

Reframing Common Myths About Students Who Are Multilingual: Resource Use and Legal Requirements

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This brief is the fourth in a series for educators, leaders, and policymakers and is designed to reassert what is known about educating students classified as English Learners, also referred to as Multilingual Learners. The series reframes a set of 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
- Brief #3 Language Development
- **Brief #4 Resource Use and Legal Requirements**

This brief addresses a set of myths related to the core legal responsibilities of districts, schools, and states and to their resource use. The term “resource” is meant broadly to include both fiscal and human resources such as teachers, counselors, and paraprofessionals. Given its focus, this brief is most relevant to **local and state administrators** who make purchasing decisions—for example, individuals who solicit proposals and select vendors for instructional materials, assessments, or professional learning opportunities.

Misguided Myths

In conversations about how to maximize resources and resource use for English Learners, and for all students, the following misconceptions often crop up:

Myth 4A.

English Learners are supported primarily by dedicated federal funding sources such as Title III.

Since its inception in 1968, the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) has included

a section focused on educating students who are multilingual. Initially, Section VII of the law focused on bilingual education and provided only competitive grants to interested districts. In 2002, under the *No Child Left Behind* reauthorization, the program shifted to Title III, which provides formula grants to all eligible districts and focuses on English language acquisition. Since this change, all states have received at least \$500,000 per year from the federal government to support English Learner education.

Importantly, however, federal funds account for only a small portion (typically around 10%, on average¹) of the state and local education budgets (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Title III makes up a small portion of all federal funding (Wolfe, 2025) (typically less than 3%²). And although Title III is an important source of funding to support professional learning and program improvements (Hopkins, 2025), the ESEA has always mandated that these funds “supplement, not supplant” local funds (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). Among other things, this means that Title III funds cannot be used to pay for core services that districts are required to provide for students classified as English Learners (services which stem primarily from policies external to the ESEA). Rather, federal funds must support activities that are more peripheral, such as professional learning, assessment development, technical assistance, or one-time improvements or enhancements to existing programs.

Myth 4B.

Federal waivers or the removal of federal guidance would release districts and schools from their responsibility of supporting English Learners in school.

Despite the fact that federal dollars make up only a small part of education funding, the association between English Learners and Title III is strong. Since the turn of the century, every reauthorization of the ESEA has included requirements designed to hold states accountable for English Learners’ opportunities and achievement in school. These range from mandated inclusion in statewide assessments to disaggregated reporting of English Learner achievement to the inclusion of an indicator for English language development progress that affects which schools are identified for state intervention and technical assistance. It can be tempting to conclude that if the ESEA were to go away, states would be off the hook for the requirements for implementing or reporting these activities.

Such a conclusion would be wrong, however. While the ESEA has consistently included funding and requirements focused on English Learner education, these programs primarily serve to complement and reinforce other laws and court rulings³ that have established English Learners’ right to access a quality education. For example, the requirements that districts provide language support services and ensure that English Learners have access to their school’s curriculum both come from the 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* decision and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974.

1 Note that average federal revenues were higher between 2020 and 2024 due to stimulus funding provided to states in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 See, for example, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/explainer/u-s-department-of-education-101-federal-funding-in-k-12-education/> for Title III funding levels relative to other federal K–12 education funding in 2025 and <https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/formula-grants/formula-grants-special-populations/english-language-acquisition-state-grants-title-iii-part#funding-status-awards> for information about the total amount of Title III grants over the past several years.

3 [This presentation](#) provides a succinct summary of the legal history and precedents.

The 1981 *Castañeda v. Pickard* decision establishes minimum compliance and quality standards for English Learner programs and services. This means that changes or disruptions to the ESEA do not disrupt or change districts’ core responsibilities toward English Learners—they only affect things like the reporting structures and the amount of federal funding that states and districts have to fulfill their responsibilities.

Myth 4C.

Policies and programs that benefit English Learners are irrelevant or harmful to other students.

Myth 4D.

Spending and resource use for English Learners means taking resources or attention away from other students.

These two myths are closely related. Both draw on the idea that programs, policies, or structures follow an “either/or” in terms of who they benefit: Either they benefit one group, or they benefit another, but never both. This lack of overlap leads to the zero-sum mindset of Myth 4D: One student or group’s gain necessarily means another group’s loss. With this mindset, education leaders are forced to make hard choices that either pit groups against one another or require everyone to compromise and give up something they need.

One point of nuance: Considering the kinds of policies and programs that are typically provided to English Learner students, people are right to worry about expanding those offerings to other students. For example, learning environments that teach below grade level, offer less than the full breadth of content standards, or include more rote or simplified learning opportunities are likely to be irrelevant or harmful for other students. However, as discussed more below and in Briefs #2 and #3, these kinds of practices are *not* particularly helpful for English Learners either. In other words,

the intuition that typical English Learner programs are to be avoided is often well advised. The solution, however, is not to protect other students by keeping groups separated—the better approach is to replace ineffective and harmful practices with ones that actually work both for English learners and for all students.

Reframing

Reframing these myths involves two key ideas. First, English Learners’ rights and districts’ responsibilities to uphold those rights stem primarily from laws and federal court decisions outside of the ESEA. Waivers or funding disruptions related to the ESEA do not disrupt or change districts’ core responsibilities toward English Learners.

Second, a zero-sum perspective presumes that supporting English Learners requires a separate set of services and solutions that must be paid for separately from “regular” programming and that benefits only English Learners. In fact, this approach to addressing the needs of English Learners is neither necessary nor inevitable. Rather, it often stems from the common practice of first designing programs for monolingual English speakers and then finding ways to modify or add to these to accommodate students who are multilingual.

Third, this segregated approach also often stems from the misguided belief that programs and approaches that benefit English Learners are not beneficial for other students. As noted above, this may appear true in practice but only because many systems implement practices for English Learners that are not actually beneficial for these students and that do not reflect what research and practice have demonstrated works.

There is ample research evidence that many of the practices that *do* benefit English Learners are good for *all* students. For example, building opportunities for written and oral language use

into academic instruction (Baker et al., 2014), using scaffolds to help students access challenging content, and implementing bilingual instructional programs (Steele et al., 2017) are all approaches with strong evidence for English Learners and that also benefit other students. While it may be tempting to conclude that what is good for all students is good for English Learners, it is more accurate to frame this the other way: What is good for English Learners is good for all students.

Takeaways for Decision-Makers

You may be a decision-maker trying to implement quality programs to help all the students in your community succeed, and you may be facing reductions in federal funding while none of your core responsibilities have actually changed. If you are left to do the same amount of work with less federal support (financially and otherwise), what are your options?

It may sound counterintuitive, but a strategic choice in this scenario is to incorporate a focus on what is effective and beneficial for English Learners into how you make decisions about program design, resource allocation, and system features for all students. Why? Because what is good for English Learners is good for all students, as pointed out above. Accordingly, designing a single system that centers these students does not amount to putting special interests first—rather, it is an efficient way to design a system that aims to serve everyone and harm no one.

Here are some examples of how a system designed in this way can be intentional and proactive about considering what English Learners need or will benefit from when making schoolwide or systemwide decisions that affect everyone:

- When you are purchasing new **curriculum or assessment materials**, your system requires vendors to provide evidence for how their products can validly and appropriately support and include English Learners.
- When planning **professional learning** for in-service teachers, you require service providers to explicitly address the inclusion and support of English Learners specifically (ideally from an asset-based perspective) and general considerations around disciplinary language practices, scaffolds, and opportunities for peer discussion and language use. You also require that all teachers—not just English Learner specialists—participate in these learning opportunities.
- When selecting **screeners** for early literacy development and dyslexia, you require vendors to demonstrate the validity of the assessment for Multilingual Learners and to provide guidance to educators and coaches about how best to screen students who are multilingual across their various languages.
- When assigning **teacher teams and planning time**, you require intentional collaboration and coordination among different educators to ensure that content instruction and language supports are complementary and coordinated.
- When providing technical assistance or intervention to **schools identified for improvement** under federal or state accountability, you ensure that any schoolwide, general, or comprehensive initiatives explicitly consider the inclusion of, and impacts on, English Learners and their opportunities and achievement.

The theme is to try to streamline your system's expenditures and efficiencies by finding a single solution that can include and accommodate all students. In many settings, such an approach would replace current practice, which typically

involves purchasing multiple products or developing multiple systems: one for monolingual English students and then various add-ons, modifications, and work-arounds to include Multilingual Learners. Even when Title III funds are reliably available to pay for these types of add-ons, this two-step approach can be counterproductive because of its tendency to create multiple systems that appear unconnected or even in conflict. Now, with Title III funds under threat of being revoked altogether, this bifurcated approach is simply unsustainable financially.

The table below shares brief examples of what systemic design and practice might look like in contexts where the myths in this brief are entrenched versus contexts that have embraced the suggested reframing. Shifting to a model that more closely resembles the reframing examples will almost certainly require internal investments and coordination. For example, a system that requires vendors to demonstrate their capacity to include English Learners should ideally be able to evaluate the technical quality of vendors' responses. And a system's ability to accomplish this kind of review will depend on its ability to get the right internal experts to actually conduct such a review—or, even better, to have those experts develop the request for proposals that goes out to vendors in the first place. Building structures and capacity like this takes time and requires vision from leaders. Accordingly, leaders may benefit

from building toward these goals in step-by-step, intentional ways, such as the following:

1. **Identify one content area and grade span** (e.g., middle school science) **as an initial focus area** for coordinating instructional practices and materials.
2. **Select specific schools to serve as exemplars and models** such that educators and leaders from other sites could visit and observe their practices.
3. **Require school sites to include plans and metrics** for achieving more strategic and unified resource use as part of their yearly planning, but give them flexibility about where they want to focus or how they plan to proceed.

In all cases, the choice of where to focus might be based on the capacity or attitudes of the teachers in this area, the availability of materials to support the transition, the timing of local contracts, or the priorities of the school or community. In general, it may also be strategic to **prioritize younger grades (K–4)** because the English Learner population is always largest in these grades, and investments here can reduce the size of the English Learner population in higher grades by preparing more students to exit from English Learner status before the end of elementary school.

Myths About Resource Use: What They Can Look Like in Action

	Under the myth	Under the reframing
At the state level ...	The director of Title III or multilingual programs spends the majority of their time on monitoring Title III compliance and developing tools, plans, and initiatives to support the inclusion of English Learners in statewide systems and policies that have been developed independently by other offices. There is spotty awareness and uptake of the director’s materials among educators and leaders who are not already English Learner specialists.	The director of Title III or multilingual programs plays a collaborative and central role in the development and implementation of statewide systems and policies to ensure they are proactively designed with English Learner accessibility and inclusion in mind. All educators and leaders are required to understand and implement these systems and policies.
At the district level ...	The director of curriculum and instruction purchases a new science curriculum that does not support classroom discussion or include any accommodations or amplifications to support English Learners. The director of multilingual programs then hires a contractor to develop additional materials to amplify the curriculum for English Learners and provide professional development for science teachers to understand how to use the additional materials. Many science teachers are bewildered as to why they need to participate and do not use the additional materials.	The directors of multilingual programs and curriculum and instruction collaborate to evaluate and select a science curriculum that can support teachers and students in using and drawing attention to disciplinary language and practices. Together, they also select a professional service provider to help all science teachers familiarize themselves with the new curriculum, including the discussion-rich teaching practices it is designed to elicit.
At the site level ...	English Learners are supported by a small cadre of English Learner specialists who split their time across classrooms and school sites and primarily engage with students by delivering small-group instruction and intervention during specials or elective periods. English Learner specialists must keep track of other teachers’ and students’ daily, weekly, and semester-long schedules and design their supports accordingly.	At the elementary level, English Learner specialists are equal and integrated members of stable teaching teams. At the secondary level, English Learner specialists have regular planning time built in to collaborate and engage with academic content teachers. In both setups, English Learner specialists contribute to planning for scope and sequence and lessons to ensure there are intentional connections and integration between what linguistic and academic content is taught when and why. English Learner specialists are assigned to teams in ways that are mindful of their schedules so that their transitions across sites and classrooms are minimal and efficient.

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