TESOL Legislative Priorities for the 120th U.S. Congress

Supporting English language educators and multilingual learners of English

October 2026

TESOL International Association[1] calls on the 120th Congress of the United States and the administration to strengthen federal policies that support English language educators and the multilingual learners of English, families, schools, and communities they serve. Our priorities advance access to high-quality education, a well-prepared educator workforce, effective adult and family literacy programs, and international educational exchange.

Importance of English Language Teaching and Multilingual Learners of English

Multilingualism enriches lives[2] and serves as a bridge in our interconnected world in which communication knows no boundaries. Educators here in the United States and across the world play a pivotal role in this process by supporting multilingual learners of English (MLEs) and fostering linguistic, social, and cultural understanding through English for a robust and impactful global citizenship.

For educators, teaching English is more than just transmitting vocabulary and grammar; it is nurturing confidence, fostering empathy, and empowering individuals to engage meaningfully within our communities and across our connected world. Educators inspire learners to embrace diversity, including the invaluable asset that is their home language(s). In short, we educate, we advocate, we contribute, and we build for the whole student, no matter their background, experience, education, or identity.

For MLEs, the journey of becoming multilingual is transformative and propels them toward greater academic, personal, and professional success. The journey broadens their horizons and cultivates adaptability, access, resilience, and empathy, empowering them to navigate diverse cultural contexts with confidence and sensitivity.

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[1] Founded in 1966, TESOL International Association, www.tesol.org, represents over 8,000 members worldwide who serve their communities by providing quality English language instruction and support. TESOL is committed to the support, advancement, and elevation of the English language teaching profession.

[2] Source: https://ncela.ed.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/files/announcements/20200805-NCELAInfographic-508.pdf

TESOL champions the importance of teaching English as an additional language and advocates for recognition of the invaluable contributions educators and learners alike bring in shaping a world where language is not a barrier but a bridge to understanding, cooperation, and progress, embodying the spirit of global citizenship, enriching lives, and forging connections that transcend all boundaries.

Our policies as a nation should and must reflect these contributions, empowering and enabling educators, learners, schools, and communities. TESOL's priorities reflect our values and core mission, advocating for federal legislation that:

- appropriately funds English language teaching (ELT) professional development and recruitment; MLEs, families, schools, and communities; evidence-based research; and educational and cultural exchange;
- protects safe access to schools and other educational settings for learners and families;
- advances fair and equitable immigration reform; and
- supports international education and exchange

Together these priorities advance the ELT profession in support of MLEs across all educational levels and at all professional stages.

Priority Recommendations for the U.S. Administration and U.S. 120th Congress

Support an active U.S. Department of Education, with strong and visible areas of expertise to support the ELT profession and MLEs

- Maintain a strong U.S. Department of Education with clear responsibility, dedicated expertise, and sufficient staffing to administer education programs, enforce civil-rights protections, and produce independent research and statistics. Preserve coordinated federal leadership for English language acquisition and adult education.
- Reverse administrative fragmentation that weakens these functions or reduces accountability to Congress and the public.
- Restore dedicated leadership, staffing, expertise, and operational capacity for the Office of English Language Acquisition; the Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education; the Office for Civil Rights; and the Institute of Education Sciences.

Appropriately fund educational initiatives supporting the ELT profession and MLEs

- *Elementary and Secondary Education:*

  - *Prioritize investment in Title II-A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to fund professional learning and development.*
    - *TESOL supports stand-alone funding, level at $2.2 billion, and not rolled into aggregated funding with other grants.*
  - *Prioritize investment in Title III of ESEA to fund English language acquisition for MLEs in public schools and support ELT recruitment and development.*
    - *TESOL Supports Appropriations at $1 billion annually to support the over 5 million MLEs in our public education systems, inclusive of educator support through the National Professional Development Program.*
- *Provide sufficient funding for the Office for Civil Rights to investigate complaints and enforce federal protections for learners and families.*
    - *TESOL supports funding levels more than FY24, FY25, and FY26 of $140 million.*
- *Fund the Institute of Education Sciences, including the National Center for Education Statistics, to sustain independent research, evaluation, and timely data on English learners and the educators who serve them..*
    - *TESOL supports funding levels at or above $870 million.*

- *Higher Education: prioritize investment in the Teacher Quality Partnership program: TESOL supports continuing or increased funding of at least $70 million annually.*

- *Adult and Family Literacy: prioritize investment in Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act to support adult education programs at $810 million for state grants in FY27, with increased funding to $1 billion by FY30.*

- *International Exchange: prioritize investment in U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) to support English teachers and MLEs throughout the world, funding ECA at or above FY25 levels of $741 million and specifically earmarking for English language programs[3], English language access, Regional English Language Officers, and U.S. embassy and consulate support.*

[3] https://elprograms.org/

Support international education for higher education and English language programs throughout the United States

- Establish a national strategy for international education that recognizes the importance of English language programs in serving MLEs to advance their educational, social, and professional goals.
- Ensure timely, fair, and transparent visa processing and predictable admission, extension, and transfer policies that allow eligible students and exchange participants to complete legitimate educational programs.
- Remove costly and uncertain barriers for length of study, educational advancement, and transfers.

Support Fair and Equitable Immigration Policy

- Create opportunities for immigrants to learn English and civics by building and enhancing the capacity of current systems and programs.
- Enhance resources and opportunities for the linguistic, economic, and civic integration of immigrants into the United States.
- Enact permanent protections and a pathway to citizenship for eligible undocumented people brought to the United States as children, including DACA recipients.
- Reduce unnecessary immigration barriers to legitimate language study and educational exchange, and support fair pathways for eligible students and scholars to continue their education and contribute to U.S. communities.
- Provide support for refugees and those fleeing oppression so that they may develop the resilience needed for successful resettlement and integration.
- Offer orderly and fair pathways to legal residency and citizenship for all immigrants.
- Foster respect and appreciation for the contributions made by all immigrants and those who work with them.
- Respect the human and civil rights of all immigrants, refugees, and their families.

Legislation TESOL Supports for Reintroduction in the 120th Congress

- Families Learning and Understanding English Together Act[4]
- Supporting Providers of English Language Learning Act[5]

[4] https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/10437 A bill which focuses on family and inter-generational literacy.
[5] https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/5634/text

- Reaching English Learners Act[6]
- Supporting Young Language Learners' Access to Bilingual Education Act[7]
- Dignity for Immigrants While Guarding our Nation to Ignite and Deliver the American Dream Act[8]
- Preparing and Retaining All Educators Act[9]
- Reading Excellence and Achievement for Development Act[10]
- Protecting Sensitive Locations Act[11]

TESOL also seeks support for the reauthorization of the following:

- Elementary and Secondary Education Act
- Higher Education Act
- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Title II of which is the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act)

Why These Priorities Matter

Individuals identified as "limited English proficient" (LEP) ages 5 and older in the United States:

Over 50% of the LEPs in the United States are U.S. Citizens[12]:

- 5,438,360 are U.S. born
- 9,438,042 are naturalized citizens

English learners in public education:

- English learners represent 10.6% of the U.S. elementary and secondary education public school enrollment, at 5.3 million students in fall 2021[13].
- About 65% of all public education (SY17-18) teachers had a least one English learner in their classroom[14].

[6] https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/10436
[7] https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/10438
[8] https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/4393
[9] https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/5476
[10] https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/4689
[11] https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/455/text
[12] Figures derived from https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data-tool/state-profiles/us#language_education_english_proficiency
[13] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf/english-learners-in-public-schools
[14] https://ncela.ed.gov/sites/default/files/2023-06/ELsTeachers-Infographic-20230616-508.pdf

- The number of certified licensed English learner instructors in the U.S. is decreasing, with 370K in the 2019-2020 school year. Nationwide, 76K additional English learner educators are needed[14].

Adult English learners in federally funded programs:

- Almost 60% of adult participants are English learners[15] - over 700,000.
- In program year 2024–25, about 13% of paid local teachers reported in the National Reporting System were listed as holding TESOL certification.[16].
- Data is lacking on the total need for adult education for English learners but we do know that over ten million foreign born, ages 25 and up, possess less than a high school diploma[17].

International students in English language programs:

- 66,033 international students study in English language programs[18].
- In academic year 2024–25, international students in English language programs at U.S. colleges and universities contributed an estimated $392.3 million and supported 2,778 jobs.[19].

TESOL International Association and its members stand ready to support the 120th Congress, the administration, and the U.S. Department of Education in promoting these priorities. Collectively, we continue to strive for a nation and a world in which all learners, regardless of language background, are valued for their linguistic, cultural, and social assets and in which all educators have the resources and high-quality professional development to equip them for success.

[15] https://nrs.ed.gov/rt/reports/aggregate/2024/all/table-3
[16] https://nrs.ed.gov/rt/reports/aggregate/2024/all/table-7
[17] https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data-tool/state-profiles/us#language_education_educational_attainment
[18] https://opendoorsdata.org/data/intensive-english-programs/
[19] https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2