

The Bilingual Educational Programming in Core Classes Act

I. Executive Summary

California has the most linguistically diverse public school system in the nation. More than 1.5 million English Learner (EL) students, nearly one in five public school students, are enrolled in California's public schools. Among children ages 0-5, the majority are identified as Dual Language Learners (DLLs), developing two or more languages simultaneously from birth. In cities like Los Angeles and San José, up to half of households speak a language other than English at home.

Despite this, fewer than 10% of all California schools offer bilingual or dual language immersion (DLI) programs. This gap between educational practice and community reality is not merely an administrative shortcoming—it is a structural inequity with measurable consequences.

Research consistently shows that students in dual language programs perform better than their peers in English-only settings across key metrics, including literacy, academic achievement, and long-term outcomes. They also maintain their home language and develop stronger social-emotional skills.

Although Proposition 58 (2016) restored the ability to offer bilingual education, it did not require schools to implement it. As a result, access to effective bilingual programs often depends on where a student lives.

The Bilingual Educational Programming in Core Classes Act addresses this inequity directly. By mandating dual-language immersion programs in schools that serve high concentrations of ELs and DLLs, expanding bilingual teacher certification pathways, and prioritizing equitable resource allocation, the Act aligns California's public education system with its demographic reality, its research consensus, and its stated commitment to educational equity.

II. Overview

California is one of the most linguistically diverse regions in the world. In major metropolitan areas including Los Angeles, Long Beach, Anaheim, San Jose, Sunnyvale, and Santa Clara, more than half of the households speak a language other than English. Nearly 60 percent of children ages 0-5 are Dual Language Learners, and these children now constitute the majority of entrants into many kindergarten classrooms across the state.

Despite this reality, bilingual instruction remains the exception rather than the norm. Decades of research confirm that bilingual education produces meaningful, lasting benefits: stronger literacy development, higher long-term English proficiency skills, improved socio-emotional functioning, and a more robust educational identity. Yet fewer than 10 percent of California schools offer any bilingual or dual language immersion program.

The consequences of this gap are well-documented. When DLL children transition abruptly into English-only kindergarten classrooms, the disruption of their bilingual development can be severe. Research consistently links such discontinuity to home-language loss, delayed literacy development, and widening achievement gaps, propagating academic disparity.

The research record on dual language immersion outcomes is strong and growing. In the studies conducted by RAND Corporation and American Educational Research Journal, students who are placed in dual language immersion programs perform better than students who are placed in traditional English-only programs on standardized tests and reclassification rates. English Learners enrolled in dual language immersion programs outperform peers in English-only programs in reading

achievement by 0.07 to 0.13 standard deviations by fifth grade, with effects increasing through middle school. According to AERJ, English Learners in dual language immersion programs also reach English proficiency one to two years earlier on average than comparable students in English-only instructional settings. College readiness results indicate that students who attended dual language immersion classes have higher chances of achieving college-ready standards in English and mathematics compared to English Learning students who did not attend immersion programs. Students attending dual language immersion programmes have lower chances of acquiring remedial coursework in high school, showing higher academic preparation and perseverance.

The demographic imperative is equally clear. The U.S. Census Bureau reports a 14 percent increase since 2010 in the number of individuals who speak languages other than English, a trend that continues to accelerate in communities where non-English languages are already widely spoken. California's existing populations of Latin American, Asian and Africa-origin families makes this linguistic diversity a permanent, defining feature of the state's social fabric. Meeting that reality with an educational system still organized around English-only defaults is neither equitable nor effective.

III. Historical Context

California's current inequities in bilingual education are the direct result of past policy decisions. The passage of Proposition 227 in 1998 effectively dismantled bilingual education statewide by mandating English-only instruction, even as immigration increased and linguistic diversity expanded. For nearly two decades, English Learners (ELs) and Dual Language Learners were denied access to evidence-based bilingual instruction.

In 2016, Proposition 58 repealed these

restrictions and restored the authority for school districts to offer bilingual and dual language immersion programs. However, because the law made implementation optional rather than required, access has remained uneven across the state. Districts with greater financial resources and access to bilingual-certified teachers have been able to expand programs, while under-resourced districts with higher EL populations have struggled to do so.

Meanwhile, the body of research supporting bilingual education has continued to strengthen, highlighting not only academic benefits but also cognitive, socio-emotional, and civic advantages. Despite these findings, California's policies have not translated into equitable access to bilingual instruction.

IV. Policy Problem

California's voluntary approach to bilingual education has produced a structural inequity with four defining characteristics:

- High concentrations of ELs and DLLs coexist with limited access to dual-language instruction.
- English-only instructional models remain the default across the state, despite clear evidence of inferior long-term outcomes.
- Bilingual teacher shortages persist without coordinated statewide workforce development to address them.
- DLLs experience early language loss and fragmented educational pathways with no continuity from early childhood through elementary grades.

Low-income, Title 1 schools, where EL enrollment is highest, are the least likely to offer dual-language programs, reinforcing existing achievement gaps and undermining linguistic equity. Without structural intervention, demographic trends will continue to outpace educational reform, deepening disparities rather than closing them.

V. Tried Policy

California's existing policies signal support for multilingualism but fall short in practice. Measures such as the English Language Development Standards, the Local Control Funding Formula, and the State Seal of Biliteracy primarily function as accountability or recognition tools rather than mechanisms for ensuring access to bilingual instruction. They do not require schools to implement bilingual education in core academic subjects or guarantee continuity across grade levels.

Similarly, grant-based and pilot programs have failed to scale effectively. Districts with the greatest need for bilingual education often lack the administrative capacity and financial flexibility to compete for limited funding opportunities. As a result, these incentive-based approaches have reinforced existing inequities, allowing more resourced districts to expand programs while leaving high-need communities underserved.

VI. Policy Options

California faces a clear choice: continue to rely on a decentralized, voluntary framework that has demonstrably failed multilingual students, or establish a statewide mandate that brings public education policy into alignment with the state's demographic and educational realities.

Option One: Maintain the Status Quo

Maintaining the current decentralized and voluntary approach to bilingual education will likely perpetuate and deepen existing inequities. In a state with over 1.5 million English Learners, where linguistic diversity is both widespread and growing, the fact that fewer than 10 percent of schools offer dual language immersion programs reflects a systemic failure rather than a temporary gap. Without meaningful structural change, access to bilingual education will continue to depend on district capacity rather than

student need, leaving many students without the support necessary for long-term success.

Option Two: Incentivizing Voluntary Adoption of Bilingual Programs

Expanding grants and other incentive-based strategies has been proposed as a way to encourage districts to adopt bilingual programs. However, this approach has consistently proven ineffective in both California and nationally. Districts with the greatest need for bilingual education are often the least equipped to compete for limited funding due to constraints such as staffing shortages, high EL enrollment, and limited financial resources. Additionally, the lack of comprehensive data on the number of bilingual-certified teachers further complicates efforts to scale these programs. As a result, voluntary incentive models have failed to reach the populations they are intended to serve.

Option Three: Mandating Bilingual Programs

A statewide mandate requiring bilingual education in schools with high EL and DLL populations represents the most effective and equitable policy solution. Such a mandate would ensure that districts provide the necessary infrastructure, qualified educators, and research-based instructional models that have been validated by decades of research. California already mandates instruction in other core subject areas, and bilingual education—supported by strong empirical evidence—should be treated with the same level of importance.

The benefits of statewide mandate include:

- Equitable access to evidence-based instruction, regardless of district wealth or location.
- Consistency across districts, ensuring that no child's language development is contingent on their zip code.
- Alignment with developmental science and decades of research demonstrating superior outcomes for DLI students.
- Clear accountability mechanisms for districts serving large EL and DLL populations.

- Continuity from early childhood through elementary grades, preventing the language loss associated with abrupt transition to English-only instruction.

VII. Conclusion

California's linguistic diversity is a defining and enduring characteristic of the state, yet its education system has not fully adapted to reflect this reality. Continuing to rely on English-only or voluntary bilingual models contradicts decades of research and fails to meet the needs of more than 1.5 million English Learner students.

The Bilingual Educational Programming in Core Classes Act provides a comprehensive, evidence-based solution by mandating dual language immersion programs in high-need schools, strengthening the bilingual teacher pipeline, and ensuring equitable allocation of resources. This policy represents not an expansion of obligations, but a necessary correction to longstanding inequities. By aligning educational practice with research and demographic trends, California can create a more inclusive and effective public education system that fully supports the success of all students.

VIII. Acknowledgment

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