

RESEARCH BRIEF March 2017

Important 2017 National Academies of Sciences report on English learner education provides new research-based guidance for the field.

A new National Academies of Sciences report, "Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures," was released in February 2017 providing research-based guidance and recommendations for the field related to policies and practices that can result in better educational outcomes for English learners (ELs)/dual language learners (DLLs). The report, edited by Ruby Takanishi and Suzanne Le Menestrel, is a product of the Committee on Fostering School Success for English Learners, which the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine convenes through its Board on Children, Youth, and Families and Board on Science Education. The committee's task was to recommend policies and practices that will enhance successful educational outcomes for ELs and DLLs in the U.S. from birth through grade 12. This brief summarizes and excerpts key findings and recommendations from the report.

Context of Urgency

Attention to how ELs/DLLs are faring in grades pre-K-12 comes at a pivotal time in American education. Schools throughout the nation are teaching to higher curricular standards in core subject areas – English language arts, social studies, mathematics and science. All students, including ELs/DLLs, are expected to engage with academic content that is considerably more demanding than in previous years, and they must now demonstrate deeper levels of understanding and analysis of that content. ELs/DLLs face the dual tasks of achieving English proficiency while mastering grade-level academic subjects. Despite their linguistic, cognitive and social potential, many ELs/DLLs – who account for more than 9 percent of enrollment in grades K-12 in U.S. schools and approximately one-quarter of students in California schools – are struggling to meet the requirements for academic success, and their prospects for success in postsecondary education and in the workforce are jeopardized as a result. A large educational achievement and attainment gap exists between ELs/DLLs and their English-monolingual peers. The Committee on Fostering School Success for English Learners identified key challenges that may impact the language development and educational attainment of ELs/DLLs. Evidence clearly indicates that these children and youth lag behind their English-monolingual peers in educational achievement and attainment. Limited proficiency in English poses a high barrier to academic learning and performance in schools where English is the primary language of instruction and assessment. Moreover, ELs/DLLs face a number of additional barriers to educational success and the availability of learning opportunities that go beyond their English proficiency, such as poverty and attending underresourced schools.

A defining characteristic of ELs/DLLs is their demographic diversity.

ELs/DLLs are members of every major racial or ethnic group and include both U.S.- and foreign-born youth. Most come from Latin America and Asia, with Mexico being their leading country of origin. They speak a wide range of languages. Relative to other U.S. children, ELs/DLLs are far more likely to live in poverty and in two-parent families with low levels of education. Many ELs/DLLs grow up in contexts that expose them to a number of risk factors (e.g., low levels of parental education, low family income, refugee status, homelessness) that can have a negative impact on their school success, especially when these disadvantages are concentrated.

Children have the capacity to learn more than one language and reap benefits from bilingual proficiency.

Scientific evidence clearly points to a universal, underlying human capacity to learn two languages as easily as one. Children have the capacity to learn more than one language if given appropriate opportunities. Fulfillment of this capacity can be accomplished with no harm and has benefits. Those who become proficient in both a home or primary language (L1) and English (L2) are likely to reap benefits in cognitive, social and emotional development and may also be protected from brain decline at older ages.

One of the greatest challenges in educating ELs/DLLs is the opposing views that society at large and many educational and health professionals hold about whether ELs/DLLs should be supported early in their development and later in classrooms. There is no evidence to indicate that the use of two languages in the home or the use of one in the home and another in an early



care and education (ECE) setting confuses ELs/DLLs or puts the development of one or both of their languages at risk. Given adequate exposure to two languages, young children have the capacity to develop competence in both. Children who are given the opportunity to develop competence in two or more languages early in life benefit from their capacity to communicate in more than one language and may show enhancement of certain cognitive skills, as well as improved academic outcomes in school.



Families, schools, other institutions and policies are influential in ELs'/DLLs' language development and educational attainment.

Early development of both home language and English is critical for academic success.

For ELs/DLLs, early, rich development of the child's first language is a beneficial foundation for learning English in school. The languages of bilinguals do not develop in isolation from one another. Evidence indicates that certain aspects of dual language learning, processing and usage are significantly and positively correlated and that the development of strong L1 skills supports the development of L2 skills. Educational programs that provide systematic support for the development of ELs'/DLLs' L1 facilitate and enhance their development of skills in English, especially literacy. Early proficiency in both L1 and English at kindergarten entry is critical to becoming academically proficient in a second language. Preschool ELs/DLLs need systematic exposure to English to prepare them for success in kindergarten and beyond. However, important benefits are lost if the English acquisition comes at the expense of continuing development in the child's L1. When ELs/DLLs are exposed to English during the preschool years, they often show a preference for speaking English and a reluctance to continue speaking their L1. ELs/DLLs who fail to maintain proficiency in their home language may lose their ability to communicate with parents and family members and may risk becoming estranged from their cultural and linguistic heritage. For this reason, ELs/DLLs benefit from consistent exposure to both their L1 and English in early childhood education settings. Because bilingualism conveys some social, cultural, linguistic and cognitive advantages, early childhood programs can best serve ELs/DLLs by providing them with high-quality language experiences and support in mastering both languages, recognizing that the cognitive advantages of bilingualism are greatest when ELs/DLLs have comparable levels of proficiency in both languages. Research is limited, however, on how much and what type of support for each language is most effective in supporting bilingual development.

Development of the home language should be maintained throughout the preschool and school years as ELs/DLLs learn English.

The report concludes that the cognitive, communicative, cultural and economic benefits of knowing English and another language are most likely to occur when individuals have high levels of linguistic and functional competence in both languages, including speaking, listening, reading and writing. This is most likely to occur if development of the home language is maintained throughout the preschool and school years as ELs/DLLs learn English. It can take from five to seven years for students to learn the English necessary for participation in a school's curriculum without further linguistic support. This is due in part to the increasing language demands of participation in school learning over time, especially with respect to the language used in written texts beyond the early primary years. Thus, students may require help with English through the upper elementary and middle school grades, particularly in acquiring proficiency in the academic uses of English. Syntheses of evaluation studies that compare outcomes for ELs/DLLs instructed in Englishonly programs with outcomes for ELs/DLLs instructed bilingually find either that there is no difference in outcomes measured in English or that ELs/DLLs in bilingual programs outperform ELs/DLLs instructed only in English. Studies that followed students for sufficient time to gauge longer-term effects of language of instruction on ELs'/DLLs' outcomes find benefits for bilingual compared with English-only approaches. The report concludes that ELs/DLLs need both systematic exposure to English and ongoing support for L1 maintenance and development for two major reasons: (1) ELs/DLLs exposed to both languages show as much growth in English language and literacy skills as those instructed only in English, and (2) children immersed in English at an early age often show declines in their L1 skills, and strong language skills in a child's first language have been shown to facilitate English language development.

Parents and early childhood educators should talk with children in their strongest language.

Research indicates that children's language development benefits from the input of adults who talk to them in the language in which the adults are most competent and with which they are most comfortable. ELs'/DLLs' language development, like that of monolingual children, benefits from the amount and quality of child-directed language – that is, language that is used frequently in daily interactions is contingent on the child's language and focus of attention and is rich and diverse in words and sentence types. For most EL/DLL families, this quantity and quality of child-directed language are more likely to occur in the home language, not English. All ECE teachers of ELs/DLLs can learn and implement strategies that systematically introduce English during the infant, toddler and preschool years while simultaneously promoting maintenance of the home language. Not all teachers can teach in all languages, but all teachers can learn specific strategies that support the maintenance of all languages.



The development of academic language is supported by evidence-based instructional practices.

Given findings that the levels of proficiency in ELs'/DLLs' home language and in English at school entry are related to the time-to-English proficiency in the K-12 grades, the report calls for more attention to how the early grades, especially K-5, build the academic language that young children need to be successful in school.¹ Instruction that fails to appropriately address ELs'/DLLs' linguistic, cultural, socioemotional and academic needs when they first enter elementary school leads to their lack of progress and to the growing number of longterm ELs/DLLs in secondary schools, which in turn can lead to these students' disengagement. Instructional approaches developed for students proficient in English offer a learning advantage for ELs/DLLs as well. However, these approaches are likely to be insufficient for improving ELs'/DLLs' literacy achievement absent attention to oral language development. Oral language proficiency plays a foundational role in ELs'/ DLLs' academic success. The following characteristics of instructional programs support ELs'/DLLs' oral language development: specialized instruction focused on components of oral language proficiency, opportunities for interaction with speakers proficient in the second language, feedback to students during conversational interactions and dedicated time for instruction focused on oral English proficiency.

In addition, the report cites benefits from providing explicit instruction in literacy components; developing academic language during content area instruction; providing visual and verbal supports to make core content comprehensible; encouraging peer-assisted learning opportunities; capitalizing on students' home language, knowledge and cultural assets; screening for language and literacy challenges and monitoring progress; and providing small-group academic support in literacy and English language development for students. Furthermore, literacy engagement is an important factor for ELs/DLLs in their ability to learn to read, in their academic language learning from school texts and in their literacy and academic achievement. Literacy engagement may be even more important for ELs/DLLs than for students whose first language is English because (1) learning to read in a language one is still learning is difficult and literacy engagement can support ELs'/DLLs' efforts to learn despite those difficulties; and (2) literacy is necessary to learning academic language required for reclassification. Language-rich classroom and school environments should be promoted in which communication and self-expression are encouraged. Finally, because accurate assessment of

¹The Sobrato Early Academic Language model is presented as an example of a preK-3 approach that provides aligned, articulated language development support in both English settings and bilingual settings centralizing the needs of ELLs utilizing the research-based instructional strategies called for by the report.

ELs'/DLLs' developmental status and instructional needs is the foundation for effective instruction, it is necessary to examine their skills in both English and their home language. School and district practices can support the academic success of ELs/DLLs.

School and district practices can support the academic success of ELs/DLLs.

Based on case studies, the report cites schools' and districts' practices and characteristics that support ELs'/DLLs' academic success. These include: administrative leadership at the school and district levels that take responsibility for initiating and sustaining instructional programs and practices that support the full academic development of all students, including ELs/DLL; beliefs and recognition that ELs/DLLs are capable of learning whatever society expects all children to learn in school; teachers who are encouraged to work collaboratively and support one another to improve instruction; cross-disciplinary endeavors in planning and integrating instruction that support the integration of language and literacy development across the curriculum; teachers who are linguistically, culturally and pedagogically prepared to meet ELs'/DLLs' academic and sociocultural needs; instruction that is adapted based on frequent analysis of student performance in formative and summative assessments; and school and community partnerships that are encouraged to augment and enrich classroom-based learning.

Planning and investments to build an educator workforce to meet the needs of ELs/DLLs is an urgent need.

The educator workforce – including ECE providers, educational administrators and teachers – is inadequately prepared during preservice training to promote desired educational outcomes for ELs/DLLs. The emergence of alternative teacher preparation programs is promising, but traditional institutions of higher education remain the major source of new teachers, and changes in these institutions may therefore be required to increase the pipeline of well-prepared teachers for ELs/DLLs. All education agencies in states, districts, regional clusters of districts, and intermediary units and agencies responsible for early learning services and the pre-K-12 grades should support efforts to recruit, select, prepare and retain teachers, care and education practitioners, and education leaders qualified to serve ELs/DLLs. Consistent with requirements for the pre-K-12 grades, program directors and lead teachers in early learning programs should attain a Bachelor of Arts degree.

Fears, misunderstandings and competing attitudes about the benefits of bilingualism and dual language learning require public information and social marketing efforts.

The report recommends social marketing campaigns to provide information about young children's capacity to learn more than one language, including information on the communicative, social, cognitive, emotional and employment advantages of bilingualism and the absence of evidence of harmful effects. The report also calls upon government agencies and organizations, including professional associations whose members work directly with children, to promote practices in families and programs that support the development of children's bilingualism.



The full report is available through the National Academies Press www.nap.edu/24677

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