

Supporting Multilingual Learners in Early Childhood in Chicago and Illinois: A Review of Evidence and Future Directions

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Multilingual Learners: A Growing Demographic in Chicago and Beyond

In the United States, a significant and growing portion of the child population speaks a language other than English at home. Approximately 33% of children in the U.S. are multilingual learners (birth-to-5), or children learning two or more languages simultaneously (Migration Policy Institute, 2024; WIDA, 2025). Multilingual learners and their families come from a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, with the most common languages spoken being Spanish, followed by Mandarin and Cantonese (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). This demographic shift emphasizes the critical importance of ensuring that multilingual children receive the necessary support they need to thrive, both at home and in educational settings. For immigrant children, maintaining a heritage language while also learning English (i.e., becoming multilingual) is a core component of their adaptive success (Weisleder et al., 2024) and is further recognized as a human right under the ‘Universal Declaration on Linguistic Rights’ (UNESCO, 1996; see also Weisleder et al., 2024). Thus, schools and communities should create environments where children can maintain and develop their home or heritage language(s) while also acquiring proficiency in English.

In the city of Chicago, multilingual learners represent a growing and vital part of the population. The city has long been home to many migrant communities, with recent arrivals most commonly coming from countries such as Venezuela and other countries in South America and Asia (Cardona-Maguigad, 2024; Gregg, 2025). Over the past three years, approximately 35,000 immigrants have moved to Chicago (City of Chicago, 2024a, 2024b), many of whom are newcomer families raising children who speak a language other than English at home. Some of these languages include Spanish, Polish, Arabic, Urdu, and Hindi (IECAM, 2023). These families bring rich linguistic and cultural diversity, and their presence plays a key role in shaping the needs of multilingual children in early childhood education (ECE) and K-12 education. In response to these shifting dynamics, policymakers and educators across Chicago and the state of Illinois have been working to adapt instructional practices to better support multilingual learners and their families (Baig, 2023; Illinois State Board of Education, 2025b).

Throughout their schooling, multilingual learners often face the challenge of navigating multiple languages and cultures, sometimes under pressure to assimilate into the English-speaking society (Portes & Hao, 2002). Although the transition to school can be difficult for all children, it is particularly challenging for multilingual learners because they are often shifting from an environment in which they can use both of their languages to one in which only English is prioritized. Typically, they also must meet academic standards only in English, even though their linguistic repertoire is spread out across two languages. Research shows that supporting bilingual children in both of their languages can have positive effects on their cognitive and socio-emotional development and can ultimately lead to long-term academic success and overall well-being (Bialystok, 2017; García et al., 2017). However, the way in which this is done in practice is not always consistent. A substantial body of research identifies a number of effective strategies for supporting multilingual learners both at home and in school environments, as reviewed below.

Across Illinois, initiatives supporting multilingual learners have gained prominence as policymakers and practitioners seek to meet the needs of a growingly diverse student population. For instance, to identify students who are learning English, Illinois mandates the use of a Home Language Survey when students enter school at Pre-K or any other grade (Illinois State Board of Education, 2025a). If a Pre-K classroom has 20 or more students speaking the same language, a Transitional Bilingual Education program is required, providing instruction in both the dominant home language and English. For any student who is identified as learning English, their English proficiency is assessed and monitored to ensure ongoing support across Pre-K through 12th grade or until they are deemed proficient in English. However, despite monitoring and support, challenges remain for multilingual learners who continue to be deemed as not meeting predominantly English-only educational standards (Domínguez-Fret & Oberto, 2022).

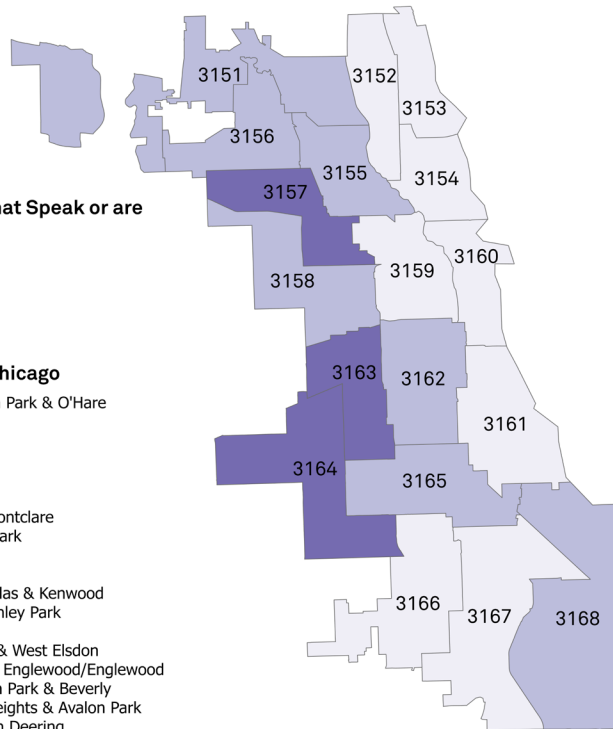
Thus, the purpose of this memo is to highlight the growing presence and evolving needs of multilingual learners, particularly in the city of Chicago and across the state of Illinois. As the population of multilingual learners continues to increase, especially among multilingual learners under the age of 5 entering schools in Chicago, it is important to implement inclusive, culturally responsive, and research-based practices that center their linguistic and developmental needs. Supporting multilingual learners in maintaining and developing their home language(s) alongside English is essential, and doing so requires consistent efforts from teachers, school leaders, practitioners, and caregivers alike. Although the city of Chicago currently has some existing initiatives to identify and support multilingual learners from Pre-K through 12th grade, variation in implementation across settings highlights the need for more consistent and comprehensive support systems to ensure equitable outcomes for all multilingual children.

Percent of Population Age 5 and Under that Speak or are Learning Spanish

- 2%-9%
- 9%-36%
- 36%-64%

Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs) in Chicago

- 3151. Albany Park, Norwood Park, Forest Glen, North Park & O'Hare
- 3152. West Ridge, Lincoln Square & North Center
- 3153. Uptown, Edgewater & Rogers Park
- 3154. Lake View & Lincoln Park
- 3155. Logan Square, Irving Park & Avondale
- 3156. Portage Park, Dunning & Jefferson Park
- 3157. Belmont Cragin, Humboldt Park, Hermosa & Montclare
- 3158. Austin, North Lawndale & East/West Garfield Park
- 3159. West Town & Near West Side
- 3160. Near North Side, Loop & Near South Side
- 3161. Hyde Park, Grand Boulevard, Woodlawn, Douglas & Kenwood
- 3162. New City, Lower West Side, Bridgeport & McKinley Park
- 3163. South Lawndale, Brighton Park & Gage Park
- 3164. Ashburn, Garfield Ridge, West Lawn, Clearing & West Elsdon
- 3165. Chicago Lawn, Greater Grand Crossing & West Englewood/Englewood
- 3166. Auburn Gresham, Washington Heights, Morgan Park & Beverly
- 3167. Roseland, Chatham, West Pullman, Calumet Heights & Avalon Park
- 3168. South Shore, South Chicago, East Side & South Deering

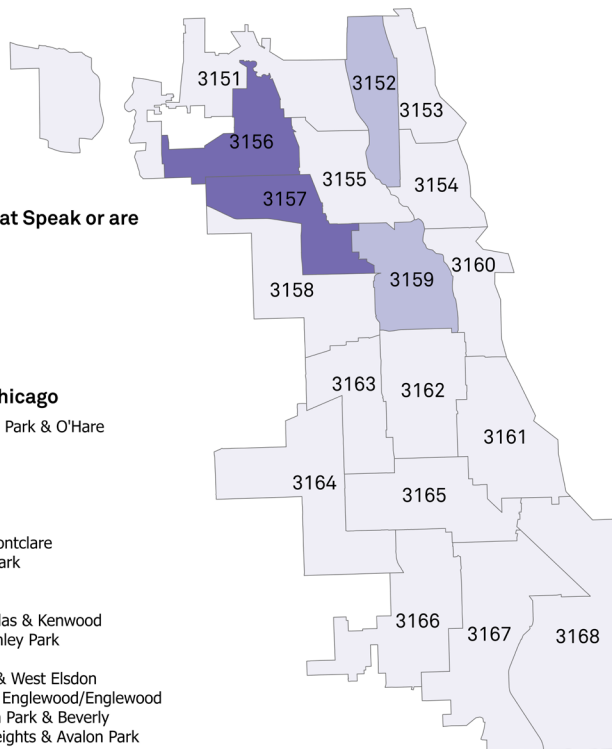


Percent of Population Age 5 and Under that Speak or are Learning Polish

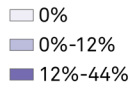
- 0%
- 0%-3%
- 3%-6%

Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs) in Chicago

- 3151. Albany Park, Norwood Park, Forest Glen, North Park & O'Hare
- 3152. West Ridge, Lincoln Square & North Center
- 3153. Uptown, Edgewater & Rogers Park
- 3154. Lake View & Lincoln Park
- 3155. Logan Square, Irving Park & Avondale
- 3156. Portage Park, Dunning & Jefferson Park
- 3157. Belmont Cragin, Humboldt Park, Hermosa & Montclare
- 3158. Austin, North Lawndale & East/West Garfield Park
- 3159. West Town & Near West Side
- 3160. Near North Side, Loop & Near South Side
- 3161. Hyde Park, Grand Boulevard, Woodlawn, Douglas & Kenwood
- 3162. New City, Lower West Side, Bridgeport & McKinley Park
- 3163. South Lawndale, Brighton Park & Gage Park
- 3164. Ashburn, Garfield Ridge, West Lawn, Clearing & West Elsdon
- 3165. Chicago Lawn, Greater Grand Crossing & West Englewood/Englewood
- 3166. Auburn Gresham, Washington Heights, Morgan Park & Beverly
- 3167. Roseland, Chatham, West Pullman, Calumet Heights & Avalon Park
- 3168. South Shore, South Chicago, East Side & South Deering

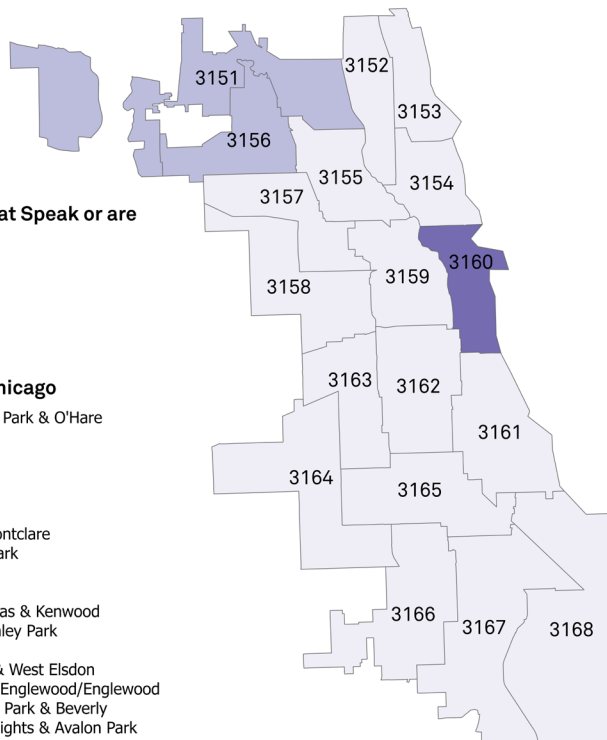


Percent of Population Age 5 and Under that Speak or are Learning Arabic



Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs) in Chicago

- 3151. Albany Park, Norwood Park, Forest Glen, North Park & O'Hare
- 3152. West Ridge, Lincoln Square & North Center
- 3153. Uptown, Edgewater & Rogers Park
- 3154. Lake View & Lincoln Park
- 3155. Logan Square, Irving Park & Avondale
- 3156. Portage Park, Dunning & Jefferson Park
- 3157. Belmont Cragin, Humboldt Park, Hermosa & Montclare
- 3158. Austin, North Lawndale & East/West Garfield Park
- 3159. West Town & Near West Side
- 3160. Near North Side, Loop & Near South Side
- 3161. Hyde Park, Grand Boulevard, Woodlawn, Douglas & Kenwood
- 3162. New City, Lower West Side, Bridgeport & McKinley Park
- 3163. South Lawndale, Brighton Park & Gage Park
- 3164. Ashburn, Garfield Ridge, West Lawn, Clearing & West Elsdon
- 3165. Chicago Lawn, Greater Grand Crossing & West Englewood/Englewood
- 3166. Auburn Gresham, Washington Heights, Morgan Park & Beverly
- 3167. Roseland, Chatham, West Pullman, Calumet Heights & Avalon Park
- 3168. South Shore, South Chicago, East Side & South Deering



Evidence-Based Best Practices for Supporting Multilingual Learners at Home

Research highlights the critical role of parents and caregivers in supporting children's multilingual development (Fibla et al., 2022; Hoff, 2018). Studies have shown that the language used in the home—whether through structured activities like book sharing or informal ones like mealtimes or play—plays a crucial role in developing children's linguistic skills (Fibla et al., 2022; Hoff, 2018). For multilingual learners, the amount of exposure to each language is strongly associated with their development in that language. In addition, caregivers tend to use more diverse and complex language in interactions with their children when they are using their dominant/preferred language (Hoff et al., 2020; Place & Hoff, 2011). Thus, it is important that caregivers expose children to the home language(s) in ways that are comfortable and natural for the family, promoting both language development and familial bonds. While there is ongoing discussion on which language(s) parents and caregivers should use with their children, specifically whether parents and caregivers should prioritize supporting the home language for home language maintenance or the societal language for academic purposes, scholars suggest that parents and caregivers speak to their child in the language that is most comfortable to them (Place & Hoff, 2011). Further, while some multilingual families may be hesitant to choose to mix languages or 'code-switch' when choosing which language to speak to their child in the home, scholars argue that there are no known detrimental effects of code-switching with children in the home environment on children's multilingual language development (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013).

Despite these evidence-based recommendations, some families feel deterred from engaging with their children in their home languages (Surrain, 2021) due to the marginalization of languages other than English that exists in the U.S. To support families' efforts in supporting their child's dual language development, policymakers and practitioners can provide easier access to more materials (e.g., books), in locations such as schools and libraries that can be used in the home to support home language use (Reinoso et al., 2026). For example, researchers have developed the Háblame Bébe app which can be accessed on families' mobile phones and provides resources that encourage and support Spanish-speaking caregivers in having bilingual interactions in English and Spanish with their children (Baralt et al., 2020). In addition, we also encourage early childhood practitioners to create space within existing infrastructures for these families and their voices to be heard. We know that many spaces continue to perpetuate deficit-based narratives about multilingualism. Recent work centering the voices of families has found that parents and caregivers report wanting and needing more resources to support their multilingual children as the support that is currently available does not fully meet their needs (Méndez et al., 2023). More research is needed to better understand the specific needs of these families regarding their home language maintenance and supporting their children's multilingual language development.

At School (ECE)

Although research in ECE is limited, scholars acknowledge the need to value and incorporate young children's home languages as foundational tools for meaning making across developmental domains (Winsler et al., 2014; Espinosa 2018). Translanguaging is an approach that encourages educators to create educational environments in which students can use their entire linguistic repertoire (e.g., words, phrases, or expressions from all their known languages), which could include using both languages flexibly during interactions or classroom activities and assignments. Translanguaging has been recognized as an effective approach for promoting engagement and deepening understanding in early childhood education settings (García & Lin, 2016; Garcia & Kleyn, 2016). In early childhood classrooms, where language development is foundational, creating discourse-rich environments through play-based collaboration, peer interactions, and storytelling allows multilingual learners to build both home and societal language skills (Bohr & Acar, 2021; Uccelli & Páez, 2007).

Yet in practice, support for multilingual learners varies significantly across ECE programs. In contexts like Chicago Public Schools (CPS), multilingual learners in ECE (also known as Chicago Early Learning) are supported under policies set forth by CPS. For example:

- 1) The **Home Language Survey (HLS)** is used across the board to identify children as 'ELs' (English Learners) upon PreK entry. This is important, as we know that the first step to getting children the support that they need – in most cases – is identification.
- 2) If a Pre-K classroom has more than 20 students who speak the same home or heritage language, a **Transitional Bilingual Program (TBE)** is required where children receive more instruction in the home language while receiving supports as needed. This could also be an option if there are less than 20 children. However, if a school fails to provide this (or if there are multiple languages in one classroom), then a **Transitional Program of Instruction (TPI)** is required where children receive instruction in English, with adequate supports made available in the home or heritage languages as needed.

3) **Transitional supports**, such as continuous testing and monitoring of English proficiency, are mandated to be available to multilingual learners upon PreK completion throughout their schooling (K-12) to ensure they have the adequate linguistic support they need.

However, considerable variability exists across Chicago and Illinois, especially in early learning programs outside the jurisdiction of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and CPS. These inconsistencies mean that not all multilingual learners in the City of Chicago and their families receive equitable language and educational support. To address this, scholars urge school and district leaders to fund targeted professional development, foster collaboration between bilingual and monolingual educators, and develop instructional approaches that are truly language-responsive and inclusive of children's home languages (Hopkins et al., 2015; de Araujo & Smith, 2021; Grapin et al., 2023).

Research Gaps & Future Directions

While progress has been made in identifying supports for multilingual learners, several gaps in the research remain. First, more research is needed to understand how to best implement those strategies in early childhood settings. Although we know that research-based strategies to support multilingual learners exist (Espinosa, 2018), more research is needed to understand the extent to which those strategies are implemented across early childhood settings, particularly in the City of Chicago and state of Illinois more broadly. Furthermore, beginning at a young age, there is a need for more longitudinal studies that evaluate the long-term impact of various interventions on multilingual learners' cognitive and socio-emotional development (DiNapoli & Morales Jr., 2021; Viesca et al., 2019). Large-scale quantitative studies—rather than singular case studies at individual school sites—are necessary to inform broader policy decisions (Collier & Thomas, 2017). Furthermore, incorporating critical theoretical perspectives into robust methodological design could deepen our understanding of how cultural backgrounds influence learning experiences over time (Viesca et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Supporting multilingual learners in early childhood education requires a multifaceted approach that recognizes and values the linguistic and cultural diversity that multilingual children bring to their classrooms and home environments. While there is growing evidence of effective practices at home and in schools, more research is needed to evaluate, refine, and expand these strategies with the specific goal of supporting young children in early childhood settings. By ensuring that multilingual learners' needs are met both inside and outside the classroom, we can help set the foundation for their long-term academic success and well-being.

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