

How Can States Improve Multilingual Learner Education?



California is home to the nation's largest population of multilingual learners. Although the population has [declined](#) in recent years, [roughly](#) one in five of the nation's 5.3 million multilingual learners live in the state. As a result, the state's schools have much more experience educating this population than do states where populations are smaller ([but growing](#)). However, this does not mean that California's approach is ideal. A new analysis by NEPC Fellows [Francesca López](#) and [Christopher Saldaña](#) of the University of Wisconsin, Madison and [Lucrecia Santibañez](#) of the University of California, Los Angeles draw upon lessons from other states—including Texas and Indiana—to propose improvements to state policies that fund and regulate multilingual learner education.

The study was released in May as part of a massive project, [Getting Down to Facts III](#), which produced 55 technical reports and 22 research briefs reviewing California's public education system. The influential project is the subject of May's [NEPC Talks Education](#) podcast interview of Stan-

ford Professor [Susanna Loeb](#), who led the initiative. Multiple NEPC Fellows contributed to this effort. Other studies have been highlighted in [past](#) newsletters, and additional work will be described in future installments.

In their analysis, López, Saldaña, and Santibañez propose six recommendations for improving California's approach to educating multilingual learners. Although targeted at one state, the suggestions highlight best practices that are applicable nationwide:

Double count students: States often allocate additional per-pupil funding for students from low-income families because they have more educational needs than do students from higher-income families. For that same reason, states also often allocate additional funding for multilingual learners. In all but five states, the additional resource needs of multilingual learners from low-income families are separately considered in the funding formulas; their districts receive both multilingual and low-income funding for the same student. The researchers recommend extending this approach to the five states—California included—that currently don't use it. "[T]hese students face compounding challenges that require additional resources to address."

Fund based on actual costs: Past research suggests that educating multilingual learners costs 15% to 40% more than educating students who do not fall into this category. States should thoughtfully assess their own actual costs, not only for educating multilingual learners but for educating multilingual learners who also fall into additional high-needs categories (e.g., they are from low-income families) and weight funding accordingly.

Provide more money for students with lower levels of proficiency: As multilingual learners gain English proficiency, their levels of need decline. The researchers suggest providing more funding for students with lower levels of proficiency and less money for those with higher levels.

Hold districts accountable: The research suggests that states should audit school districts to ensure that they are actually spending supplemental funds for multilingual learners on those students, rather than

using it for other purposes.

Incentivize districts to provide dual language immersion: Past research suggests that multilingual learners have higher levels of achievement in dual language immersion programs that teach them to read and write in both English and their home language. The programs provide a corresponding educational experience for native English speakers, helping them to become multilingual as well. Dual language programs cost more to provide than cheaper but less effective programs—like mainstreaming multilingual learners and pulling them out of class to teach them English. Rather than providing the same level of funding regardless of the model that districts choose, the researchers suggest that states offer additional funds to districts that implement dual language immersion.

Invest in the bilingual education teacher pipeline: To provide dual language immersion, districts need to hire educators who can teach reading, writing, math, and other core subjects in languages other than English. This requires investing in the teacher-education pipeline, particularly in states like California, which passed initiatives in the 1990s that attempted to outlaw bilingual education.

The researchers conclude by stressing the need to implement multiple measures simultaneously—particularly emphasizing the first four.

No single reform will close California's MLE achievement gap, the authors write:

Funding policy reforms without resource use reforms may result in additional dollars that never reach classrooms. Resource use reforms without adequate funding policy will leave districts unable to hire qualified teachers or implement effective programs. But by attending to both dimensions and learning from both the successes and ongoing challenges of Texas and Indiana, California has an opportunity to strengthen its approach to supporting the 1.1 million English learners who represent the state's future.

NEPC Resources on Language Policy

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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