



What Families Want: New Polling on Public Demand for Bilingual Education

NOVEMBER 12, 2025 — DR. CONOR P. WILLIAMS, DR. MAGGIE S. MARCUS, AND DR. MONIQUE ESCOBEDO

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“I vaguely remember, I think it was like kindergarten or first grade, they would pull me aside to the back of the class and.... I was so jealous that everybody else was doing other stuff like reading or participating, and I had to be learning English.”

—Latine mother in TCF’s English-language focus group in Sunnyvale, California

Key Points

- Studies have established that English learners in bilingual programs—particularly dual-language immersion programs—are more likely to become proficient in English, more likely to succeed academically, and more likely to fully develop their emerging bilingualism.
- While schools sometimes report that English learners and their families are reluctant to enroll in bilingual programs, TCF’s research finds little evidence that this mindset is widespread.
- TCF’s focus group and survey data show strong family interest in bilingual education and dual-language immersion programs, with multilingual families showing particularly high levels of enthusiasm.
- Latine families were consistently less likely to express concerns about bilingualism, bilingual education, and dual-language immersion programs compared to other demographics surveyed.
- Latine families were particularly likely to report that bilingualism could help their children connect with their culture, heritage, and traditions.

Introduction

The United States has long distinguished itself as uniquely effective at attracting and integrating immigrants into its broader society, economy, and culture. Over many generations, K–12 campuses have connected millions of newcomers to inclusion and opportunity. American University researcher Ernesto Castañeda explains, “despite its ethnic and cultural diversity, the United States has been very successful in creating a common national identity. There is ample room for immigrant groups and subcultures to exist in the American social landscape without really threatening the future of the United States as a state and a political union.”¹ For well over a century, public schools have been central components of the United States’ “welcoming strategy.”

Throughout American history, many communities have intentionally crafted schools that (1) celebrate these new arrivals’ languages and cultures while also (2) raising their English-language proficiency and their awareness of U.S. society. Over time, researchers have determined that these sorts of bilingual approaches are the best models for meeting the needs of English-learning students (ELs).² And

A shorter, web version of this report can be found at: tcf.org/content/report/what-families-want-new-data-on-public-demand-for-bilingual-education/

yet, political pressures have periodically driven politicians to ignore this evidence in favor of mandating monolingual, English-only instruction.

Meanwhile, the voices of immigrant families have not often been included in these debates. Data on linguistically diverse families' views on public schools' support for student bilingualism and biliteracy are relatively scarce. In this report, we share new California focus group and survey data to fill this gap in the field. To learn their views on bilingual and dual-language education, multilingualism, and multiliteracy more generally, we talked directly with dozens of families and polled 1,000 more in both English and Spanish. In a moment where American immigrant integration strategies—including those involving K–12 schools—are under heavy scrutiny, these families' views are essential for local, state, and federal policymakers to understand.

Immigration, Language, and Education in California and the United States

In 2023, one-quarter of U.S. children under the age of 18 had at least one immigrant parent, up from not quite one-fifth of U.S. children in 2000.³ This demographic trend is bringing rich linguistic and cultural assets to the United States and its schools. Nearly 22 percent of U.S. children speak a non-English language at home, and over 15 percent of U.S. children speak Spanish.⁴ Furthermore, 5.2 million U.S. students (or 10.6 percent of all K–12 students) are formally classified as English learners by their schools and states,⁵ an increase of more than 1.5 million ELs since 2000.⁶ Meanwhile, around one-third of Head Start participants speak a non-English language at home.⁷

California has played—and continues to play—a particularly central role in this national discussion. The region has been a highly diverse, multilingual region for centuries—well before its existence as an American state. Shifting migration trends in the past 150 years brought new language diversity, spanning dozens of languages from every corner of the globe. Forty percent of California's K–12 students⁸—and almost 60 percent of children 5 years old or younger—speak a non-English language at home.⁹ Latine students make up

56 percent of California's K–12 enrollment and 82 percent of its EL population; more than 80 percent of California ELs speak Spanish at home.¹⁰

As has been the case for many generations in both California and the broader United States, immigrant families and their children are major contributors to their communities' economic, cultural, and social well-being.¹¹ Immigrants grow the economy as workers,¹² taxpayers, and consumers.¹³ They provide immense contributions to American art, music, cuisine, sports, and broader cultural discourse by sharing the richness of their languages and cultures.¹⁴

And yet, America's historic success at integrating immigrants has only infrequently been an intentional result of public policy. In fact, it has come *in spite of* pitched, interminable debates over how U.S. institutions should engage the country's multicultural, multilingual newcomer populations. On the one hand, decades of civil rights legislation¹⁵—and subsequent case law¹⁶—have largely established the expectation that, as often as possible, public institutions should translate written materials and interpret spoken language so that public services are available to community members regardless of their English proficiency levels.¹⁷ But this legal consensus has not prevented noisy criticism and staunch resistance from a vocal minority of monolingual,¹⁸ English-only activists.¹⁹

Public schools are no exception.²⁰ American K–12 education has repeatedly swung between earnest embrace of immigrant communities' multilingual abilities and insistence on imposing English on all students at all times. For instance, in the nineteenth century and earlier, U.S. schools offered instruction in German, Polish, Dutch, Spanish, and a bevy of other languages. But these programs largely evaporated in the early twentieth century under waves of jingoism—particularly around World Wars I and II.²¹ Then Congress's 1968 passage of the Bilingual Education Act made significant investments in multilingual instruction. However, by the end of the twentieth century, xenophobic pressures muted this resurgence with a raft of new English-only instructional mandates in California, Arizona, Massachusetts, and other states.²² Naturally, two decades into the twenty-first century,

an explosion of interest in new bilingual programs—operating under the mantle of “[dual-language immersion](#)”—reversed nearly all of those mandates and brought multilingual learning back into the mainstream of U.S. education’s approach to serving English learners (ELs).²³ These programs broadened the coalition of bilingual education supporters by offering academic instruction in two languages, often to classrooms enrolling roughly equal shares of native speakers of English and native speakers of the program’s other, non-English language.

As if on cue, monolingual English-only activists have pushed forward again, with their efforts culminating in a 2025 White House [executive order](#) declaring English as the official language of the United States.²⁴ However, another swing of the pendulum is not inevitable. Nearly a decade after California voters reversed the state’s ban on bilingual education, the state’s leadership is making [halting progress](#)²⁵ toward [building a school system](#) that fully supports linguistically diverse EL students.²⁶ This has been a significant challenge, as the state’s eighteen years of English-only education [decimated its bilingual educator training programs](#) and created a public education system intrinsically and explicitly designed to deprioritize EL students’ emerging bilingualism.²⁷ Understanding families’ demand for bilingual schooling will hopefully bolster the efforts to build the institutions and wraparounds that bilingual education needs to succeed.

Language and Learning: State of the Research

If the politics of bilingual education are pendular, the research is not. For decades, studies have coalesced around a straightforward [consensus](#)²⁸: bilingual programs are more effective for ELs than English-only programs, and they tend to offer valuable educational opportunities for English-dominant students [as well](#).²⁹ The reasons are myriad. For one, ELs in [bilingual programs are more likely](#) to become proficient in English by middle school than their peers in English-only programs.³⁰ Moreover, ELs in [bilingual programs tend to garner](#) better academic outcomes over time, and higher scores on tests screening their social and emotional

well-being at school.³¹ [Bilingual programs also help](#) children maintain connections to their families’ home languages and cultures as they integrate into English-dominated sectors of American life.³² Finally, research [indicates](#) that linguistically integrated “two-way” dual-language immersion schools enrolling roughly equal shares of ELs and English-dominant students are uniquely strong for ELs and English-dominant students alike.³³ Both bilingual and dual-language education programs are designed to deliver these outcomes, though [quality design and implementation](#) are key.³⁴

Buoyed by these findings, researchers at TCF and elsewhere have argued for changes to policies governing ELs’ language learning opportunities and for significantly greater public investments to grow ELs’ access to bilingual and dual-language immersion programs. But uncertain politics—and the usual lag between new research’s publication and its acceptance into policymaker, practitioner, and general public discourse—mean that many linguistically diverse families may not be aware that their EL children are likely to do best in programs that support bilingualism and biliteracy. Mistaken belief in the efficacy of English-only education can be particularly prevalent in states—like California—where monolingualism was established and imposed as official policy for decades.

It’s not clear how pervasive these beliefs are among Latine and/or ELs’ families, since researchers have paid comparatively little attention to understanding their educational preferences. While [some research](#) explores how these families navigate school choice systems, very little is known about these families’ views on choosing bilingual or dual-language programs for their children by researchers, education leaders, and the public.³⁵

There is some evidence that misconceptions about the research on bilingual learning and language acquisition have been persistent in this community. When California voters faced a referendum to mandate English-only education across the state in 1998, [polls initially showed large majorities of Latine voters in favor of the measure](#). Voting day exit polls suggested that these numbers were inflated, though nearly 40 percent of Latine voters still appeared to back

English-only education.³⁶ Years later, in [December 2024 focus groups](#), UnidosUS found some evidence of Spanish-dominant families worrying that their children’s emerging bilingual skills might hinder their English learning progress.³⁷

Indeed, when launching new bilingual or dual-language programs, teachers and administrators sometimes say that they encounter resistance from families who speak non-English languages at home—particularly Spanish-dominant families. A [seminal research study](#) in the late 1990s documented the differences in school preference for dual-language education by a Mexican-American population in Texas and California, finding that the Mexican-American families in Texas wanted the public education system to play a role in home language instruction, while the California families thought the task of home language was the sole responsibility of the family.³⁸ By contrast, [a study of parents](#) in Dallas, Texas generally found negative attitudes toward bilingual education, even though many wanted their children to learn Spanish. In their focus groups with parents of children ages 3–7, families expressed their preference for English-only classes at school and to teach Spanish at home.³⁹ Some of their concerns stemmed from thinking that their children would struggle more to learn English, and that the quality of teachers was less than the English-only classes. Critically, parents also expressed the lack of information from the school district to help families understand their bilingual education choices.

By contrast, [a study of twenty-three Mixteco mothers in New York](#) identified their preference for dual-language education, both because they felt welcome in that community, and because of the perceived socioeconomic mobility resulting from speaking these two languages for Indigenous language speakers.⁴⁰

Families’ views may vary by their perceptions of whether bilingual or dual-language education options are available to them. In cases where dual-language immersion programs are not the standard educational model—the case in most U.S. school districts—[many parents have to “opt in” through a lottery or another choice mechanism](#) to access this programming.⁴¹ In other cases, the process

itself causes confusion, or unofficial entry points—like a school administrator switching a student to a dual-language program without an official process—can also impact how parents perceive and choose dual-language immersion. In some cases, waitlists for these programs can stretch into the hundreds.

[In many places](#), dual-language immersion programs primarily enroll based on their surrounding neighborhoods, which can mean that access is limited to those living nearby.⁴² This might make access to these models more procedurally streamlined—particularly in places where these schools are located in predominately Spanish-speaking areas—but if parents are not aware of the benefits and reasons behind this programming, they may decide to opt out. [Some research](#) has suggested that neighborhood enrollment can reduce ELs’ enrollment in some communities, because privileged, often English-dominant families will purchase housing in search of guaranteed access for their children.⁴³

[A bilingual 2025 survey of nearly 1,400 Latine parents from Abriendo Puertas and UnidosUS](#) found that “Eighty-eight percent of participants reported they want their children to be bilingual, and 92% said child care facilities should offer multilingual and multicultural education.”⁴⁴ In 2024, their survey found that [90 percent](#) of the parents and caregivers interviewed wanted their children to be bilingual.⁴⁵ [In 2023](#), the researchers asked slightly different questions, and found that two-thirds of Latine families would send their children to bilingual early education programs if they were available, though just one-third of respondents with young children said that their children were currently enrolled in such programs.⁴⁶

[In a spring 2024 survey](#), California’s Parent Institute for Quality Education asked over 1,200 families—overwhelmingly Spanish-dominant Latines—similar questions. They found that 84 percent of respondents were interested in enrolling their children in “dual language immersion programs for bilingual/multilingual growth.”⁴⁷

Finally, [in 2024](#), TCF researchers polled 579 families to gather their views on bilingual education.⁴⁸ Nearly 70 percent of Latine respondents said they would choose bilingual

education if it were available, compared to just 15 percent who said they preferred English-only education. After disaggregation of the data along racial, ethnic, political, or socioeconomic lines, that was still the highest level of bilingual education preference of any demographic group.

In sum, researchers have not adequately explored the preferences of Latine and ELs' families regarding bilingual learning opportunities at school. As a result, the field lacks solid data exploring these families' views about bilingual education programs and dual-language immersion, let alone data on the information and information sources that inform those views. This study fills that gap with new qualitative and quantitative data that greatly enhance our understanding of families' K–12 bilingual learning preferences.

Methods

In conjunction with [FM3 Research](#), The Century Foundation conducted a series of six focus groups in three California communities—Los Angeles, Fresno, and Sunnyvale. We conducted one group in English and another in Spanish at each site. Taken together, the groups covered twenty-four hours of in-depth conversation about bilingual education with dozens of Latine parents and caregivers. Themes and quotes from these focus groups are interspersed throughout this report.

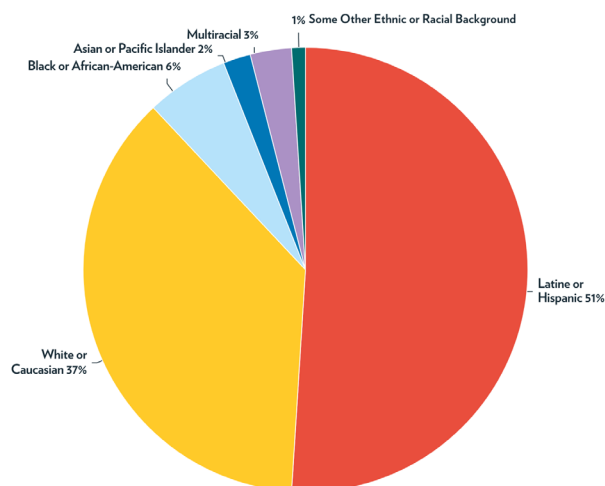
Researchers used these focus groups to inform the creation of a survey to learn more about California families' views on bilingual and dual-language education. From June 12 to July 7 of 2025, FM3 administered the survey to a diverse panel of 1,000 California parents and caregivers, oversampling for Latine families, multilingual households, and families with young children. Researchers also oversampled for respondents in Los Angeles County, Silicon Valley, and the Central Valley.

The survey was offered in both English and in Spanish. While 93 percent of respondents completed the survey in English, 56 percent of respondents identified as multilingual, with a heavy majority (95 percent) reporting that they speak Spanish. Half of respondents identified as Latine, 37 percent identified as white, and 6 percent identified as Black or African-American.

For more information on the demographics of the survey respondents, see the appendix.

FIGURE 1

RESPONDENTS' RACE/ETHNICITY



THE CENTURY FOUNDATION Source: TCF

Focus Group Findings

The six focus groups spanned two languages and three communities—Los Angeles, Fresno, and Sunnyvale—representing Southern California, the Central Valley, and Silicon Valley. As such, it was no surprise to hear Latine families share a wide range of experiences and perspectives on bilingualism. This viewpoint diversity among participants pre-empts many generalizations about the groups as a whole.

Still, families in every group emphasized that Spanish–English bilingualism supports connections to family, culture, and traditions, while also providing economic and educational opportunities. At the same time, parents described tensions in sustaining bilingualism at home and frustrations with structural barriers that limited their choices for dual-language education. The three main themes that permeated focus groups discussions were the perceived benefits of bilingualism, parental tensions and anxieties about bilingualism, and inequitable access to bilingual learning.

Perceived Benefits of Bilingualism

Nearly all participants were eager to discuss how Spanish-language proficiency for themselves and their children affected relationships with their extended families in the United States and elsewhere, their shared cultural heritage, and their sense of identity as Latines.⁴⁹ Focus group members consistently shared research-aligned views like one Los Angeles Spanish-language participant, who said, “Especially nowadays, people that speak two languages, two or more, have better opportunities.” Families in Spanish-language sessions generally spoke more about the importance of maintaining tradition and the amplifying benefits—linguistic, academic, cultural, economic, and more—of becoming fully bilingual, though one father in an English focus group stressed this: “I don’t want them to be a ‘no sabo’ kid... like they look like Mexicans but then they can’t speak their language.”

Meanwhile, families in the English-speaking sessions were somewhat more likely to prioritize the economic benefits of Spanish proficiency, while sometimes speaking about the cultural benefits as hypothetical or less urgently valuable. As one Fresno father in the English-language focus group said:

Well, both of my parents spoke Spanish growing up but they didn’t teach it to us. It was just like we know certain words, we know instructions, you hear certain words, you know what they’re talking about. It’s the same thing with my fiancée, she’s been in the same boat, we’re both light-skinned Mexicans—we always come to the conclusion that maybe we should learn more about it. But at the same time, what is the benefit? Because I know a lot of people feel like the benefit of learning the language is for the culture. For me, I’m more so thinking, well, would it help my baby get a better job later on in life?

Parental Tensions and Anxieties about Bilingualism

Families expressed uncertainty about their role in protecting and strengthening their children’s emerging bilingual skills. Some parents expressed “zero-sum” misconceptions about how young children learning in two languages might not

master English as thoroughly. A Spanish-language focus group mother in the Sunnyvale group said:

[We speak] more English than Spanish, [because] Spanish is a little bit more difficult for them. And since they’ve always lived with my family, we force them to and I like that, but I also grew up the same way. So I’m like, “Yes, you’re going to have access to Spanish when you get to middle school, high school, but we don’t want to confuse you with English.”

A father in the English-language Sunnyvale group agreed:

[W]hat’s important to me is [that] my children master the language of English.... Like to speak grammatically correct, to have an expansive vocabulary, and to be able to spell almost all the words in the dictionary. I think few people really master even the language of English. I don’t want them juggling two languages until they master one.

By contrast, a mother in the English-language Fresno group acknowledged the tension between racial dynamics, belonging, and generational considerations when considering bilingualism:

So I think it becomes hard to... I don’t think we’re discriminated [against] because of our race or our color, but I still think we’re still somehow frowned upon because of where we come from or where our parents come from, especially since I’m first-generation. So I think it’s trying to find the balance of I have a light-skinned daughter, she’s super light, she speaks Spanish, so it’s like am I forcing Mexican Spanish on her because she’s so white that I want people to know that she’s more than her skin? So I think it becomes hard because you don’t know if you’re forcing these things on your kids or you’re just letting it develop.

Another Fresno mother in the Spanish-language group lamented, “I made a mistake and I made the worst mistake, the oldest I taught English and then from there, it’s all English.... now I’ve tried to speak Spanish with the youngest, it’s all been Spanish.”

However, this wasn't the only—or even a majority—view in our focus groups. A mother in the Sunnyvale Spanish-language group accurately reflected the research consensus on bilingualism's benefits, saying, "[Bilingual adults have] more opportunities in work, to study. It will be easier because knowing one language, it changes your brain. It makes you see things differently when you learn more languages.... When you have more than one language, your cognitive capacity changes. And it makes it so that some tasks or learning is just easier."

Inequitable Access to Bilingual Learning

Finally, families largely had a dim view of their ability to secure bilingual learning options for their children at school—and, more generally, of whether they felt that they had a choice in how their children were educated. Many reported knowing of bilingual or dual-language education options, but said they were unable to attend because of availability in relation to where they live. "It is all based on your address and your zip code," said one mother in the Los Angeles English-language focus group. "Whatever school you attend and wherever your zip code is or your address, there is a limit of the radius where you can attend."

Some respondents shared their strategic calculations about how to access dual-language programs, which are limited to certain areas. Many said that they felt these programs are more readily available in higher income areas. A mother in the Fresno Spanish-language focus group agreed: "[S]chools have their areas, but then the only way to choose is if we put them in a private school...or you use a different address so that way they're 'in' the area of the school you want them to go to." In fact, a Sunnyvale mother shared that she had done precisely that: "[W]e put the address of my husband's relative... just changing your address, your names. And so we did that because we wanted for her to go to that school, a different school."

Survey Findings

Our survey was designed to test these themes with a sample of 1,000 California families of school-aged children with diverse backgrounds. First and foremost, survey respondents

made it clear that they valued multilingualism for their children. Fully 94 percent of respondents with multilingual children said that it was "extremely" or "very" important that their children maintain their primary language as they reach English proficiency. Meanwhile, a majority—55 percent—of respondents with monolingual, English-speaking children agreed it was "extremely" or "very" important that their children become bilingual as they grow up.

Families showed strong preference for early exposure to multiple languages: 56 percent said that the best time for a child to learn a second language was before turning 5 years old, while 32 percent said that the best time was between 6 and 10 years old.

When it came to school options for fostering language acquisition, families were strongly interested in bilingual and dual-language learning options. After reading a description of bilingual education, three-quarters of families (77 percent) ranked their interest in bilingual education as seven or higher (on a one-to-ten scale). Asked the same question about dual-language programs, an identical share (77 percent) of respondents ranked their interest as seven or higher.

FIGURE 2

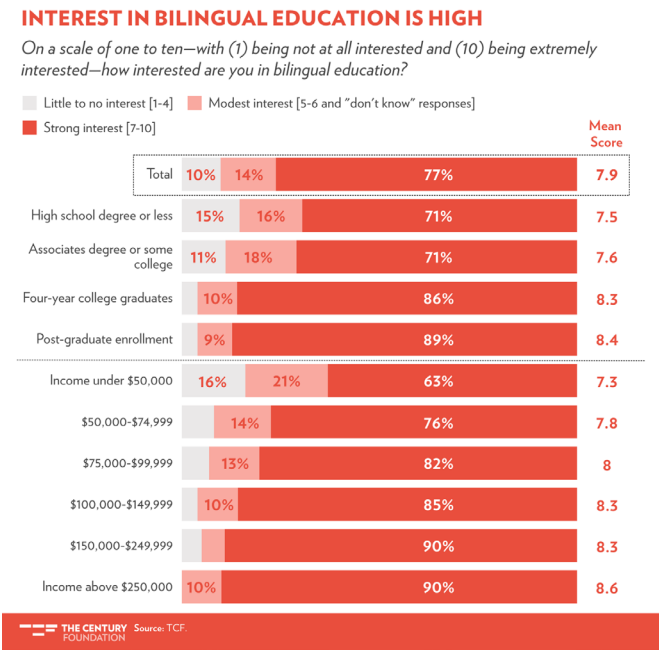
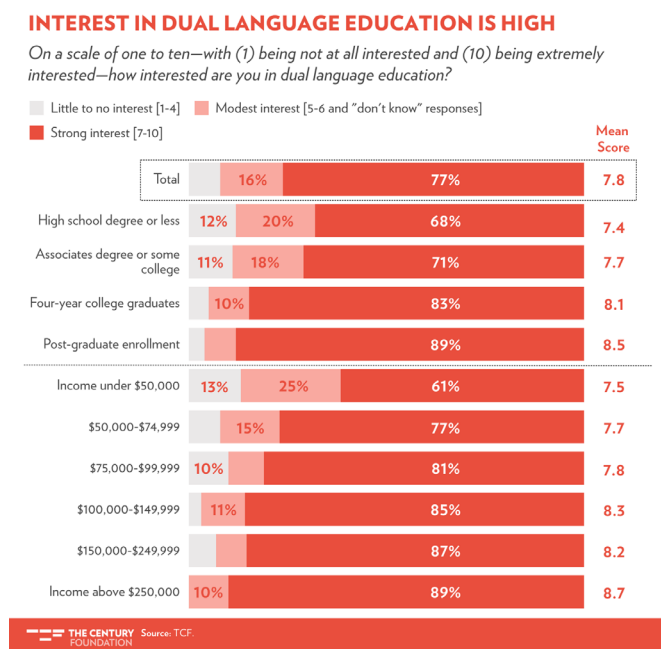


FIGURE 3



Interest in these programs was strong across all demographics, with interest in bilingual education generally rising alongside respondents’ income levels and consistently rising with respondents’ education levels.

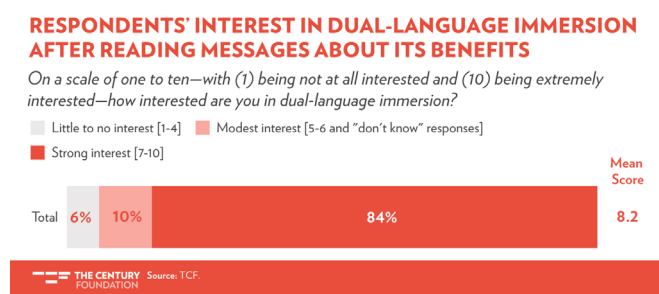
Parents who speak another language had, on average, slightly higher levels of interest in bilingual/dual-language education than monolingual parents. Spanish-speaking households’ average interest in both educational models was higher still, both in households where the parent/caregiver speaks Spanish and in households with Spanish-speaking children. The highest ratings came from households that reported that their Spanish-speaking children are fluent in the language. See Table 1 for details.

Families’ enthusiasm for bilingual and dual-language education models wasn’t just high—it was also a floor, not a ceiling. After reading several sentences about what research shows about the cognitive, cultural, academic, and economic benefits of dual-language programs, respondents’ interest in these programs increased further—with more than five in six families (84 percent) rating their interest in the model as seven or higher.⁵⁰

TABLE 1

Respondents’ Language Abilities and Interest in Bilingual/ Dual-Language Education, on a Scale of One to Ten		
Language Profile	Interest in Bilingual Education	Interest in Dual-Language Education
Monolingual Parent/Caregiver	7.7	7.8
Multilingual Parent/Caregiver	8.0	7.9
Multilingual (Spanish-speaking) Parent/Caregiver	8.2	8.0
Parent/Caregiver of Monolingual Children	7.5	7.6
Parent/Caregiver of Multilingual Children	8.2	8.2
Parent/Caregiver of Multilingual Spanish-Speaking Children	8.3	8.2
Parent/Caregiver of Multilingual, Fluent Spanish-Speaking Children	8.5	8.3

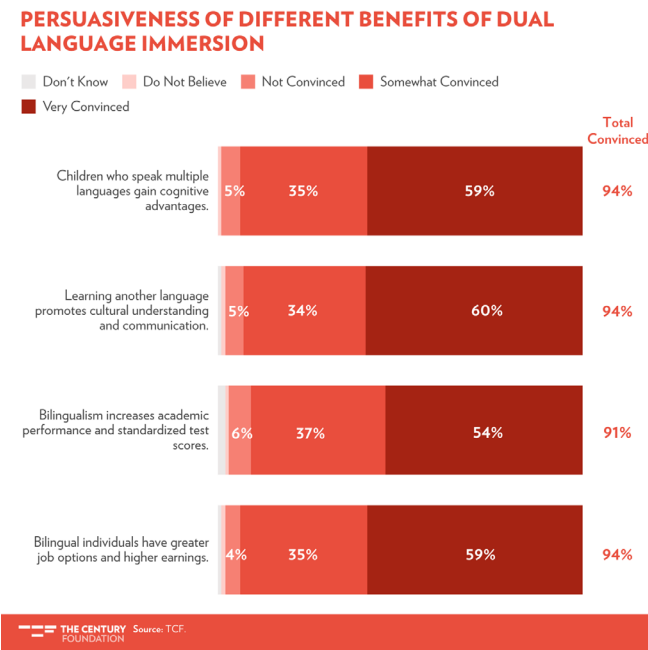
FIGURE 4



All of the benefits were roughly equivalently persuasive—94 percent of respondents found each of the passages on career, cultural, and cognitive benefits to be “very” to “somewhat” convincing. Meanwhile, 91 percent of respondents found the passage on academic benefits to be “very” to “somewhat”

convincing. However, the passage on academic benefits also garnered somewhat lower levels of “very” convincing. See Figure 5 for more information, and see the appendix for the specific passages on dual-language immersion’s benefits that were presented to respondents.

FIGURE 5



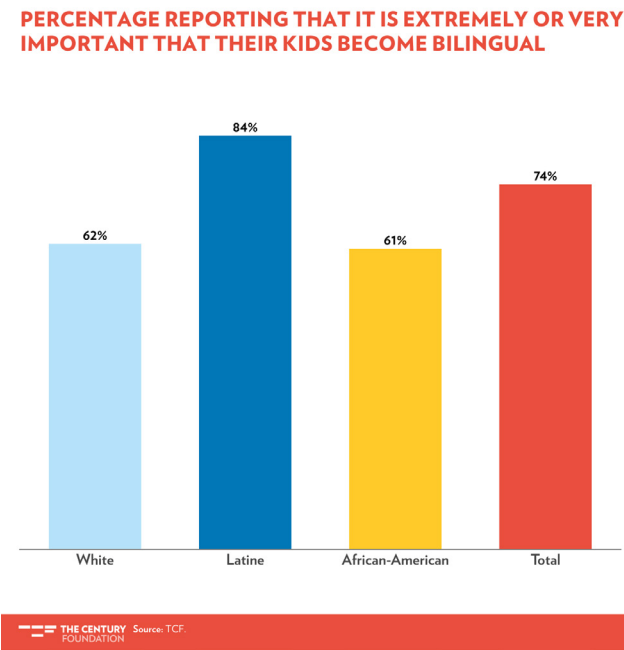
Our survey’s topline findings are unambiguous: there is strong interest in—and demand for—bilingual and dual-language programs from a wide range of California families. However, given the state’s complicated history of sometimes encouraging and sometimes withholding bilingual learning options from its Spanish-dominant, Latine population, these data deserve deeper analysis.

Latine Families Are Not a Monolith: Survey Findings in Broader Context

California schools have a [mixed track record](#) at supporting EL and Latine students’ success.⁵¹ Indeed, recent research [suggests](#) that, on average, ELs have not yet wholly recovered from the pandemic, with their rates of reclassification as English-proficient continuing to lag behind pre-pandemic rates.⁵² California Latine students’ academic scores in math and reading appear to have been [significantly lowered](#) by the pandemic.⁵³ As such, California’s education policies must attend particularly carefully to the needs of Spanish-speaking Latine ELs.

Latine families in our focus groups and survey consistently showed high levels of enthusiasm for bilingual and dual-language education: fully 84 percent of Latine survey respondents said that it was “extremely” to “very” important that their children become bilingual. This may reflect the fact that this demographic group is particularly likely to speak more than one language: while 56 percent of our survey respondents reported speaking a non-English language at home, 82 percent of Latine respondents did. Nearly two-thirds of Latine respondents reported that they were fluent in Spanish.

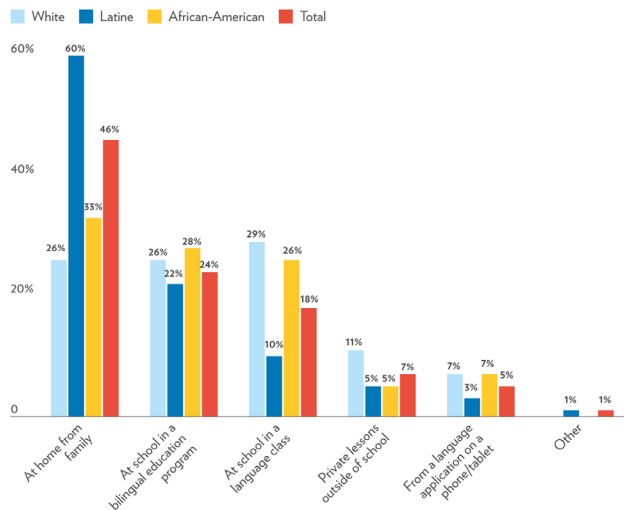
FIGURE 6



This group’s high prevalence of bilingualism is perhaps driving other trends in the survey data. For instance, Latine families were considerably more likely than other respondents to say that the best place for their children to become bilingual was at home.

FIGURE 7

WHAT IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO HELP YOUR CHILD BECOME BILINGUAL?



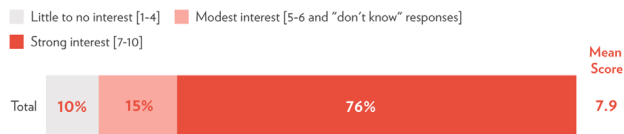
THE CENTURY FOUNDATION Source: TCF

Meanwhile, Latine families' baseline interest in bilingual education (an average of 7.9 on a ten-point scale) and dual-language immersion (7.8 on the same scale) was essentially the same as non-Latine families' average interest—and the average interest of all survey respondents.

FIGURE 8

LATINE FAMILIES' INTEREST IN BILINGUAL EDUCATION

On a scale of one to ten—with (1) being not at all interested and (10) being extremely interested—how interested are you in bilingual education?



THE CENTURY FOUNDATION Source: TCF

FIGURE 9

LATINE FAMILIES' INTEREST IN DUAL-LANGUAGE IMMERSION

On a scale of one to ten—with (1) being not at all interested and (10) being extremely interested—how interested are you in dual-language immersion?



THE CENTURY FOUNDATION Source: TCF

When we asked survey respondents about some of the concerns about bilingual school settings that surfaced in our focus groups, Latine respondents were consistently less troubled. They were less likely to worry that schools teach languages too formally or that helping their children with homework might be difficult, less worried about bilingualism impeding English acquisition or academic progress, and less worried that children might resist picking up another language. In fact, 65 percent of Latine respondents strongly agreed that bilingual instruction at school was helpful for reinforcing bilingualism in the home, and 29 percent somewhat agreed with that statement. And just 33 percent of Latine respondents said that teaching children a language at home was difficult, compared with 47 percent of non-Latine respondents.

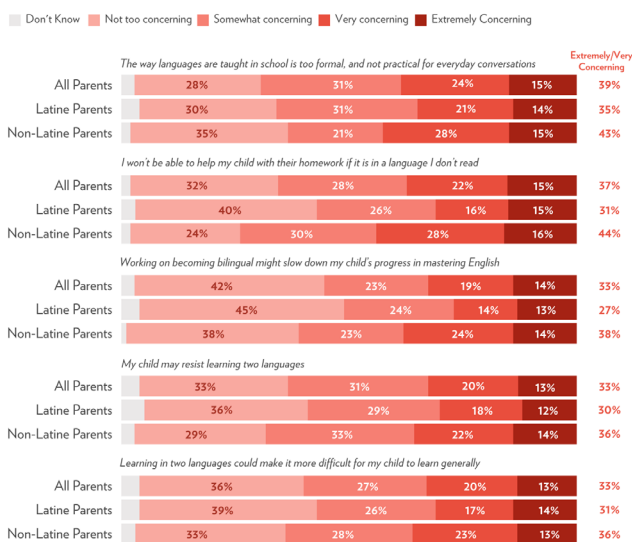
Many of the Latine parents and caregivers in our focus groups emphasized how they saw bilingualism as intertwined with their traditions, immigrant integration, and their families' cultural heritage. Our survey data corroborated this theme, with 86 percent of Latine respondents saying that children who become proficient in their family's home primary language can better connect with their cultural traditions—compared with 78 percent of non-Latine respondents. Similarly, 86 percent of Latine respondents also said that bilingualism helped children communicate with family and community—compared with 77 percent of non-Latine respondents.

Like most survey respondent groups, Latine respondents reported increased interest in dual-language programs after hearing about the model's benefits, up to an average interest rating of 8.2 on the same ten-point scale.

In sum, Latine families generally expressed positive views toward bilingualism and bilingual education, with some recognizing the inherent value for their children's academic and professional futures, and others strongly emphasizing the culturally sustaining benefits.

FIGURE 10

FAMILIES' CONCERNS ABOUT ENROLLING CHILDREN IN DUAL-LANGUAGE IMMERSION PROGRAMS



THE CENTURY FOUNDATION Source: TCF

Implications and Recommendations

Everyone thinks that it's good to be bilingual.

The survey and focus group data in this report have clear implications for schools and policymakers in California and across the rest of the United States. First, we found broad interest in bilingualism from all respondents, of all backgrounds. No demographic group in our study was inherently opposed to their children becoming bilingual. Rather, majorities of every group (racial, ethnic, education level, family-size, language, income-level, et al) reported that it was “extremely” or “very” important for their children to reach that goal. Across all focus groups, nearly every participant—even those skeptical about schools’ ability to deliver bilingualism for all children—agreed that bilingualism was of positive value for kids and adults.

Latine families, particularly Spanish-speaking families, are interested in bilingual and dual-language education.

Second, we found no evidence that the majority of Latine families—whether they speak Spanish, English, or some combination in their homes—are resistant to enrolling their children in bilingual or dual-language schools. Rather, in both the focus groups and survey data, we found widespread

enthusiasm for bilingual and/or dual language education at school. Indeed, we found some of the strongest enthusiasm for bilingual and dual-language education from multilingual families—particularly those with Spanish-speaking children.

Socioeconomically privileged families are very enthusiastic about bilingual education in general and dual-language immersion programs in particular.

Third, we found that interest in these research-backed educational models was somewhat stronger for families with higher levels of education and income. This is particularly important for policymakers to note. Since research has shown that dual-language programs are particularly effective at supporting ELs’ success—and given the fact that ELs are disproportionately likely to be growing up in low-income households—it is imperative that education leaders prioritize linguistically and culturally competent family engagement practices to ensure that all families are aware of these programs’ benefits.⁵⁴

However, as researchers have noted for decades,⁵⁵ interest from educationally and socioeconomically privileged families can be a double-edged sword for educational fairness.⁵⁶ Children from these families are more likely to speak English at home, which can help schools offer linguistically-integrated two-way dual-language immersion programs. Research suggests that these schools offer the gold standard model for fostering ELs’ academic success, English acquisition, and emerging bilingual abilities. With policies in place to protect fair access for ELs, interest from these privileged groups can foster linguistic, socioeconomic, and racial integration.

And yet, without policy guardrails, privileged families’ demand for access to bilingual learning environments can lead to displacement of ELs and their families from bilingual and/or dual-language programs.⁵⁷ Given that, as chronicled at the outset of this report, research shows unique benefits for ELs enrolled in these programs, policymakers must ensure that new or expanded bilingual/dual-language programming prioritizes these children’s access.

To that end, we close with a series of concrete recommendations for growing access to bilingual and dual-language programming—and for ensuring that ELs’ access is protected as these schools’ popularity grows. Some of these reiterate recommendations made in past reports, which are linked and footnoted for further reading.

1. Local policymakers at the school and district levels should commit time, energy, funding, and other resources to growing bilingual and dual-language options in their communities, particularly for ELs and their families. Specifically, they should do the following:

Launch bilingual or dual-language education programs in schools with high enrollments and/or shares of ELs, particularly if those schools have persistently struggled to improve ELs’ educational outcomes. They should commit to this strategy in writing in any local strategic planning and implement it with fidelity.

Commit additional resources, both monetary and otherwise, to starting new bilingual and dual-language education programs, as well as to expand existing programs, particularly in schools with large shares of ELs.

Overtly reach out to discuss local bilingual and dual-language education options with ELs’s families, and do so in culturally sensitive ways and in languages spoken by these families. At an absolute minimum, consistently translate all locally-published information about bilingual and dual-language programs into languages commonly spoken in their communities.

Evaluate their pathways for entry into the dual language programs, both current and projected, to ensure that ELs have prioritized access to this programming.

Honor and welcome families’ languages and cultural knowledge by offering interpretation, co-designing programs with parents, and meaningfully integrating them into school processes and decision-making.

2. As suggested in a 2023 Century Foundation report,⁵⁸ California policymakers should require LEAs with significant concentrations of ELs to consider expanding bilingual or dual-language immersion as a strategy for closing academic gaps between ELs and non-ELs while drafting their local control and accountability plans (LCAPs). For high-EL districts with persistent challenges serving their EL students well, California should mandate the launch of new bilingual and/or dual-language programs.

3. California policymakers should publish regular updates on progress towards the state’s Global California 2030 goals, including a list of bilingual and dual-language immersion programs with information on program model and languages of instruction.⁵⁹

4. California policymakers should grow funding to meet the state’s stated goals for bilingualism in its public K–12 system. Specifically, they should do the following:

Expand the state’s Dual Language Immersion Grants program with annual funding of at least \$75 million per year and explicit prioritization of increasing ELs’ access as a core priority for all districts seeking grants.

Significantly grow the Bilingual Teacher Professional Development Program, providing at least \$200 million in funding in the next state budget.

Commit at least half of future Bilingual Teacher Professional Development Program grants towards alternative teacher credentialing pathways, such as apprenticeships, residencies, and/or “grow-your-own” models.

Prioritize the training of bilingual teachers in all subsequent rounds of California’s Teacher Residency Grant Program, Golden State Pathways Program, and Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program.

5. State policymakers—in California and beyond—should establish bilingual education mandates for all school districts with at least twenty ELs in a particular grade speaking the same primary language at home other than English. Following Texas’s example, states should support this mandate through their core K–12 funding formulae by increasing their weighted funding for each EL that a district enrolls in a bilingual or dual-language program. For more on this system, see [this 2025 Century Foundation report](#).⁶⁰

6. As suggested in a 2023 Century Foundation report, state policymakers should examine their teacher licensure systems to ensure that each of their components is essential to supporting high-quality instruction—and that no component worsens bilingual teacher shortages.⁶¹ If, for instance, English-language licensure exams are not effective proxies for maintaining instructional quality—but do constrain bilingual teacher supply—linguistically diverse teacher candidates should be exempted from these tests.

7. As suggested in a 2021 Century Foundation report, federal policymakers should significantly increase funding supporting ELs and bilingualism.⁶² Specifically, they should do the following:

*Congress should grow the Elementary and Secondary Education Act’s Title III budget to at least \$1.5 billion annually.*⁶³

Congress should also provide a minimum of \$500 million annually for competitive grants to districts and schools interested in launching new bilingual or dual-language immersion programs. At least \$200 million of these funds should be designated for state and local efforts to design and start new bilingual teacher training pathways, and these funds should be administered through competitions that overtly prioritize ELs’ access to new and expanding bilingual programs. The Department of Education should set aside some of these resources explicitly for two-way dual-language programs that enroll 50 percent native speakers of English and 50 percent native speakers of the program’s other, non-English language.

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(COGNITIVE BENEFITS) Research has shown that children who can speak and write in multiple languages have cognitive advantages over their peers who only know one language. Children develop increased cognitive flexibility, improved decision-making skills, multitasking abilities, and enhanced problem-solving abilities.

(CULTURAL) Learning another language promotes a greater understanding, awareness and appreciation of different cultures. Additionally, speaking another language enhance communication, builds bridges between communities and can help children access the wisdom of their heritage cultures.

(ACADEMIC SUCCESS) Bilingualism has been shown to increase academic performance. Bilingual students tend to score higher on standardized tests and have higher overall academic success.

(CAREER) Studies have shown that bilingual individuals can have as much as 35% greater job options and typically earn 5% to 20% more than those who do not speak more than one language. Bilingualism sets children up for success in a competitive global economy.

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Appendix

TABLE 2

Respondents' Age Brackets	
Age in 2023	Percentage
18–24	10%
25–29	13%
30–34	23%
35–39	19%
40–44	14%
45–49	7%
50–54	6%

TABLE 3

Respondents' Last Level of Education Completed	
Education Level	Percentage
Less than high school	4%
High school graduate	22%
Vocational or technical school	5%
Some college, but no degree	17%
Associate degree	11%
Four-year college degree	23%
Graduate school	17%

TABLE 4

Respondents' Household Before-tax Income in 2024	
Income Level	Percentage
Less than \$50,000	26%
\$50,000 to \$74,999	20%
\$75,000 to \$99,999	16%
\$100,000 to \$149,999	22%
\$150,000 to \$249,999	11%
\$250,000 or more	4%

TABLE 5

Respondents' Language Profiles	
Do you speak another language other than English?	Percentage
Yes	56%
No	44%

TABLE 6

Respondents' Children's Language Usage	
Do any of your children speak another language other than English?	Percentage
Yes	49%
No	51%