



Pre-K Policy Context For Dual Language Learners

Policies matter: They set assumptions and expectations for what and how English Learners (ELs) should learn in schools.¹ Over the past 50 years, federal policies have progressively sought to support EL academic learning outcomes by addressing the reality that students with limited English proficiency face a significant barrier to mastery of subject matter content in schools where English is the primary language of instruction and assessment.

Policies affecting English language learners and dual language learners are among the subjects explored in *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures* (2017), a report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. This brief summarizes the report's examination of these policies.

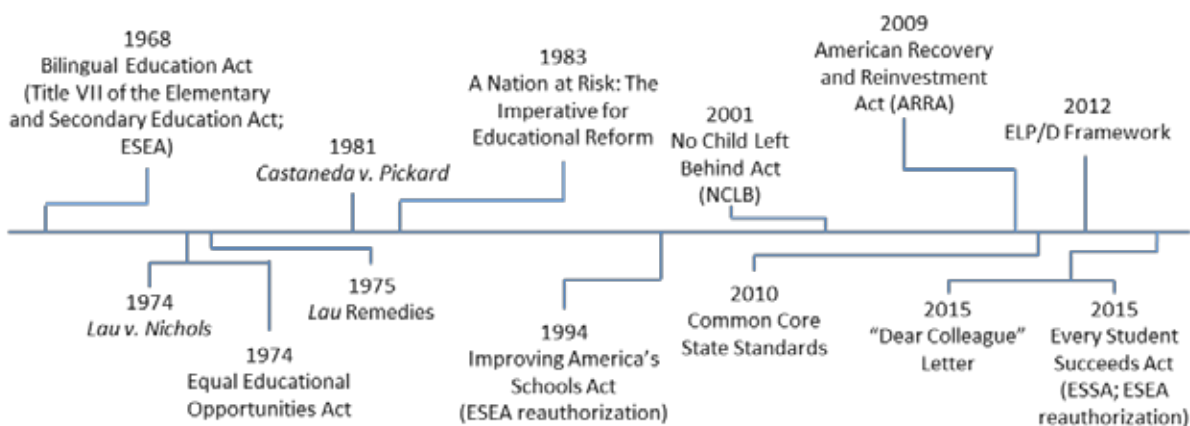


Fig. 1. Timeline of major EL education policies

The 1968 Bilingual Education Act was the first federal action that specifically addressed the educational needs of ELs by authorizing grants for the implementation of local bilingual education programs. The 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court ruling that “There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education” was incorporated into the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 which stated that no state could deny students the right to equal education as a result of “failure by an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs.” The “Castaneda Standards”, which emerged from the 1981 ruling

¹ When referring to children aged birth to 5 in their homes, communities, or early care and education programs, the term “dual language learners” or “DLLs” is used. When referring to children aged 5 or older in the pre-K-12 education system, the term “English learners” or “ELs” is used. When referring to the broader group of children and adolescents aged birth to 21, the term “DLLs/ELs” is used.



of *Castaneda v. Pickard* and to this day remain the foundation for Title VI enforcement activities, stated that to take “appropriate action”, a program must be: based on sound educational theory, implemented adequately, and evaluated for its effectiveness.

The 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* catalyzed a standards-based reform movement which shifted the focus from accountability for spending of federal funds to accountability for demonstrated results. In 2001, The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), made schools, local districts, and states accountable for the performance of ELs by requiring states to adopt English language proficiency standards and annual assessments, with corrective actions for systems failing to meet requirements. The 2012 ELP/D Framework report built an explicit bridge between academic content and students’ use of language by outlining the English language proficiency required for students to engage in learning the grade-level course content specified by the Common Core State Standards and Next Generation Science Standards that emerged from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The Every Student Succeeds Act, the 2015 reauthorization of ESEA that replaced NCLB, is the newest legislation to address the educational needs of ELs.

The goal of pre-K programs is to prepare children for academic success in kindergarten and beyond. Critically, Dual Language Learners (DLLs) need pre-K programs that support their first language while developing their English proficiency to provide a strong foundation in academic learning and rich literacy development. Federal and state policies governing pre-K programming can influence the long-term educational success of DLLs by guiding expectations for literacy and content learning, offering culturally sensitive and accessible programming, and setting priorities for family engagement.



Federal Programs

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA, the 2015 reauthorization of ESEA, includes new provisions for early learning. The law explicitly directs individual states to address early education, which will likely contribute to considerable variation in the quality of primary education across states. For ELs, ESSA includes preschool teachers and early childhood education programs as part of the stated purposes for professional development and EL formula subgrants. ESSA also directs states to develop policies designed to forge closer connections between early learning programs and K-3 education. This will provide more opportunities for schools, districts, and states to create programs for DLLs that start early with pre-K at ages 3 and 4 and are well aligned with grades K-3 and beyond.



Head Start & Early Head Start Programs. Head Start and Early Head Start programs serve more than 1 million children and their families, reaching approximately 42 percent of eligible preschool-aged children and 4 percent of infants and toddlers living at or below the federal poverty level². Critically, nearly 1/3 of children in Head Start come from homes in which a language other than English is spoken.

Head Start is governed by a set of “multicultural principles,” which emphasize the importance of culturally inclusive early learning environments for child development and explicitly posit that “effective programs for children with limited English speaking ability require continued development of the first language while the acquisition of English is facilitated.” Thus, the current Head Start approach can be classified as one that promotes biliteracy and bilingualism in DLLs. The Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework provides explicit guidance on learning expectations for DLLs, stresses the importance of giving children the opportunity to express their knowledge in their home language, and emphasizes the importance of choosing “assessment instruments, methods, and procedures that use the languages ... that most accurately reveal each child’s knowledge, skills, and abilities”³.

Despite high rates of overall enrollment in Head Start programs, DLLs are less likely than children from monolingual English homes to be enrolled in programs that offer full-day, center-based early care and education. The Office of Head Start has a number of initiatives to improve access and services for underserved DLLs with a strong emphasis on family engagement.

- ▶ **Parent Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) framework** offers detailed guidance to programs on how to engage families, encourages practices that are culturally responsive, and offers a set of outcomes that can be used to evaluate family engagement practices. Programs are also encouraged to develop their own data-driven family engagement practices and evaluate their services to families of DLLs.
- ▶ **The Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness Center** provides guidance on how to improve outreach, services, and outcomes for DLLs. A toolkit is available to help programs evaluate and strengthen their methods for communicating with parents whose primary language is not English and to be more culturally and linguistically responsive to children and families.
- ▶ **The Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) program** is designed to address the residential mobility of Spanish-speaking migrant DLL families by providing open and continuous enrollment so that families can follow crop-harvesting schedules.

² Schmit and Matthews, 2013

³ Office of Head Start, 2010b



State-Funded Pre-K Programs

All states have issued early learning and development standards (ELDS) for increasing children’s kindergarten readiness, and many states have developed standards for younger ages as well. Nearly one-third of the nation’s 4-year-olds are currently being educated in state-funded pre-K programs, and conservative estimates suggest DLLs may represent 19 percent of enrollment in these programs.

Access to public pre-K programs varies substantially across states. Some states, like Georgia, offer public pre-K for all 4-year-olds, while ten other states do not fund any such public programs. California is one of the few states that provides a clear philosophy about the goals for DLL learning; establishes a separate set of domains for DLLs on English language and home language development; and addresses DLLs’ needs in communication, language, literacy, and social-emotional development.

Immigrants and Hispanics are less likely than nonimmigrants and non-Hispanics to enroll in quality child care and education programs. Programs can encourage the involvement of DLLs’ families through a number of strategies, such as implementing culturally and linguistically responsive services and using community resources to support family engagement; however, the extent to which state policies encourage these practices varies greatly. In a recent report, only 7 states (of 22 reviewed) had specific recommendations on how to engage DLL families in the education of their children. Serving as a potential model, California’s curriculum framework acknowledges the importance of family engagement and provides educators with a set of practices designed to form meaningful relationships with families, such as:

- ▶ highlighting the many ways in which families are already involved in their children’s education
- ▶ providing opportunities for parents and family members to share their skills with staff, the children in the program, and other families
- ▶ holding an open house or potluck dinner for families in the program



Conclusions

While Head Start has issued clear guidance concerning what constitutes a quality program for young children, consistent guidance does not exist at the state level: only a few states have explicit standards and practices for DLL pre-K education. Under ESSA, it will be critical for states, districts, and schools to develop cohesive DLL programming that forges stronger connections between pre-K-3 education, engages families in DLLs' early education, and that supports bilingualism by both emphasizing and advertising the benefits of supporting children's' first language while developing their English proficiency.

This brief is based on the report *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*, a PDF of which can be downloaded free of charge at <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24677>.