

How Can Statewide and Community Organizations Take Action to Improve English Learner Programs in California?

Recommendations From a Strategic and Economic Analysis

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Evidence has been growing in recent years about the clear and unique benefits of multilingual instructional programs for English Learners.ⁱ 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.”ⁱⁱ 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.

State and local organizations are uniquely positioned to mobilize for changes large and small to improve programs for English Learners—which, in turn, will positively impact the education experiences of hundreds of thousands of students. This brief provides statewide and community organizations 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 Statewide and Community Organizations

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

For the purposes of this project, we are considering **Statewide and Community Organizations** as an audience to be organizations focused on issues related to multilingual learners and student success in California.

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

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.

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 Statewide and Community Organizations:

- **Motivate these strategic workforce investments** by mobilizing local and regional partnerships between statewide and community organizations. These partnerships should engage policymakers to address systemic challenges and reflect community priorities.
- **Leverage practitioner networks** and **collaborate with state leaders** to further motivate the recommended strategic investments.
- **Cultivate partnerships with English Learner researchers** in California and across the nation. Help them translate their research findings into policy recommendations for policymaker audiences.
- **Share with policymakers at all levels of the system** examples of success in these areas of investment. Share best practices for successfully implementing the recommended investments.

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 Statewide and Community Organizations:

- **Promote the latest research and effective practices** to school systems and actors in statewide support systems through communication and strategic engagement.
- **Create state and regional networks of community-based organizations and service providers** supporting these improvements to the system of support. Build on existing collective efforts, such as the Consortium for Multilingual Learner Success in Los Angeles and the Central Valley.

B. Expand Access to Integrated Care

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 Statewide and Community Organizations:

- **Engage in existing community-based advocacy networks** and grow relationships with local grassroots leaders to mobilize around a shared vision for integrated care. This vision should reflect the priorities of local communities and best practices for English Learners.
- Use these networks to support bilingual family care navigators. Also, use the networks to **expand and strengthen engagement with communities and families**.

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 Statewide and Community Organizations:

- **Mobilize multisystem community-based organizations** to partner with county agencies and school districts. These partners should work together to design, build, and activate coordinated care systems.

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 Statewide and Community Organizations:

- **Integrate this recommendation into future policy planning efforts.** Identify organizations in *different sectors* to partner with in this effort (e.g., transportation; food; housing; childcare; mental/behavioral health; immigration services; adult education, job training, and placement).

C. Transition to a Multilingual Workforce

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 Statewide and Community Organizations:

- **Request and report on what information is or is not available about English Learner programs and the workforce supporting them.** This information includes, for example, educator preparation data (e.g., enrollment in and completion of bilingual authorization programs) and teacher supply data by certification area and teacher characteristics (e.g., demographics, experience).
- Promote ensuring that all positions requiring Bilingual, Cross-Cultural, Language, and Academic Development (BCLAD) certification are taught by teachers with the required credentials (to reduce out of field and substandard positions).

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 Statewide and Community Organizations:

- **Advance prioritizing English Learners in ongoing state efforts at cross-agency collaboration** such as the Career Education Master Plan and Educator Workforce Collaborative.
- **Support efforts to build regional capacity for proactive, strategic expansion of bilingual teachers.** Help mobilize efforts to address other shortage areas critical to multilingual instructional programs as well. Leverage local and regional workforce planning pilots in these efforts.

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

Proposed Actions by Statewide and Community Organizations:

- **Generate support for these investments** at the state and local levels. This includes support for expanding or sustaining previous investments such as the Bilingual Teacher Professional Development Program. Raise awareness about the broader shortage of bilingual teachers in California and the need for greater investments over time.

In conclusion, statewide and community organizations 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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ⁱ 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.

ⁱⁱ 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>.