

Recommendations for Improving the Quality of Early Learning Programs for English Learners

An excerpt from:

**Texas Early Childhood English Learner
Initiative Policy Roadmap**



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Fortunately, Texas has one of the more comprehensive state bilingual education laws in the country.⁴ Texas requires that public schools provide bilingual

education programs if 20 or more students with the same home language, other than English, are enrolled in the same grade. Texas is also one of just five states that

requires state-funded public pre-kindergarten bilingual education for young English Learner (EL) students.

Texas School District Programs for Educating English Learners

ESL Program

- **English as a Second Language (ESL)** programs provide all instruction in English. They offer supplementary language instruction to teach English to ELs under the direction of an ESL-certified teacher. ESL programs typically serve EL children exclusively, and are administered through two main models: the pull-out approach, where instructors “pull out” EL students from mainstream classroom instruction for ESL services, and the content-based approach, where ESL language instruction is integrated into academic content in class.

Bilingual Education Programs

- **Transitional Bilingual** programs educate EL children in both English and another language before transferring them to English-only programs. These programs focus on transitioning ELs into English-only classes rather than cultivating students to become bilingual. Transitional Bilingual programs typically serve EL children exclusively.
 - Early Exit Model: Ranges from three to five years, with instruction in the students’ home language utilized during the first two years.
 - Late Exit Model: Ranges from five to seven years, with instruction in the students’ home language utilized during the first four years.
- **Dual Language Immersion** programs (DLI) cultivate bilingualism, biliteracy, and cross-cultural competence by educating children in both English and another language. Different from transitional programs, DLI programs consider bilingualism a goal and an asset, rather than simply a strategy to ease the transition to English-only classes. Implementation of DLI programs varies. The ratio of the home language to English in each grade in DLI can vary from campus to campus and district to district. For example, some DLI programs use 80 percent home language and 20 percent English while others use a 50-50 approach.
 - Two-Way DLI Model: Combines ELs and native English speakers in the same classroom.
 - One-Way DLI Model: Exclusively serves ELs.

The vast majority of ELs — particularly Spanish speakers — would be best served by DLI. Based on a review of longitudinal academic research, TEA concluded, "English learners served through well-implemented DLI showed, on average, higher academic outcomes than their English learner peers served through any other language program and were the only group in the study to achieve full gap closure with their English proficient peers, which occurred by the middle school years."⁵

Unfortunately, DLI is not widely offered across the state. Among EL children in pre-k through third grade, 37 percent receive ESL instruction, 17 percent transitional bilingual, and 18 percent DLI.⁶ The remaining 28 percent receive alternative services or have opted out of bilingual education and ESL altogether. ESL may be the only viable option for the small portion of ELs who speak languages that are particularly rare in individual communities.

Meanwhile, state and federal agencies do not systematically collect data on the models used in licensed child care programs for EL children. There are also no Texas or federal policies that require, incentivize, or track the use of effective models for supporting EL children's language development.

Like all children, there are also EL children with autism, speech delays, learning disabilities and other developmental delays and disabilities. Our survey and workgroup convenings elicited

many concerns among community leaders and early childhood experts that some EL children are referred to early intervention and special education services for what are actually linguistic differences. They also expressed concern about the reverse - that some EL children with disabilities and developmental delays are not given the proper support they need. Clear standards and best practices could help ensure that EL children receive the linguistically and culturally responsive support they need.

To improve the quality of early learning programs for ELs, Texas leaders should take the steps outlined below, including shifting to DLI from other programs for ELs, improving family engagement, and boosting standards.

Texas Legislature Recommendations

Create a state strategic plan to cultivate bilingualism across all early learning systems and set clear benchmarks to increase the number of bilingually certified teachers, the number of students who are bilingual or multilingual, and the availability of high-quality dual language immersion classes in pre-k through 12th grade. In 2018, the State of California launched *Global California 2030*, formally setting the goal to double the amount of bilingual teachers by 2030 and guide three out of four students to be proficient in two or more languages by 2040.⁷ Texas should embrace this challenge and establish its own plan to meet

and exceed these goals with a coordinated statewide strategy that brings together the state Legislature, state agencies, higher education institutions, and school districts to set and meet the established goals. Addressing the bilingual teacher shortage with well-prepared, certified teachers trained in culturally-responsive pedagogies and instruction would be a critical component of this goal.

Update high-quality prekindergarten standards to include a maximum class size of 22 students and a student - teacher ratio of no more than 11:1. While state law sets a limit of 22 students per class for kindergarten through fourth grade, there is no statewide standard for pre-k classes. A 2016 report commissioned by the Texas Education Agency recommended a maximum of 22 students and no more than 11 students for each teacher or aide in a classroom with more than 15 students.⁸ Although this change would help all children, it would be particularly impactful to young English Learners who can become bilingual with the proper individualized support.

Create a state broadband and technology plan that serves the needs of young English Learners. In the Spring of 2020, a Texas Education Agency report found that pre-k and kindergarten students — as well as children of color and lower-income kids — were less engaged in distance learning.⁹ This is due, in large part, to difficulty accessing reliable internet and devices.¹⁰ State

policymakers should leverage state and federal funding to offer technology support to families of ELs, including access to reliable internet services, online platforms, digital literacy outreach, training, and devices. Though effective bilingual education instruction is based on in-person strategies, improvements in broadband will help educate EL children when they need to be taught virtually.

Furthermore, state leaders should leverage funds to help districts identify hard-to-reach families and engage with parents to ensure academic gaps don't widen as children are unable to attend in-person instruction. Texas is one of only six states without a state broadband plan, which many experts fear makes the state less competitive for future federal funding.¹¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed gaps in technology and internet access that must be addressed, given the role it will play in public education for years and decades to come.

As Texas policymakers update Texas pre-k standards, consider the examples provided in the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework. Recent research has shown that Head Start's standards produce strong student outcomes for young learners.¹² These standards have proven successful in a wide variety of communities and contexts. Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide services to over a million children every year, in every U.S. state and territory, in farmworker camps, and in over 155 tribal communities. Head

Start programming is intentionally responsive to the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage of each child and family. State lawmakers should consider aligning Texas pre-k standards to mirror the requirements found in Head Start's Early Learning Outcomes Framework concerning English Learner children, including its research-based curricula, screening and assessment procedures that promote effective teaching practices, and plans to engage with the entire family when meeting a child's educational goals.

State Agency Recommendations

Texas Education Agency

Provide stronger curricular guidance to schools and child care programs regarding ELs' education needs. Curricular guidance should include addressing developmental milestones, and providing culturally and linguistically responsive instruction. Guidance should include a focus on how to prepare EL children

"Smaller class sizes in the early grades where students are still building a foundation in their native language would be extremely helpful. Where teachers in general have to navigate educating students at various academic levels, bilingual teachers also have to navigate students at various language proficiency levels."

— Cristina Vázquez, Lockhart ISD



during key educational transitions. Key transitions include child care settings to pre-k and kindergarten as well as the transition from late elementary grades (5th and 6th grades) into upper grades. In addition, TEA should ensure districts have access to instructional materials in students' home language (either appropriately translated or originally written in the home language) to support the curriculum guidance.

Monitor implementation of Dual Language Immersion (DLI) and Transitional Bilingual programming at the campus and district level, including disparities in English Learner vs. non-English Learner enrollment.

To better understand how successful district DLI programs are at serving the educational needs of English Learner children, the Texas Education Agency should assess whether programs are prioritizing the enrollment of ELs in these programs. Although DLI programming is a research-based strategy to educate native English speakers as well, the needs of ELs should be put first in DLI programs. TEA should also share best practices and provide technical support to those districts who may be struggling to achieve strong outcomes.

Prioritize family engagement.

Family engagement between schools, parents, and students is critical to crafting an effective bilingual learning environment. As TEA works to bolster programs, services, and policies to serve ELs, academic plans must prioritize authentic, two-way communication so that families

have meaningful opportunities for input. Schools can draw on family members' in-depth knowledge of their child's language skills and usage at home to provide more comprehensive screening, learning opportunities, and assessments in the classroom.¹³ However, the parents and families of ELs themselves often speak a language other than English, and they are often less likely than other parents to be meaningfully engaged by their child's school.¹⁴ State officials should actively invite and engage families in major agency decisions. Effectively engaging families will enhance student opportunities and outcomes.

Launch a statewide campaign to educate school district leaders, local workforce development boards, and families about the importance of bilingualism.

To ensure ELs receive a high-quality, bilingual education, families need to be assured that bilingualism will be embraced by their school. There is a long history in Texas of schools focusing ELs' education solely on English acquisition. Fortunately, many schools and education leaders have already shifted away from that approach in recent years. That shift has drawn on research regarding effective education for ELs and a growing recognition of the economic and cultural benefits of bilingualism. However, many families — as well as some teachers, administrators, and others working in education — are unaware of this new emphasis on the importance of bilingualism. TEA should leverage the regional Education Service

Centers (ESCs), media networks (e.g. Public Broadcasting System), and other educational networks in the creation and dissemination of state branded materials to local education decision makers and to families, outlining the benefits of cultivating bilingualism as early as possible.

Texas Workforce Commission

Incorporate criteria relevant to English Learner children in the Texas child care quality rating and improvement system, Texas Rising Star (TRS).

Overseen by the Texas Workforce Commission, the TRS program is a critical tool to improve the quality of teacher-child interactions for infants, toddlers, and young children in child care programs. Research shows that positive and effective teacher-child interactions are critical to children's first three years.¹⁵

The TRS certification system currently offers three levels of certification (Two-Star, Three-Star, and Four-Star) to encourage providers to attain progressively higher certification requirements leading to a Four-Star level. To incentivize the state's quality programs to better serve the needs of EL children, programs should receive points towards their Star Rating for establishing a process to identify EL children when they enroll, reflecting and valuing English Learners' home culture and languages throughout their programming, and supporting professional development to support culturally and linguistically responsive practices.



The Texas Health and Human Services Commission

Add information about services for English Learner children in child care searchable databases.

When families are searching for available child care regulated by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, they can look for a program in their area by going to [TXChildCareSearch.org](https://www.txchildcaresearch.org). Through this tool, families and caregivers can filter their search results to see if programs provide night care, offer financial assistance, serve children with special needs, or are accredited to follow higher standards. Search tools administered by the state should also tell families whether programs offer dual language immersion, home language instruction with English support, English instruction with home language support, or provide English-only instruction. That information is crucial for families who wish to access a high-quality, bilingual education as early as possible.

Community Recommendations

Schools Districts, Charter Schools, and Child Care Programs

Recognize bilingualism and biliteracy as strengths and implement research-based teaching practices that support their development. To maximize the potential of ELs, schools and child care programs must embrace bilingualism and biliteracy from early childhood through 12th grade, especially in districts that enroll a high number of EL children. Schools should incorporate DLI instruction throughout their educational continuum and evaluate the impacts on their students to enhance the Texas research base.

Engage families of ELs as collaborative partners in their children's education. Diligent outreach and aggressive recruitment of EL families is an essential first step to ensuring ELs' developmental and educational needs are

met in the classroom. Programs should ensure they are equipped to effectively communicate with families about their children's needs and opportunities. Programs should also provide families with high-quality bilingual materials and information about educating children at home and accessing critical services. Communication should include examples of home-based activities and instructional materials that support parent-child relationships at home, information in their home language about accessing Early Childhood Intervention (ECI), resources for children to receive diagnostic screening, and clear guidance on the benefits of bilingualism and the importance of home language development.

Utilize culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate procedures to screen ELs' language proficiency in both English and their home language. School districts are required to conduct a home language survey of each student who is new to the district or who has not been previously



surveyed. To identify ELs, districts are required to conduct a home language survey and administer an oral proficiency test to assess English proficiency. In child care programs, there are no existing standards requiring children's language be screened or assessed.

These screenings are critical to ensure ELs are learning in educational environments that best support their linguistic potential. For children to be screened in a culturally and linguistically responsive way, families need to be collaborative partners. The state should ensure school districts provide information to families in their home language, with trained translators utilized where feasible. As families are engaged, the screening must also be developmentally appropriate, which may involve meeting with a child multiple times. This is even more critical for children with potential disabilities and developmental delays, who may benefit from

Early Childhood Intervention or special education. Programs must work individually with families and children, assessing both their English and home language proficiency as equally important benchmarks to ensure they are in the right educational environment to meet their needs.

Honor and celebrate children's home cultures and languages throughout instruction. Stocking bookshelves with bilingual books; asking families to provide images from home that honor family celebrations and foods; and playing music from different countries and in different languages are all simple but critical practices to help children feel their culture and language is being valued at their child care program. To succeed in providing a quality education to EL children, it is critical programs work closely with families and meet children's individual language development needs in the classroom.

School Districts and Charter Schools

Invest in and expand Dual Language Immersion (DLI) programs and ensure the model is equitably placed in campuses across districts. DLI is proven to be the most effective model for educating English Learners and cultivating bilingualism. Districts should leverage the new dual language allotment to pare down the use of ESL programs and expand DLI for EL students. Districts should also leverage state and local resources to offer DLI programs throughout pre-k to 12th grade and seek to increase the number of students who graduate high school with a Seal of Biliteracy. To support DLI, schools should: help in-district teachers obtain supplemental bilingual education certifications; utilize the ESC resources for DLI implementation and bilingual education instructional resources; develop and offer upper-level bilingual academic courses; and develop strong family engagement programs to promote interest in DLI programs.



Texas Early Childhood English Learner Initiative

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