

Closing the Achievement Gap for Dual Language Learners



Common sense suggests that students will fall behind if they start school unable to understand the language their teacher is speaking. In California – where our public schools serve a diverse body of children that speak more than 400 different languages – supporting students' language development is especially important. In 2006, 42 percent of California's children that enrolled in kindergarten were identified as English Language Learners. As these children move through the public school system, they continue to struggle to achieve proficiency in academic English which impacts the cognitive skills necessary to excel in school. This is also often reflected in their standardized test scores. As these children grow and the achievement gap widens over time, California must work toward implementing better methods to serve these young children.

What is Dual Language Learning?

Children whose first language is something other than English are often referred to as English Language Learners (ELLs). Most of these ELL students are not immigrants or recent arrivals. In fact, more than three-fourths of the ELL elementary students are native-born.

Young children ages 0-5 are language learners – they have neither perfected their language proficiency in their home language or in another language. Dual language learning (DLL) refers to a form of education in which a child is taught in more than one language. In dual language instruction, emphasis is placed on developing and maintaining a child's home language while adding a second language, such as English.



Importance of the Early Years

High-quality early education provides a language-rich environment for young children and lays the foundation for learning to read. Research has shown the best approach for a young child's language and overall cognitive development is to support their home language as they are learning English.

A variety of rigorous national research shows the benefits of the dual language model in early learning environments:

- There is scientific consensus that infants have the capacity to learn two languages from birth and that this early dual language exposure supports the development of greater tissue density in areas of the brain that control memory, language and attention.
- English skills – when learned as a second language – are best acquired by students who first have strong oral language development opportunities (e.g. strong vocabulary, phonics and letter knowledge) in their home language.
- Young children who are taught in their home language and English demonstrate the highest achievement in both languages by the end of third grade and beyond.
- Dual language programs enable native English speakers to acquire advanced second language skills without compromising their first language development.
- In addition to supporting the acquisition of English, children benefit from knowing two (or more) languages. Multilingual children experience higher levels of self-esteem and are afforded greater professional opportunities.



Head Start: Leading the Way

Recognizing the importance of dual language learning, the Head Start Act and the Head Start Program Performance Standards require that programs support dual language development while simultaneously providing services to families in a culturally appropriate way. In 2008, the Office of Head Start completed an assessment of its current delivery model. It developed recommendations that focused on the following three areas:

- 1. Professional Development:** Develop trainings and materials that help educators understand the best practices and benefits of dual language development.
- 2. Assessment:** Create a developmentally appropriate language and literacy assessment for young children learning two languages.
- 3. Family Involvement:** Enhance family involvement through outreach and dissemination of information that is culturally and linguistically appropriate.

These best practices are currently being implemented in Head Start centers nationwide.

California Investments

The California Department of Education Child Development Division (CDD) has invested in English language development through publications, trainings and improving existing assessment tools that support English language and home language development, including:

Publications

- Preschool Learning Foundations, Volume I
- Preschool English Language Learners: Principles and Practices to Promote Language, Literacy and Learning

Child Assessment Tools

- Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP)

Provider & Educator Training

- California Preschool Instructional Network

The Work Ahead

While California has made some critical investments in resources designed to support DLLs, our state still faces significant challenges. Progress must be made to meet the following goals:

1. Design professional development around the most current language development research.
2. Provide coursework and trainings in multiple languages for early childhood education educators.
3. Create a culturally and linguistically appropriate early learning environment for families.



“And so starting out very young, reading to your children...builds their vocabulary and will be building a foundation for learning...we’ve got to make sure that we continue to fund strong programs, both bilingual education programs but also immersion programs that ensure that young people are learning English but they’re not falling behind in their subjects even as they are learning English.”

— President Barack Obama, in remarks at a 2011 Univision Town Hall

For more information, visit www.preschoolcalifornia.org/