

# Strategic and Economic Analysis of English Learner Programs in California

## Project Brief

March 2025

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In 2024, WestEd partnered with Sobrato Philanthropies to conduct a strategic and economic analysis of English Learner programs in the state of California. The study sought 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. Based on the study's conclusions, WestEd identified recommendations related to the following three overarching areas of focus, grounded in the long-term goal of bringing multilingual programs for English Learners to scale in California: (a) improve the design of English Learner programs, (b) expand access to integrated care, and (c) transition to a multilingual workforce.

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This document provides a high-level summary of the study's activities, conclusions, and recommendations. Additional information is available in a comprehensive set of PowerPoint presentations, study briefs focused on key audiences, and a technical methods summary. These materials are available at [the project's resource collection webpage](#).

## What is the context for this project in California?

Evidence has been growing in recent years about the clear and unique benefits of multilingual instructional programs for English Learners.<sup>i</sup> As defined by the California Department of Education (CDE), these programs include a range of specific types, but they are generally “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 despite the fact that in 2023/24 English Learners made up 18 percent of students in California, multilingual instructional programs are still relatively rare in the state, identified in only about 13 percent of schools as of early 2025.<sup>iii</sup>

### **FAST FACTS: English Learner Students in California<sup>iv</sup>**

- There are 1,074,833 English Learner students in California, making up about 18% of all students (2023/24).
- Approximately 869,438 English Learner students (~81%), are Spanish speaking. The remaining 205,395 speak 1 of nearly 130 other languages other than English (2023/24).
- Among the English Learners in California, 914,347 (~85%) are socioeconomically disadvantaged, 187,756 (~17%) are students with a disability, and 29,192 (~3%) are migrant students (2023/24).
- Approximately 105,759 English Learner students (~10%) are enrolled in a Dual Language Immersion program, and 94,260 (~9%) are enrolled in a Transitional Bilingual or Early Exit Bilingual Program (2022/23).
- According to an analysis by the Public Policy Institute of California, per pupil spending for English Learners was only about \$1,000 more than for their non-English Learner peers and about 3 percent more than the average per pupil spending for all students (2022/23).

This is partly because in 1998, voters in the state passed Proposition 227, which almost completely banned multilingual education for English Learners. Until this ban was overturned in 2016, English Learners were taught primarily in English, and many of the resources that these programs require were redirected.

Around the same time, English Learner supporters, their partners, and philanthropic organizations mobilized to improve state policy related to English Learner instruction, including adopting the [English Learner Roadmap](#), incorporating English Learners into the state funding formula, and developing models to improve English Learner instruction such as the [Sobrato Early Academic Language \(SEAL\)](#) model. During this period, the Center for Applied Linguistics also published their influential [Guiding Principles for Dual Language Education](#).

In recent years, momentum has been growing around the goal of expanding multilingual instructional programs for English Learners in California as evidence grows regarding the clear and unique benefits of multilingual instructional programs for English Learners. This includes the following activities:

- The state committed to expanding these programs in its [Global California 2030](#) goals.
- A recent [Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles report](#) offered recommendations on reaching universal access to these programs in California.
- An ongoing partnership of philanthropic foundations, called the [Emerging Bilingual Collaborative](#), is now focusing on this goal.
- Media attention focused on the disparities in access to these programs in California compared to states with large English Learner populations, such as Texas.<sup>v</sup>

Complementing these other activities, this project uses an economic lens to assess the design, implementation, and improvement of English Learner programs. This project also identifies strategic opportunities to advance the long-term goal of bringing multilingual programs for English Learners to scale in California.

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## What are the project's goals and methods?

The goals of this project, which was commissioned by Sobrato Philanthropies, are to accomplish the following:

1. 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
2. Identify opportunities for philanthropy and education leaders over the next 5–10 years to improve programs for English Learners in California

### Goal 1

To address the first goal, the study team analyzed two key sources of data:

- public data sources, including information about English Learners, the staff and programs serving them, and their communities
- new data collected as part of the study through interviews with (a) English Learner program staff from a county office of education and six local education agencies from across the state of California, (b) English Learner Advisory Committees (ELACs) in these communities, and (c) WestEd experts in English Learner program implementation and improvement

To analyze these data, the project team focused on exploring economic factors in the costs of English Learner programs. The project team applied a

range of research techniques, including economic evaluation, cluster analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and logistic regression analysis. The project's activities led to a deeper understanding of current investments in English Learner programs, the costs associated with improving these programs, and how these costs differ depending on the population of students served and the context of program implementation.

## Goal 2

To address the second goal, 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.

These areas of focus and the related recommendations were identified through analyzing key data, engaging in strategic conversations with policy advisors, and reviewing the growing evidence of the many ways that multilingual programs benefit English Learners. All of these areas of focus are grounded in the long-term goal of bringing multilingual programs for English Learners to scale in California.

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## How did we identify recommendations?

The recommendations were guided by three broad considerations—they should ideally be strategic, aspirational, and feasible.

- **Strategic—Adding Value Today:** Strategic actions in the near-term should add immediate value.
- **Aspirational—Preparing for Tomorrow:** While daunting, multilingual instruction at scale is a goal worthy of practical and strategic planning.

Thus, recommendations should support a long-term transition to multilingual instruction at scale.

- **Feasible—Practical in Today’s System:** Actions in the near term should be feasible in the current system or represent a feasible step toward transitioning the system.

In the subsequent sections, recommendations in each key area are presented, followed by a summary of their alignment with these three broad considerations.

Further, the study team considered the following key audiences who can take action to support these recommendations: state policymakers, local policymakers, regional and local practitioners, statewide and community organizations, and philanthropy. Every recommendation includes specific proposed actions that each of these key audiences can take to support the recommendations.

## What are we recommending?

The subsequent sections present

- recommendations for each key area of focus,
- a summary of their alignment with the three broad considerations,
- associated key conclusions, and
- recommended actions by key audiences.

More detail on the key conclusions can be found in the project PowerPoint presentations and the technical methods summary, and a deeper dive into the recommendation actions by key audiences can be found in the additional audience-focused project briefs. These materials are available at [the project's resource collection webpage](#).

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

#### Recommendations

- 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.
- A2. Expand investment in the career growth of bilingual paraprofessionals** to (a) ensure sufficient student support in the short term and (b) support a more robust workforce of bilingual instructors in the long term.
- 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 locations.

### Strategic, Aspirational, and Feasible

- **Strategic—Adding Value Today.** There is an immediate need to improve how programs for English Learners integrate English language development with academic subjects and to strengthen the bilingual paraprofessional workforce that supports these programs.<sup>vi</sup> Further, facilitating collaboration between districts with similar program settings in different geographic regions can accelerate immediate improvements to English Learner programs.
- **Aspirational—Preparing for Tomorrow.** Multilingual programs inherently integrate language with academic content. These programs also require the expansion and growth of bilingual staff. Investment in these areas would thus establish a strong foundation for a transition to multilingual programs. Further, districts will be able to more effectively transition to multilingual programs if they can collaborate and share strategies and best practices specific to their setting, regardless of their geographic location.
- **Feasible—Practical in Today’s System.** The recommended areas of investment—integrating English language development with academic subjects and strengthening the bilingual paraprofessional workforce—are already well within the scope of existing English Learner program improvement efforts. Thus, these recommendations represent a call for a strategic focus as opposed to widespread, and less feasible, system change. Likewise, existing statewide support systems need not be entirely redesigned to integrate a strategic focus on facilitating collaboration between districts with similar program settings, regardless of geographic location.

## Key Conclusion #1

*Limited public data suggest relatively low additional spending on average for English Learners in California. Our analysis of primary data collected from six case study school districts points to opportunities to make modest, targeted, and high-leverage investments to improve three key aspects of program design—program coordination, instructional coaching, and the role of bilingual paraprofessionals.*

### How did we reach this conclusion?

- Descriptive analysis of state education spending data suggests that the difference in average spending on English Learners compared to their non-English Learner peers has grown since the adoption of the Local Control Funding Formula in 2014. That said, in alignment with recent analysis by the Public Policy Institute of California, the difference was still relatively low in recent years—only around \$1,000 more per pupil was spent on English Learners.<sup>vii</sup>
- Analysis of primary data collected from six case study school districts from across the state suggests variation in the types and amounts of resources invested in English Learner programs in different regions and program settings.
- We compared current estimated investments in the case study districts to investments for achieving success that were recommended by an English Learner cost study conducted in Ohio.<sup>viii</sup> This comparison suggests large gaps with respect to investments in instructional staff, including instructors and instructional paraprofessionals. Specifically, student-teacher ratios for these positions were well below the Ohio study recommendation of 25:1 for instructors and 15:1 for bilingual paraprofessionals.<sup>ix</sup> Gaps for program coordinators and instructional coaches were generally more modest.<sup>x</sup>

- We sought input from English Learner program experts in WestEd’s English Learner and Migrant Education Services team. They identified the need in California for improvements in the coordination of these programs with other subject areas. They also indicated that improvement is needed in the coaching provided to instructors, especially with respect to integrating English language development with instruction in other academic content areas.
- WestEd experts, and data from case-study school districts, also point to the critical role of bilingual paraprofessionals. These paraprofessionals provide valuable support to English Learners in their primary languages. Further, investing in the career growth of these staff to ultimately advance to instructional roles makes them a strategic, potential future source of supply of bilingual instructors.

## Key Conclusion #2

*The population of English Learners in California and the context of programs serving this population vary widely even within common geographic areas.*

*These differences in settings—with respect to students and program contexts—can influence the costs of the English Learner programs and should be accounted for in how these programs are designed.*

### How did we reach this conclusion?

- Descriptive analysis of state education data suggests that higher concentrations of English Learners are associated with higher concentrations of non-White students and students who are economically disadvantaged regardless of geographic setting. In addition, districts with the largest concentrations of English Learners tend to have less diverse English Learner populations, especially with respect to language diversity.
- Further analysis suggests that there are large differences in the numbers of English Learners served in a given school district, pointing to large variations in the scale of these programs.
- Cluster analysis suggests that school districts with similar settings—specifically, similar English Learner student populations, program sizes, and instructional staff demographics and qualifications—span geographic boundaries.

How can the key audiences contribute to achieving the recommended actions?

Audience	Action
<b>State policymakers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Integrate local program settings into the organization of statewide supports to improve their overall coherence.</li> </ul>
<b>Local policymakers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make strategic investments to hire additional English Learner program coordination staff and instructional coaching staff and support the career growth of bilingual paraprofessional staff (i.e., support paraprofessionals to secure additional credentials and create pathways for these staff to fill instructor vacancies).</li> </ul>
<b>Regional practitioners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lead collaboration of cross-agency teams to support the more effective and coherent organization of services for students and families.</li> </ul>
<b>Community organizations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote recommended investments and facilitate collaboration between cross-agency teams through existing networks of engagement and advocacy.</li> </ul>
<b>Philanthropy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invest in collaboration between state and regional entities to support regional practitioners in leading cross-system coordination.</li> </ul>

## B. Expand Access to Integrated Care

### Recommendations

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

### Strategic, Aspirational, and Feasible

- **Strategic—Adding Value Today.** Communities across the state of California can benefit immediately from direct support in navigating and accessing noneducational public services. Improving the systemwide coordination of these services will also immediately benefit communities.
- **Aspirational—Preparing for Tomorrow.** By expanding engagement with English Learner families and communities, family care navigators can foster greater trust and partnership. This sort of collaboration with families and communities is a necessary first step toward a successful transition to multilingual instructional programs.

- **Feasible—Practical in Today’s System.** Ongoing initiatives—such as community schools, the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative, and the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program—are already focused on improving coordination between the education sector and a range of other service sectors. This project’s recommendations are a call to strategically build on those efforts to improve access for English Learner families and communities.

### Key Conclusion #1

*Most English Learner programs, regardless of their context, could benefit from stronger family and community engagement and better coordinated and integrated supports adjacent to the school setting in the economic, health, social, and neighborhood domains.*

#### How did we reach this conclusion?

- Logistic regression analysis of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Social Determinants of Health framework suggests that economic and social needs outside of school are statistically significantly associated with the context of schools’ English Learner programs, such as the students served, the size of the program, and the staff supporting it.<sup>xi</sup>
- Primary focus group data gathered from English Learner Advisory Committee representatives in the six case study school districts across the state suggest that families (a) struggle to access information about the English Learner programs provided to their child(ren) and (b) would benefit from support provided by school staff to access noneducational services.
- WestEd English Learner program experts identified a need in California to improve engagement with English Learner families. These engagement activities are commonly conducted informally by program staff, typically a bilingual paraprofessional.

- Analysis of primary data from the six case study districts points to potential underinvestment in family support and engagement, with the majority of these districts reporting that they have no English Learner program family/community liaisons.

### How can the key audiences contribute to achieving this recommendation?

Audience	Action
<b>State policymakers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support through existing funding efforts, community schools, the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative, and the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program.</li> <li>• Adjust future policy to allow for and incentivize child- and youth-focused agencies to support family care navigators.</li> </ul>
<b>Local policymakers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make strategic investments in family care navigators; formalize any existing activities that would logically sit within this role.</li> </ul>
<b>Regional practitioners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lead coordination of cross-agency teams, supporting more effective and coherent organization of services for students and families.</li> </ul>
<b>Community organizations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bring together community-based organizations to support family care navigators. Promote connecting multilingual families to these services through the public education school system.</li> </ul>
<b>Philanthropy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage flexible funding strategies to collaborate across sectors with an aim of facilitating system coherence and increasing the integration of educational and noneducational services.</li> </ul>

## C. Transition to a Multilingual Workforce

### Recommendations

- C1. Expand available program and workforce data** by (a) collecting more comprehensive program data and (b) making existing workforce data publicly accessible.
- C2. Convene and facilitate state and regional cross-system strategic workforce planning initiatives** focused on launching and/or expanding (a) support for English Learners in their primary languages and (b) multilingual instructional programs.
- C3. Make strategic state investments in programs that help expand the supply of staff** prepared to support multilingual instructional programs.

### Strategic, Aspirational, and Feasible

- **Strategic—Adding Value Today.** The challenges with staff shortages in education, especially instructors of English Learners, are well documented. The expansion of data-based strategic planning can support immediate efforts to address this issue.
- **Aspirational—Preparing for Tomorrow.** Bringing multilingual instruction for English Learners to scale in California will not be possible without a strategic and significant expansion of multilingualism in the workforce. Investing in strategic planning initiatives sets the state on the path toward making this expansion a reality.
- **Feasible—Practical in Today’s System.** The state already invests in initiatives focused on increasing the supply and recruitment of new multilingual instructors to the workforce. Cross-system coordination around this initiative and the development of shared regional strategic plans to achieve staffing goals related to serving English Learners effectively are feasible extensions of these ongoing activities.

## Key Conclusion #1

*Multilingual instructors are low in supply and their assignments are, in some cases, misaligned with demand.*

### How did we reach this conclusion?

- Analysis of state education data through the 2018/19 school year illustrates that only a small percentage of educators in the state were authorized to teach in multilingual instructional settings, holding a Bilingual, Cross-Cultural, Language, and Academic Development (BCLAD) authorization. In fact, many regions of the state had no staff with this authorization.
- Further analysis of these data alongside federal English Learner program data illustrated that in many cases school districts with above average BCLAD-authorized staff had below-average bilingual program enrollment and vice versa. This suggests that the supply of these staff could be more effectively aligned with current demand for these programs.

### How can the key audiences contribute to achieving this recommendation?

Audience	Action
<p><b>State policymakers</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage ongoing state efforts—such as the Cradle-to-Career Data System and ongoing refinement of state data dashboards and reports—to improve access to and use of up-to-date workforce data.</li> <li>• Leverage ongoing state initiatives—such as the Master Plan for Career Education, the California Workforce State Collaborative, and the Educator Workforce Investment grant—to facilitate strategic expansion of multilingual instructors across the state.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Local policymakers</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate regional workforce planning into local educational strategic plans.</li> <li>• Strategically leverage Local Control Funding Formula dollars to expand the recruitment and retention of multilingual instructors.</li> </ul>

Audience	Action
<b>Regional and local practitioners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document information about English Learner program staffing.</li> <li>• Leverage local data in strategic workforce planning.</li> </ul>
<b>Statewide and community organizations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Request public English Learner program workforce data (e.g., staff counts by authorization and demographics, staff turnover), and report on what is not currently available.</li> <li>• Encourage English Learner programs to be incorporated into ongoing state initiatives, such as the Master Plan for Career Education and the California Workforce State Collaborative.</li> </ul>
<b>Philanthropy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in regional and local strategic educator workforce planning.</li> <li>• Pilot the development of workforce improvement processes that can be replicated and sustained.</li> <li>• Disseminate workforce planning tools and resources through existing networks.</li> </ul>

## Acknowledgments

This project was made possible by the generosity of Sobrato Philanthropies, and the WestEd team would like to thank them for their financial support and thought partnership on this project.

The authors would also like to acknowledge the partnership and advice provided by a wide range of experts in the improvement of English Learner programs in California.

We are grateful for the donation of their time and the thoughtful input and feedback they provided on the project work throughout the process.

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> This is based upon CDE public data, including 2023/24 Census Day enrollment data found online at <https://www.ed-data.org/State/CA> and directory data reviewed as of January 2025 and found online at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/SchoolDirectory/>.
- <sup>iv</sup> The data presented here were accessed through the CDE's DataQuest system's English Learner Data and the U.S. Department of Education, ED Data Express Data Download Tool, File 116, Data Group 849, and an analysis reported in Lafortune, J., & Guinan, B. (2024). *Financing California's public schools* [Fact sheet]. Public Policy Institute of California. <https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/financing-californias-public-schools.pdf>
- <sup>v</sup> See, for example, Williams, C. P. (2024, December 17). *In Los Angeles, a teacher residency program creates bilingual teachers*. The 74. <https://www.the74million.org/article/in-los-angeles-a-teacher-residency-program-creates-bilingual-teachers/>; Stavely, Z. (2023, November 30). *California lags behind other states in bilingual education for English Learners*. EdSource. <https://edsources.org/2023/california-lags-behind-other-states-in-bilingual-education-for-english-learners/701270>; and Zabala, J. (2022). *How Texas is funding the expansion of dual language programs*. The Century Foundation.
- <sup>vi</sup> This may include, for example, the following specific roles; Bilingual Cross-Cultural Instructional Paraprofessional – K–12; Bilingual Cross-Cultural Instructional Paraprofessional Sp Ed – K–12; Bilingual Cross-Cultural Instructional Paraprofessional Early Intervention – K–8, and so on. Individuals in these roles typically work under general supervision to support bilingual cross-cultural teachers in serving English Learners and other students in a bilingual cross-cultural instructional program. This may also include instructional paraprofessionals who are bilingual and serve a similar role outside of a bilingual cross-cultural program.
- <sup>vii</sup> A recent analysis conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California reports a similar finding; see Lafortune & Guinan, 2024.
- <sup>viii</sup> The *Ohio English Learner Cost Study* recommends relatively large additional investments for English Learners and thus should be viewed as the upper end of the range in investments to achieve success. See Jacobson, A., Brown, A., McClellan, P., Ferrell, R., Porter, L., Silverstein, J., & Piscatelli, J. (2022). *Ohio English Learner Cost Study: Final report*. WestEd; Augenblick, Palaich, and Associates. <https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Student-Supports/English-Learners/English-Learner-Programs/English-Learners-Cost-Study.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>
- <sup>ix</sup> Specifically, current investments for these positions are estimated to be between approximately \$2,400 and \$5,500 per English Learner *below* the Ohio recommendation. It should be noted that the Ohio study recommended paraprofessional staffing at a 15:1 ratio *only for high schools*, while this project's analysis extended this ratio to all schooling levels in light of the critical role of paraprofessionals in California described by case study districts and WestEd English Learner program experts.
- <sup>x</sup> Specifically, gaps for these roles were no more than an estimated \$300 per English Learner below the Ohio English Learner Cost Study recommendations.
- <sup>xi</sup> [The Social Determinants of Health framework](#) is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Healthy People 2030 goals. This project's data analysis leveraged the [Health and Human Services Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality Social Determinants of Health Database](#).

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Suggested citation: Jacobson, A., Porter, L., Hadley, L., Alcalá, L., & Willis, J. (2025). *Strategic and economic analysis of English Learner programs in California: Project brief*. WestEd.

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