



A New Federal Equity Agenda for Dual Language Learners and English Learners

DECEMBER 8, 2021 – CONOR WILLIAMS

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English learners (ELs) constitute a large—and growing—share of the student body in the United States. More than 10 percent of U.S. pre-K–12 students are formally classified as ELs, which means that their states have determined that they have not yet reached sufficient English proficiency to cease participating in language instruction educational programs.¹ But the linguistic diversity of U.S. schools stretches well beyond those 5 million students. U.S. schools also enroll millions of former ELs, linguistically diverse students who have met state criteria to exit EL status and be reclassified as English proficient; data from California and Oregon suggest that the number of former ELs is likely to be nearly as large as the number of current ELs.² Indeed, data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that nearly one-quarter of U.S. children speak a language other than English at home.³ Furthermore, one-third of children under age 8 have at least one parent who speaks a non-English language—these younger language learners are sometimes referred to as dual language learners (DLLs) in the early years.⁴

Despite their increasing share of the U.S. student body, ELs have long been underserved and marginalized in the nation's schools. Too often, states and school districts have treated ELs' linguistic diversity as an obstacle or liability to be overcome. This monolingual, English-only approach has stripped many

of these students of their emerging bilingualism and failed to set them up for academic or professional success. ELs' graduation rates are lower than the national average, as well as the rates of almost every other student group: across the country, in the 2018–19 school year, the four-year high school graduation rate for current ELs was 69 percent, compared to the national four-year high school graduation rate for all students, which was 86 percent.⁵

Clearly, the United States is decades—generations—overdue for overhauling how its schools serve EL students. The nation needs a more equitable, “English-plus” approach to supporting ELs, beginning with systemic recognition that their home languages are considerable strengths to be developed. Research suggests that the work of developing bilingual proficiencies may confer cognitive benefits to young bilingual students, such as greater mental flexibility and a range of metalinguistic skills.⁶ This helps explain why these students often thrive in integrated, two-way dual language immersion programs that foster their bilingualism alongside English-dominant peers.⁷ Further, studies indicate that there may be long-term wage advantages for adults who have retained and deepened their bilingualism during their time in school.⁸

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Better serving EL students means engaging the full diversity of the student group. Specifically, any efforts to support linguistic equity in education must also engage in discussions of racial and socioeconomic disparities in United States schools. For instance, a large majority of ELs are children of color. Nearly 78 percent of ELs identify as Hispanic, 11 percent identify as Asian, and 4 percent identify as Black. Just 7 percent of ELs identify as White.⁹ Further, while many ELs are children of immigrant parents, the large majority of these students are native-born U.S. citizens.¹⁰

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Finally, ELs' families are disproportionately likely to be facing poverty. A 2017 National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine report found that 65 percent of ELs' families qualify for federal lunch subsidies, while just 36 percent of non-ELs' families do.¹¹ Similarly, U.S. Census Bureau data suggest that the poverty rate for school-aged children who speak a non-English language at home (nearly 23 percent) is approximately ten points higher than for peers who speak only English (14 percent).¹² What's more, recent analysis from the Brookings Institution suggests that ELs are particularly likely to attend socioeconomically segregated schools.¹³

Notwithstanding the significant and intersecting structural inequities facing ELs in U.S. schools, these students bring unlimited potential to their campuses each day. For instance, evidence from California, Chicago, New York, Oregon, and Hawaii suggests that these students do particularly well once they reach proficiency in English.¹⁴

In sum, no matter how schools and other public institutions define ELs, it is clear that policy reforms made in the name of educational equity will be incomplete if they do not incorporate the strengths and needs of these students. This report offers a series of concrete policy reforms that stand to improve ELs' chances to graduate from high school prepared for postsecondary education or high-quality workforce opportunities. Now, at the beginning of a new presidential administration—and with the Every Student Succeeds Act

(ESSA) due for reauthorization—is the perfect time to establish a new, equitable policy framework that supports EL students' success.

Making Title III More Robust and Effective

The advent of No Child Left Behind's Title III marked a significant shift in federal EL policy. It was the first time that the federal government committed formula funds that would, in theory, support the educational success of all ELs in the nation's schools. Before Title III, the federal government's EL-targeted funding programs were limited to competitive grants that did not cover all ELs.

And yet, Title III has not yet delivered on its goal of improving ELs' educational opportunities nationwide. Title III's initial funding levels were insufficient from the start, when there were roughly 3.8 million ELs in U.S. schools. Indeed, there are now at least 5 million ELs, and funding levels haven't commensurately increased. When Title III was first funded, it amounted to an annual federal investment of roughly \$175 per EL. In 2017, Title III funding came out to just \$147 per EL. In other words, Title III funding levels were inadequate from the start, and they have actually dropped relative to the number of students they now support.¹⁵ *Educational equity for ELs requires providing schools and school districts with adequate funding to provide these students with instructional supports that integrate and advance their linguistic and academic development.*

- Congress should triple annual Title III funding for ELs, from its historical levels (roughly \$740 million) to \$2.2 billion, which would be roughly \$440 in annual federal funding per EL.
- The Department of Education should explore the consequences of rebalancing the weighting of the Title III funding formula to rely more heavily on states' reported EL data and less heavily on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey.¹⁶

Supporting Bilingualism and Biliteracy

Research suggests that ELs do best when their emerging bilingual skills are supported in school. ELs in high-quality bilingual settings—particularly in linguistically integrated dual language immersion programs—perform better academically and generally have stronger linguistic development in both English and their home languages.¹⁷ However, states, schools, and districts who try to launch these programs frequently struggle to find the bilingual teachers and staff they need.¹⁸ *Educational equity for ELs requires expanding access to bilingual instruction, and that requires a more linguistically diverse teaching force.*

- Congress should rename the Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition as the Office of Multilingual Learning, and restore its authority over Title III’s formula grants.
- Congress should provide the Department of Education’s newly renamed Office of Multilingual Learning with funding to launch a \$200 million competitive grants program supporting the development of new bilingual teacher training programs—and the expansion of existing bilingual teacher training programs. These grants should be available to traditional training programs within institutions of higher education and alternative training programs, such as “grow-your-own,” apprenticeship, and/or teacher fellowship programs. Congress should set aside a significant portion of these grants for programs hosted by Hispanic-Serving Institutions.
- Congress should provide the Department of Education’s newly renamed Office of Multilingual Learning with funding to launch two rounds of a \$50 million competitive grants program for states to pilot, redesign, and implement new bilingual teacher certification and licensure policies.

- Congress should include a new requirement in ESSA’s Title I that states track and annually publish statistics on the racial, ethnic, gender, and linguistic diversity of their state’s pre-K–12 teachers on ESSA state report cards.
- The Department of Education should publish updated guidance focused on how schools and educators can use federal funding to develop these students’ emerging bilingualism and biliteracy, given the strong role that DLLs/ELs’ ongoing home language development plays in their English acquisition.¹⁹ This guidance can expand from the department’s 2015 EL Tool Kit.²⁰
- The Department of Education should establish a system to identify, track, and publish data on the amount of Title I funds that are used to serve EL-specific needs.

Improving Data on EL Linguistic Development

Existing policies for measuring ELs’ linguistic and academic development present an incomplete—even misleading—picture of these students’ progress.²¹ For instance, while policymakers, advocates, and policy analysts frequently bemoan “achievement gaps” between ELs and non-ELs on standardized academic assessments, these gaps are largely a function of how the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) tracks their performance.²² By definition, ELs lack proficiency in English. Once they become English proficient, they are no longer classified as ELs. Thus, it stands to reason that ELs—who have limited English proficiency—will be unable to fully demonstrate their knowledge of math, English language arts, and other subject areas when they are tested on these subjects in English. This flawed framework for identifying ELs and gauging their performance obscures the reality of EL educational equity in U.S. schools. Studies suggest that former ELs—those students who have reached their state’s definition of English proficiency—often perform as well as, or better than, peers who were never designated as ELs on a range of academic outcomes.²³ By contrast, long-term ELs—

students who have not reached English proficiency after roughly five to seven years in school—tend to have worse academic outcomes.²⁴ *Educational equity for ELs requires collecting better, more accurate data on their linguistic and academic development.*

1. Congress should require states to report on former ELs' and long-term ELs (LTELs) linguistic and academic development as unique student groups, and include their progress in state accountability systems for both schools and school districts. Further, Congress should instruct the Department of Education to develop definitions of newcomer ELs and students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE).
2. Congress should increase funding to the Competitive Grants for State Assessments program with the specific goal of allowing for states (or consortia of states) to develop, test, and adopt versions of their annual academic assessments in ELs' home languages. This would allow more of these students to demonstrate the full repertoire of their skills and knowledge.
3. Congress should provide additional funding to the Competitive Grants for State Assessments program to support the development of assessments that would measure ELs' linguistic development in their home languages, particularly in Spanish, the home language of more than 75 percent of ELs.²⁵

Supporting ELs in Early Education

There is significant evidence that young DLLs uniquely benefit from early education programs, particularly when these programs support their emerging bilingualism.²⁶ Such programs can help these children continue their development of early literacy and language skills in their home languages, while also accelerating their English language exposure and development. Early education programs can also serve as brokering institutions that help DLLs gain school readiness

skills before enrolling in kindergarten and help their families learn to navigate U.S. educational settings. Unfortunately, these children do not have equitable access to early education programs.²⁷ Educational equity for DLLs requires including these students in the design and implementation of all early education programs.

1. The Department of Education should partner with the Department of Health and Human Services to develop the clearest possible standards, protocols, and recommended screening tools for early education programs to use when identifying DLLs.²⁸
2. Ongoing efforts to expand publicly supported, affordable, high-quality pre-K and child care should include weighted enrollment lotteries, reserved seats, or other policies that ensure that DLLs have equitable access.
3. Congress should provide the Department of Health and Human Services with \$50 million for an annual competitive grants program that would allow early educators in Head Start and other federally funded programs to convert more of their settings from English-only to bilingual approaches. This funding should be administered jointly through interagency collaboration with the Department of Education, and should support planning and implementation of new dual language or bilingual instructional models, bilingual family outreach efforts to ensure that DLLs' families are aware of these new early education opportunities, and local efforts to train and retain more linguistically diverse early educators.

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This project’s review process deviated from the norm within education policy research and writing. To ensure that the final publication reflected the views of a broad consensus of educators, experts, researchers, and advocates across the field, I requested—and received—feedback on an early draft of the agenda from roughly 100 people working in or around the fields of education, public policy, and/or EL policy. Predictably, the size of this pool of reviewers meant that I received a wide and diverse range of responses. While I discovered some points of overlap and widespread consensus on many of the policy recommendations, I found less clarity on others. As such, while I believe this document reflects significant agreement across the field around a series of concrete ideas for improving DLLs/ELs’ learning opportunities in U.S. schools, the recommendations here are solely mine and do not necessarily reflect the views of any one of the reviewers. The following is a partial list of those who were able to grant us release to use their names and affiliations in the final publication.

- Kathleen Anderson, Prince George’s County Public Schools
- Ashley Simpson Baird, Merit Research, Policy, and Evaluation
- Charles Barone, Democrats for Education Reform, Education Reform Now
- M. Beatriz Arias, Center for Applied Linguistics
- Leo Bialis-White, NewSchools Venture Fund
- Manuel Buenrostro, Californians Together
- Shasta Burton, Jordan District
- Donna Christian, Center for Applied Linguistics
- Jane Clark, Data Quality Campaign
- Delis Cuéllar, University of Wisconsin
- Karen Feagin
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- Carrie Gillispie, The Education Trust
- Catherine Gonzalez, Vanderbilt University
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- Teresa Hayden, Prince George’s County Public Schools
- Martha Hernandez, Californians Together
- Adrienne Johnson, Missouri Western State University
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- Santiago Wood, National Association for Bilingual Education

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Notes

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