

# How Can Policymakers Take Action to Improve English Learner Programs in California?

## Recommendations From a Strategic and Economic Analysis

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Alex Jacobson, Lorna Porter, Lucy Hadley, Lupita Alcalá, and  
Jason Willis

Evidence has been growing in recent years about the clear and unique benefits of multilingual instructional programs for English Learners.<sup>i</sup> These programs are “designed to provide instruction to students [that] leads to linguistic and/or academic proficiency in one or more languages, in addition to English.”<sup>ii</sup> But even though English Learners made up 18 percent of students in California in 2023/24, multilingual instructional programs are still relatively rare, identified in only about 13 percent of the state’s schools.

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State and local policymakers are uniquely positioned to put in place policies that improve programs for English Learners—which, in turn, will positively impact the education experiences of hundreds of thousands of students. This brief provides policymakers with research-based recommendations from a recent strategic and economic analysis of English Learner programs in the state of California.

## Project Overview

In 2024, WestEd partnered with Sobrato Philanthropies to conduct a study that used an economic lens to assess the design, implementation, and improvement of English Learner programs in California. Specifically, the goals of this project are to

- define the scale of economic challenges and explore underlying conditions impacting the costs of implementing English Learner programs in California in alignment with best practice and
- identify opportunities for philanthropy and education leaders over the next 5–10 years to improve programs for English Learners in California.

Ultimately, the project team identified recommendations in the following three areas of focus:

**A. Improve the Design of English Learner programs.**

**B. Expand Access to Integrated Care.**

**C. Transition to a Multilingual Workforce.**

All of these areas of focus and related recommendations are grounded in the long-term goal of bringing multilingual programs for English Learners to scale in California.

For additional details about the project, please visit [the project's resource collection webpage](#) to download the Executive Summary, a comprehensive set of PowerPoint presentations, and a technical methods summary.

## Recommendations for Policymakers

This section summarizes some targeted, practical actions that **Policymakers** can take to support implementation of the study recommendations.

For the purposes of this project, the term **Policymakers** refers to policymakers at the state level (including *the governor, legislative leaders, and state agencies*) and at the local level (including *county supervisors and school board members*).

The proposed actions outlined in this section were identified by analyzing key data, engaging in strategic conversations with a range of experts and policy advisors, and reviewing the growing evidence of the many ways that multilingual programs benefit English Learners.

### A. Improve the Design of English Learner Programs

**Study Recommendation A1: Invest locally and regionally in hiring additional English Learner program coordination staff and instructional coaching staff** where needed to improve the integration of English language development with academic subjects.

**Study Recommendation A2: Expand investment in the career growth of bilingual paraprofessionals** to (1) ensure sufficient student support in the short term, and (2) support a more robust workforce of bilingual instructors in the long term.

**Proposed Actions by Policymakers:**

- **State Policymakers: Promote these workforce investments** through existing state networks and support structures (e.g., California Collaborative for Educational Excellence). **Develop quality standards** for these English Learner program roles. Adapt these actions if needed to fit the potentially shifting funding landscape for English Learners in California described in a recent [Learning Policy Institute](#) report.
- **Local Policymakers: Support investment** in these roles and the **implementation of associated quality standards.**

**Study Recommendation A3: Ensure that statewide support systems facilitate collaboration and peer support between districts that have similar English Learner program settings**—including the characteristics of English Learners served, size of the English Learner population, and program staff—regardless of their geographic location.

**Proposed Actions by Policymakers:**

- **State Policymakers: Create a community of practice** that connects regional and local practitioners across similar English Learner program settings in different geographic locations. It should be informed by previous statewide communities of practice such as the [Long-Term English Learner Community of Practice](#) initiative.
- **Local Policymakers: Request support from and proactively leverage existing networks** to connect with communities that have similar program contexts with respect to English Learner programs.

## B. Expand access to integrated care.

**Study Recommendation B1: Invest in formal English Learner family care navigators** to help the families of these students navigate existing education and community supports and ensure families/caregivers can effectively advocate for their children. Hire navigators who are peers who have lived in the community and speak the languages of the community.

### Proposed Actions by Policymakers:

- **State Policymakers: Support this recommendation through existing funding efforts** such as community schools, the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELOP), the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI), and the California Health and Human Services-Health Care and Access Information. Incentivize child- and youth-focused agencies to prioritize support for family care navigators.
- **Local Policymakers: Make strategic investments in multilingual family care navigators.** These investments should, where applicable, formally acknowledge and compensate staff who are informally carrying out activities that would logically sit within this role (e.g., informal community engagement conducted by bilingual paraprofessionals or other staff).

**Study Recommendation B2: Design, build, and activate coordinated care systems** that link education, health, social, and neighborhood domains at the county level to support, for example, access to both health care and immigration services.

**Proposed Actions by Policymakers:**

- **State Policymakers:** Provide updated guidance to **local actors to help them develop these systems of coordinated care**. These efforts should, where possible, build on existing programs such as community schools, CYBHI, and ELOP.
- **Local Policymakers:** Elected county and school district officials should **create cross-agency working committees** to establish coordinated care systems. These committees should issue formal guidance and memorandums of understanding to guide collaboration among existing programs. Elected leaders should **ensure families have increased access to coordinated care** through these systems.

**Study Recommendation B3: Design a pilot block grant program** that combines funding resources from several state funding programs that can be directed to a community's greatest needs outside of school.

**Proposed Actions by Policymakers:**

- **State Policymakers: Establish a substantive block grant program** that combines funds from multiple child-serving agencies. The program should support communities to address their greatest noneducational needs. **Evaluate the program's impact** on the educational and noneducational outcomes of English Learners.
- **Local Policymakers: Support the establishment of a block grant program.** Support local actors to apply for these funds.

### C. Transition to a multilingual workforce.

**Study Recommendation C1: Expand available program and workforce data** by (1) collecting more comprehensive program data and (2) making existing workforce data publicly accessible.

#### **Proposed Actions by Policymakers:**

- **State Policymakers: Support these expanded data through several avenues**, including (a) continuing to develop the Cradle-to-Career Data System, (b) supporting the State Board to establish objective criteria for improvement and progress in the teacher workforce, (c) sharing state workforce data that are more comprehensive and current through annual downloadable data files, and (d) investing at the state level in gathering comprehensive multilingual instructional program data to support goals for multilingualism/multiliteracy. The latter would include details such as English Learner and non-English Learner participation, language allocation by grade, and program staff assignment.
- **Local Policymakers: Invest in and make use of workforce data** in policy and program decision-making.

**Study Recommendation C2: Convene and facilitate** state and regional **cross-system strategic workforce planning initiatives** focused on launching and/or expanding (1) support for English Learners in their primary language and (2) multilingual instructional programs.

**Proposed Actions by Policymakers:**

- **State Policymakers: Support this effort through multiple avenues**, including, for example, (a) developing a Career Education Master Plan, (b) engaging in the California Educator Workforce State Collaborative initiative, and (c) investing in other educator workforce initiatives.
- **Local Policymakers: Integrate regional workforce planning** into local educational strategic planning. **Champion and facilitate participation in regional workforce planning efforts.**

**Study Recommendation C3: Make strategic state investments in programs that help expand the supply of staff** prepared to support multilingual instructional programs.

**Proposed Actions by Policymakers:**

- **State Policymakers: Support strategic state workforce investments through multiple avenues**, including (a) reallocating remaining resources to established residency programs (e.g., the Teacher Residency Grant Program) and collaboratives that can be sustained after the expiration of state funds and (b) redesigning student loan programs (e.g., the Golden State Teacher Grant, the Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program) to support aspiring educators.
- **Local Policymakers: Strategically leverage Local Control Funding Formula funds** to expand supply of these staff. Blend other sources of funding (e.g., Title II, Title III, other federal programs) to support these efforts.

In conclusion, state and local policymakers can play a critical role in moving the needle on improving English Learner programs in California and, ultimately, bringing multilingual programs for these students to scale.

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That said, the work of this project is entirely that of the WestEd team. All errors are our own.

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<sup>i</sup> See, for example, Williams, C., Umansky, I., Porter, L., Vazquez Cano, M., & Zabala, J. (2024). *Meeting its potential: A call and guide for universal access to bilingual education in California*. The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles, UCLA.

<sup>ii</sup> This definition is included in CDE school directory data and provided in full at the following CDE website: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/SchoolDirectory/Topic?id=8>.