

February 2017

## Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures

Effectively educating children who are learning English as their second language is a national challenge with consequences both for individuals and for American society. Despite their potential, many young English learners (ELs) are struggling to meet the requirements for academic success, a difficulty that jeopardizes their prospects for success in postsecondary education and in the workforce.

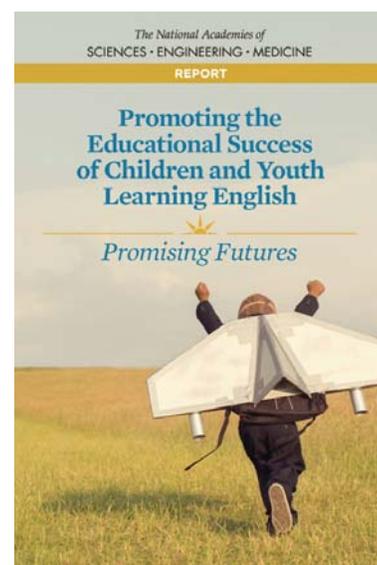
A committee of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine examined how evidence relevant to the development of English learners can inform policies and practices that can result in better educational outcomes for these young people.

The committee's report, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures* (2017) examines what research evidence reveals about learning English from early childhood through high school, identifies effective practices for educators to use, and recommends steps policy makers can take to support high-quality educational outcomes for children and youth who are learning English.

### THE CHALLENGES

Students with limited proficiency in English face a high barrier to academic learning and performance in schools where English is the primary language of instruction and assessment. Many English-language learners face additional barriers to educational success, such as poverty, living in families with low levels of education, parents' immigrant generational status and years in the United States, and attending underresourced schools.

At the same time, ELs have assets that may serve them well in their education and future careers. Those who become proficient in both a primary language and English are likely to reap benefits in cognitive, social,



and emotional development and may also be protected from brain decline at older ages. In addition, their varied cultures, languages, and experiences are assets for their development, as well as for the nation.

Educators and researchers agree that to succeed in school and participate in civic life in the United States, all children must develop strong English proficiency and literacy skills. However, there is debate over the best ways to support English learning, the ongoing role of children’s primary language as their English skills deepen, and the social and cultural costs of losing proficiency in the primary language and the role of the education system in supporting it.

## WHAT SCIENCE REVEALS ABOUT BILINGUALISM

Scientific evidence clearly points to a universal, underlying capacity to learn two languages as easily as one. Children who are dual-language learners have an impressive capacity to manage their two languages when communicating with others. For instance, they can differentiate when to use each language based on the language known or preferred by the people to whom they are speaking. Recent research evidence also points to cognitive advantages, such as the ability to plan, regulate their behavior, and think flexibly for children and adults who are competent in two languages.

### A DIVERSE RANGE OF ENGLISH LEARNERS

The report uses separate terms to refer to two groups of children and youth who are learning English as their second language:

- Dual language learners (DLLs) are children ages birth to age 5 who are learning two languages at once—their home language and English—and who are not in the K-12 school system.
- English learners (ELs) are children in the pre-K-12 education system whose primary language is not English and who are learning English as a second language. English learners account for more than 9 percent of enrollment in grades K-12 in U.S. schools.

The population of children and youth in the United States who make up these groups of learners are demographically diverse. They vary in their home language, language abilities, race and ethnicity, immigration circumstances, generational status in the United States, geographic distribution, academic achievement, parental characteristics and socioeconomic resources, disability status, and other characteristics. The majority of children in the U.S. English-learner population are born in the United States and are birth-right citizens.

At the same time, however, the competence with which children learn their primary language and English varies considerably among individuals, which may be explained by multiple factors—for example, parents’ immigrant generational status and years in the United States, socioeconomic status, and exposure to the risks of poverty.

A key question has been the extent to which ability in the first language supports or hinders their acquisition of a second. Some immigrant parents may fear that talking with their child in the first language will slow or interfere with English acquisition; teachers also express this concern. Yet there is no evidence that the use of two languages in the home, or the use of one in the home and another in an early care and edu-

cation setting, from birth to age 5 confuses dual-language learners or puts the development of one or both of their languages at risk. Given adequate exposure to two languages, young children have the capacity to develop competence in vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics in both.

Research indicates that children’s language development benefits when adults talk to them in the language in which the adults are most competent and with which they are most comfortable.

### ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND EDUCATION

One of the major and most puzzling questions for researchers, policy makers, and the public has been how long it takes or should take for

English learners to achieve great enough proficiency in English so that they can benefit from participating in classrooms where English is the language of instruction. Decisions about children’s readiness for this have been based on “reclassification” tests devised by individual states. Once an English learner meets the defined cut-off scores on these tests and in some cases meets other criteria, they are reclassified as a non-English learner or fully English proficient. Research shows that, under current educational conditions, it can take from 5 to 7 years for a child who initially has no or limited proficiency in English according to these tests to learn the English necessary to participate in the school’s curriculum without further linguistic support. Thus, students may require help with English through the upper elementary and middle school grades, particularly in acquiring proficiency in the academic uses of English.

### **LONG-TERM ENGLISH LEARNERS**

Over the past decade, increasing attention has been paid to students labeled as “long-term English learners”—typically students who have not been reclassified as English proficient after 7 years, although no common definition of the term exists across schools, school districts, and states. Evidence suggests that schools fail to provide adequate instruction to many English learners in acquiring English proficiency, as well as consistent access to academic subjects at their grade levels. Secondary schools continue to fail to meet the diverse needs of long-term English learners, including their linguistic, academic, and socioemotional needs.

### **DISABILITIES**

About 9 percent of dual-language learners and English learners have disabilities—about 350,000 children. Dual-language learners and English learners are less likely than other students to be referred to early intervention and early special education programs, with potentially serious consequences. Early childhood education, home visiting, health, and other professionals may not be identifying dual-language learners and English learners with special needs who could benefit from such programs.

## **EFFECTIVE AND PROMISING PRACTICES**

### **EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION**

Most, if not all, early-childhood education teachers and staff will work with dual-language learners during their careers and will need to understand effective practices that promote these young children’s healthy development and learning. All such teachers can learn and implement strategies that systematically introduce English during the infant, toddler, and preschool years while simultaneously promoting maintenance of the home language—an important principle. Not all teachers can teach in all languages, but all teachers can learn specific strategies that support the maintenance of all languages.

When dual-language learners are exposed to English during the preschool years, they often show a preference for English and a reluctance to continue speaking their first language. Children who fail to maintain proficiency in their home language may lose their ability to communicate with parents and family members and risk becoming estranged from their cultural and linguistic heritage. There is clear consensus that young dual-language learners need consistent exposure to both their first language and English in early childhood care and education settings. Research is limited on how much and what type of support for each language is most effective in supporting bilingual development.

### **K-12 EDUCATION**

Two broad approaches are used to teach English to English learners in these grades: (1) English as a second language (ESL) approaches, in which English is the predominant language of instruction; and (2) bilingual approaches, in which both English and students’ home languages are used for instruction. Though students’ learning under the two approaches may follow different trajectories, syntheses of evaluation studies that compare outcomes for the two approaches find either no difference in outcomes measured in English or find that students in bilingual programs outperform students instructed only in English. Two recent studies that follow students for sufficient time to gauge longer-term effects of language of instruction on outcomes find

benefits for bilingual approaches compared with English-only approaches.

Research has identified seven guidelines for educating English learners in grades K-5:

- Provide explicit instruction in literacy components
- Develop academic language in the context of content-area instruction
- Provide visual and verbal supports to make core content comprehensible
- Encourage peer-assisted learning opportunities
- Capitalize on students' home language, knowledge, and cultural assets
- Screen for language and literacy challenges and monitor progress
- Provide small-group academic support in literacy and English-language development for students

In middle school, English learners—whether they are long-term English learners or newcomers to American classrooms—face new challenges that influence their opportunities to learn both English and the rigorous academic subject matter required by today's higher state standards. Their degree of success in meeting these requirements will have consequences for their career and postsecondary education prospects. Research points to three promising practices for middle school English learners:

- Teachers should use the student's first language to develop academic English in specific content areas in middle schools.
- Teachers should use collaborative, peer-group learning communities to support and extend teacher-led instruction.
- Texts and other instructional materials should be at the same grade level as those used by English-proficient peers.

In addition, research points to nine promising practices with relevance to the manner in which English learners are educated in high school:

- Develop academic English and its varied grammatical structures and vocabulary intensively as part of subject-matter learning
- Integrate oral and written language instruction into content-area teaching

- Provide regular structured opportunities to develop written language skills
- Develop reading and writing abilities of ELs through text-based, analytical instruction using a cognitive strategies approach
- Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction
- Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation
- Foster student motivation and engagement in literacy learning
- Provide regular peer-assisted learning opportunities
- Provide small-group instructional opportunities to students struggling in areas of literacy and English-language development

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The report offers ten recommendations to government agencies at all levels to help support the academic success of children and youth learning English.

**Recommendation:** Federal agencies with oversight of early childhood programs serving children from birth to age 5 (such as the Child Care and Development Fund and Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program) and state agencies with oversight of such programs should follow the lead of Head Start/Early Head Start by providing specific evidence-based program guidance, practices, and strategies for engaging and serving DLLs and their families and monitor program effectiveness.

**Recommendation:** Federal, state, and local agencies and intermediary organizations with responsibilities for serving children birth to age 5 should conduct social marketing campaigns to provide information about the capacity of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers—including those with disabilities—to learn more than one language.

**Recommendation:** Federal and state agencies and organizations that fund and regulate programs and services for DLLs (for example, Office of Head Start, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, state departments of education and early learning, state child care licensing agencies) and local education agencies that serve ELs in grades pre-K to 12 should

examine the adequacy and appropriateness of district- and schoolwide practices for these children and adolescents. Evidence of effective practices should be defined according to the Every Student Succeeds Act.

**Recommendation:** Federal and state agencies and organizations that fund and regulate programs and services for DLLs and ELs in grades pre-K to 12 should give all providers of services to these children and adolescents (for example, local Head Start and Early Head Start Programs, community-based child care centers, state pre-school and child development programs) and local education agencies information about the range of valid assessment methods and tools for DLLs/ELs and guidelines for their appropriate use, especially for DLLs/ELs with disabilities. The Institute of Education Sciences and the National Institutes of Health should lead the creation of a national clearinghouse for these validated assessment methods and tools, including those used for DLLs/ELs with disabilities.

**Recommendation:** The U.S. Department of Education should provide more detailed guidelines to state and local education agencies on the implementation of requirements regarding family participation and language accommodations in the development of individualized education plans and Section 504 accommodation plans for DLLs/ELs who qualify for special education. The state and local education agencies, in turn, should fully implement these requirements.

**Recommendation:** The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education should direct programs to strengthen their referral and linkage roles in order to address the low rates of identification of developmental disorders and disabilities in DLLs/ELs and related low rates of referral to early intervention and early childhood special education services. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education should address underidentification of DLLs/ELs in its analyses, reports, and regula-

tions in order to examine the multidimensional patterns of underrepresentation and overrepresentation at the national, state, and district levels in early childhood (birth to 5) and by grade (pre-K to 12) and for all disability categories.

**Recommendation:** Local education agencies serving American Indian and Alaska Native communities that are working to revitalize their indigenous heritage languages should take steps to ensure that schools' promotion of English literacy supports and does not compete or interfere with those efforts.

**Recommendation:** Research, professional, and policy associations whose members have responsibilities for improving and ensuring the high quality of educational outcomes among DLLs/ELs should implement strategies designed to foster assessment literacy—the ability to understand and interpret results of academic assessments administered to these children and adolescents in English or their primary language—among personnel in federal, state, and local school agencies and DLL/EL families.

**Recommendation:** State and professional credentialing bodies should require that all educators with instructional and support roles (for example, teachers, care and education practitioners, administrators, guidance counselors, psychologists and therapists) in serving DLLs/ELs be prepared through credentialing and licensing as well as pre- and in-service training to work effectively with DLLs/ELs.

**Recommendation:** All education agencies in states, districts, regional clusters of districts, and intermediary units and agencies responsible for early learning services and the pre-K to 12 grades should support efforts to recruit, select, prepare, and retain teachers, care and education practitioners, and education leaders qualified to serve DLLs/ELs. Consistent with requirements for the pre-K to 12 grades, program directors and lead teachers in early learning programs should attain a B.A. degree with certification to teach DLLs.

## COMMITTEE ON FOSTERING SCHOOL SUCCESS FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS: TOWARD NEW DIRECTIONS IN POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

**RUBY TAKANISHI** (*Chair*), Education Policy Division, New America; **ALFREDO ARTILES**, Graduate College, Arizona State University; **DIANE L. AUGUST**, Center for English Learners, American Institutes for Research; **XAVIER BOTANA**, Portland Public Schools, Portland, Maine; **DYLAN CONGER**, Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Administration, George Washington University; **RICHARD P. DURÁN**, Gervitz Graduate School of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara; **LINDA M. ESPINOSA**, University in Missouri, Columbia (emeritus); **EUGENE E. GARCIA**, Arizona State University (emeritus); **FRED GENESEE**, McGill University (emeritus); **KENJI HAKUTA**, Stanford University (emeritus); **ARTURO HERNANDEZ**, Department of Psychology, University of Houston; **BOBBI CIRIZA HOUTCHENS**, Retired Teacher/Consultant; **JEFF MACSWAN**, Department of Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership, University of Maryland, College Park; **HARRIETT ROMO**, Department of Sociology, University of Texas at San Antonio; **MARIA SERA**, Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota; **CATHERINE S. TAMIS-LEMONDA**, Department of Applied Psychology, New York University; **KEVIN J.A. THOMAS**, Department of Sociology and Criminology, Pennsylvania State University; **CLAUDIO TOPPELBERG**, Judge Baker Children's Center, Harvard Medical School; **LILY WONG-FILLMORE**, University of California, Berkeley (emeritus); **SUZANNE LE MENESTREL**, *Study Director*; **FRANCIS AMANKWAH**, *Research Associate*; **PAMELLA ATAYI**, *Program Coordinator*; **ANNALEE GONZALES**, *Senior Program Assistant*; **REBEKAH HUTTON**, *Associate Program Officer*; **SHEILA MOATS**, *Program Officer*; **AMY STEPHENS**, *Program Officer*.

---

**For More Information . . .** This Report Highlights was prepared by the Board on Children, Youth, and Families based on the report, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures* (2017). The study was sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Foundation for Child Development, Health Resources and Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Heising-Simons Foundation, McKnight Foundation, and U.S. Department of Education. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this Report Highlights are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nap.edu> or via the DBASSE page at <http://nas.edu/ELpromisingfutures>.

Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education

*The National Academies of*  
SCIENCES • ENGINEERING • MEDICINE

The nation turns to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine for independent, objective advice on issues that affect people's lives worldwide.

[www.national-academies.org](http://www.national-academies.org)

Copyright 2017 by the National Academy of Sciences. All rights reserved.