FIRST 5 CALIFORNIA
Dual Language Learner
PILOT STUDY

The Context of DLLs in California Early Learning Settings

DLLs are young children living in households in which a language other than English is spoken. They make up more than half of California's birth to age 5 population[1] and are served in different ways across the early learning and care system. Our study found that in California:

MOST EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS serve DLLs.
- **98%** of centers and **70%** of FCCHs in the state serve at least one DLL.

DLLS REPRESENT diverse languages and cultures.
- The most common languages spoken by DLLs in early learning programs are Spanish, Mandarin, Tagalog/Pilipino, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Korean, Hmong, Russian, and Hindi.

HAVING A STAFF–CHILD LANGUAGE MATCH is more common for Spanish-speaking DLLs than DLLs from other language backgrounds.
- Many centers **(85%)** and FCCHs **(64%)** that serve Spanish-speaking DLLs have staff who speak Spanish, but this is much less common for other languages.

MORE THAN 80% OF EARLY LEARNING PROGRAM DIRECTORS value bilingualism, but programmatic supports for home language development are not always present.
- At least 1 in 3 programs use only English for instruction, less than a third of programs assess DLLs in their home language (and even fewer assess in languages other than Spanish), and fewer than 1 in 5 programs have an explicit plan for supporting DLLs.

Supporting Dual Language Learners (DLLs) in California's Early Learning Settings

Findings from a recent study on dual language learners (DLLs) in early learning and care settings across California provide new insights on how early learning programs can best support DLLs and their families. The First 5 California DLL Pilot Study, conducted by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®), included a sample of more than 700 early learning teachers from centers and family childcare homes (FCCHs) across the state and 1,900 DLLs (age birth to 5) and their families from Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Vietnamese language backgrounds. The results from direct assessments of DLLs' outcomes and parent, teacher, and administrator surveys are summarized below. Policymakers, administrators, and educators can use these findings to ensure that DLLs and their families receive supportive and effective early education experiences.

HOW CAN EDUCATORS WHO SPEAK THE HOME LANGUAGE of their DLLs best support their learning?

Recent research has highlighted the benefits of using the home language in the classroom, which can lead to better outcomes for DLLs in their home language *and* English.[2] Our study found evidence that teacher home language use relates positively to child outcomes. The results from the DLL Pilot Study suggest educators should:

USE THE HOME LANGUAGE WITH DLLS IN THE CLASSROOM.

- The more Spanish teachers used in preschool classrooms, the better Spanish-language DLLs did on language and literacy in Spanish *and* English, math, executive functioning, and social-emotional well-being. We found similar results for the Spanish language development of infants and toddler DLLs from Spanish-language backgrounds.

- The more Cantonese and Mandarin teachers spoke in preschool classrooms, the better DLLs from those language backgrounds did on assessments of their home language vocabulary and bilingualism.

HOW CAN ALL EDUCATORS, regardless of the languages they speak, support DLLs' learning?

Even if teachers do not speak the home language, which is quite common given the substantial diversity in early childhood settings, they can still support DLLs in many ways.[3] Teachers can use the following strategies, which we found to be positively related to DLL children's learning:

HAVE BOOKS AVAILABLE IN THE HOME LANGUAGE.

Having more books in the home language was linked to better outcomes for DLLs from Spanish, Cantonese, and Mandarin backgrounds.

USE A FEW KEY WORDS IN THE HOME LANGUAGE.

Even singing songs and using basic words or phrases (such as "hello" and "thank you") can be helpful. The use of simple home language was related to better outcomes for Spanish- and Cantonese-language DLLs in preschool classrooms.

USE GENERAL SUPPORTS AND SCAFFOLDS FOR DLLS TO PROMOTE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING.

Providing general supports and scaffolds for DLLs (e.g., pairing language with gestures and body language, or using questions to engage children) was related to better outcomes for DLLs from Mandarin-language backgrounds.

HOW CAN EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS better engage families of DLLs?

Programs should engage families in linguistically and culturally responsive ways, which include learning about and valuing their home language and culture; engaging in ongoing, two-way communication; and providing resources for families to use at home,[4] which can help promote learning for DLLs.[5] Our study found many programs do this and identified several strategies programs can use to engage families of DLLs:

PROVIDE POSITIVE MESSAGES ABOUT BILINGUALISM AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY.

- We found that families who received these positive messages were more likely to value home language skills as an aspect of school readiness.

ENGAGE IN FREQUENT CONTACT WITH DLL FAMILIES FOR A VARIETY OF PURPOSES.

- Families whose programs contacted them more frequently and for a variety of purposes (like sharing information, discussing child's progress, and discussing family language background) attended program activities more; assigned more importance to school readiness skills; and engaged their child in learning activities at home more often.

PROVIDE LEARNING MATERIALS TO DLL FAMILIES IN LANGUAGES FAMILIES CAN UNDERSTAND.

- Families who received learning materials engaged in more at-home learning activities like reading and counting, and this was especially true if the materials were provided in the home language.

HOW CAN EDUCATORS LEARN more to improve their practice?

Ongoing professional learning is a critical resource to support educators. Prior research shows that early educators who participate in DLL-specific PD engage in more instructional practices specifically for DLLs, which in turn promotes learning for dual language learners.[6] The results from our study, combined with existing research, point to a clear recommendation for educators to:

PARTICIPATE IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH A FOCUS ON HOW TO SUPPORT DLLS AND THEIR LEARNING.

- We found that teachers who received DLL-related PD were more likely to:
  - Have more positive beliefs about bilingualism.
  - Have higher confidence in their ability to support DLLs.
  - Use evidence-based instructional practices for DLLs.
  - Use more family engagement strategies that are linguistically and culturally responsive.

For More Information

If you are an early educator or early learning program administrator who needs more guidance for supporting DLLs, you are not alone. In our study, **we found that 92% of teachers wanted more PD** to successfully support DLLs. *Check out this new, free* online hub *for early educators, co-developed by Early Edge California and AIR, that includes best practices and resources specifically for educators to support DLLs.*

To learn more and read our full set of research briefs highlighting all of the study's findings, please visit https://californiadllstudy.org/reports.

Endnotes

1   UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. (2020). Ask CHIS (California Health Interview Survey) (pooling 2018, 2019, & 2020) [Data tool]. University of California, Los Angeles. https://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/chis/ Pages/default.aspx

2   National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM). (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures.* National Academies Press. https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24677/promoting-the-educational-success-of-children-and-youth-learning-english

3   Espinosa, L., & Crandell, J. (2020). Early learning and care for multilingual and dual language learners ages zero to five. In California Department of Education (Ed.), *Improving education for multilingual and English learner students: Research to practice* (Ch. 4). California Department of Education. www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/improvingmleleducation.asp

4   González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2006). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms.* Routledge.

5   Boyce, L. K., Innocenti, M. S., Roggman, L. A., Norman, V. K. J., & Ortiz, E. (2010). Telling stories and making books: Evidence for an intervention to help parents in migrant Head Start families support their children's language and literacy. *Early Education and Development, 21*(3), 343–371; Hammer, C. S., & Sawyer, B. (2016). Effects of a culturally responsive interactive book-reading intervention on the language abilities of preschool dual language learners: A pilot study. *NHSA Dialog, 19*(2).

6   Buysse, V., Castro, D. C., & Peisner-Feinberg, E. (2010). Effects of a professional development program on classroom practices and outcomes for Latino dual language learners. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 25*(2), 194–206; Castro, D. C., Gillanders, C., Franco, X., Bryant, D. M., Zepeda, M., Willoughby, M. T., & Méndez, L. I. (2017). Early education of dual language learners: An efficacy study of the Nuestros Niños School Readiness professional development program. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 40,* 188–203.