

# How Can Practitioners 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.<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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Regional and local practitioners are uniquely positioned to collaborate and put into practice changes that improve programs for English Learners—which, in turn, will positively impact the education experiences of hundreds of thousands of students. This brief provides practitioners 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 Practitioners

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

For the purposes of this project, the term **Practitioners** refers to practitioners at the regional level (e.g., *county agency leaders in education, social services, public health, behavioral health, basic health care*) and at the local level (e.g., *central office leaders; principals; teachers; and other key staff, such as paraprofessionals and coaches*).

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 Practitioners:**

- **Regional and Local Practitioners: Leverage the California English Learner Roadmap state policy as a “North Star” for program implementation.** Focus on achieving Global California 2030 goals.
- **Regional Practitioners:** County office of education staff should **facilitate initiatives focused on the strategic growth of bilingual paraprofessional staff.** These initiatives should identify pathways for bilingual paraprofessional staff to grow into teaching positions as demand for bilingual skills grows.
- **Local Practitioners:** Program coordinators and district leaders should **participate in these initiatives to support their bilingual paraprofessionals.**
- **Regional Practitioners: Focus professional learning for all educators who work with English Learners on improving the integration of English Language Development (ELD) and academic core content.** Leverage program coordination and instructional coaching to support these efforts. Use the [California ELA/ELD framework](#) to guide this improvement process.
- **Local Practitioners: Help with identifying available funding to invest in hiring English Learner program coordination and coaching staff, as well as bilingual paraprofessionals.** This could involve braiding state and federal funding (supported by resources such as the brief [Braiding Funds to Support an Effective and Diverse Educator Workforce](#)).

**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 Practitioners:**

- **Local Practitioners: Strategically allocate staff time** to allow practitioners to help develop and participate in a community of practice that brings together districts with similar English Learner program settings. Participants can leverage lessons learned from prior efforts, such as through the Emerging Bilingual Collaborative’s High-Quality Instructional Practices for Multilingual Learners Community of Practice led by [Education First](#).
- **Regional Practitioners: Create systems to share learning from these communities of practice** with peer county office of education staff. Integrate this learning into regional and local practice.

**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.

**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 Regional Practitioners:**

- **Support local education practitioners to access these coordinated regional services.** Encourage investments in family care navigators to spearhead this process.
- Leaders within **county agencies should activate their staff and prioritize their time** to collaborate across agencies to establish procedures for increasing coordinated care.
- **Leverage a combination of county-level funding sources** to create and maintain formal partnerships and memorandums of understanding across county agencies. Use these partnerships to support a range of public services inside and outside of education.
- **Leverage these partnerships across county agencies** to improve coordination of the local implementation of these services.

**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 Regional Practitioners:**

- Regional agency leaders should **prioritize application for these funds and empower local practitioners to apply.**

**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 Regional and Local Practitioners:**

- **Prioritize accurate documentation** of detailed information about English Learner programs. Leverage local data in strategic workforce planning.

**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 Regional and Local Practitioners:**

- **Launch and/or participate in cross-system strategic planning efforts** that include regional leadership, local participants, and regional institutions of higher education.

**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 Regional Practitioners:**

- Regional agency leaders should **prioritize application for these funds and empower local practitioners to apply.**

In conclusion, regional and local practitioners 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>.