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How Will Schools Measure English-Learners' 'COVID-Slide' Learning Loss?

By Corey Mitchell

Educators are worried about students losing ground while school buildings are closed to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus.

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 farther 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 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 sys-

tem 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-fourth 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.

"That, in combination with the limitations we've seen all over the place, the limitations in equity, access to tools, teachers in an online environment not directly targeting skills that English-language learners need to practice," are cause for concern, Krastel said.

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. ■

How Do You Make the Science of Reading Work for All Students?



Over the past twenty years, gold-standard research has shown that the science of reading works.¹ The problem? This body of research **focuses primarily on the needs of English-only speaking students**, or monolinguals.²

What about Emergent Bilinguals, or English Learners? As they simultaneously learn to speak, understand, and read in English, Emergent Bilinguals have additional language needs and require different types of support than those of their monolingual peers.

Emergent Bilinguals are the future. So what can educators do to better address the literacy learning needs of these students?

Learn more in the Lexia white paper, “**How Do You Make the Science of Reading Work for All Students? Understanding the Needs of Emergent Bilinguals**,” which examines the differences between monolingual and Emergent Bilingual literacy learning needs.



Provide more equitable literacy instruction in the classroom. Find out how.

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Understanding the Literacy Learning Needs of Monolinguals vs. Emergent Bilinguals



To learn to read, students need to know how to speak and understand the language.¹ While monolinguals, or English-only speaking students, may already understand 95% to 98% of the words their teacher is saying,² Emergent Bilinguals come to school with their own background knowledge and a rich understanding of- and abilities in their heritage language.

Who Are Emergent Bilinguals?

Comprising roughly **1 in 10 students in schools across the United States**,³ Emergent Bilinguals are a diverse group, speaking more than four-hundred different languages and representing various cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities.

Why Is an Asset Model Important for Emergent Bilingual Literacy Learning?

When describing English Learners, schools and districts commonly use the terms “EL” or “ELL” and categorize these students as an “intervention” group. This terminology emphasizes what these students don’t know as opposed to what they do know, failing to highlight one of the most important aspects of English language learning: becoming bilingual.⁴ The term “Emergent Bilingual” celebrates the asset of bilingualism that these students bring to the classroom and to society, reflecting instead the asset model.

An asset-based approach in the classroom helps ensure that students see themselves and their communities reflected and valued in the content they’re taught in school.⁵ As part of this approach, it’s important to consider and address the unique needs of Emergent Bilinguals who are learning to read.



Use an asset-based approach to address the literacy learning needs of Emergent Bilinguals. Find out how.

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What Do Emergent Bilinguals Need for Successful Literacy Learning?



As they simultaneously learn to understand, speak, and read the English language, **Emergent Bilinguals have unique needs**—and instruction should be adjusted to meet these needs.¹

For starters, reading programs for Emergent Bilinguals should include intensive language development as well as instruction in literacy strategies and skills,¹ and research shows that supporting a student’s first language will help the student learn to read in English.²

Who Are Emergent Bilinguals?

The Lexia white paper “How Do You Make the Science of Reading Work for All Students? Understanding the Needs of Emergent Bilinguals” explores strategies that educators can use to ensure more equitable literacy learning for Emergent Bilinguals. Here are just a few:

- **Encourage family members** to engage in language and literacy activities in their native languages while at home.²
- **Use educational technology** to support a more personalized, adaptive learning experience.
- **Leverage cultural individualities**, knowledge, and perceptions as opportunities for more effective teaching.
- **Provide additional work** on English phonemes that are not present in the student’s native language.
- **Provide extra practice** in reading words, sentences, and stories.

As the number of Emergent Bilinguals in schools continues to increase, understanding how to better support and teach them is imperative for districts, schools, and educators.



Get strategies for supporting successful Emergent Bilingual literacy learning.

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Published on February 7, 2020

The Invisible Burden Some Bilingual Teachers Face

By Corey Mitchell

Finding bilingual educators has been a long-standing problem for school districts across the country. Now, a study out of Georgia State University explores why finding those teachers may be only half the problem.

The “invisible work” of translating and creating curriculum materials in languages other than English that falls on the shoulders of dual-language bilingual educators “too often goes unrecognized and is never remunerated.” That responsibility could lead to teachers leaving the profession, concludes Cathy Amanti, a clinical assistant professor at Georgia State.

Using data from six interviews, the study reveals that most school administrators aren’t even aware of the extra work. This “linguistic labor,” as Amanti calls it, is work that many dual-language teachers must take on because of the scarcity of quality learning materials for English-language learners and students enrolled in dual-language programs—which are surging in popularity around the country.

The bilingual teacher shortage is an emerging issue nationwide, federal data indicate: 31 states and the District of Columbia have a shortage of teachers who work in bilingual, dual-language immersion, and English-as-a-second-language classrooms, federal data indicate.

For the study, Amanti interviewed six teachers in elementary school dual-language programs (four are Spanish-English programs and two are French-English programs). All the participating teachers had some curricular materials provided by their school or district in the language they teach, but the quality and amount varied by subject, school, and district.

Amanti, who cautioned against making widespread generalizations based on her work, thinks more extensive research is needed to explore whether educators working in these positions are leaving their jobs because of the lack of recognition and compensation for the extra work they incur.

In Amanti’s study, two of the six teachers left their jobs at the end of the school year in which her study took place—one transferred to a school without a dual-language bilingual education program and the other left teaching



— Brandon Thibodeaux for Education Week

Amaya Rodriguez-Lema, of Bilbao, Spain, conducts a reading lesson with 2nd grade students at William Lipscomb Elementary School in Dallas. Rodriguez-Lema is one 150 teachers from Spain currently working in the district.

altogether. Amanti reported that the teachers left various reasons, some of which are tied to the additional work involved and resources required for the job.

“It is unlikely that any [dual-language bilingual education] teacher is provided with all the instructional materials and resources they need,” Amanti writes in the study. “But it is more likely that [dual-language bilingual educators] have less ready-made curriculum materials available to them than their counterparts who teach in English. This is an extra burden that directly impacts the working conditions.”

Amanti, who has experience as a bilingual educator and currently teaches English-as-a-second-language and dual-language bilingual education courses at Georgia State, said teacher colleges should consider requiring more students to study curriculum development in languages other than English since they inherit the responsibility when they take new jobs.

“I see a lot of value in teachers creating their own materials because they are in the best position to know their students in the communities that they come from,” Amanti said in an interview with Education Week. “I would love to see coursework in teacher-preparation programs that specifically focuses on creating curriculum materials, particularly culturally relevant curriculum materials that respond to local histories, local knowledge.” ■

“

It is unlikely that any [dual-language bilingual education] teacher is provided with all the instructional materials and resources they need.”

CATHY AMANTI

A clinical assistant professor at Georgia State



—Por Nuestros Niños host Ceri Chaffee

Published on August 31, 2020

Spanish-Speaking Students Need Support. A New Podcast May Help

By Corey Mitchell

Geri Chaffee's first live radio appearance came as a surprise.

As schools shut down to slow the spread of coronavirus, the sudden shift to distance learning left parents frazzled and frustrated. It quickly became apparent that, without in-person instruction, families of children who were not fluent in English faced additional barriers and schools would struggle to support them.

In Florida, where Chaffee lives, Spanish-speaking families had questions. But many of them had trouble finding answers because they did not speak or read English, lacked internet access or devices, or felt uncomfortable approaching school leaders to ask for help.

Concerned about the challenges that families faced in adjusting to distance learning, an acquaintance with Solmart Media, a company that owns Spanish-language radio stations in Florida, sought out Chaffee for advice.

"At that time, they were getting a lot of calls from parents, like, 'What do we do? What does this mean? Hispanic parents, non-English-speaking parents. So, this producer called me and asked if I could do an interview,'" Chaffee said.

Chaffee figured she was up to the task. With a master's degree in educational leadership, the native Spanish speaker had home-schooled her bilingual, biliterate children with learning differences. She is also the founder of Dreamers Academy, a planned dual-language charter school in Sarasota, Fla.

During the interview, Chaffee recalled rattling off a series of tips to help families adjust to distance learning. Unbeknownst to her, the conversation was broadcast live to listeners across a 10-county area in the state. In the days after it aired, school administrators called her up or reached out on social media, asking for advice on parent engagement.

"Oh no, that was live," she recalled thinking. "I don't even know what the heck I said."

That conversation spawned *Por Nuestros Niños*, a new Spanish-language radio show and podcast that aims to help families in Florida and across the nation navigate an uncertain fall after a tumultuous spring of distance learning. The show was borne out of the pandemic, but Chaffee expects it will continue even after students return to school.

Chaffee partners with Solmart Media for the weekly 30-minute national radio show, which now airs on more than 300 Spanish-language stations across the country. It features inter-

views with educators and leading English-language-learner researchers who share tips and insights on how parents can support their children.

Chaffee spoke with Education Week about *Por Nuestros Niños*, which translates to 'For Our Children' in English. The questions and answers have been edited for length and clarity.

Chaffee: There are the cultural barriers that we talk about on the show all the time. [Some families] are not going to go to the school and say, 'My kid is not doing well. I can't help them. I don't know how to read or write in English.' It's almost taboo. We try to empower parents with information in a very casual conversation. Information, resources, tools that they can immediately put to use. We constantly remind them that they are their children's first teachers and that the home is the first school and that, 'We've got this. You can do this.'

What are the biggest obstacles that parents encounter when trying to advocate for their children?

Chaffee: Parents don't realize that they can go to school and they have a right to have an appointment and a professional [interpreter]. Not the custodian who is very nice and can translate. No, a professional [interpreter], an ESL person that's bilingual. They don't realize it. They can ask to speak to the principal, right? I've seen that happen just recently. I was translating for a mom that was very upset. And right there, we discovered that [her son] had been crying for four weeks because he didn't want to be retained because his little sister who was also in 3rd grade and a twin made it to 4th grade. You can imagine this kid has been traumatized. Mom was able to express that to the principal while I was translating. And all I could think of is how many of these stories are there out there where parents are doing everything they can to help their kids succeed, but they don't even know the tools that they have in their toolbox.

What can schools do to support parents who are not fluent in English?

Chaffee: There's this incredible desire that these parents have. If we take advantage of the fact that their children could be bilingual and biliterate and that they have parents that are doing everything possible, because they really love America, we have an enormous opportunity here. There's a lot of room for improvement. Right now, you hear, 'Oh, culturally responsive teaching and social, emotional learning,' but it really has not translated into giving the teachers the tools they need. We need everything to be infused with equity and culturally-responsive teaching and learning. ■

Published on April 17, 2020

Where They Are: The Nation’s Small But Growing Population of Black English-Learners

By Corey Mitchell

In five U.S. states—Maine, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Vermont—black students comprise more than a fifth of English-language-learner enrollment, a released report from the U.S. Department of Education shows.

Using data from the 2016-17 school year, the report shows that 25 percent of all black English-learners in the country—roughly 201,000 students in all—are concentrated in nine Northeastern and Midwestern states and the District of Columbia.

The enrollment trends contrast with other federal data that show states across the West and Southwest, such as California, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas, have the largest share of English-learners.

There are nearly 5 million English-learners in the nation’s public schools, with enrollment having increased 28 percent since 2000. Overall, black students comprise about 4 percent of the population. Nearly 80 percent of the nation’s English-learners are Latino.

Two of the states with the highest share of black English-learners, Maine and Vermont,



—Getty

are among the just four states where Spanish is not the most common language spoken by English-learners, federal data show. About 31 percent of English-learners in Maine speak Somali. Roughly 24 percent of English-learners in Vermont speak Nepali. ■

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Published on March 19, 2019

Bilingual Teachers Are in Short Supply. How Can Schools Cultivate Their Own?

By Corey Mitchell

The national shortage of multilingual educators has caught the eye of Congress and led school districts to travel overseas and off the U.S. mainland to fill vacancies or newly created positions.

Now, a Washington-based think tank has released a guide to help school districts and states that want to identify, develop, and hire bilingual educators in their own communities.

The Education Policy Program at New

America has studied schools in Minnesota, Oregon, and Washington state to learn about the design and implementation of successful grow-your-own programs—partnerships that prepare residents to work as teachers in their own communities.

Their new two-page resource synthesizes findings from those communities and research, outlining key practices and policies for states and districts to consider when launching or fine-tuning their efforts to train and hire bilingual teaching candidates.

The bilingual teacher shortage is wide-



—Swikar Patel/Education Week-File

Ahmed Hassan, left, a bilingual communication support specialist at Talahi Elementary School in St. Cloud, Minn., mediates a conflict between two students. Hassan provides linguistic and cultural support to school staff members and Somali families.

spread: 31 states and the District of Columbia have a shortage of teachers who work in bilingual, dual-language immersion, and English as a second language classrooms, federal data indicate.

The proposed policies and practices include creating data systems to track recruitment, job placement, and retention outcomes and developing teacher certification and licensure systems that offer multiple pathways for candidates to earn teaching credentials. The guide recommends that districts focus on recruiting “linguistically and culturally diverse candidates” who are reflective of the need of

the community and offer potential candidates paid work experience under the guidance of mentor teachers.

The guide also aims to expand the definition of grow-your-own programs because some districts restrict their recruitment and development efforts by only grooming bilingual high school students as potential hires. That misses a wealth of candidates already working in schools as paraprofessionals or other working adults looking to make career changes, said Amaya Garcia, the deputy director for English learner education with the Education Policy Program at New America.

In previous reports, New America has explored the bureaucratic and financial barriers that paraprofessionals face when they want to transition to a lead role in the classroom and partnerships that help prospective teachers earn paychecks while getting on-the-job training.

“Grow-your-own is a much bigger term and concept that is really rooted in this idea of community and that you’re pulling people from the community to be teachers, and that part of that effort is done through partnerships,” Garcia. “These partnerships, they can be really impactful to promoting candidates’ success.” ■

Published on January 14, 2020

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 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.



—Gretchen Ertl for Education Week

Kindergarten teacher Priscilla Joseph works with students starting their second year enrolled in the Toussaint L’Ouverture Academy, a Haitian Creole dual-language program at Mattahunt Elementary School in Boston.

In dual classes, teachers split instruction 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 lan-

guages 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. ■

▶ Vital Resource

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OPINION

Published on June 12, 2019

Stop Trying to Standardize Your Students' Language

By Olivia Obeso

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 her language in to separate categories in the first place. We as students and teachers internalize an 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 prac-

tices 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



How Do We Make Literacy Learning More Equitable for All Students?

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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. ■

Olivia Obeso is a doctoral student in urban schooling at the University of California, Los Angeles. She previously worked as an English-as-a-foreign-language teacher in Costa Rica, before returning to the United States to volunteer in community college classrooms and teach immersion Spanish to elementary-age students.

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