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Bridging California's Bilingual Teacher Gap in Early Childhood Education

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This brief delves into the shortage of bilingual teachers in early childhood education (ECE) in California, against the backdrop of the state's ambitious target to have at least half of PK-12 students proficient in two or more languages by 2030. Despite commendable strides in language initiatives, California faces an ongoing deficiency of bilingual teachers, a challenge intensified by the recent expansion of Universal Preschool (UPK) programs. The analysis examines the current landscape of ECE teacher preparation, emphasizing the necessity for accessible pathways to bilingual authorizations. Additionally, it identifies potential sources for the bilingual early childhood workforce, such as Seal of Biliteracy graduates and bilingual teachers in English-only classrooms. The brief concludes with comprehensive recommendations, outlining strategies for the recruitment, preparation, and retention of bilingual ECE educators, with the overarching goal of bridging the critical gap and ensuring the success of California's linguistic objectives.

In recent years, the California Department of Education set forth an ambitious objective: to ensure that by 2030, at least half of the state's PK-12 students attain proficiency in two or more languages, with this target increasing to three-quarters by 2040. Notable progress has been made towards this goal, marked by initiatives like the overturning of Proposition 227's English-only provisions through Proposition 58 and the establishment of the State Seal of Biliteracy to recognize and incentivize multilingualism. However, nonprofit education research organizations, such as the Learning Policy Institute, Californians Together, and the California Budget & Policy Center, have consistently raised significant concerns regarding the critical shortage of bilingual teachers in California. This shortage has come to the forefront during the recent expansion of Universal Preschool (UPK) programs, a pivotal component of California's early educational landscape.

The Escalating Demand for Bilingual Educators in Early Childhood Education

As the state advances towards its language proficiency targets, it is grappling with an escalating demand for bilingual educators, particularly in early childhood education (ECE). In California, roughly 60 percent of children aged zero to five reside in homes where languages other than English are spoken. These young learners, commonly referred to as dual language learners (DLLs), hold the potential to become fluent in multiple languages.

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Research underscores the significant benefits of supporting biliteracy development in early childhood programs, including enhanced cognitive development, improved language proficiency, and increased academic achievement. To ensure that DLLs receive the highest quality education and to help California realize its linguistic objectives, there is an urgent need to recruit, prepare, and retain a substantial cadre of highly qualified bilingual educators ready to teach in transitional kindergarten (TK) and other early childhood settings.

In 2021, California made historic changes to its early learning system by committing to universal preschool for all four-year-olds by 2025–26. This commitment encompasses various early learning initiatives, including TK, the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), Head Start, community based providers, and expanded learning opportunities. Among these programs, TK stands out as the only preschool program that is both tuition-free and universally accessible within the state’s public education system. Administered by local education agencies (LEAs), TK currently serves all four-year-olds who reach the age of five between September 2 and April 2, with plans for further expansion to encompass all four-year-olds by 2025-26.

A recent **publication** from the Learning Policy Institute estimated that in the academic year 2025–26, more than 300,000 children in California are likely to enroll in TK programs (Melnick, García, & Leung-Gagné, 2022). In this report, they projected that, in order to accommodate this burgeoning demand, school districts will need to hire between 11,900 and 15,600 additional lead teachers by the 2025–26 academic year. The realization of this potential, however, is intricately linked to the availability of well-prepared bilingual early childhood education teachers. Alarming, during the 2020-21 school year, just 1,116 teachers received their bilingual authorization in K-12 education (California Department of Education, 2023). While there are presently no available data sources that delineate how many of these teachers intend to work in early childhood classrooms, the urgent need to address the bilingual TK teacher shortage is abundantly clear.

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Teacher Preparation and California’s Early Childhood Workforce

In California, teacher credentialing requirements in early childhood education are tailored to meet the specific needs of diverse educational settings. The demand for bilingual teachers extends across a wide spectrum of early educational contexts, including TK, Head Start, CSPP, and community care providers. Consequently, it is imperative for the state to establish accessible pathways to bilingual authorizations across all levels of the early teacher preparation system. Transitional kindergarten teachers’ qualifications notably exceed those required in other early childhood settings.

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Furthermore, districts receiving state funding for TK must guarantee that their lead TK teachers meet additional criteria, including the fulfillment of 24 college units in Early Childhood Education (ECE), holding a Child Development Teacher Permit, or showcasing an equivalent level of experience as determined by the employer. The second pathway, set to be available in the 2024-2025 academic year, grants lead TK teachers the option to obtain a PK-3 ECE Specialist Instruction Credential. This new alternative entails fulfilling the same foundational requirements as the Multiple Subjects pathway, with specialized coursework in preschool to third grade instruction.

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For bilingual teacher candidates pursuing either licensure route, additional coursework is required to acquire their bilingual authorization, enabling them to effectively teach in dual language and bilingual classrooms. This coursework must be completed in a commission-approved bilingual program combined with passing scores on the CSET: World Languages Examination(s). It is noteworthy that despite the substantial investment of time and effort required for this supplementary preparation, bilingual teachers in California typically do not receive any additional incentives or financial compensation commensurate with their specialized skills and training.

In contrast, lead teachers employed in state-funded preschools and community based providers are required to hold or work towards obtaining a Child Development Teacher Permit. This requirement entails completing 24 units of ECE coursework, 16 general education units, and gaining 175 days of hands-on experience within an ECE program. While a college degree is not obligatory, a significant proportion of these teachers indeed possess a bachelor's degree. Currently, no established pathways exist for earning a bilingual authorization alongside a Child Development Permit. Finally, it is important to note that while most family child care providers are required to hold a childcare license, they do not have to meet any professional preparation requirements.

Identifying the Potential Bilingual Early Childhood Workforce

Analyzing California's current recruitment sources is the crucial first step for developing effective strategies to address the bilingual early childhood teacher shortage. Thankfully, in California, there are a substantial number of individuals who are fluent in another language who could serve in bilingual ECE and TK settings, if given support. While there is an urgent need to recruit new talent, it is also crucial to tap into existing sources of fully trained bilingual educators.

State Seal of Biliteracy Graduates

In California, there is a substantial pool of students who have received their Seal of Biliteracy. In a 2019 publication titled, **Who are the Recipients of the State Seal of Biliteracy?**, Californians Together reported that of the 418,205 students who earned high school diplomas in 2017-18, 47,248 of those students graduated with a State Seal of Biliteracy, a distinction that recognizes proficiency in English and one or more other languages. During the 2022-23 school year, nearly 60,000 graduates attained the State Seal of Biliteracy. One way to address the bilingual teacher shortage is to encourage students who received the State Seal of Biliteracy to become bilingual teachers.

Bilingual Teachers in English-Only Classrooms

In 2019, Californians Together published a report on the bilingual teacher shortage citing that of the 8,650 teachers holding bilingual authorizations in California, only 31 percent were teaching in bilingual programs within their districts (Harris & Sandoval, 2019). This same report estimated that there are at least ten times the number of teachers who possess fluency in another language but do not hold a bilingual authorization. These teachers present an untapped resource for potential bilingual early childhood educators, underscoring the importance of state leadership taking proactive measures to support their professional development and incentivize their placement in bilingual settings.

Bilingual Child Development Permit Holders and Early Care Providers

Early childhood teachers who possess fluency in another language present another untapped resource for potential bilingual educators. These educators bring with them a broad spectrum of languages that more closely reflects the linguistic diversity found among the student population they serve. Among these educators, nearly half speak only English, 37 percent are proficient in Spanish, while others are proficient in languages such as Chinese, Tagalog, Vietnamese, and more (Melnick, García, & Leung-Gagné, 2022). Despite their linguistic diversity and the potential they hold to bridge language gaps for young learners, they often lack the specialized training, support, and authorizations needed to deliver high-quality bilingual education.

Comprehensive reform is needed to ensure the state can tap into the educator workforce to meet ambitious language goals.

Recommendations

The shortage of bilingual teachers in California is a pressing concern that threatens to undermine student outcomes and the state's ambitious education goals. The disparities between teacher qualifications and the linguistic diversity of California's early childhood student body underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reforms. To rectify this shortfall, California must adopt a comprehensive approach that entails enhancing the recruitment, preparation, and retention of bilingual early childhood educators.

Recruitment: Strategies to Incentivize Bilingual Pathways and Harness Current Linguistic Resources

- Waive fees for current native speakers of other languages to apply for and receive their bilingual credentials.
- Work with bargaining units to identify diverse incentives for teachers in bilingual classrooms.
- Incentivize development of regional cohort programs or partnerships (e.g. county level, in partnerships with higher education, etc.) that support teachers in obtaining bilingual authorization.
- Recruit future bilingual teachers from the students who graduated high school with a Seal of Biliteracy and are currently in college.
- Build articulated pathways for bilingual Child Development Permit holders to attain their PK-3 Teaching Credential with a bilingual authorization.
- Identify and support existing teachers with a bilingual authorization who are willing to transition from other roles into bilingual TK classrooms.

Preparation: Strategies to Build and Expand Bilingual Certification Programs

- Work with teacher preparation programs at UC, CSU, and private universities to expand bilingual authorization programs and increase the number of faculty and universities offering bilingual certification programs.
- Establish a bilingual authorization within the Child Development Permit.
- Build articulated pathways for bilingual Child Development Permit holders to attain their PK-3 Teaching Credential with a bilingual authorization.
- Work with CSU, community colleges, and private universities with early care and education (ECE) preparation programs to ensure that early educators have a foundation in dual language development and dual language education pedagogy.
- Ensure that new funding streams for school districts are used to incentivize and prioritize "Bilingual Teacher" academies for TK teachers.
- Implement "grow your own" programs to train local teachers to become certified in bilingual ECE education and to help former bilingual education teachers renew their training and certification.

Retention: Strategies to Promote Professional Development and Support for Bilingual Teachers

- Ensure that the California English Learner Roadmap policy and guidance materials for UPK are developed and implemented.
- Prioritize bilingual early childhood educators in grant programs and other professional development opportunities.
- Address the professional development needs of bilingual teachers willing to transition to bilingual Pre-K classrooms with local funding sources.
- Establish ongoing professional support for bilingual PK-3 teachers that includes alignment and collaboration, professional learning communities, classroom coaching, and co-teaching.
- Provide professional development to district and site administrators to lead expansion and development of new bilingual PK-3 programs.

Conclusion

California's educational landscape is rapidly evolving, driven by an increasingly diverse student population, an expanding universal preschool system, and ambitious language proficiency goals. To ensure the success of these goals, including the aim to have at least half of the state's PK-12 students proficient in two or more languages by 2030, comprehensive reforms are needed to bridge the critical shortage of bilingual early childhood education teachers in the state. To address this shortage comprehensively, California must adopt a multifaceted approach that encompasses recruitment, preparation, and retention of bilingual educators. By tapping into existing linguistic resources, offering financial incentives, developing innovative programs and partnerships, and providing professional recognition and support for bilingual educators, the state can significantly expand its bilingual early childhood teacher workforce.



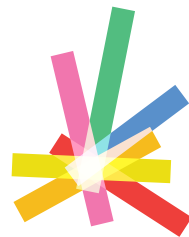
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Californians Together, a coalition of education, civil rights, parent/caregiver, community, and advocacy organizations, champions the educational success of California's more than 1.1 million English learners. Californians Together serves as a trusted voice, source of expertise, and steadfast advocate standing for the educational rights of access for California's English learners, immigrants, and linguistically and culturally diverse students. We seek to overcome and transform the harms of systemic racial, language, and cultural inequality in education and to close opportunity gaps from early childhood through post-secondary education. The coalition exposes timely issues, advocates for cutting-edge policy and practice solutions grounded in research, and mobilizes to provide capacity-building support to multiple levels of the educational system.