



Expanding Access to the State Seal of Biliteracy in California

A Californians Together Brief
By Jeanette Gomez

About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

The State Seal of Biliteracy (SSB) is one of California’s most visible commitments to multilingual excellence, celebrating and recognizing high school graduates who have demonstrated proficiency in English and at least one other language. Passed in 2011, and most recently strengthened through AB 370 (Addis) in 2023, the seal stands as a powerful statement of California’s belief in recognizing multilingualism as a true asset to the field, our state, and the global economy.¹

The SSB was designed to celebrate the linguistic and cultural diversity that defines California’s education landscape. As participation grows from year to year, districts and the state must continue to monitor SSB awards to ensure that current and former English learners, along with other high-need student groups, have equitable access to attain the SSB. California and its districts now have a momentous opportunity to support English learner (EL) and reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP) students to ensure they are on a pathway to attaining the SSB.

As the state advances its multilingual equity goals, strengthening the SSB requires more than just recognition, but demands investment in systems that expand opportunity. This brief positions the SSB as both a powerful recognition and a proxy indicator for access to rigorous bilingual coursework and intentional counseling practices. This brief shines a light on areas of progress, and what systemic investments are needed to increase SSB participation with the preparation of current and former ELs in mind.

1 California Department of Education. State Seal of Biliteracy. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/sealofbiliteracy.asp>

Understanding the State Seal of Biliteracy

The SSB is awarded to graduating high school students who demonstrate proficiency in English and one or more additional languages through approved coursework and assessments. The California Department of Education (CDE) describes this award as one that “recognizes high school graduates who have attained a high level of proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing one or more languages in addition to English.”²

[See here for full completion requirements.](#)

2 California Department of Education. State Seal of Biliteracy. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/sealofbiliteracy.asp>

What Do We Mean by Rigorous Coursework?

For purposes of this paper we are using “rigorous coursework” as a term that refers to learning experiences that are academically challenging and advanced, hold students to high-expectations, and are designed to support deep conceptual understanding. In the context of multilingual learners, rigor must also include intentional language development in both English and a student’s home language, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and access to advanced learning opportunities. This access, placing students on a pathway to the SSB (including enrollment in bilingual programs), should start as early as preschool.

In the context of the SSB, coursework includes:

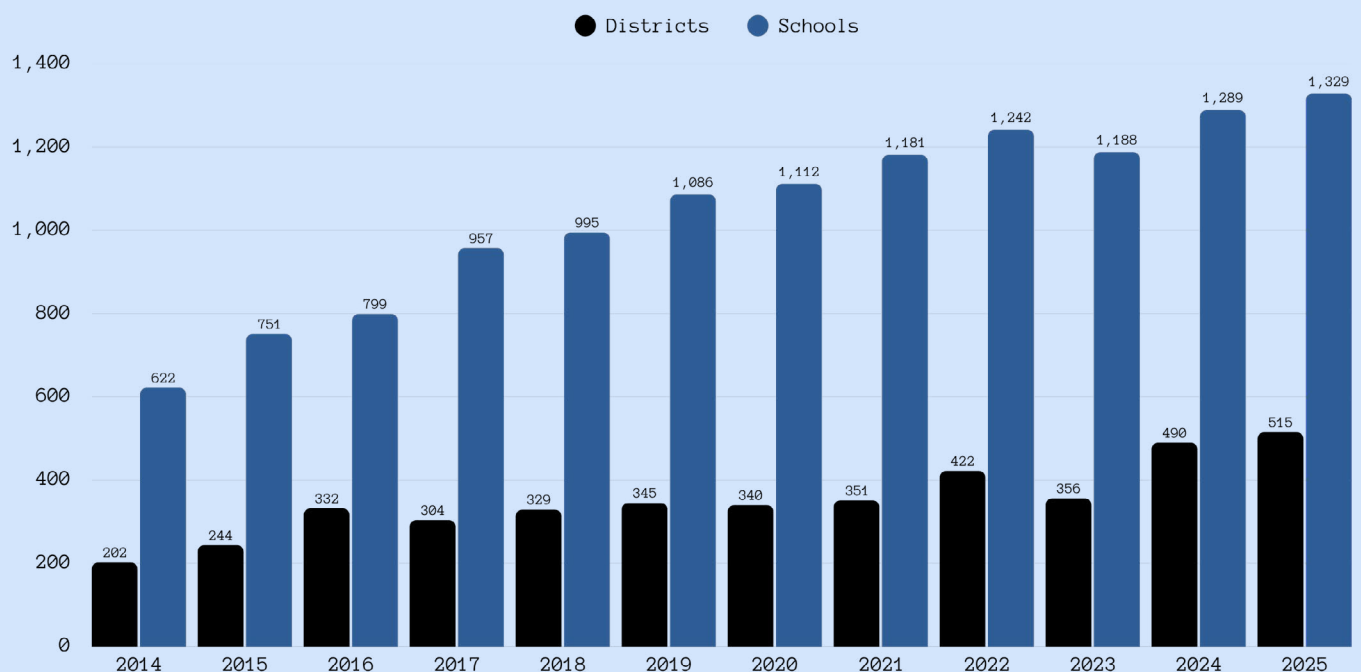
- Heritage language, dual immersion, and developmental bilingual programs and courses that build on students’ home languages;
- Coherent biliteracy and world language sequences that enable students to reach advanced levels of proficiency;
- Enrollment in Interbaccalaureate Programs that offer courses and assessment in multiple languages;
- Advanced academic coursework in languages other than English; and
- For ELs, in addition to the listed above, designated and integrated English Language Development (ELD) that supports attainment of English proficiency and access to grade level content.

California's Growth in Students Attaining the State Seal of Biliteracy

Ensuring that all eligible schools and districts participate in and award the SSB is a critical step to expanding access. While there is no official statewide list of schools or districts that offer the SSB, California does release annual data identifying schools and districts that have awarded at least one SSB.

These data provide a useful proxy for participation. Since 2014, the state has seen steady growth in the number of schools and districts awarding the seal. In 2025, 1,329 schools across 515 districts awarded at least one SSB, an increase of 217 schools and 175 districts over the preceding five years (since 2020).³

Figure 1: Participating Districts and Schools, 2014 to 2025



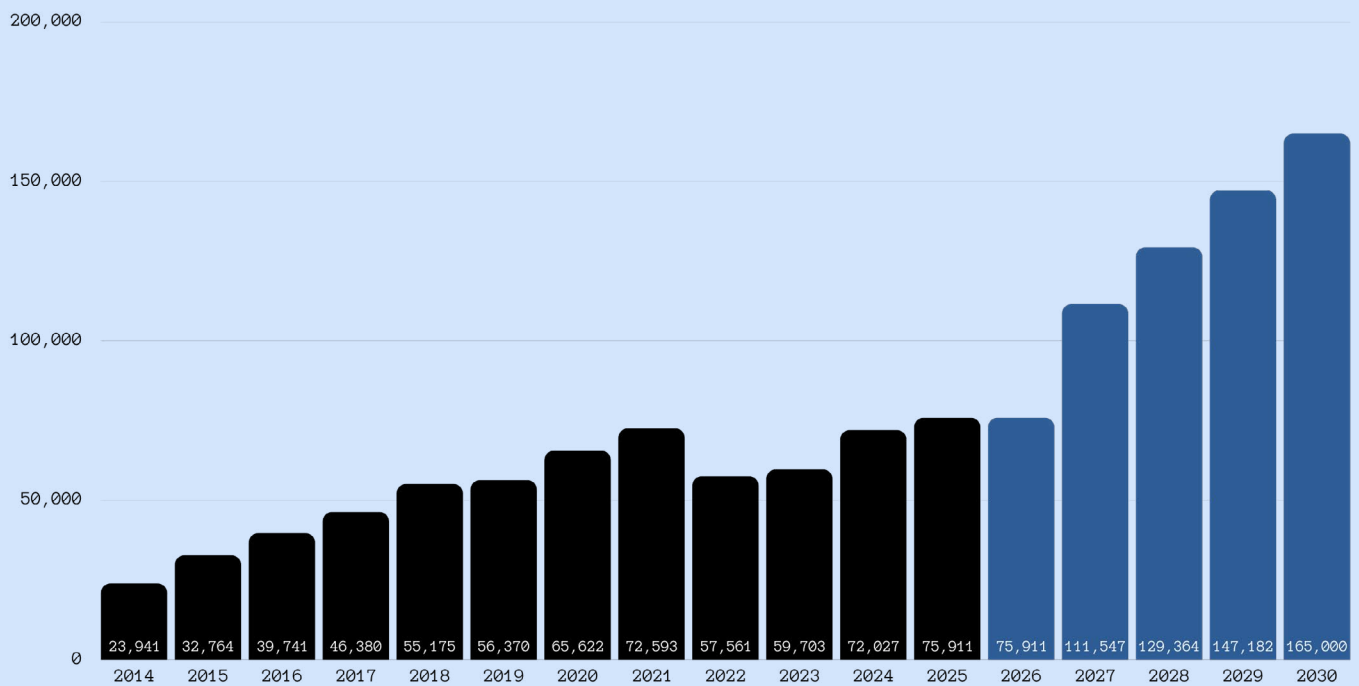
As we celebrate this growth, continued expansion remains critical so that more students have the opportunity to demonstrate their multilingual proficiency, and for the state to recognize their achievements. Ensuring that all eligible districts offer the SSB is an important step toward this goal. Our analysis suggests most districts in the state are on the path to doing so: nearly nine in ten unified and high school districts awarded the SSB during

3 Californians Together analysis: California Department of Education. State Seal of Biliteracy: Participation data. Downloaded March 4, 2026 from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/sealofbiliteracy.asp>

the 2024-25 school year. However, there are approximately 43 unified or high school districts that did not award the SSB during the 2024-25 school year, leaving approximately 7,000 12th grade students without access to this recognition.

California set a goal, established in [Global California 2030](#), for more than 165,000 students to earn the State Seal of Biliteracy by 2029-2030. This would mean tripling the number of recipients, 55,175, recorded in 2017-2018. Our report [State of English Learners](#) analyzes the conditions necessary for making this goal a reality.

Figure 2: California Recipients of the State Seal of Biliteracy



California is currently not on track to meet the Global 2030 goal despite an increase in districts awarding the SSB in recent years. Achieving the target would require increasing the number of recipients by more than 90,000 students over the next five years, an average annual increase of 17,818 students.

The 2030 goal is attainable if California fully leverages both the opportunity within its student population and the momentum created by recent legislation. For example, in 2024–25, SSB recipients represented just 14 percent of four-year cohort graduates, meaning more than 400,000 graduates did not earn the seal.⁴ At the same time, [45 percent](#) of high school students come from households where a language other than English is spoken at home, (including EL, RFEP, and Initially-Fluent English Proficient (IFEP) students), underscoring the significant untapped potential to expand access and attainment.⁵ Moreover, California has seen a significant increase in recipients over the past two years, likely attributed, in part, to the implementation of AB 370 (Addis) which took effect during the 2023-24 school year. Continued and deeper implementation across districts will be critical to accelerating progress and reaching the 2030 goal.

4 California Department of Education, Dataquest. 2024-25 four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/CohRate.aspx?cds=00&aggllevel=state&year=2024-25>

5 California Department of Education, Dataquest. 2024-25 Enrollment by English language acquisition status (ELAS) and grade. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/DQCensus/EnrELAS.aspx?cds=00&aggllevel=State&year=2024-25>

Multilingual Learner Representation in the State Seal of Biliteracy

As we celebrate the increase in both SSB awardees and the number of districts offering the recognition, current and former ELs continue to represent a substantial share of recipients.

Over the past four years, these students have consistently comprised between 40 and 50 percent of all SSB awardees. The proportion declined from 50 percent in 2021-22 to 40 percent in 2023-24, before increasing to 45 percent in 2024-25. In overall numbers, 2024-25 was the year in which the greatest number of current and former ELs attained the SSB, an increase in nearly 6,000 students from three years prior. This data highlights the importance of strengthening access to seal-aligned pathways to not only maintain, but increase the number of current and former EL students attaining the recognition.

Table 1: Recipients who are Current and Former English Learners, 2021–22 to 2024–25⁶

School Year	2021–2022	2022–2023	2023–2024	2024–2025
Percentage of Overall Recipients (Number of Students)	50% (28,698)	45% (27,082)	40% (28,713)	45% (34,292)

Current public state reporting aggregates “current and former ELs,” which obscures important differences in access and outcomes for these two student groups. Without the ability to isolate RFEP students, the state misses a critical opportunity to better understand how current students who have already demonstrated English proficiency, and bring assets in another language, are accessing the SSB. For current EL students, this obscures insights into whether they are being provided equitable access to coursework and language pathways necessary to attain the seal, including biliteracy programs. This lack of disaggregated reporting limits the state’s capacity to monitor progress, identify opportunities, and design supports that intentionally leverage students’ bilingual strengths. Improved data transparency is essential for recognizing this opportunity, and ensuring current and former English learners are supported in attaining the State Seal of Biliteracy.

⁶ California Department of Education. State Seal of Biliteracy participation data, 2021-22 through 2024-25. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/sealofbiliteracy.asp>

Understanding the State Seal of Biliteracy as a Proxy for Access

Earning the SSB reflects the culmination of years of course-taking, assessment, and guidance decisions. As such, participation in the SSB can serve as a meaningful proxy for whether systems are effectively recognizing and building upon the linguistic assets students already bring. This is especially true for current and former ELs who have already attained, or are working toward, English-language proficiency.

As the state works toward expanding overall SSB attainment for current and former English learners, important questions remain about whether schools are fully leveraging this opportunity:

- Are RFEP and current ELs intentionally identified and encouraged to pursue the SSB early in their academic trajectories?
- Do students have access to biliteracy, world language or heritage language pathways that enable them to build on their existing bilingual skills?
- Do counseling and advising systems clearly communicate the benefits of attaining the SSB, and support students in completing their requirements alongside reclassification requirements and other graduation expectations?
- Are instructional supports, materials, and assessments designed to meet the needs of current EL and RFEP students working toward biliteracy?

Implications for Equity and Access

Requirements for earning the seal and state data raise several important implications for student access.

- 1. RFEP students represent a significant opportunity to expand SSB completion. RFEP students have already demonstrated English proficiency and bring linguistic assets to the classroom.** By more intentionally identifying and encouraging RFEP students, schools could substantially increase overall SSB participation and help the state reach its 2030 goal.
- 2. Access to coursework drives attainment.** EL and RFEP students are well positioned to earn the seal, but attainment depends on early course sequencing, identification, and guidance. Without intentional planning, both RFEP students and currently designated English learners may miss opportunities to build toward eligibility.
- 3. SSB participation can serve as a signal for how well systems leverage multilingual assets.** Current and former EL representation among recipients reflects whether systems are effectively aligning curriculum, counseling, and instruction to recognize students' bilingual assets. Participation can serve as a diagnostic indicator of where systems are working and where additional attention is needed.

Leveraging the State Seal of Biliteracy to Expand Access for Multilingual Learners

The SSB can be intentionally leveraged as a tool to expand access to rigorous coursework for current and former ELs, in addition to serving as a capstone recognition for students. Possible strategies include:

At the Local Level

Building Intentional Pathways

- Align middle and high school course sequences to ensure current and former ELs can complete SSB requirements on time.
- At the elementary and middle school levels, implement the Pre-K - 8th grade Biliteracy Pathway Recognition Awards to create motivation for attaining the SSB.
- Initiate and expand bilingual programs, such as Dual Language Immersion and developmental bilingual programs, which can foster biliteracy in TK - 12th grade.
- Offer rigorous course content in the languages spoken by the EL and RFEP students to develop academic proficiency in home languages.
- Embed SSB planning into master scheduling processes to ensure students can enroll in required courses.
- Ensure heritage language, advanced, and AP world language courses are available and accessible.

Centering English Learner Access in Counseling and Assessment

- Ensure all academic counselors understand and communicate the criteria for receiving the SSB.
- Provide early and ongoing counseling to RFEP students and current ELs about the SSB and its requirements. In supporting EL students, this means acknowledging that their EL status does not exclude them from SSB eligibility.
- Ensure assessment options and instructional materials are accessible and supportive for students strengthening their English language proficiency.
- Embed SSB planning works alongside student reclassification requirements during the development of master scheduling processes.

For practical guidance on supporting students toward earning the State Seal of Biliteracy, see [A High School Counselor's Toolkit for English Learner Success](#), which outlines eligibility requirements, planning considerations, and strategies counselors can use to empower students to successfully complete the Seal of Biliteracy pathway.

At the state level

Use SSB Data for Targeted Supports

- Celebrate districts showing high levels of SSB completion, including current and former EL student completion, and conduct analysis to shine a light on best practices.
- Track SSB eligibility and participation alongside completion and attainment data.
- Disaggregate data further by EL status and typology (IFEP, long-term English learners, newcomer students) to identify gaps in access.
- Use data trends to inform investments in bilingual coursework and professional development.

Conclusion

California's progress in expanding the SSB reflects an important and meaningful commitment to multilingualism. The steady growth in the number of students earning the SSB demonstrates increasing recognition of the importance of bilingualism. This progress is worth celebrating, and signals real momentum toward a multilingual future. It opens the door to further expanding recognition for students whose language assets are present but not always fully cultivated.

Earning the State Seal of Biliteracy requires access to aligned and rigorous coursework, informed advising, and intentional academic planning. Current and former English learners represent a significant opportunity that California should more intentionally support to reach biliteracy goals. These students embody the very competencies the SSB is designed to recognize and promote in service of California's multilingual goals. As such, they represent a powerful and largely untapped opportunity for the state to accelerate progress toward its attainment targets through more intentional identification and support.

👉 **State Seal of Biliteracy webpage from the California Department of Education.** Information about the California State Seal of Biliteracy program and its requirements for students, parents, and educators.

👉 **Biliteracy Pathway Recognitions webpage from the California Department of Education.** Information about the Biliteracy Pathway Recognitions program and its requirements for students, parents, and educators.

👉 **A High School Counselor’s Toolkit for English Learner Success (2025) by Californians Together.** Supports secondary school counselors in helping ELs navigate pathways to graduation, ensuring placement into courses that will provide meaningful access and appropriate instruction.

👉 **The State of English Learners in California Public Schools (2024) by Californians Together.** Dives into a variety of data to answer questions about who our state’s ELs are, how they are being served in the education system, and what state and local leaders can do to better serve their needs.

👉 **Global California 2030 (2019) by the California Department of Education.** Sets goals and a bold vision for expanding multilingualism in California public schools by the year 2030.



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Californians Together is a coalition championing the academic success and wellbeing of California's multilingual learners. Working at the intersection of research, advocacy, practice, and policy, we dismantle historic inequities and build an education system where linguistic and cultural diversity is recognized as a strength.

We envision an education system where multilingual learners and immigrant communities are affirmed, supported, and empowered to thrive. Schools embrace linguistic and cultural assets as core strengths, preparing students to graduate ready to lead in a multilingual, multicultural world.