

Reframing Common Myths About Students Who Are Multilingual: Introduction and the Myth of Risk

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This brief is the first in a series for educators, leaders, and policymakers and is designed to reassert what is known from research and the field about best practices for educating students classified as English Learners, also referred to as Multilingual Learners. The series reframes common myths and misunderstandings that often get in the way of best practice.

- **Brief #1 Framing and a Fundamental First Myth**
- Brief #2 Academic Capabilities
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Education policy and priorities in the United States shifted considerably in 2025. Particularly affected are educators and education leaders who focus on students who are Multilingual Learners. In 2025, the federal government simultaneously [emphasized the importance of all students using English](#) (The White House, 2025) while also threatening to [reduce](#) (Lieberman, 2025) or [rescind](#) (Najarro, 2025a) dedicated funding for students to learn English (most notably Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act). The administration also [rescinded guidance](#) (Najarro, 2025b) on the responsibilities of states and districts for students classified as English Learners, [reduced staffing in federal offices](#) (Jacobson, 2025) that are responsible for

enforcing regulations for this population, and [reinterpreted legislation and legal norms](#) (Restoring Equality of Opportunity and Meritocracy, 2025) in ways that deemphasize the rights of these students and weaken protections for them. In spring 2026, the Secretary of Education announced the [dissolution of the Office for English Language Acquisition](#) and a transfer of its responsibilities within and beyond the Department of Education (Najarro, 2026).

These actions created major challenges for anyone seeking to help American students thrive and meet their full potential. [Roughly 1 in 10 K–12 students](#) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024) is classified as an English Learner.

Even more students are multilingual but not formally classified as English Learners. These students [live in every state](#) (Najarro, 2024) and can be found in [all types of districts](#) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024) – from the large and urban to the small and rural. [More than two thirds](#) (Bialik et al., 2018) of students who are classified as English Learners were born in the United States and are U.S. citizens. [Many others](#) (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022) are here on legal or protected bases. Like all American students, English Learners are future employees, business owners, innovators, parents, and taxpayers, so the country’s economic future depends on their success. Rescinding guidance and funding does not make these students disappear, but it can make the jobs of educators and leaders more difficult and more confusing.

This brief is part of a series intended to cut through some of this confusion. In the absence of clear guidance or enforcement, misinformation can spread easily and missteps can be made but not caught or corrected. Uncertainty can lead to nihilism: Not knowing what is right, what is required, or whether anyone is paying attention makes it easy to conclude that individual actions do not matter one way or the other.

However, this brief and the series are premised on the notion that the actions of educators and education leaders *do* still matter—very much so. For educating English Learners and other Multilingual Learners, there *are* right answers—and *wrong* ones. While the world of federal funding and policy in education may seem to be shifting underfoot, relatively little has actually changed. A couple years into the current administration, no relevant laws have been repealed, court decisions overturned, or research findings disproven. It is true that the federal government has stepped back in its willingness to enforce the laws and encourage best practices that already exist. This does not absolve states or districts of their responsibilities or change the reality of what works to best educate students.

What it *does* do is turn the responsibility of knowing these things squarely back onto state and local educators and leaders. A lack of federal oversight means education leaders, policymakers, technical assistance providers, and others must provide their own oversight and try to make the best decisions possible in good faith. In many cases, living up to this responsibility will require individuals—educators, policymakers, researchers, decision-makers—to learn more and become more aware about what laws require and what best practice entails for Multilingual Learners. This was already true but is even more critical now: Everyone in education is responsible for ensuring that these students receive a quality education that will prepare them to be contributing members of society.

Who This Series Is For

The briefs are for anyone involved in education, especially those who do not consider themselves educators or advocates specifically for English Learners: classroom teachers, instructional coaches, assistant principals, principals, district administrators, superintendents, school board members, parents. If you have never thought much about English Learners, this series is for you.

Why Focus on Myths?

Misunderstandings about Multilingual Learners can lead decision-makers to enact policies or programs that are ineffective or even harmful for Multilingual Learners. These missteps can also be costly and inefficient, leading districts to funnel limited resources into programs, services, or personnel that are ineffective or unnecessary. Reframing these myths is intended to help educators and leaders do more with less, improve system inputs and outcomes, and meet the shared goal of preparing all students for a productive future.

A Fundamental First Myth

This first brief focuses on a general myth about Multilingual Learners that underlies nearly all the other more specific or nuanced myths that are explored in the next briefs.

Myth 1.

English Learners are at greater risk of failure because of their multilingualism.

English Learners are often described as vulnerable students who are “high needs,” “at risk,” or “struggling.” Underlying these terms is an unspoken assumption that using or knowing multiple languages is a liability that impedes learning. Any language other than English is viewed as a barrier or weakness that students bring to school with them, something the school system must help them overcome.

Reframing

It is true that Multilingual Learners often find it challenging to thrive in the current educational system. But, to be clear, the source of that challenge is the system, not the students.

Research shows that speaking multiple languages [does not predispose](#) a person to failure or lower achievement. In fact, research has consistently found evidence of [cognitive benefits from multilingualism](#), including cognitive flexibility, self-regulation, and skill at perspective-taking (Kroll & Dussias, 2017). Multilingualism also has been shown to have economic benefits for individuals and communities (Kroll & Dussias, 2017).

If multilingualism is not the problem, then what is? It is the prevailing attitude toward multilingualism. English Learners are at greater risk of failure *because the U.S. school system is designed around*

English monolingualism. Too often, schools take students’ *strength of being multilingual* and turn it into a liability by ignoring it and designing systems that—by centering English or requiring that students use English exclusively¹—are ill-equipped to tolerate multilingualism, let alone nurture it.

Implications for Decision-Makers

Shift to and promote asset-based thinking. You may hear people who work with English Learners talk about the importance of “asset-oriented” or “strengths-based” ways of thinking. In contrast with the “deficit orientation” of the fundamental first myth about English Learners, which views multilingualism as a barrier or drag on students’ learning, an asset orientation reframes students’ language backgrounds as valuable strengths they bring with them to school. In this orientation, students’ languages become tools that support their ability to make meaning of what they are learning, to connect with classmates and teachers, and to add depth and value to their community.

This mindset shift, from deficit to asset, is a key foundation of any successful efforts to educate English Learners. The next briefs in this series present and reframe several additional types of myths about educating this group. All of the reframings involve some version of this shift. Whether you are figuring out a new budget, selecting professional learning for the new school year, or deciding which courses and instructional approaches to offer for English Learners, part of overcoming misconceptions is letting go of the idea that these students are separate from, or less than, the monolingual students who attend school alongside them. If this feels challenging, the exercises below may help.

¹ For example, consider the fact that fewer than 7 percent of all English Learners supported by Title III were enrolled in a dual language program in the 2021/22 school year, while more than 75 percent were educated in English-only programs, and an additional 8 percent were enrolled in “subtractive” bilingual programs that seek to use students’ home language for the sole purpose of accelerating their acquisition of English (not as an end in itself) (U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, 2025).

Practice perspective-taking. If you find yourself complaining about the challenges or inconveniences of a student's multilingualism, try taking a pause and practicing a skill that multilingualism is known to enhance: perspective-taking.

- Ask yourself: How would this look different if I viewed this **student's language as something valuable to protect** rather than a problem to eliminate?
- If a student speaks to you in a language you cannot understand, think first about how **vulnerable or uncertain** you feel when you struggle to communicate or be understood. Then consider that this student is potentially feeling that same way during the entire school day.

- Think about how you might work to make yourself understood by the student despite the language barrier. **How might you use your own language or understanding of the situation to connect** with the student despite your own language limitations? Perhaps you could use more gestures, point to objects, or ask the student for help in finding the word you want in their language. Maybe you bring out a translation app. Actions you take here are examples of leveraging your own linguistic assets to connect and communicate. Inhabiting an asset-based mindset means, among other things, encouraging students to do the same.

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