America’s English Learner Population: The Benefits of Biliteracy

Recommendations for the Campaigns

Summary: The undersigned organizations respectfully urge the Presidential Campaigns to expand their K-12 policy statements to

- Acknowledge the needs of English Learners, the fastest-growing segment of America’s school population;
- Include additional funding for Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act, which is the primary vehicle for providing Federal support for English Learners

Background: The definition of an English Learner (EL) according to Title III legislation is any child, student or youth (including immigrants) ages 3-21 who do not speak English as the primary language at home. In 2015, English Learners accounted for 10% of America’s K-12 students, speaking more than 400 different languages.1 The fastest growing segment of America’s school population, more than 80% of this ethnically and racially diverse population are citizens themselves, and the majority of the remaining 20% are in the United States legally.2 Educational services for English Learners are mandated in Supreme Court case law (Lau v Nichols, 414 US 563, 1974) and in Federal Law since 1968.3 In Plyler v Doe (457 US 202, 1982), the United States Supreme Court held that all school-age children are entitled to education, regardless of immigration status. In Castaneda v Pickard (648 F.2d 989 (5th Cir. 1981) the Fifth Circuit held that local education agencies must provide language instruction education programs that are based on scientific research, supported by necessary resources and qualified personnel and monitored in a timely fashion to ensure ‘language minority children’ have equal

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1 Source: [https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/el-characteristics/index.html](https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/el-characteristics/index.html): “In total, ELs in U.S. public schools speak over 400 different languages. In 2014–15, more than three-quarters of all ELs spoke Spanish. The next most commonly spoken non-English languages were Arabic, Chinese, and Vietnamese. However, these languages were spoken much less commonly than Spanish, representing about 2 percent each.

Spanish was the language most commonly spoken by ELs at home in 45 states and the District of Columbia, and in all but seven of those states, more than 50 percent of the ELs in the state spoke Spanish at home. The states in which Spanish was not the most common language were Alaska (Yupik languages), Hawaii (Iloklo), Maine (Somali), Montana (German), and Vermont (Nepali). The number of unique languages spoken by ELs in each state varies from five in Mississippi to more than 225 in Pennsylvania.”


3 The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 established a voluntary program for bilingual education. Poorly funded, it was superseded by Lau v Nichols, and subsequent reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act have provided state population formula based grants to support mandatory efforts to provide meaningful access to education for English Learners.
access to equal educational opportunities provided by districts for all students. In sum, English Learners must be afforded meaningful educational access, regardless of the language they speak, and this obligation obtains for every school district in the country.

**Benefits of Biliteracy:** An extensive body of academic research from the past 30 years indicates that children who achieve meaningful bilingualism and biliteracy by high school graduation have significantly better educational and career outcomes.⁴ Among these are:

- Higher graduation rates (than monolingual peers);
- Higher college matriculation rates;
- Higher career earnings.

Moreover, children enrolled in high-quality Dual Language programs generally score higher than their peers on state assessments required under ESSA.⁵ Finally, as noted in the Congressionally requested report, *America’s Languages*, of the Commission on Language Learning of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, as a country the United States needs bilingual and biliterate citizens for national security, to promote economic growth, and to advance social justice.⁶ American employers report a lack of qualified bilingual candidates with roughly 11% reporting that they require language skills for their workforces and 90% reporting lost revenue due to a lack of language and culture skills.⁷ In sum, America needs biliterate and bilingual young people entering the workforce, the military, and the intelligence community; and, at the same time, biliteracy confers lifelong benefits on the individual.⁸

**Therefore:** The following policies must be undertaken to improve the educational outcomes and lives of America’s K-12 English Learners:

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⁶ [https://www.amacad.org/publication/americas-languages](https://www.amacad.org/publication/americas-languages)


First, the campaigns must acknowledge the right to equity and excellence in Education for America’s diverse and rapidly growing segment of K-12 student population and to make a commitment to bring about changes in educational systems to meet their socio-academic needs. This is a significant deficit in that America’s schools are rapidly changing, and nearly every district faces real and ongoing challenges in educating multilingual learners.

Second, funding for Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act must be increased. Currently at $787m, Title III has been funded at $732-$787m per year since 2011. We recommend $2b per year, with increases for the professional development discretionary grants as well as the state formula grants. Within Title III, the additional funding should be directed to:

- A new program for mid-career and researcher fellowships, modeled on the Title VII fellowship program in the 80s and 90s, should be added to Title III.
- The Department should increase efforts to expand the pool of qualified bilingual and dual language teachers;
- The Department should make discretionary grants to support heritage language programs and parent engagement for multilingual learners;
- Finally, the Department of Education should continue supporting additive models of bilingual education, where the goal of the program is biliteracy in English and the student’s home language.

Third, support for English Learners in the pre-K population through programs such as Head Start must also be increased commensurately.

Fourth, Additional support for ensuring digital access for English Learners and their families is needed.

Supporting Organizations:

National Association for Bilingual Education
American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese
American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages
American Federation of Teachers
Center for Applied Linguistics
ELPA21.org
Joint National Committee for Languages
Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities
National Council for Languages and International Studies
TESOL International Association