EDITOR’S NOTE
Dual-language learning has become more challenging amid the shift to remote instruction. In this Spotlight, discover how schools and districts are keeping English-language learners connected during school closures, understand the importance of English fluency among parents, and learn about the demand for bilingual and biliterate graduates.

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Kindergartner Ava Josephine Mikel and teacher Priscilla Joseph dance to Haitian music during a game of “freeze dance” at Toussaint L’Ouverture Academy, a Haitian Creole dual-language program at Mattahunt Elementary School in Boston. More dual-language programs are cropping up in districts around the country.
Schools Lean on Staff Who Speak Students’ Language to Keep English-Learners Connected

By Corey Mitchell

For weeks, Alicia Araje-Van Dyk, a multilingual liaison in the Burlington, Vt., schools, has juggled late-night check-ins and predawn wakeup calls.

There are the 1 a.m. calls with Swahili-speaking parents—many of them fresh off 4 p.m. to midnight shifts as essential workers—struggling to use internet hot spots and access online classes for their children in English, a language they barely understand.

Hours later, Van Dyk is often back at it again, stirring pre-teens and teenagers out of bed for their morning classes with early morning texts and phone calls.

During the day, she fields calls from teachers concerned about students who are not logging into class, tracks down tutors for those who are, and counsels her caseload of 43 African refugee families on how they can curb the spread of the novel coronavirus.

“This has been a difficult time,” said Van Dyk, a Burundian refugee who has worked for the school system since 2013. “I cannot imagine the adjustment for families who are new to this country.”

Distance learning has posed a significant challenge for families who are not fluent in English and the teachers who educate them and will continue to be in the months ahead.

Nearly 5 million U.S. schoolchildren are classified as English-language learners and millions more come from homes where their parents speak a different language: About 1 in 4 children, roughly 18 million, in the nation’s K-12 schools live with immigrant parents.

As they struggle to keep instruction going for this vulnerable group of students, school districts around the country are leaning heavily on multilingual staff—employees that have become more of a necessity than a luxury during the nation’s widespread school closures—to connect with these English-learner and immigrant families.

The stakes are high: Among advocates and researchers, there is concern that the extended school closures happening across the nation could exacerbate the struggles of a student population that already faces a high risk of experiencing homelessness, hunger, and academic struggle.

“As [schools] pivoted to virtual or online education, it really [showed] in very concrete ways the impact of language barriers and what their consequences are,” said Gabriela Uro, the director for English-language-learner policy and a researcher for the Council of the Great City Schools, an organization of the nation’s largest urban school systems.

Valuing Connections

Van Dyk is among 11 members of the Burlington school system’s multilingual team who have abandoned their 9-to-5 schedules to work round-the-clock to help non-English-speaking families navigate everything from computers to American culture.

Before online instruction began, the liaisons reached out to determine if families had access to technology, food, and support from social service agencies. They’re also dispatched to soccer fields to break up pick-up games that violate social distancing guidelines.

For some staff, especially those who are immigrants or refugees themselves, helping parents understand the nuances of the U.S. education system can be difficult, because they did not attend schools here either. They’re serving as navigators and cultural connectors in places they do not fully understand themselves.

“The [families] need someone to guide them through all this stuff because of the language, because of the culture,” said Ahmed Jasim, an Iraqi immigrant who works for the Portland, Maine, schools as a parent community specialist for Arabic-speaking students and families. “But sometimes we get lost honestly.”

Schools had trouble connecting with
How can dual language education strengthen communities?

Throughout US history, bilingual education has fallen in and out of favor. But today, more and more schools have begun to reframe their thinking regarding dual language learning.

This is due to an increasing number of emergent bilingual students, or English language learners, as well as a growing body of research demonstrating both individual and community benefits of bilingualism—from greater acceptance and empathy to cross-cultural communication and collaboration.

Find out how bilingualism can create greater unity.

DOWNLOAD THE EBOOK
English-learner families long before the coronavirus shut schools.

Federal studies have shown that English-learner families are far less likely to serve on school committees, attend parent-teacher conferences, or go to school or class events, all important opportunities to communicate about students’ academic progress.

“Parents are feeling overwhelmed,” said Celina Moreno, the president and CEO of the Intercultural Development Research Association, a nonprofit focused on ensuring equal educational opportunity. “Without family engagement, all the educational gaps are widening.”

The association is among 40 education and civil rights groups that have asked Congress for a $1 billion infusion to states and school districts to support English-learner families who are new to the country.”

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A MULTILINGUAL LIAISON, BURLINGTON, VT., SCHOOLS

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The task was daunting: The Burlington

Schools liaison Krishna Bhandari, who worked as a teacher for 10 years in India before coming to the United States, did not have all the answers, but knew people who did.

Using their shared language of Nepali, he helped Tamang communicate with her children’s teachers and found staff who could help her find her youngest child’s homework assignments online. Tamang speaks with liaisons at least once per week.

“I do not know much about the U.S. school system,” Tamang said through her translator, her 8th grade daughter Shusanti. “But me and my community are valued here.”

‘It’s a Struggle’

In states such as Vermont and Maine, refugee resettlement has enjoyed widespread support. State and local political leaders view immigrants as a welcome answer to their struggles to lure younger people to live and work there. But the infusion of new immigrants can pose challenges for schools that need to connect with families in their home languages.


In Portland, the parent community specialists serve crucial roles: interpreting for parents of students with disabilities during individualized education program meetings and explaining to parents that they must now serve as co-teachers for their children during distance learning.

“There’s a difference now because they have to work with the teachers,” said Monique Mutumwinka, a parent community special with the Portland schools who works with families in five languages. “The computer, it’s an issue for them, the language is an issue. It’s a struggle, especially in this crisis of remote learning, to just learn to use the devices.”

To foster communication with families, some districts use software that can send text messages and place phone calls in multiple languages. In Burlington, all recorded phone calls are sent out in nine languages.

“We still struggle with basic ways to connect with families,” said Miriam Ehtesham-Cating, the director of English-learner programs for the Burlington schools. “Then all of a sudden, we were not together.”

Given just a two-day notice that schools were shutting down and faced with the reality that many families, especially those new to the country, did not have email accounts, the liaisons launched a phone campaign to connect with at least one parent in every household.

The task was daunting: The Burlington schools have about 550 students who are eligible for English-learner support services. At least double that amount

have parents who do not speak English at home.

Those learning challenges were already significant for English-learners because of challenges inside and outside of school.

A December 2019 report from the U.S. Department of Education found that few teachers reported assigning English-learners to use digital learning resources outside of class, in part because of concerns about students’ lack of access to technology at home.

Now that those same students have been thrust into online learning the odds are stacked against them. Nearly a quarter of immigrants and their U.S.-born children live in poverty. A recent report from the U.S. Department of Education found that while English-learners are only 10 percent of the student population, they represent 16 percent of the homeless student population. In urban districts, English-learners account for nearly 20 percent of student homelessness.

The challenges that English-learners face are why Van Dyk does not mind the middle-of-the-night phone calls from concerned parents or the early morning pep talks for students.

“I understand their struggles,” said Van Dyk, who worked as a paralegal and studied law before fleeing her native Burundi. She worked in school cafeterias before taking her current district job.

“Education is the one ticket that everybody is given in life,” she said. “I don’t want them to fail because they’re at home.”
Dual-Language Learning: 6 Key Insights for Schools

By Corey Mitchell

For decades, two factors drove the demand for dual-language education: a desire to preserve native languages and recognition that dual-language learning can boost overall achievement for English-language learners. Now, a growing number of states also see bilingualism as key to accessing the global economy, as evidenced by the surging popularity of the “seal of biliteracy”—a special recognition for graduates who demonstrate fluency in two or more languages. The popularity of the seal is spurring even more demand for dual-language-education programs.

There is no definitive count of the number of schools that provide dual-language instruction, but new programs are cropping up each year in districts of all sizes. The New York City schools alone have more than 100 dual-language programs, but schools in at least 40 states and the District of Columbia also operate programs. With more new programs undoubtedly in the works, Education Week talked with several regional and national dual-language education experts, who offered insights into what it takes to launch dual-language programs and strengthen existing ones. Here are some excerpts from those conversations, edited for clarity and length:

What resources do you need to start a dual-language program?

“Once a program is well designed and implemented and it has all of its systems of support in place, the additional costs for a dual-language program is not much higher than any other monolingual English program. The issue, though, up front is going to be ... it’s a very different design, a very different approach to education. You have training costs, you have leadership-development costs, you have resource costs because, of course, now you need materials in the non-English language. That takes a while for districts to reach that capacity where now their budget is going to be able to ... ensure sufficient materials to support instruction in both languages. That takes some time. It depends on where you are in the country as to how much that startup cost will be.

Here in New Mexico, we would say that the cost could be ... somewhere between $30,000 and $60,000 per school for the first three years of design and implementation. That would be a starting point.”

—David Rogers
Executive director, Dual Language Education of New Mexico

Spanish is the most dominant target, or non-English, language offered in dual programs, but districts now offer a broader array of languages to learn. What are some of the challenges districts may encounter with those lesser-taught languages?

“There is a level of investment that a district has to make to be able to provide the core materials in those languages, because you just can’t go to Vietnam and buy the standard curriculum that’s used in schools there, nor could you do that for [Chinese] or any other languages, because it has to be really aligned with [Common Core State Standards]. First of all for us is to figure out, what is our content allocation? What are we going to be teaching in the partner language, versus what are we going to be teaching in English? And then our goal is to try to provide those materials in an equivalent and rigorous way. Sometimes that involves buying materials that are out in the field and adapting those. Sometimes that means developing them ourselves. Sometimes that means translating the English material. Just like any good educational program, you have to invest in the curriculum, the professional development, to make it work well for kids.”

—Michael Bacon
Director, department of dual language, Portland, Ore., schools

How can schools with dual-language programs emphasize the importance of both languages?

“Sometimes what we see is that the [target] language is only represented in the classroom, and that doesn’t give the appropriate idea about the dual-language program. When one decides to adopt a dual-language program, both languages should be integral throughout the school, should be present throughout the school. Both in the corridors but also in the meetings, in staff development, etc. Both languages should be present, and it should be obvious. Signs are in both languages, things are happening in both languages, because that also gives students the idea that both languages are valuable. Sometimes school districts don’t. It’s one of the things that is first noticeable. So, English
is typically all over the place and the other language, well, it’s within the classroom, but hardly anywhere else.”

—David Nieto
Executive director, BUENO Center for Multicultural Education, University of Colorado, Boulder

When helping districts establish dual-language programs, is there a big misconception that you have to work to dispel early on?

“One of the big myths about implementing these programs has to do with the mindset that little children are just open to a second language, that it’s just easy for them. It’s schooling, and so schooling, after a certain point, gets difficult and so we have to have people understand that this is not just an enrichment program or a foreign-language option. This is a complete shift of the child’s core program, and it’s developed so that kids really do become literate in both languages. So it’s not business as usual with this little overlay called a second language. It has to be redefined so that everyone understands that we’re going to teach language arts in English, but we also are going to teach language arts in Spanish. So it’s not 45 minutes a week, it’s a minimum of half a day, every single day.”

—Rosa Molina
Executive director, the Association for Two-Way & Dual Language Education, based in Santa Cruz County, Calif.

How can educators, even those working outside of classrooms, support dual-language education?

“My push right now, big time, is principals, making sure that our principals, our assistant principals, central-office leaders, all are aware of what dual language is because everybody plays a role in the rollout of dual language. Budget, curriculum, evaluation, policy. You need a leader that understands the whole background on dual language, not just learning in Spanish. Not just learning to read in Spanish. No, everything that it encompasses, what dual language encompasses, which is bilingualism, biliteracy, cultural competence, high academic achievement, through, not in, but through both languages. So you need the leadership. They need to know what to look for when they go into a classroom and do an observation in a room that is dual, which is very rich. What should they be looking at, what should they be paying attention to? How should they be guiding their teachers?”

—Elena Izquierdo
Associate professor, University of Texas, El Paso

Quick Guide to Dual-Language Education

- **Two-Way Immersion:** Native English-speakers and native speakers of the target language are taught in the same classroom, with the goal of helping both sets of students become bilingual and biliterate by splitting instruction between the two languages.
- **Total Immersion:** Native English-speakers are taught almost exclusively in the target language. Also known as one-way immersion.
- **Partial Immersion:** Only a portion of academic subjects are taught in the target language.
- **Developmental Bilingual:** English-learners are taught using both English and their first language.

What are some growing pains that schools can expect to encounter after launching dual-language programs?

“The number of [language] immersion programs continues to grow across the country, and so the demand [for] having a quality teacher workforce is growing, too. That’s been one of our biggest challenges, to find a pipeline of teachers, qualified teachers. We’ve been finding an alternate way to help certify teachers that we need.”

—Gregory Fulkerson
Director of language-acquisition work-
The so-called coronavirus- or “COVID slide” may be especially troublesome for English-language learners, the 5 million students still learning English in the nation’s K-12 schools. Many of them could fall further behind because of a confluence of factors, including limited access to the internet and the language support services they often receive in school.

Along with their native English-speaking peers, English-learners likely will face a battery of tests when school resumes to gauge what they’ve learned and lost during the extended school closures—but those assessments may not fully reflect what they know and can do in academic subjects, especially if they cannot demonstrate their knowledge in English.

A new policy brief from the Migration Policy Institute explores the policy and practical questions for states considering implementing native-language assessments, tests that may be better suited to gauge what students know and what subjects they need support in apart from their English-language instruction.

“With high-stakes accountability likely to remain a fixture of the U.S. education system and increasing recognition of the value of multilingualism for students’ future and the U.S economy, it is more important than ever to ensure that education policymakers have the means to capture a full and accurate picture of EL academic achievement,” the brief’s authors, Julie Sugarman and Leslie Villegas, wrote.

The authors argue that native-language assessments are tools to measure students’ grasp of concepts, not just their English proficiency. However, not all schools and states offer assessments in languages other than English.

Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, states must “make every effort” to develop statewide assessments in students’ first languages if they constitute a significant portion of the student population. But the law stops short of requiring the assessments.

According to the Migration Policy brief, 31 states plus the District of Columbia offer native language assessments, most commonly in math or science but sometimes in reading-language arts and social studies, too.

Since some states and districts have no native-language assessments of their own, many use the Northwest Evaluation Association, the maker of the widely used MAP assessments, which are also available in Spanish, to gauge the academic growth of their English-learners. Nearly three-fourths of the nation’s English-learners are native Spanish speakers.

English-learner students are “not in the environment they’re used to where they’re getting input to be able to practice, to be able to interact,” said Teresa Krastel, who guides content development for the Spanish MAP Growth and Spanish MAP Reading Fluency assessments for NWEA.

“They are not in the environment they’re used to,” she said. “When school is closed, they are not in the environment they’re used to where they’re getting input to be able to practice, to be able to interact.”

Schools typically use the NWEA
assessments three times per year, in the fall, winter, and spring. Roughly 160,000 students took the NWEA Spanish assessments in fall 2019; that number dropped down to 5,000 students for the spring 2020 testing period, said Adam Withycombe, manager of assessment products for NWEA.

“We anticipate that that kind of COVID slide is going to be pretty dramatic,” Withycombe said. “I’m pretty sure it’s going to be even more so for English-learners.”

It remains unclear if the coronavirus-related school closures will spur demand for native-language assessments, but they are needed for a “fair and accurate accountability system,” said Sugarman, a senior education policy analyst at the Migration Policy Center’s National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy.

Published on January 21, 2020, in Education Week's Special Report: Quality Counts 2020

English Fluency Among Parents: Why It Matters for Student Success

States vary in this piece of school readiness

By Sterling C. Lloyd and Corey Mitchell

Research shows that children whose parents are involved in supporting their learning do better in school, but that’s often a barrier for children whose parents aren’t fluent speakers of English.

English-language-learner families are less likely than English-only families to attend parent-teacher conferences and other school-related events, U.S. Department of Education surveys have shown.

These families, most of whom are Latino, are also far less likely to volunteer or serve on school committees and attend school or class events—all important opportunities to communicate about students’ academic progress.

Linguistic integration—the percent of dependent children whose parents are fluent speakers of English— is one of 13 indicators that make up the EdWeek Research Center’s Chance-for-Success Index. The index examines the role education plays in providing opportunities throughout an individual’s lifetime.

Across the United States, the percentage of children whose parents are fluent English speakers ranges from 67 percent in California to nearly 100 percent in Montana.

Roughly half of states have levels of linguistic integration that are higher than 90 percent. In 17 states and the District of Columbia, the percent of children whose parents are fluent English speakers is between 80 and 90 percent.

Levels of linguistic integration are below 80 percent in seven states—Arizona, California, Florida, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, and Texas.

While language barriers affect student achievement, linguistic integration is just one factor that can influence academic outcomes. As the index reveals, boosting academic achievement is a complex process.

Some states that rate near the top of the index have relatively low levels of linguistic integration. The three states that rank highest on the overall index, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Connecticut, have had at least a 4 percentage point decrease in the number of English-speaking families since 2008, the year the EdWeek Research Center Chance-for-Success Index began its current scoring system.

Massachusetts ranks first on the overall index, with an A minus grade, but 42nd for linguistic integration. New Jersey and Connecticut rank second and third respectively on the overall index, but in the bottom quarter of states for linguistic integration.

Conversely, some states struggled on the index despite high linguistic integration rankings.

Students in Montana and West Virginia face fewer language barriers than their peers in other states, but that does not necessarily translate to stronger academic achievement and adult outcomes.

Montana ranks first in the nation for linguistic integration, but only 28th overall, with a C-plus grade.

West Virginia has the second-highest level of linguistic integration, but ranks 49th overall on Chance for Success with a C minus grade.

Louisiana and Mississippi also rank in the top 10 for linguistic integration, but fare much worse on the overall index, earning a C minus and C grade respectively.

Developing Connections

Linguistic integration is part of the early foundation category of the Chance-for-Success Index, which also includes parental educational levels, family income, and other factors that can influence whether children start school ready to learn.

Under the index guidelines, all parents in the home must be fluent in English for a family to be considered linguistically integrated.

Having at least one English-speaking
adult in the home increased the likelihood of a parent or guardian attending a school or class event, parent-teacher conference, or meeting with a guidance counselor, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Studies out of Boston University’s Wheelock College of Education and Human Development have shown that parent involvement is a significant predictor of children’s literacy skills, and that bonds formed with other parents at the school may help increase school involvement among Latino families.

A 2015 report from the Center for American Progress, “The Case for a Two-Generation Approach for Educating English Language Learners,” makes the case that communities looking to improve education for school-aged English-language learners should also offer services to their parents.

The study found that limited English skills for parents and students “can create a poverty trap for families” and argues that engaging them simultaneously improves the academic and educational well-being of both generations.

Similarly, a 2015 report from the Education Commission on the States recommended that states do more to connect with English-learner families, including offering adult ELL community education classes to help bridge the language gap.

English-learners who do not reach proficiency can often end up illiterate in two languages, effectively unable to read or write in either.

LINGUISTIC INTEGRATION

The percent of children whose parents are fluent English speakers ranges from 67.1 percent in California to 99.3 percent in Montana. Levels of linguistic integration are below 80 percent in seven states.

Research from the Center for Early Education Development at the University of Minnesota indicates that parents whose primary language is Spanish—by far the most common language of English-learner families—or another language besides English, should encourage and support their child’s development and literacy in the home language, which can benefit their English-learning.

Published on January 14, 2020, in Education Week’s Learning the Language Blog

Spanish Dominates Dual-Language Programs, But Schools Offer Diverse Options

By Corey Mitchell

School districts across the country are offering students a broad array of target languages to learn in dual-language programs.

Schools now offer dual-language education in 18 languages, according to newly released data from the U.S. Department of Education. The report from the office of English language acquisition lists the number of states that offered programs in each language during the 2016-17 school year.

Spanish, by far the most common home or first language of the nation’s English-language-learner students, topped the list with 30 states.

Federal data show that roughly 75 percent of the nation’s English-learners are Spanish-speaking. No other language accounts for more than 3 percent of school-age language-learners.

Mandarin Chinese was next on the list, with programs in 13 states, followed by French in nine states, German in six states, and Vietnamese in four states.

A desire to preserve native languages has driven demand for programs for decades. Economics play a role too, with a growing number of states seeing foreign language as the key to accessing the global economy. There’s also a growing recognition among educators that dual-language learning has shown great promise for increasing achievement for English-learner students.

In dual classes, teachers split instruc-
The power of dual language education

Throughout US history, bilingual education has fallen in and out of favor. But today, due to an increasing number of emergent bilingual students, or English language learners, and a growing body of research demonstrating the individual and community benefits of bilingualism, more and more schools have begun to reframe their thinking regarding dual language learning.1,2

THE BILINGUAL ADVANTAGE

Over the course of the last 50 years, research has found evidence that, for individuals, bilingualism can improve:3

- Executive function
- Concentration
- Metalinguistic awareness
- Phonetic perception
- Cognitive flexibility
- Creative thinking

BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN THE US

Though perspectives, approaches, politics, and pedagogies have changed over the years, teaching other languages has been part of US public school education since Colonial times.4 Today, dual language immersion programs, designed to teach students in two languages, are on the rise.5 These programs vary in structure but often share three common student goals:6

1. Develop bilingualism and biliteracy
2. Achieve academically at grade level or better in both languages
3. Develop an understanding and appreciation of multiple cultures

Dual language immersion programs are more effective when they incorporate an asset model approach, which views heritage languages and cultures as a strength. Immersion programs also benefit from culturally responsive pedagogies, which help ensure that students see themselves and their communities reflected and valued in the content they’re taught.7
How can dual language education strengthen local and global communities?

Beyond individual benefits, dual language education and bilingualism have the power to strengthen community ties, for greater unity. Here are a few ways how:

**INCREASING CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING**
Bilingual education can open students’ eyes to cultures different from their own, increasing what is referred to as “cultural competence.” In today’s globalized world, cultural competence can be a key to success.⁸

**DEVELOPING PROBLEM-SOLVERS WHO CAN ADDRESS GLOBAL CHALLENGES**
Researchers have found that bilingualism strengthens problem-solving skills,⁹ which will serve students well as they move into an increasingly interconnected world. The ability to communicate with many different kinds of people will be useful in addressing global challenges like climate change, inequality, and poverty.¹⁰

**IMPROVING COMPETITIVENESS IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY**
The demand for bilingual workers is rising, at both the low and higher ends of the skill spectrum. Between 2010 and 2015, online job listings targeting bilingual employees rose by 15.7%.¹¹ Bilingual employees allow businesses to widen their potential customer base, increase their revenues, and better serve their existing customers.¹¹

**ENHANCING COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**
Bilingual education can make students feel a greater sense of belonging, facilitating more active civic participation. As a result, more bilingual communities may participate more fully in society and the democratic process, helping to ensure their needs and priorities are represented.¹²
How can the right EdTech solution support bilingual education?

Educational technology, or EdTech, has proven to be an effective way to support emergent bilingual students. Below are some of the ways EdTech can help support individuals, and create stronger communities.

THE RIGHT EDTECH SOLUTION:

- Enables remote language learning, allowing students to keep learning and connecting across distances, whether in school or at home.
- Incorporates cultural responsiveness, enhancing a student’s feeling of belonging within the school community and beyond.
- Creates more opportunities for speaking and listening practice, to help ensure more voices are heard in the classroom.
- Boosts linguistic competence and confidence, for better engagement among all students.
- Offers ongoing assessment, allowing educators to see how engaged their emergent bilingual students are, as measured by their progress.
- Provides real-time data to help educators understand their students’ levels of knowledge and proficiency, enabling them to personalize learning and make more informed decisions.

Learn more about the ways in which dual language education can create greater unity. Read the Rosetta Stone eBook The Language Connection: How Dual Language Education Strengthens Local and Global Communities. Learn more about Rosetta Stone language solutions at rosettastone.com/k12.

tion time between English and the target language, though the balance of time spent teaching in each language can vary program to program.

But the home languages of English-learners are not always the most popular choices for dual-language programs. The percentage of Arabic-speaking English-learners, the second-largest group in U.S. schools, has increased 75 percent over the past eight years to 122,000. Yet, only two states reported offering dual-language programs in Arabic.

Two states also reported having dual-language programs in Hmong, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Somali. Like Arabic, Somali is also among the top five home languages for English-learners in U.S. schools yet it isn’t broadly offered as a dual-language option.

One state each reported having dual-language programs in Armenian, Cantonese, Haitian, Hebrew, Italian, and Korean.

The report does not list which states have programs in those languages, but did report that California offers programs in 13 different languages. Fifteen reported that they do not have schools that offer dual-language programs.

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**OPINION**

Published on June 12, 2019, in Education Week

Stop Trying to Standardize Your Students’ Language

Too often, teachers suppress valuable language diversity

By Olivia Obeso

A few weeks ago, at a central Los Angeles after-school homework club full of students who were bilingual in Spanish and English, I asked a young girl I was working with if she spoke Spanish. “¿Hablas español?” She responded casually, “No, pero mi mamá habla español.” No, but my mom speaks Spanish. Amused by the response, I reflected on my instinct to classify language as either/or: as English or Spanish, as good or bad, as correct or poor form. These classifications end up reinforcing deficit views of students who aren’t monolingual, middle-class English speakers.

It is impossible to avoid the insidious narratives about the language deficiencies of students who have been “minoritized”—or pushed to a subordinate position by social expectations. From catchy news articles, to research rooted firmly in monolingual, middle-class practices, these narratives are hard to escape. In fact, whenever I meet someone new, and they learn that I was a teacher, two talking points never fail to come up: the tragedies of the word gap and the failure of certain students to learn academic language.

But these tragedies are fabricated. The researchers of the 1995 study that introduced the “crisis” of the word gap claimed that children from low-income households were entering school with 30 million fewer words than their more economically advantaged peers. This conclusion has come under fire in recent years both from activists who criticize the study’s impact on policymakers and from researchers who question its methodology and cultural biases. In fact, later studies failed to reproduce the so-called word gap.

Validity aside, this and similar studies also make implicit judgments about the value of certain ways of speaking and writing that are rooted in monolingual ideals. The “dilemma” of students learning academic language—the language used in textbooks or on standardized tests—then permeates instruction and evaluation. Such a narrow focus discounts the huge variety of language skills needed for communication and success, and limits students’ learning opportunities.

These two manufactured dilemmas attempt to strictly demarcate language boundaries. The titles we give to languages (e.g. standard, academic, slang, formal, etc.) imply the worth of the language being labeled, but the hierarchies that result are not objective.

In fact, students who are bi- or multilingual effectively engage in complex language practices every day. But, because their practices don’t fit into our monolingual models of language, we neglect to recognize it.

Even as appreciation for bilingualism grows in our schools, that appreciation is not equal. The bilingualism of students from monolingual backgrounds is celebrated, while the bilingualism of other students...
is treated as a problem to be “fixed.”

Take the girl in homework club as an example. I watched her move deftly between making a plan with her mother in Spanish, completing her homework in English, and engaging with her peers in two languages. She demonstrated her linguistic knowledge and social dexterity throughout the afternoon, but will her teachers recognize the talent she has?

As educators, we’re especially attuned to the labeling and categorization of language. With honest intentions, we take up what we’re taught in our teacher preparation: that language can be standardized. Unfortunately, what results is the denial of deeper-learning opportunities for our students as we judge them to be not proficient in any language when, in reality, they are just not practicing the language we find valuable.

This is not new in education. My father and his nine siblings were prohibited from developing their Spanish-English bilingualism in school. After they were disciplined multiple times for speaking Spanish in school, my grandparents were forced to be complicit in the erasure of their language.

Their teachers didn’t consider that they were cheating their students out of the opportunity to develop their unique language skills. Now, my father and his siblings have to pay for others to teach their children the valuable skill of bilingualism that they were denied and that other students are rewarded for cultivating.

This suppression of diverse language practices is not limited to students who speak languages other than English. There is also diversity and value within English-speaking communities that we should not attempt to eradicate. Fortunately, there are various ways that all of us as educators can help our students develop their language practices for all of the spaces they pass through. Here are a few:

- **Encourage flexible language practices (translanguaging).** Allow students to draw on all of the tools in their language toolbox to learn, communicate, and express themselves. For example, if we ask students to make an outline for a paper they are assigned, they could be allowed the freedom to use any format and language that help them organize their thinking.

- **Raise language awareness (metalinguistic awareness).** Guide students to see patterns in their own language and the language of others so that they’re more conscious about the decisions they make.

- **Promote context-rich language development (legitimate peripheral participation).** Provide real examples of language use in different spaces—such as communicating needs at a doctor’s visit, negotiating policies with school leaders, or applying to a job in the hospitality industry—and allow for real, guided communication in those spaces.

- **Build student-centered classrooms.** Get to know the students we teach and provide flexible lessons and projects that guide them in connecting new information to their prior knowledge.

Valuing diverse language practices is difficult in our current system of education. Many assessments prevent multilingual students from demonstrating their full language ability, yet these tests are core to the education system in the United States. Teachers are held accountable for a narrow definition of achievement. Communities’ values and practices are often ignored in the schools that serve them.

I know from personal experience that it’s not easy to adopt the practices I’ve detailed here. I know that language is not static and that rules governing its use are subjective. Too often, I bowed to the constant warnings from teacher educators, researchers, and principals of the failure that awaited my students who did not learn the correct kind of language in my classroom.

It’s time to recognize that our insistence on labeling and classifying language is not a necessary evil. Let’s allow our students to tell us what they can do with language instead of asking them to always make it fit into our own models.

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**OPINION**

Published on June 19, 2020, in Education Week

**English-Language Learners Need More Support During Remote Learning**

Here are four ways to help offset learning loss

By Leslie M. Babinski, Steven J. Amendum, Steven E. Knotek, and Marta Sánchez

Young children who are learning English require special consideration during virtual instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 1 in 6 children in kindergarten and 1st grade in the United States are learning English as a second (or third) language. As teachers grapple with the monumental task of providing remote instruction to English-language learners, it’s important that state and district leaders provide extensive support and clear guidelines for engaging their ELLs.

Virtual learning for elementary school students, particularly those in the early grades, has been provided in a wide range of formats, including live online sessions with teachers, videos, internet links, and printed packets. The responsibility of connecting young children to these resources often falls to parents. In many ELL communities, internet access may be limited to a cellphone, making it difficult for parents and children to navigate learning activities, especially if multiple children are in the home.

This spring, 48 states suspended school for the remainder of the school year, resulting in millions of students who will miss over 20 weeks of in-person learning. Given what we know about learning loss
During the traditional summer months, it is critical to support families and teachers to ensure that children are able to engage in learning activities during this unprecedented time.

Under federal Title VI requirements, school districts are required to ensure that English-language learners can meaningfully participate in instruction. Although the types of in-person instructional services vary both across and within states, ELLs typically spend most of their school day in the general classroom with English-only peers and receive specialized instruction from English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teachers for a specified number of hours a week. In the current climate, it is critical that ELLs continue to make academic progress and receive social-emotional support from their teachers along with their English-only peers.

As state and district leaders consider outreach through email, phone calls, and physical copies of instructional resources for providing equitable access to possible remote instruction when schools reopen, we offer the following evidence-informed suggestions for consideration.

1. **Support students’ emotional and mental health by maintaining relationships with schools and teachers.**
   During the abrupt end to in-person schooling because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to virtual instruction, it was important for school leaders to pay special attention to their districts’ outreach efforts to families who do not speak English as their first language. Many families with English-language learners may also face significant challenges during this time from loss of work, separation from extended families, and concerns about their health. Information to help parents support their children allows for continuity of the central place of the school in the lives of many families. Additional resources from schools and districts for interpretation and translation with clear two-way communication may be necessary to support both teachers and families during remote instruction for ELLs.

2. **Encourage and support families to use their best language.**
   As parents have moved into a home schooling role, it is important to provide a clear message to families that by using their home language, they can continue to support their children’s progress in literacy. In fact, recent research shows that young ELLs with strong early-literacy skills in their native Spanish at kindergarten entered kindergarten through 4th grade. In this study, the effect of early Spanish reading ability was more influential than students’ ability to understand and speak English. Given the results of this study, the message for virtual learning is clear: Support and encourage families to use their best language. Skills learned from reading in native languages support learning in that language and can also transfer to learning to read in English.

3. **Build on the considerable strengths of bilingual families.**
   Families of English-language learners have considerable strengths that can be leveraged by schools and teachers to help them through this difficult time. By building on families’ cultural wealth when planning virtual learning activities, ESL and classroom teachers can collaborate to tap into their students’ cultural and family backgrounds through instructional activities that originate from a strengths-based viewpoint and can engage and sustain connections with families. Such a model can be used to recognize and build on family strengths and cultural knowledge. For example, teachers can offer learning activities that include the entire family, such as taking turns in storytelling or having older siblings read to younger ones. In the Latino community, for instance, parents may engage their children by using “cuentos” (stories) or giving “consejos” (advice in the form of a proverb).

4. **Provide opportunities for enhanced teacher collaboration.**
   Imagine kindergarten and 1st grade students and their parents trying to navigate virtual instruction from multiple teachers with different content, web portals, and instructional strategies. From our research in elementary schools, there are clear benefits for students when ESL and classroom teachers collaborate to provide aligned instruction with coordinated scaffolding for their ELLs. For example, after briefly planning together, ESL teachers can provide direct instruction to preteach specific academic vocabulary to support ELLs’ comprehension during literacy lessons provided by their classroom teachers. Or ESL and classroom teachers can align instruction by using the same instructional strategies to teach phonics or reading-comprehension strategies across settings. Meaningful access to remote instruction for ELLs requires intentional collaboration between classroom and ESL teachers. As this type of collaboration is all the more difficult as the teachers themselves work remotely, it will require support for teachers from education agencies at the school, district, state, and national levels.

Focusing on supporting English-language learners and their families during virtual instruction will help teachers provide access to the curriculum and keep lines of communication open. While this is critical as families, teachers, schools, and communities adjust to life during various
phases of stay-at-home orders in many states, these principles can also support families in the transition back to in-person schooling.

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