

# How Can Philanthropy 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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The philanthropic field is uniquely positioned to help scale and improve programs for English Learners—which, in turn, will positively impact the education experiences of hundreds of thousands of students. This brief provides philanthropy 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 Philanthropy

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

For the purposes of this project, the term **Philanthropy** refers to philanthropic organizations focused on *English Learners, economic mobility, health, immigration, educational equity, and community outcomes*.

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.

**Proposed Actions by Philanthropy:**

- **Invest in regional or local efforts to improve instructional coaching and coordination for English Learner programs.** These efforts could include providing intensive professional learning in existing coaching models (e.g., Sobrato Early Academic Language, coaching models by other technical assistance providers with expertise in English Learner pedagogy). Efforts to improve English Learner program coordination could involve developing and disseminating standard best practices through existing networks (such as the Bilingual Coordinators Network). These best practices could then be institutionalized for the long term through public funding.
- Partner with researchers to **disseminate the results and learning from these investments** as proof points for local, regional, and statewide audiences.

**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 Philanthropy:**

- **Invest in local advocacy** to engage service providers and local policymakers to support strategic investments in growing the bilingual paraprofessional workforce. Build on and collaborate with similar efforts, such as the English Learner Workforce Investment Initiative (EL-WIN) funded by the Emerging Bilingual Collaborative.
- **Promote and participate in pilot efforts to support accessible and affordable pathways for bilingual paraprofessionals** to become classroom teachers. These efforts could involve providing stipends, engaging local or regional advisors, and conducting informational outreach campaigns.
- **Support strategic communication with local policymakers. Share results of prior successful efforts** focused on bilingual paraprofessional career growth, including significant public investments such as the Bilingual Teacher Professional Development Program.

**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 Philanthropy:**

- **Invest in efforts to create state and regional networks of supporters and service providers.** These networks should facilitate collaboration and peer support, building on current initiatives such as EL-WIN.
- **Invest in a pilot community of practice** connecting regional and local practitioners across similar English Learner program settings in different geographic locations.
- **Support strategic communication** to state, regional, and local policymakers about the results of pilot networks and communities of 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.

**Proposed Actions by Philanthropy:**

- **Support local advocacy** to encourage service providers and local policymakers to prioritize these strategic investments.
- **Strategically target successful and sustainable investments** in bilingual family care navigators to contexts where this is a full-time role that earns a living wage (e.g., community school navigators, expanded learning staff, new wellness coaches).

**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 Philanthropy:**

- **Develop a statewide network of philanthropic partners** that have an interest in implementing a coordinated care system and supporting multilingual students and families. Invest in initiatives focused on providing coordinated care and share demonstrations of success.
- **Strategically disseminate the results of this collaborative philanthropic network** to policymakers at all levels.

**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 Philanthropy:**

- **Invest in pilot efforts by city or county leaders** to enhance coordinated care for children and families (e.g., transportation; food; housing; mental/behavioral health; immigration services; adult education, job training, and placement). **Prioritize efforts that strategically blend and braid local, state, and federal funding.** Disseminate learning from these efforts about what is possible when multiple sources of funding are combined to support this common goal.

**C. Transition to a multilingual educator workforce.**

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

**Proposed Actions by Philanthropy:**

- **Invest in advocacy supporting timely access to educator workforce data.** These data could include educator preparation data (e.g., data on enrollment and completion of bilingual authorization programs) and teacher supply data (e.g., by certification area and teacher characteristics).
- **Invest in local, regional, and statewide advocacy** efforts to ensure all positions requiring Bilingual, Cross-Cultural, Language, and Academic Development (BCLAD) authorizations are filled by teachers with the required credentials. This will help reduce filling these positions with out-of-field and substandard candidates.
- **Fund a research study** on strategies for improving the workforce of bilingual authorized teachers and teachers of English Learners.<sup>iii</sup>
- **Partner with researchers to disseminate the results and learning from these investments** as proof points for local, regional, and statewide audiences.

**Study Recommendation C2: Convene and facilitate** state and regional **cross-system strategic educator 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 Philanthropy:**

- **Invest in regional and local strategic workforce planning pilots** that develop improvement tools and processes. Disseminate these resources through existing networks.
- **Invest in efforts to build regional capacity to proactively and strategically expand the bilingual teacher workforce** and other shortage areas critical to multilingual instructional programs. Build on existing initiatives such as the registered apprenticeships (RAPs) in teaching developed by Education First.
- **Invest in regional and local strategic workforce planning pilots focused on a range of key areas** such as establishing TK–12 and higher education collaboration/partnerships; supporting two-way engagement between local, regional, and state leadership; establishing protocols and systems for planning that can be adapted to multiple contexts; and implementing continuous improvement processes.

**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 Philanthropy:**

- **Promote state programs targeting the expansion of bilingual educators.** Focus on programs that can be replicated and sustained. Build on previous investments through programs such as the Bilingual Teacher Professional Development Program.
- **Strategically document findings and disseminate the tools and resources** developed in these state programs to policymakers at all levels.

In conclusion, philanthropy 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>.

<sup>iii</sup> Legislation passed in 2021 required that the State Board of Education adopt a dashboard and establish objective criteria for improvement and progress in the teacher workforce for ineffective and out-of-field teachers.