solutions to academic and social problems and tasks. Teachers model rich, expressive language and create environments where

vocabulary and concepts come to life. Children learn through active hands-on, play-based, project-based, inquiry focused opportunities to engage with their world.

For young Dual Language Learners, SEAL creates the learning conditions that build language and literacy skills necessary for participation in their multiple language and cultural worlds, the academic world and their communities. Whenever possible, SEAL promotes the development of biliteracy, affirming and supporting home language for Dual Language Learner children and families, and developing high levels of proficiency in both Spanish and English. For all children, the SEAL classroom brings to life the rigor and richness called for by the California Preschool Curriculum Framework, the Learning Foundations, and the Preschool Program Guidelines, the California ELA/ELD Framework, the Common Core Language Arts standards, the English Language Development standards, and the new California English Learner Roadmap Policy.

Imperial County SELPA: Improving Outcomes for English Learners With Disabilities

https://www.icoe.org/selpa/el-swd

From the website:

Imperial County SELPA offers state-wide in-person and virtual training opportunities for teachers, teacher leaders/ coaches, support personnel, general and special education service providers, and administrators, to advance the achievement of multilingual learners across CA. Imperial County's workshops include the following topics related to Multilingual learners with disabilities or suspected disabilities:

- An Introduction to the CDE California Practitioners Guide for Educating English Learners with Disabilities

- Identification of English Learners, MTSS, and Pre-Referral Interventions - Section 1 of the California Practitioners' Guide

- Pre-Referral & Referral Process for English Learners with Suspected Disabilities

- Evaluation of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Populations: A nondiscriminatory assessment framework for all practitioners

- Improving Outcomes for English Learners: Pre-referral and Referral, Assessment, and IEP Processes for English Learners who May be eligible for Special Education (and many others)

Fresno Language Project

http://www.fcoe.org/departments/early-care-education/fresno-language-project

The following description is excerpted from chapter four of the California Department of Education publication, *Improving Education for Multilingual and English Learner Students: Research to Practice* (Espinosa & Crandell, 2020, pp. 204–205).

> In the 2011–12 school year, Fresno Unified School District (FUSD) convened an Early Learning Task Force that included educators, administrators, families, and community partners. The task force was commissioned by FUSD's superintendent and school board to examine the supports available in the Fresno community and school district for children age birth to five, to study current research, and to develop recommendations. Fresno is a diverse community where 76 different languages are spoken, 35 percent of kindergarten through grade three (K–3) students in FUSD are DLLs, and 84 percent of K–12 students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. Low academic achievement and high school graduation rates of FUSD's EL students were motivators for the task force's work. The Early Learning department had participated in the development of FUSD's English Learner Master Plan and recognized the need to intentionally address language development strategies for young EL students, or DLLs.

> The resulting initiative of the task force—the Language Learning Project—was based on a cross-agency collaborative that included all community providers of services to DLL children age birth to five (Early Head Start, Head Start, FUSD, and community-based family child care). Each agency participated equally in creating a vision, establishing goals, and making operational decisions. This multiagency collaboration was essential to active engagement and high levels of implementation across all sites. The essential components of the Language Learning Project are:

> - A multiagency collaborative to ensure all children have a strong foundation in both English and their home language upon entering kindergarten

> - Broad representation, including 79 participants from the school district's infant and preschool programs, a community infant and preschool child care program, Head Start, Early Head Start, and family child care homes

> - Strong asset-based partnerships with families and a perception of parents and families as having much to offer to the education of their children

> - A targeted focus on Personalized Oral Language(s) Learning (POLL) strategies—concrete instructional approaches that support DLLs' language learning in multiple environments. The POLL strategies include (1) family engagement methods and tools, (2) guidance on environmental supports that welcome DLLs, and (3) specific instructional enhancements and scaffolds that promote early bilingualism and overall development.

- Frequent teacher professional learning opportunities focused on cultural and linguistic diversity, family engagement, and POLL strategies combined with individualized coaching and mentoring.

Evaluation results indicate that ECE educators are able to successfully apply the newly learned approaches, including the POLL strategies, across ECE settings, are satisfied with the approach, and are excited to see the language growth of their DLLs. Another promising aspect of FUSD's work was greater articulation and collaboration between ECE and K–12 educators. For example, district leaders of the ECE and K–12 EL Services departments routinely structured time for instructional coaches in each department to share knowledge and instructional practices with one another and even participate as cofacilitators in each other's professional learning sessions in an effort to enhance and align each department's services.

Appendix B: Key California Practitioner Guides and Resources

This appendix provides links to the *California Practitioners' Guide for Educating English Learners With Disabilities*, two other practitioner guides, relevant organizations, and other resources and web-based guidance for meeting the needs of multilingual learners.

California Practitioners' Guide for Educating English Learners With Disabilities **and Other Practitioner Guides**

The *California Practitioners' Guide for Educating English Learners with Disabilities* (California Department of Education [CDE], 2019) addresses many of the challenges, described throughout this report, that educators and others face in the pre-referral, assessment, and special education referral processes for multilingual learners. The CDE practitioner guide was heavily informed by practitioner guides that preceded it, including the following:

- San Diego Unified School District's *CEP-EL: A Comprehensive Evaluation Process for English Learners: A Process Manual* (Gaviria & Tipton, 2016)

- SELPA Administrators of California Association's *Meeting the Needs of English Learners (Els) with Disabilities Resource Book* (Butterfield et al., 2017)

These documents all provide guidance that focuses on multilingual learners' assets, elevating their interests, strengths, cultures, linguistic repertoires, and background knowledge. The guides also offer extensive tools that multidisciplinary teams can use to individually tailor Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports during the pre-referral process and to rule out factors extrinsic to disability during the referral process.

Widespread adoption of the systematic and highly collaborative approaches espoused by these three practitioner guides has the potential for enhancing the accuracy of the special education referral process and dismantling silos between general education, special education, and ELD at

every level of policy and practice. However, funding is needed to support the consistent and successful implementation of the guidance provided in these resources.

Other Organizations and Resources

The following are links to organizations and resources focused on supporting multilingual learners in various ways:

- The California Association for Bilingual Education (website)
- The California Department of Education (website)
    - English Learner Roadmap (PDF)
    - Multilingual Education (webpage)
    - English Learners With Disabilities (webpage)
    - Improving Education for Multilingual and English Learner Students: Research to Practice (webpage)
- Californians Together (website)
    - EL RISE! (webpage)
- Early Edge California (website)
- Disability Rights California (website)

Appendix C: Learning Collaborative Members and Affiliations

The authors extend appreciation to the members of the Learning Collaborative, without whose expertise this report would not be possible. Their tireless efforts on behalf of multilingual learners and students with disabilities have contributed to California being a national leader in the fields of multilingual education and special education.

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