



Creating Elementary Classrooms Where Multilingual Learners With Disabilities Thrive

A Practical Guide for Educators and School Leaders

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How to Use This Brief

This brief provides practical guidance, resources, and illustrative vignettes for educators and administrators seeking to provide high-quality classroom instruction for multilingual learners with disabilities (MLWDs). These materials are especially targeted to general education classrooms (English medium or dual language) in California elementary schools, although the brief's findings may be applicable to other contexts.

Specific uses include:



Staff professional development (see vignettes and discussion questions)



Support for conversations within schools or districts about practices to better serve MLWDs



Identifying areas of strength and growth related to serving MLWDs, especially with respect to:

- Assets-based perspectives
- Collaboration across school staff and families
- Classroom practices

For a definition of [multilingual learner](#) and other key terms, see the Glossary ([Appendix B](#)).



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Supporting Multilingual Learners with Disabilities

In recent years, many U.S. educators, education leaders, researchers, and others have been exploring how to better serve multilingual learners (MLs)¹ with suspected or identified disabilities.² Supporting these students is not merely a pedagogical preference—it is a **federal civil rights obligation**. The Supreme Court’s landmark decision in *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) established that providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, and teachers is not “equality” if some students cannot understand the language of instruction. *Lau* mandates that public elementary and secondary schools take affirmative steps to ensure that MLs who are designated as not fully proficient in English have “meaningful access” to the curriculum. When we

consider each MLWD’s language needs alongside their disability-related services—it becomes clear that neither set of services supersedes the other. These federal requirements collectively ensure that a student’s linguistic and disability-related needs are addressed simultaneously to uphold their right to an equitable and accessible education.

Why This Brief

As recognition of the importance of better serving MLWDs has grown, numerous resources on relevant topics have appeared across the United States. However, educators and school leaders are [calling for more specific support and guidance](#) in terms of **how to provide high-quality, equitable classroom instruction that meets both the language and the disability needs** of MLWDs. Furthermore, since education policies differ from state to state, educators need guidance that takes specific state-level policies into account. In response to these gaps in the literature, this brief provides concrete examples of **how to provide instruction** in inclusive general education, English-medium, and dual language (DL) elementary-grades classrooms that **meets the needs of MLWDs in California**.

OUR OBLIGATION

“Supporting these students is not merely a pedagogical preference — its a federal civil rights obligation.”

consider this mandate alongside the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (originally signed into law in 1975)—which, through its 1997 reauthorization, explicitly requires educators to

KEY CALIFORNIA POLICIES SUPPORTING MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS



Why California

[Nearly 60% of children](#) in California come from a home where a language other than English is spoken. Most general education classrooms serve MLs as well as students with disabilities (SWDs), and many serve MLWDs. The state has led the nation in ML-focused policies and frameworks, although only some policies explicitly address the needs of MLWDs. Since the early 2000s, the state has mandated that all preservice teacher preparation programs include coursework on teaching ELs. In 2014, California introduced the [English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework](#) to provide guidance on unifying the state's English language arts (ELA) and English language development (ELD) standards. Since 2017, the state has implemented the [EL Roadmap](#) to guide educators in fostering assets-oriented, inclusive, academically rigorous environments for ELs from preschool through Grade 12. This roadmap instructs schools to coordinate EL and special education services so that they are mutually supportive rather than redundant or contradictory. In addition, MLs in California—including those with disabilities—have benefited in recent years from increased funding and greater access to early education through the introduction of transitional kindergarten.

The Opportunity Ahead

[Research](#) suggests that these policies have contributed to improvements in the academic achievement and English proficiency of California MLs but that further improvements are still needed. Despite their learning and language gains, too many MLs who entered California elementary schools in kindergarten are still classified as ELs at the beginning of middle school (in part because California requires students to meet four reclassification criteria such that many [remain classified as ELs even after reaching the English language proficiency benchmark](#)). Using California data from 2006–07 through 2018–19, researchers found that there were [no improvements in reclassification rates](#) as of 2019 compared with earlier cohorts. The group of students who remain classified as ELs



“Nearly 60% of children in California come from a home where a language other than English is spoken.”

California provides an important context for this brief because it serves one of the nation's largest and most diverse populations of multilingual learners and has developed policies that intentionally integrate multilingual education, special education, and early learning. While this brief draws on California's policy context and classroom examples, many of the instructional practices and implementation lessons are relevant to educators and school systems across the United States seeking to improve outcomes for multilingual learners with disabilities.

for more than six years are commonly referred to as “long-term ELs.” [Once in middle school, long-term ELs experience disadvantages](#), including restricted access to rigorous academic content and to courses needed on the pathway to college. This structural barrier creates an [opportunity gap](#) that persists throughout these students’ secondary education. Remaining classified as an EL for longer can cause students to have [lower perceptions of their own abilities, which can be especially problematic for students who also have a disability](#).

Moreover, [research](#) has found that MLWDs tend to remain classified as ELs for longer than MLs without disabilities and are therefore more likely to become long-term ELs—even after they have become proficient in English. While [11% of all California students have a designated disability, 28% of long-term ELs](#) are so designated.³ Thus, MLWDs are more likely to become long-term ELs and, as a result, to experience adverse outcomes in later schooling, indicating that we are failing to meet the needs of this population.

It is important to emphasize that these adverse outcomes for long-term ELs are not due to student or educator deficits but rather to systemic failures. Preservice and in-service training does not sufficiently prepare educators to serve MLWDs, which in turn

leads to these students being underserved in schools, one aspect of which is lack of access to high-quality instruction tailored to meet MLWDs’ needs.

Using this Brief

This brief is designed to help educators and education leaders better serve MLWDs in their schools through high-quality, equity-driven, and culturally responsive classroom instruction. These materials are targeted for general education (English-medium or DL) elementary settings in California ([where the majority of students with disabilities spend most of the school day](#)), although the brief’s findings may be applicable to other contexts.

The guidance offered here was intentionally designed for work with MLs who have more [common disabilities](#) that affect cognition, including autism, speech and language impairment, specific learning disabilities, and intellectual disabilities. Some recommendations may also apply to MLs with deafness, hearing impairment, orthopedic impairment, or visual impairment. Each recommendation is accompanied by a vignette crafted to illustrate what our findings and recommendations could look like in schools and classrooms. Our hope is that administrators and educators will collaborate on using this brief as a professional learning tool, with an eye toward improving outcomes for MLWDs.



KEY TAKEAWAY

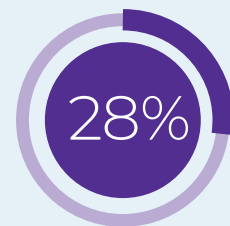
Students are entitled to supports for both their language development and their disability and both must be integrated seamlessly for students to thrive.

Long-Term English Learners Experience Higher Rates of Designated Disabilities

Long-Term English Learners are disproportionately likely to have a designated disability compared with California students overall. This underscores the importance of providing instruction that intentionally integrates language development with disability-related supports, rather than addressing each separately.



CA Students who have a designated disability



Long-Term ELs who have a designated disability

Bringing Together Expertise on Multilingual Learners and Students with Disabilities

[SEAL](#) (Sobrato Early Academic Language) is a nonprofit dedicated to advancing academic outcomes for multilingual learners through research, educator professional learning, technical assistance, and strategic partnerships. Since 2008, SEAL has partnered with schools, districts, institutions of higher education, and state education leaders to translate research into evidence-based instructional practices and implementation strategies that strengthen teaching, learning, and educational systems. Our research-based approach recognizes students' home languages as powerful academic assets while building educator capacity to create equitable learning environments where multilingual learners thrive.

Grounded in research on minimizing long-term EL designations, SEAL's work focuses on fostering MLs' use of rich, powerful, precise, and expressive academic language; creating affirming and enriched classroom environments; building and maintaining strong partnerships between families and schools; and aligning curriculum and instructional practices across grades. SEAL works in both Spanish dual language and English-medium settings serving preschool through sixth grade. Our audience for professional development (PD) has included many special education teachers and specialists, and we have received anecdotal feedback that teachers have been using SEAL instructional practices effectively by modifying them to meet the needs of some multilingual learners with disabilities (MLWDs). This brief represents SEAL's approach to systematically address the instructional needs of this student population.

That work was strengthened through a partnership with [CAST](#), an organization that focuses on inclusivity and accessibility in education. Beginning in 2023, SEAL and CAST collaborated to explore how CAST's Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Guidelines could be more fully developed to support multilingual learners. As a result of our work together, CAST strengthened its guidelines to encourage educators to honor and leverage students' home languages (see the 2024 report [Exploring the Intersections of UDL & Support for Multilingual Learners](#), pp. 10–11). The report's findings also contributed to expanding the UDL Guidelines to include more explicit attention to joy and play.

Building on this foundation, CAST and SEAL partnered to create materials to further help teachers of multilingual learners reduce barriers to learning for all students. These materials included A Guide to Instructional Rounds for Educators of English Learners and A Guide to Journey Mapping for Educators of English Learners. SEAL staff were trained in relevant CAST practices and facilitated focus groups with SEAL- and UDL-trained educators.

These collaborations deepened SEAL's understanding of the intersection between multilingualism, disability, and inclusive instruction. They sharpened our perspective on the unique instructional needs of multilingual learners with disabilities and helped inspire the development of this brief, which brings together SEAL's research, classroom experience, and instructional expertise to offer practical guidance for educators.

How This Brief Was Developed

To inform this brief, SEAL conducted a targeted review of research on MLs and SWDs. We complemented this review with classroom observations across special education and general education settings⁴ in addition to a survey administered from March to April 2026 across 25 districts in California, which yielded more than 100 responses from K–12 educators, including instructional coaches, ML and special education specialists, and administrators.

Given the complexity of serving MLWDs, SEAL convened an expert panel that brought together diverse perspectives from researchers, higher education faculty, County Office of Education leaders, special education consultants and specialists, and classroom practitioners. Panelists contributed

professional expertise and personal experience (as family members of individuals with disabilities and/or from direct involvement in DL programs).⁵ This breadth of perspectives enabled us to examine instructional, programmatic, systemic, and deeply personal, family-centered considerations in a comprehensive way. Panelists identified key challenges facing MLWDs, including issues related to identification, systemic barriers within school contexts, and gaps in current policy and practice. The panel also advocated for high-leverage instructional approaches that support MLWDs across both English-medium and DL settings. These insights shaped the essential priorities and actionable recommendations presented in this brief.

GUIDED BY EXPERTS ACROSS THE FIELD

This brief was informed by a multidisciplinary advisory panel whose expertise spans research, higher education, multilingual education, special education, accessibility, county and district leadership, and classroom practice.

Their collective insights helped shape the priorities and recommendations presented throughout this brief.

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Applying the Research

This brief adds to the existing body of resources on topics related to better serving MLWDs such as how to improve [reclassification](#), [referral and assessment](#), [state-level policies](#), [Individualized Education Plans \(IEPs\) for ELs](#), and [data-driven instruction](#). We offer guidance that reflects both evidence-based practices and the day-to-day realities of elementary classrooms in English-medium and DL settings, aiming to provide practitioners (district and school leaders, instructional leaders, and nonprofit leaders) with a roadmap for supporting teachers, students, and families as well as to spark transformative conversations at school sites.

Three Priorities for Action

Each finding identifies a key challenge facing multilingual learners with disabilities (MLWDs), and each recommendation offers practical strategies to help schools create more equitable, inclusive, and linguistically responsive learning environments. Throughout this section, a vignette set at the fictional Vista del Sol Elementary School illustrates how these recommendations can be applied in practice, with reflection questions designed to support professional learning and team discussion.



Finding 1

Barriers to leveraging MLWDs' home languages persist, despite research on the benefits of doing so. → [Page 7](#)

Recommendation 1

Counteract myths and strengthen systems to better leverage MLWDs' home languages and cultures. → [Page 9](#)

Continue to Vignette

Counteracting Myths and Strengthening Systems → [Page 10](#)



Finding 2

The needs of the whole child are met through intentional multidisciplinary collaboration guided by research and best practices. → [Page 13](#)

Recommendation 2

Create structures that promote multidisciplinary collaboration. → [Page 15](#)

Continue to Vignette

Family Collaboration & Staff Collaboration on Journey Mapping → [Page 17](#) and → [Page 19](#) respectively



Finding 3

Teachers require access to high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive instructional materials as well as the agency and expertise to adapt them to meet the needs of their students. → [Page 23](#)

Recommendation 3

Give teachers easier access to high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs), a toolkit of pedagogical practices, targeted PD, and the agency and support to use their expertise to make pedagogical decisions. → [Page 24](#)

Continue to Vignette

Reflection and Responsive Teaching → [Page 26](#)



Barriers to leveraging MLWDs' home languages persist, despite research on the benefits of doing so.

Multilingualism and multiliteracy are important assets that MLWDs bring to the classroom (see [Welcoming Bilingual Learners](#), p. 7) and that confer [cognitive benefits](#) as well as substantial [rewards in the workplace](#). Perhaps most important, children who are conversant and literate in their home languages and English can better develop and maintain connections with [family and community members](#). Such personal connections can be particularly meaningful for children with disabilities, who maximize both their independence and their relationships across their environments when they maintain and build fluency in their home languages in addition to English.

However, as [Padía, Cioè-Peña, and Phuong](#) (2024) note, “Bilingualism is often recognized as a ‘superpower’ among typically developing children but framed as an ‘additional threat’ for children with disabilities” (p. 440). Despite the persistent [misconception](#) that exposure to multiple languages confuses children with disabilities, [rigorous empirical data](#) demonstrate that DL input

PERSISTENT MYTH

“Bilingualism is often recognized as a ‘superpower’ among typically developing children but framed as an ‘additional threat’ for children with disabilities.”

— [Padía, Cioè-Peña, & Phuong](#) (2024)

does not compromise linguistic development. This and similar misunderstandings about bilingualism overlap with and are amplified by pervasive ableist beliefs and deficit orientations.⁶ Moreover, myths about linguistic capacity have multiple negative impacts: [SWDs are steered away from DL programs, teachers in English-medium classrooms fail to leverage MLs' home languages, and families are encouraged to speak only English at home](#).

Recent studies have shown, in contrast, that enrollment in DL programs does nothing to hinder the academic

achievement of MLWDs and can instead have academic benefits (see [Welcoming Bilingual Learners](#), pp. 16–17, for a research review). Further, there is evidence that bilingual instruction and bilingual intervention offer advantages to learners who speak one or more of a variety of languages and experience a range of disabilities. These advantages include

improved performance in both languages; positive cross-linguistic transfer; greater engagement and participation in lessons; equal-to-peer or better task completion, communication, and behavioral outcomes; and benefits to social-emotional development within the family (see [Welcoming Bilingual Learners](#), p. 29). While it is not always possible to place children in

DL programs, [research](#) finds that MLWDs enrolled in English-medium classrooms benefit when their home languages are both welcomed and leveraged.

Barriers to leveraging MLWDs' home languages show up not only in core instruction but also in the systems governing interventions. Many panelists noted that as soon as a student is identified as needing Tier 3 intensive intervention, these targeted services are usually provided exclusively in English—even if the student has stronger proficiency in a different language. This means that even if MLWDs are enrolled in DL

FINDING 1

programs, they rarely receive their academic interventions in the language of instruction, creating learning experiences that are fragmented and disconnected. While students often receive interventions in English due to a lack of bilingual intervention staff, decisions are also driven by the limits of commercial intervention materials. Even when intervention materials are available in students' home languages, translated curricula can prove problematic: Code-based skill progressions do not necessarily translate seamlessly from one language to another (see [Melgosa Benmellah, 2025, pp. 26–27](#)). Even in the less common cases where intervention curricula in the home language are both available and linguistically appropriate, it is often prohibitively expensive for districts to purchase duplicate sets of materials and then provide intervention specialists with the training required to use them.

KEY TAKEAWAY



Research consistently shows that multilingualism strengthens learning for multilingual learners with disabilities. The greatest barriers are the systems, beliefs, and instructional practices that fail to recognize and build on their linguistic assets.





Counteract myths and strengthen systems to better leverage MLWDs' home languages and cultures.

If MLWDs are to reap the benefits of multilingualism and biliteracy, schools must simultaneously address [misconceptions about language acquisition](#) and leverage MLWDs' capabilities, including home languages, at every instructional tier. We recommend that administrators work to [recruit school staff who are multilingual and multicultural and/or who identify as having a disability](#). These staff could include paraprofessionals, office staff, family liaisons, school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, school nurses, and specialized assessors.

In addition, administrators can consider how to **leverage multilingual staff** to improve intervention and support services. In the absence of multilingual support specialists and/or linguistically appropriate intervention materials, for example, support specialists could work in collaboration with other multilingual staff and classroom teachers to create responsive supports, such as “previewing” concepts in a student’s home language.

School Action: Create a Multilingual Learner Task Force

School communities could also create task forces composed of educators, staff, families, and community members to explore strengths and areas of growth in terms of how MLWDs are being served and to plan how to improve.

Task force actions could include:

- Cultivating a [school culture rooted in the belief that every student is capable](#) and in which multilingualism is seen and celebrated (for guidance on critical consciousness, see Alfaro, [page 11](#) for a [guide to critical consciousness](#))
- Encouraging use of students' home languages by
 - Exposing and countering [myths about bilingualism](#) across both staff and families
 - Holding [workshops with multilingual families](#) that applaud and support reading and speaking to children in their strongest language and that advocate for families to enroll and keep their children in DL programs
- Studying and implementing culturally and linguistically sustaining teaching practices and using Culturally Responsive scorecards to evaluate curricula
- Assessing how a school reaches families who speak languages not spoken by staff and how best to make use of outreach, interpreters, and technology
- Creating a process for writing IEPs that includes a discussion of how students' goals will be achieved while also supporting their bilingual development

KEY ACTION

Build school systems that recognize multilingualism as an asset by intentionally leveraging students' home languages, strengthening multilingual staffing, and partnering with families.



UP NEXT: VIGNETTE

See how Vista del Sol Elementary brings these recommendations to life

The vignette that follows describes a scenario at the fictional Vista del Sol Elementary School designed to illustrate how a school could implement some of these recommendations.

Counteract myths and strengthen multilingual systems

Meet Vista del Sol Elementary

A fictional elementary school created to illustrate how educators and school leaders can apply the recommendations presented in this brief.

Meet the Team

Ms. Zavala, First-grade Dual Language (DL) Teacher
 Ms. Kim, Special Education Specialist
 Ms. Flores, ELD Specialist
 Ms. Gomez, Paraprofessional

Ms. Zavala is the first-grade DL teacher at Vista del Sol Elementary, a small, tight-knit school with one DL class and one English-medium class per grade. Educators have noticed an increase in the number of multilingual learners with disabilities (MLWDs) at their school and have agreed to make serving these students the focus of their professional learning committee.

Ms. Zavala is energized by this initiative. As an experienced DL teacher with a bilingual authorization, she feels well prepared to meet her students' language needs in English and Spanish. However, she would like more support around meeting the needs of students with disabilities (SWDs). Over the years, she has taught many students with IEPs as well as many undiagnosed students with learning challenges. Although she has a hazy recollection of a teacher preparation course that addressed SWDs, none of this feels sufficient, and she hopes to strengthen her instructional practices to meet students' language and ability needs simultaneously.

The previous spring, the principal led a multidisciplinary task force consisting of general education, special education, and DL educators that included families, paraprofessionals, and administrators. Together, the task force members read [Welcoming Bilingual Learners With Disabilities Into Dual Language Programs](#),

a series of resources from [Multitiered System of Supports for English Learners](#), selections from the [California Practitioners' Guide for Educating English Learners With Disabilities](#), and resources from [Improving Outcomes for Multilingual Students With Exceptional Needs](#). Some families reported being discouraged after enrolling their children with disabilities in the DL program, and one mother had tears in her eyes as she described being unable to communicate fully with her fifth-grade son once he was enrolled in an English-medium class. "He's losing his Spanish," she said. Other families added that their children would benefit if school staff could see their children's capabilities, not just their disabilities. "It's about thinking 'What can Josue do?' first," one mom shared, "and then remembering that he is a member of his family and cultural community but also of his disability community."

The task force agreed that a good first phase for staff would be to receive some in-house professional learning about the capabilities of all students, focused on [busting myths around language acquisition](#). The task force would then work together to brainstorm systems, including family support groups, to attract MLWDs to the DL program and retain them. They would also discuss how to support families whose members speak languages other than Spanish and English to foster home language and literacy.

IN PRACTICE VIGNETTE 1

The task force also decided that teams should reexamine the IEPs of all MLWDs to ensure that they included achievable, appropriate, assets-based language goals. Ms. Zavala's first IEP meeting is about Luis, an EL whose IEP addresses his autism diagnosis (at age four). She is joined by:

- A special education specialist, Ms. Kim
- An ELD specialist, Ms. Flores
- A paraprofessional assigned to work in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms, Ms. Gomez

Ms. Zavala begins by sharing that Luis is a curious and fun-loving student. Ms. Gomez adds that Luis is fascinated by science and had lots to say during their unit on animal habitats. Ms. Zavala explains that Luis speaks Spanish exclusively at home. His comprehension is strong in both languages but is stronger in Spanish. In academic contexts, he struggles with expression in both languages. On the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) summative assessment, his overall score was a Level 2 (somewhat/moderately developed).

As the team opens Luis's IEP, the first thing they notice is that, per [Senate Bill 445](#), his IEP was written in English and translated into Spanish for his family. For the most part, the team is pleased with his goals, which are explicit about goals in both languages. Ms. Zavala points out that because Luis is in the DL program, she was present when his language goals were created and participated in crafting them, but

she notes that MLs in English-medium classrooms might not always have the benefit of a classroom teacher who knows them in all their languages to help write appropriate goals.

When they get to the reading goals, however, the team is taken aback—they are all in English.

MS. FLORES: "We can and should consider revising the IEP but Ms. Kim doesn't speak Spanish. Luis will still be receiving reading support in English."

There is an uncomfortable silence.

MS. ZAVALA: "Is there any money in the budget to hire an additional special education specialist who speaks Spanish?"

The team decides to ask the administration to research the budget for further staffing, specifically recruiting and hiring multilingual support staff.

MS. GOMEZ: "Maybe I can help Ms. Kim work with Luis, since I speak Spanish?"

The others agree that this is a great idea and schedule Ms. Gomez to join Ms. Kim to supplement Luis's support in reading. They also decide that Ms. Gomez can provide one-on-one support for Luis after Ms. Zavala's small-group reading lessons.

PAUSE & REFLECT

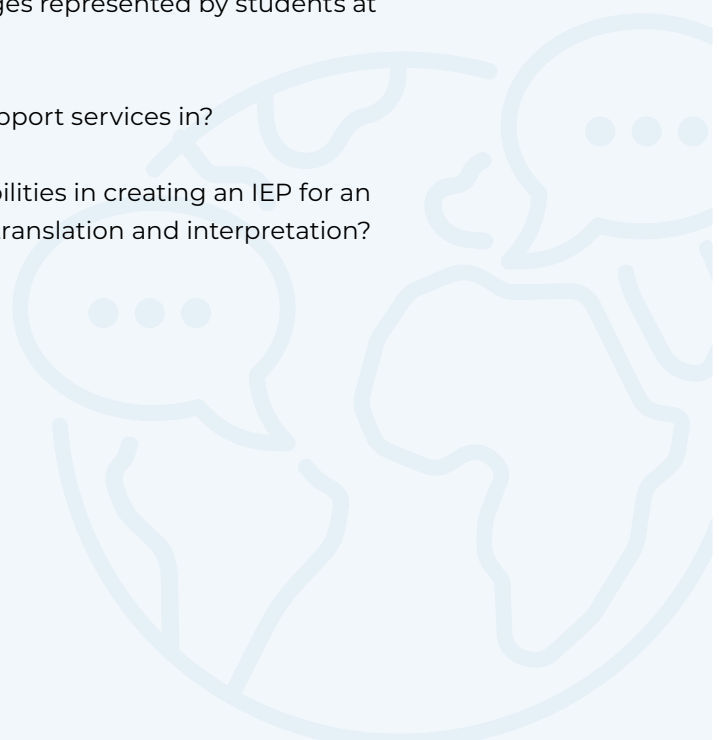
Professional Learning Discussion

Discuss how your school or district would respond in a similar situation. Turn to the next page for discussion questions for Vignette 1.



Counteract myths and strengthen multilingual systems

1. What positive steps is Vista del Sol taking to address the needs of their MLWDs?
2. What are some next steps for the school? Where might they be missing the mark?
3. If your school has a DL program, are MLWDs and their families steered into or out of the program? Why?
4. Explore the myths and facts sheet. How comfortable do you feel with these facts? How comfortable would you be conveying them to families? Where are we as a staff with regard to these facts?
5. Explain to a partner why speaking a home language is important for all MLs, including MLWDs.
6. Do your IEPs include appropriate language goals for MLWDs?
7. Is your staff multilingual? Do they speak the languages represented by students at your school?
8. What languages do you provide intervention and support services in?
9. Does your staff understand their roles and responsibilities in creating an IEP for an MLWD? Do they know the family's rights regarding translation and interpretation?





The needs of the whole child are met through intentional multidisciplinary collaboration guided by research and best practices.

The **silo effect** inherent in California's educational system stifles collaboration and fragments the learning experience, ultimately compromising the academic and social success of all students. This is particularly true for multilingual learners with disabilities (MLWDs) and others with complex needs. As one of our panelists noted: "Our systems aren't designed to hold the multiple and complex needs of the whole child. Teacher preparation programs are siloed; professional development is siloed; professional learning communities are siloed; departments within schools are siloed." While both special education and ML experts are clear that classrooms must be nested within a network of interconnected services for students to have their needs met, this is rarely put into practice.

SYSTEMIC CHALLENGE

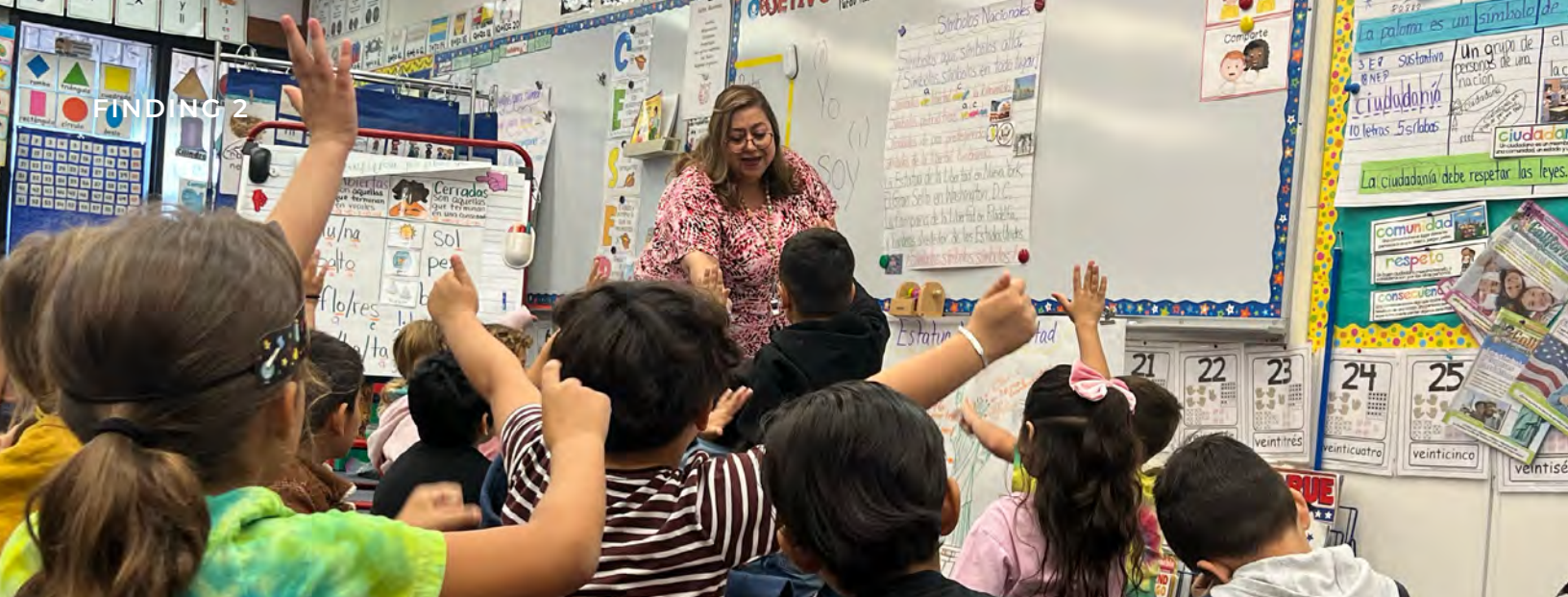
"Our systems aren't designed to hold the multiple and complex needs of the whole child. Teacher preparation programs are siloed; professional development is siloed; professional learning communities are siloed; departments within schools are siloed."

— Expert Advisory Panel Member

The disconnect begins with teacher education. In many teacher preparation programs, bilingual and general education candidates are required to take only one or two courses in special education. Conversely, special education candidates take only one or two classes focused on the needs of MLs. Typically, neither set of classes addresses the needs of MLWDs. Once teacher candidates become teachers at school sites, the disconnect continues. If teachers have common planning and collaboration time, it rarely includes specialists from Education Services or ML departments. Our advisory group panelists and survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed that more strategic collaboration is needed among classroom teachers, special education teachers and specialists, ELD teachers and specialists, and paraprofessionals.

Another result of this siloing is that it becomes very difficult for classroom teachers to hold the multiple needs of students in their heads at once. The issue became clear during a work session cohosted by SEAL and CAST. The group consisted of teachers and instructional coaches who had received two full years of SEAL training (ML-centered PD)

and had been implementing ML-focused instruction for years. As the group watched instructional videos and analyzed them using CAST's instructional rounds protocol, however, the educators focused on [barriers to access](#) for students with special needs and neglected to analyze lessons for language access and needs because the protocol itself did not explicitly point to language. These highly experienced educators have deep knowledge of scaffolding language for students throughout their day, but in the context of thinking about "disability needs," the teachers did not attend to language needs. **As our panelists noted, this is not a teacher failure—this is a system failure.** Siloing leads to unnecessary "either/or" choices and, as [Kangas \(2019\)](#) showed, to disability services taking precedence over what she terms "English as a second language" services.



Panelists agreed that siloing not only isolates professionals in their specialist fields but also affects families: “Families simply get left out of the equation,” one panelist noted. Families are [often not given sufficient information](#) about the services their children are receiving, why they are receiving services, and how they qualify to receive services. In some schools, there is no one on staff who speaks the family’s language—an obvious barrier to school–family communication. Perhaps more crucially, [families are often not included by schools as experts on their own children](#), to the detriment of students.

Siloing is performed on students as well. Another panelist noted: “We must normalize multilingualism and avoid lumping all students into broad categories like ‘EL’ or ‘students with disabilities,’ which risks overlooking the nuances of individual needs.” Indeed, our survey respondents reported serving students with more than a dozen disability categories who spoke more than a dozen different languages at home, suggesting the incredible diversity of needs that teachers of MLWDs may have to meet.

Families are often not included by schools as experts on their own children.

Recognizing families as essential partners leads to stronger collaboration and more responsive, student-centered supports for multilingual learners with disabilities.

For more information about partnering with multilingual families, see the [2023 SEAL-CSLX brief Centering Multilingual Families in California Community Schools](#).

KEY TAKEAWAY

Supporting multilingual learners with disabilities requires coordinated systems — not isolated expertise. When multilingual education, special education, and general education departments work together, students experience more coherent and effective support.





Create structures that promote multidisciplinary collaboration.

As schools shift to thinking of children holistically, a concomitant shift is required toward the understanding that no one classroom teacher can be solely responsible for meeting all their students' needs. Even though barriers such as lack of time, inadequate funding and resources, and insufficient PD can stand in the way of meaningful collaboration, schools should strive to create [“boundary-crossing” partnerships](#) in which classroom teachers, special education services, EL support services, student support services, administrators, and families work together to meet students' needs.

Such partnerships require both time and nurturing. Staff may be unaccustomed to collaborative practices, unsure of how to proceed, even resistant to welcoming new members onto their teams. Thus, building boundary-crossing teams first requires cultivating a collaborative school culture that honors and incorporates the perspectives of staff members and families so that buy-in and shared ownership are in place before changes begin. This work requires a strong commitment from administrators, who must provide protected time, protocols, and a unified instructional framework. Existing professional learning community or staff development structures can be modified to include collaborative opportunities like professional learning, communities of practice, and protocols for reviewing data to drive instruction as well as regular planning time. These structures should include both DL and English-medium teachers and paraprofessionals where relevant. [Co-teaching](#) should be supported and encouraged.

Build Structures That Support Collaboration

We recommend putting structures and protocols into place that aid collaboration across subfields in support of the understanding that no child fits into clearly defined categories. One such protocol is **Journey Mapping**, a tool to support the application of UDL by helping educators create a visual map of a student's experience across a lesson or series of lessons.

Journey Mapping encourages instructors to anticipate students' experiences and therefore to anticipate and address potential barriers. In consultation with SEAL, CAST has created [a guide to journey mapping for educators of multilingual learners](#). This updated publication guides educators to situate students in their cultural and linguistic context and prompts educators to attend to language as an asset.



RECOMMENDATION 2

Center Families in Collaborative Planning

Along the same lines, **culturally sustaining and responsive practices** are integral for building trusting relationships with students, families, and communities. Core to these practices is recognizing cultural and linguistic assets as foundational for effective support and inclusion. [Families' knowledge and expertise should be sought](#) for guiding task forces and advising on school policy as well as for collaborating to meet individual students' needs. To create IEPs that comprehensively reflect the cultural and linguistic needs and assets of students and

families, for example, collaboration should be put in place that includes ML specialists as well as families (see [CCSSO English Learners with Disabilities Guide](#)). Educators should **leverage families' understanding of their children**. [This kind of collaboration](#) aims to ensure that IEP goals are aligned with language goals and that the instruction that follows from IEPs is appropriate and responsive to students' cultural and linguistic assets as well as to their educational strengths (see the IEP example we created for this [brief](#)).

KEY ACTION

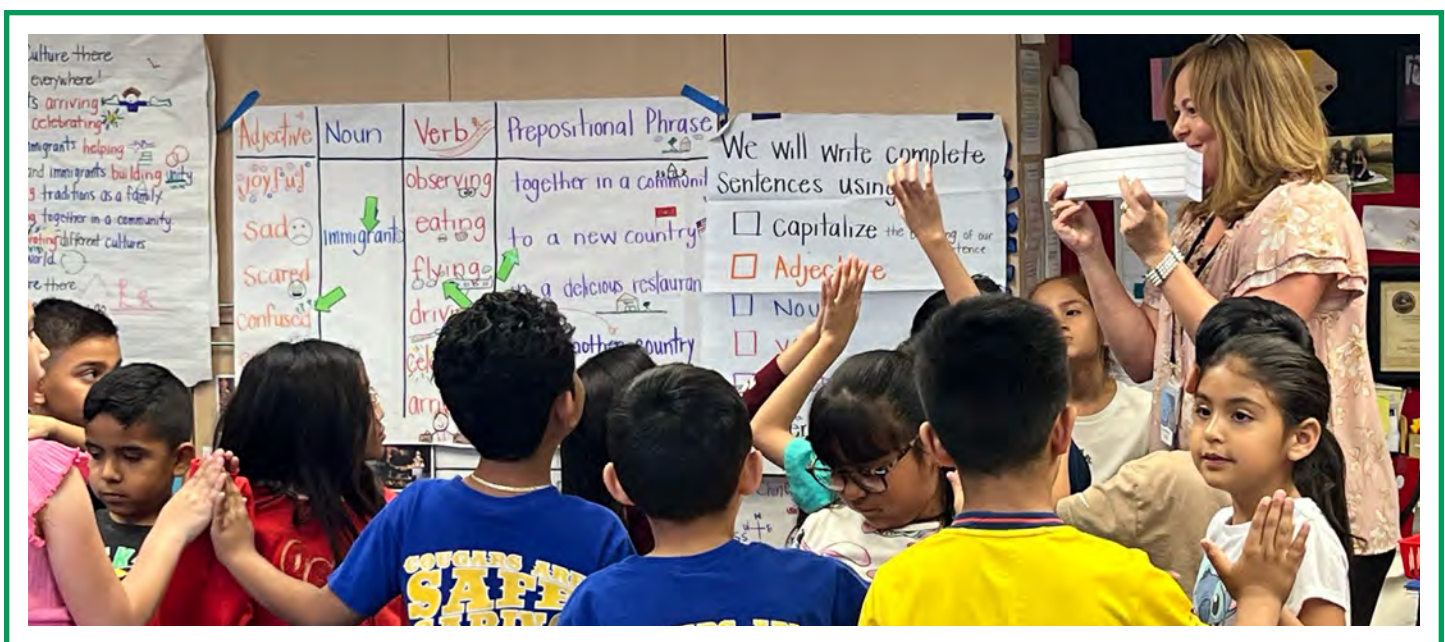
Build intentional structures that bring multilingual education, special education, general education, and families together as partners in supporting the whole child.



UP NEXT: VIGNETTE



See how Vista del Sol Elementary brings multidisciplinary collaboration to life through a team of educators and families working together to support one student's success.



Family collaboration



Family Perspective

Luis's mother shares that navigating the system feels intimidating and asks for resources in Spanish to better support her son at home.

Based on the recommendations of the Vista del Sol Elementary School task force, all staff engage in professional learning related to cultivating family partnerships. In a staff meeting, the principal asks everyone to [reflect](#) on their cultural beliefs and assumptions about families and brainstorm how they can build a more welcoming environment for multilingual families. Each staff member (including office staff, paraprofessionals, and support staff) is asked to identify a single focal student who is an MLWD. Each staff member participates in activities such as [student shadowing and empathy interviews](#) with their focal student. They also meet with their focal student's family, using prompts and a series of questions designed to strengthen positive home-school relationships and learn more about the student's [languages, strengths, and capabilities](#).

When Ms. Zavala meets with Luis's family, she learns that they immigrated from Guatemala when he was two years old. His family reports that his Spanish comprehension is strong at home, that he loves to sing and dance, and that he sometimes struggles with expression. Ms. Zavala shares that this is similar to what she has noticed at school. Luis's mother adds that they struggled with the decision to enroll him in the DL program in

kindergarten because one of his early intervention specialists at a different site had warned them that the DL program would overwhelm him with two languages. Their older neurotypical son thrived in the program, though, and she appreciated being able to communicate with the teachers in Spanish, so they decided to give it a try. Both parents are happy with Luis's progress in kindergarten, but they have been concerned that he has sometimes come home feeling overwhelmed. They are not sure if it's language or just the stress of being at school all day, but they want to find the most comfortable and supportive setting for their son. Ms. Zavala takes this opportunity to share a [Spanish version](#) of the [Myths and Research About Bilingual Development sheet](#) (with facts on how bilingualism benefits children, in contrast to common myths) and reassures them that although the road may be bumpy at times, research shows that SWDs are capable of and can better thrive when learning two languages.

Ms. Zavala reviews [Luis's IEP](#) with his parents and notes that the school is working on aligning his reading goals to the language of classroom instruction. His mother admits that she finds the whole process rather intimidating and feels helpless at times. She asks if there are any

IN PRACTICE VIGNETTE 2 | PART 1

resources available in Spanish that can help the family learn how to navigate the system and what else they can do at home to support Luis. Ms. Zavala promises to connect with the special education specialist to ask about resources in Spanish and to raise the idea of creating a local support group with the task force. In the meantime, she shares the telephone number of the [Innovations Collaborative Warmline from the Santa Clara County Office of Education](#), which offers

free support to families, educators, and community members working with children with disabilities.

True to her word, Ms. Zavala meets with the special education specialist the following afternoon and follows up with Luis's mother two days later to share translated advocacy materials. They establish a biweekly check-in schedule to review Luis's progress together.

PAUSE & REFLECT

Professional Learning Discussion

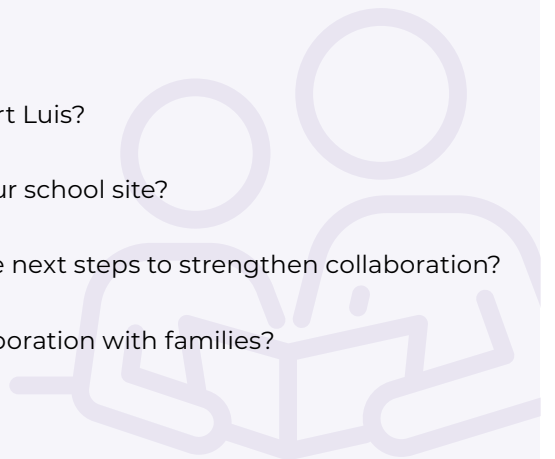
Discuss how your school or district builds authentic partnerships with families of multilingual learners with disabilities. Then see below for discussion questions for Vignette 2.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS VIGNETTE 2 | PART 1

Family collaboration

1. What did Ms. Zavala learn from the family that will help her support Luis?
2. How is collaboration with families structured and supported at your school site?
3. To what extent are you collaborating with families? What are some next steps to strengthen collaboration?
4. What tools and resources do you have in place to guide your collaboration with families? What do you need?
5. What are some resources you might share with families?



Collaborative Planning to Support Every Learner

THE TEAM

Ms. Zavala, First-grade DL Teacher

Ms. Kim, Special Education Specialist

Ms. Flores, ELD Specialist

Ms. Lund, First-grade English-medium Teacher

Ms. Gomez, Paraprofessional

Once Ms. Zavala has met with Luis's family, the new boundary-crossing first-grade team is ready to begin the instructional portion of their collaboration. Because Vista del Sol Elementary has only two classes per grade (one DL and one English-medium), teachers are accustomed to common planning at their grade level. Ms. Zavala has a close working relationship with the first-grade English-medium teacher, Ms. Lund. Indeed, Ms. Zavala often mentors Ms. Lund, a third-year teacher, to support her ELD practice, share language scaffolding strategies, and provide suggestions for cross-language connections.

Today, Ms. Zavala and Ms. Lund are joined by Ms. Flores, the ELD specialist; Ms. Kim, the special education specialist; and Ms. Gomez, the paraprofessional. Ms. Flores provides a mix of student pull-out and push-in services and is available for consultation and coaching with classroom teachers. This is the first time she has been invited to support teachers in curriculum planning. Ms. Kim taught third and fourth graders in a self-contained classroom during the first five years of her career. In her current position, she manages student IEPs and provides some push-in and pull-out support. She has never been invited to this kind of collaborative team either.

The principal has provided all of the new “boundary-crossing teams” with an agenda that calls for norm-setting at the first meeting. Both Ms. Kim and Ms. Flores express their excitement at

being asked to join the team, and Ms. Kim remarks that this is long overdue: She has, in the past, felt shut out of common planning and student data discussion. There is an uncomfortable moment as Ms. Zavala acknowledges that she has never been one to welcome others into her classroom. She admits that while she is eager to provide more support for her students, she is not thrilled with the idea of her teaching being “criticized.” After some discussion amid awkward silences, the team agrees to add norms around “presuming positive intentions,” “being honest and direct,” and “keeping the kids at the center.”

MS. ZAVALA: “This is going to be hard for me, but I don’t want anyone to think it’s because I don’t think they are good at their job or anything like that. It’s just hard to change. I’ve been doing this for a long time.”

The team members agree to keep their shared norms in mind as they move to the next agenda item. **During a recent staff meeting, team members had learned about Journey Mapping, a tool for Universal Design for Learning that helps teachers create a visual map of a student’s experience across a lesson or series of lessons.**

Journey Mapping encourages instructors to step into the student’s perspective and consider questions like the following: What might feel confusing in the lesson? What language is required for students to engage in the lesson? Where

might students feel confident or disconnected? This process enables teachers to anticipate and address barriers in a lesson's design.

The team decides to try Journey Mapping with Luis as their focal student. They map the first lesson of the upcoming six-week science unit on shadows and light, which both teachers agree has been one of the most challenging units to teach as well as for students to both understand and express their understanding. Ms. Zavala's first graders are at the 80/20 step in their language allocation (meaning 80% of instruction is in Spanish and 20% is in English), so this first lesson is in Spanish.

The lesson calls for students to warm up with exposure to relevant vocabulary by singing "[El baile de las sombras](#)." The students are then asked to play shadow tag. In this game, Ms. Zavala explains, students never touch; instead, they tag one another by moving so that their shadows touch. The goal is for students to notice that, regardless of the way they run or turn, their shadow always points in the same direction. By playing the game in the morning and again in the afternoon, students—guided by teacher questions and their own observations—can observe that their shadows mark the movement of the sun. Ms. Zavala and Ms. Lund hope to guide students to ask the question "What is a shadow?"

MS. ZAVALA: "I want students to be able to articulate—and perhaps write a sentence about—what happens to shadows based on where the sun is in the sky. For example, 'Si el sol está sobre mi cabeza, entonces mi sombra es corta y oscura' ('If the sun is overhead, then my shadow is short and dark')."

The team works collaboratively to complete [Luis's journey map](#). During this process, the team members have some big "aha" moments.

MS. ZAVALA: "I'm kind of shocked by how much I've been relying on the fact that I'm using home language as the sole language support for my students. Going through the lessons this way, I'm realizing how much complex academic language I'm asking my students to use—even for an activity I picked because I thought it would be simple and engaging. I can see now how overwhelmed Luis might be: I'm asking him to produce language for collaboration, understand and articulate rules, have some scientific vocabulary, and even, I'm realizing, engage with cause-and-effect language. The other thing I'm noticing is how much I rely on collaboration, both partner and group. I know from my training on MLs that this is an excellent way to help kids build language, but I'm realizing that some students, including Luis, probably need more scaffolding and other ways to express themselves. I'm thinking about not only the tag game and how overwhelmed he may get but also about the team sketching activity afterwards. I can anticipate him having trouble negotiating with his peers about what to draw."

MS. KIM: "First, I want to say that I'm so happy you are doing an extended lesson like this. You have the kids engaged in rich language with the song—but it also previews some of the learning in the game without being too heavy-handed or directing their thinking too much. I love that the lesson is so hands-on and inquiry-based and fun and immersive. I have to be honest: Even though we know how kids learn best when they are immersed in rich content and have the chance to explore a topic deeply, too often I see kids with disabilities doing a lot of rote activities focused on a single skill. I also love that you are incorporating drawing and collaboration. While we definitely want to be attentive to building skills, we need to make sure we do it in a way that doesn't detract from the joy of learning. I know Luis really well. He shines when he has an opportunity to show what he knows through drawing."

MS. KIM: “Having said all that, I want to interject one note of caution. Another thing I see is that teachers tend to focus heavily on behavioral skills for some of our neurodiverse kiddos. I know it comes from a good place, but in addition to providing behavioral supports for Luis, **we need to make sure we are also focusing on his language development—and not just in English.** It is written into his IEP that he will need language support in both languages.”

Ms. Zavala’s eyes widen.

MS. ZAVALA: “Yes, thank you! That goes back to what I was saying earlier. I sometimes forget that I need to provide language support in Spanish because it is the home language for most of my students. But of course, Luis needs that support, and so do many of my other kids. Yes, let’s do a social support and an academic language support.”

MS. FLORES: “OK, language supports are my area of expertise. I’ve been wanting to implement this in our classrooms, and here is a great place to start. I don’t think any of us fully realized that the writing task we have students engage in at the end is actually a cause-and-effect task that requires specific language like: ‘If the sun _____, then my shadow _____.’ What if we commit to focusing on the language function of cause and effect during this unit? You could provide students with some sentence frames to help them process their thoughts for the final part of the lesson. That could be one of the goals for the lesson: to get the students using cause-and-effect language to process their understanding of the impact of the sun’s place in the sky on shadows. You could use frames like ‘If _____, then _____’ or

‘Because of _____, _____ happened.’ So Ms. Zavala would write her frames in Spanish and Ms. Lund in English.”

MS. KIM: “And then the social accommodation could be explicit practice around taking turns, asking for what you want, and making suggestions. **The whole class would practice. It’s not just Luis who could benefit from this.**”

MS. ZAVALA: “I love this. I’ll provide picture cards for Luis for the songs to help him with the vocabulary. Actually, I think other kids would benefit from that as well. Maybe I can share them ahead of time, and we can practice looking at the card and saying the word. Like a picture of a lamp or the sun for *iluminación* (illumination). So overall, I’m going to implement these three supports into my lesson: picture cards for vocabulary, social sentence frames, and cause-and-effect sentence frames. And then I’ll come back with my observations and Luis’s feedback.”

MS. LUND: “I would love to come observe you, if possible. I can check in and see if I can get coverage. Then we could talk the lesson through together.”

Ms. Zavala takes a deep breath and smiles.

MS. ZAVALA: “This is difficult for me, but yes, of course, you are welcome. Just don’t be too hard on me.”

Ms. Lund smiles back.

MS. LUND: “You know you are a mentor to me. I’ll be there to learn ... and learn together, I hope.”

The team agrees to meet again in two weeks.

PAUSE & REFLECT

Professional Learning Discussion

Discuss how your school or district creates opportunities for educators to learn with and from one another. Turn to the next page for discussion questions for Vignette 2.



Collaborative Planning to Support Every Learner

1. What was the value of having these cross-department teams collaborate? (Be specific.)
2. What does Journey Mapping allow the team to see about Luis's needs that they might have missed otherwise? What specific instructional and behavioral supports does Journey Mapping offer?
3. How does Ms. Zavala alter her lesson plan after consideration of the Journey Map and in consultation with her colleagues?
4. Why is it important that Ms. Kim be at this meeting? Ms. Flores? Ms. Lund? Ms. Gomez?
5. Is staff collaboration valued at your site?
6. When you collaborate, who is invited and why?
7. How can you improve your collaboration?
8. Have you participated in a process like Journey Mapping to improve your focus on removing barriers for students in the classroom? If so, how did it go? Do you think journey mapping with one of your MLWDs as a focal student would be helpful?





Teachers require access to high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive instructional materials as well as the agency and expertise to adapt them to meet the needs of their students.

According to a [2019 report](#), only 17% of teachers nationwide felt well prepared to teach students with “mild to moderate learning disabilities” (p.11). (This study did not ask teachers specifically about MLWDs.) Even our survey respondents, California elementary school educators who have received extensive PD on meeting the needs of MLs, lack confidence in their ability to meet the needs of MLWDs, with only 28% reporting that they feel “very confident.” This lack of confidence may stem in part from a lack of training, as noted previously. Indeed, our panelists observed that from teacher preparation programs through in-service PD, teachers (and administrators) do not receive sufficient training on addressing the needs of MLs, SWDs, or MLWDs.

The feeling of being underprepared may also connect more generally to a larger problem: systemic lack of access to culturally and linguistically responsive high-quality materials alongside the lack of agency granted to teachers to adapt and adopt curricula with intentionality. While there is general agreement about the [connection between high-quality instructional materials \(HQIMs and improved student outcomes](#), such materials can be [inadequate for MLs, lack cultural and linguistic relevance](#), be unavailable in home languages, or not be appropriately scaffolded for SWDs.

Summarizing comments made by many of our panelists, one panelist noted: “As soon as a child has challenges, we go to decontextualized, behaviorist interventions—kids with special needs are meaning makers, they need more engagement, more chances to make meaning, not fewer.” Relying on “decontextualized” interventions, such as stand-alone scripted phonics exercises, denies MLWDs the opportunity to explore rich, content-based materials or to immerse themselves in inquiry-based experiences guided by flexible and responsive supports. Teachers

“... [but] kids with special needs are meaning makers, they need more engagement, more chances to make meaning, not fewer.”

— Expert Panelist Member

need to be able to act on their deep knowledge of what their MLWDs need, rather than be pushed to use interventions that may not reflect students’ learning styles and classroom objectives. So while teachers certainly benefit from highly specialized training in meeting a range of specific needs, it is equally—if not more—important for administrators to create the conditions for teachers to practice professional agency when selecting from a range of HQIMs and a concrete toolkit of powerful instructional practices that affirm students’ languages, identities, and backgrounds.

Just as MLWDs deserve access to rich, relevant, and meaningful learning experiences, so too do their teachers deserve flexibility, support, and agency in crafting those learning experiences.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Teachers need both high-quality instructional materials and the professional agency to adapt them to the strengths, languages, and needs of multilingual learners with disabilities.





Give teachers easier access to HQIMs, a toolkit of pedagogical practices, targeted PD, and the agency and support to use their expertise to make pedagogical decisions.

When asked to dream about the ideal classroom for an MLWD, one of our panelists said: “UDL plus ... when you have a high-quality classroom where language learning is intentionally infused throughout the day, that will be a classroom where kids with language and disability needs will thrive.”

High-Quality Materials Are Only Part of the Solution

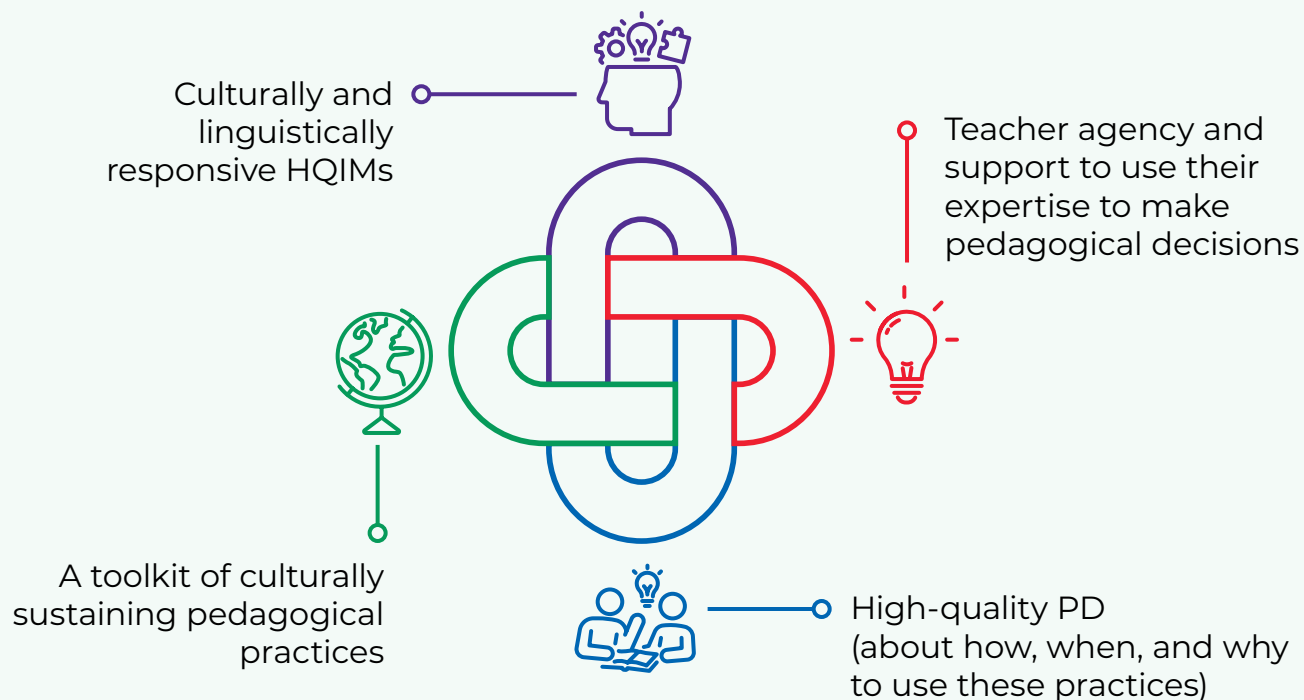
For instructional materials to be truly high quality for all, they must be accessible and relevant. However, no adopted curriculum can be responsive on its own, in part because no curriculum can anticipate the complexity and variety of all student populations. MLWDs thrive when they have teachers who respond to their needs by actively anticipating barriers and providing flexible scaffolding. To be responsive, teachers need not just HQIMs but also access to high-leverage pedagogical practices as well as a deep understanding of how and when to use them. Many panelists noted the significant degree of overlap between high-leverage practices in the fields of [special education](#) and [multilingual education](#). They added that students and teachers thrive when practitioners are empowered to use the [Multi-Tiered System of Supports](#) (MTSS) as well as their knowledge of their own students to adapt curricular materials to remove barriers and scaffold learning. Approaches such as [TrUDL](#), which [combine UDL with a translanguaging approach](#), can also support teachers with developing [classrooms that are responsive to students’ multifaceted needs](#).

Professional Learning Strengthens Instructional Decision-Making

PD that helps teachers internalize research about and best practices for MLWDs and that provides access to culturally and linguistically responsive high-leverage practices—along with reflection tools like Journey Mapping—can empower educators to make the kinds of flexible, informed choices that meet the needs of their students. When these practices are paired with the collaborative practice of examining lessons for barriers (e.g., through Journey Mapping and needs-responsive ELD) in addition to ongoing formative and data-driven decision-making, teachers sharpen their awareness of—and therefore, their ability to address and remove—potential barriers. In DL settings, collaborative planning to drive instruction can be critical because it offers educators the opportunity to analyze student production in both languages side by side.

RECOMMENDATION 3

A high-quality classroom is built through the combination of four essential elements:



KEY ACTION

Equip teachers with the materials, professional learning, and instructional flexibility they need to make responsive lesson planning and decisions for multilingual learners with disabilities.



UP NEXT: VIGNETTE

See how a team uses high-quality instructional materials, responsive instructional practices, and professional judgment to adapt instruction for a multilingual learner with disabilities.



Reflection and Responsive Teaching

When the team comes back together, Ms. Zavala shares that she had begun her lesson more deliberately than usual

MS. ZAVALA: “Rather than simply singing ‘El baile de las sombras’ with the class, I focused on comprehension and access. Once they had sung it through a few times to practice saying the words, I pointed to the words of the song on the poster and asked if there were any words that students were unfamiliar with. One child, a native English speaker, pointed to *sombras*, so I gave a quick explanation while sketching a picture of a person with their shadow stretching out behind them. The students chorally called, ‘Sombra!’ Then I circled the word *iluminó*. ‘Does anyone know what this means?’ I asked. When no one answered, I explained that it means something is lit up. I showed a picture of a flower illuminated by the late afternoon sun. I then asked the students to sing again, and this time, we added gestures for each line of the song. I also shared with students that *iluminar* and *to illuminate* are cognates. I noticed that Luis was fully engaged in singing and moving, and when I asked for his feedback after the lesson, he shared that he really liked the picture of *la flor iluminada* and that it helped him remember the word.”

MS. ZAVALA: “I feel like something clicked when I started to think through the lens of ‘What does Luis need?’ rather than ‘How do I accommodate for ability needs and language needs in the abstract?’ **And the crazy thing is the whole class was singing and making the gestures.** I also noticed them using words like *illuminated* and *shadow* throughout the rest of the lesson.”

MS. KIM: “How did Luis do with the practice sentence frames?”

MS. ZAVALA: “The social ones were very helpful. I shared them with the class beforehand and

modeled using a fishbowl experience where I pretended to be a frustrated student who wanted the red pencil. I wrote the sentence: ‘May I please have _____?’ Students offered other stems like ‘It’s my turn’ and ‘I like your drawing.’ Many of my students aren’t reading much yet, so I added some sketches. And I saw Luis referencing them when he was working on his sketch with his group.

MS. ZAVALA: “The sketching was really helpful for him, too. I could see that he understood the point of the tag game: that the direction of the sunlight creates the shadows. However, the cause-and-effect sentence frames at the end of the lesson were kind of a bust. I shared the frames on sentence strips: ‘If _____, then _____.’ I wanted the kids to draw conclusions about what happens when the sun is in different places in the sky. I offered them a chance to engage in a think-pair-share first, prior to sharing with the whole class, but it was the same kids raising their hands over and over. Luis and some of my other students were quiet. I don’t think they were quite ready for them.”

MS. FLORES: “That’s such a good observation. I think we need to pivot here and be responsive. Our initial idea about how to support Luis was a good start, but we can do better. I know the lesson was in Spanish, but I’ve been wanting to lead some in-house PD around [designated ELD \(dELD\)](#) and connecting it to [integrated ELD \(iELD\)](#). One of the most powerful things we can do in dELD is prepare students for the vocabulary and language structures they will see during whole-group instruction (iELD). I think Luis would have benefited from practicing cause-and-effect language before the whole-class lesson. You could have done it with familiar content, like: ‘If I sleep in, then I’ll be late for school.’”

MS. ZAVALA: “Yeah, that’s a bit tricky for me. I’m teaching in Spanish, so it doesn’t make sense

IN PRACTICE VIGNETTE 3

to front-load the language in that way in English. What if I did this work with the whole class? We could practice cause-and-effect language with familiar content together to give the kids some exposure so that when they do it with the shadow content, it wouldn't be the first time they are seeing it. Not all kids need the extra practice, but it would definitely be useful for many of them." She pauses. "But what would I do for dELD?"

MS. FLORES: "Could you do a lesson where you help them make some cross-language connections? What if you sang the shadows song in English and helped them find cognates with the Spanish version, so they can see how what they know in Spanish can help them with English?"

MS. ZAVALA: "I like that, and cause-and-effect language works the same way in both languages. The words are different, but the concept is the same. I could be really explicit with my English language learners that once they know how to do cause-and-effect sentence frames in Spanish, they can also do them in English. We could look at what is the same and what is different. Yeah, I really like that."

MS. KIM: "This is great. And when I work with Luis on reading, I can stay with the shadows and light theme. That way, we can make connections to what he is learning in class."

MS. LUND: "Something I was thinking as I observed, is around doing more to bring students' cultural and linguistic identities into the unit. I learned a lot from Ms. Zavala about bringing in home language all the time, and—"

MS. ZAVALA: "Well, actually, not all my students speak only Spanish at home. **Some are trilingual. So that's an important thing for me to remember.**"

MS. LUND: "Oh yeah, I hadn't even thought of that! I also have many languages and cultures in my classroom. I think we do a good job at the beginning of the year to highlight the languages students speak and making sure our library has books that represent their cultural and linguistic

identities, but I want us to think more about infusing that into the science unit. I have some Filipino students in my class this year, and I was thinking we could incorporate a video of Filipino shadow puppetry into the beginning of the unit to help them start thinking about what shadows can do and how they work. There are some incredible dance groups who make these amazing shapes with their bodies, and then the shadows are projected onto a screen."

MS. ZAVALA: "The kids would love that! And it would help provide another access point into the content. We should add the idea of cultural and linguistic relevance to the journey map when we work with your student."

MS. KIM: "I want to remind us that there is no way we are going to be able to journey map every lesson for every student. But look how much our exploration of one student for one lesson has given us. We have a new way of approaching our classrooms. **This kind of collaboration—thinking together about where the potential access and linguistic barriers in the lesson are—can really help us see our teaching and our classrooms differently.**"

The team agrees to meet again to practice Journey Mapping in Ms. Lund's classroom, to continue their focus on creating coherence between dELD and iELD, and to continue Journey Mapping periodically throughout the year to ensure that their attention doesn't stray from removing barriers—including linguistic barriers—from their classrooms.

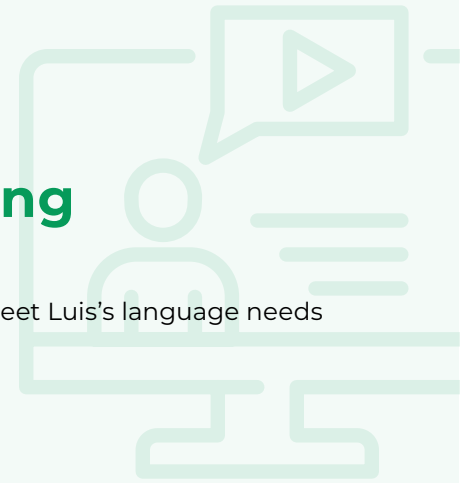
PAUSE & REFLECT

Professional Learning Discussion



Use the discussion questions on the following pages to reflect on how these ideas could strengthen instruction in your own classroom, school, or district. Then explore the sample Journey Map to apply these practices to your own planning.

Reflection and Responsive Teaching



1. What scaffolds and supports did Ms. Zavala use to adapt her lesson to meet Luis's language needs and disability needs?
2. How did meeting Luis's needs improve access for the whole class?
3. How did Ms. Kim (special education specialist) and Ms. Flores (ELD specialist) contribute to lesson planning?
4. What are some next steps for Ms. Zavala and the team?
5. What kind of PD would help Ms. Zavala (and the staff at Vista del Sol) continue to improve their practice?
6. What do you think of Ms. Lund's idea to add cultural and linguistic relevance to the Journey Map?
7. How prepared are teachers at your school to meet the instructional needs of MLWDs?
8. Does your adopted curriculum account for the needs of MLWDs?
9. How confident are you adapting your curriculum to meet the needs of MLWDs?
10. Do you include cross-language connections or other forms of translanguageing as language supports for your MLs?
11. How does support staff provide interventions that are connected to the language and content that students are exposed to in the general education classroom? How could this be strengthened?
12. What kinds of PD or tools would you need to remove barriers and add scaffolds and supports to your curricula successfully?
13. Are you providing your MLWDs (and all students) with rich, immersive, inquiry-based experiences?
14. How familiar are you with High-Leverage Pedagogical Practices for Multilingual Learners?
15. How familiar are you with High-Leverage Pedagogical Practices for Special Education?
16. Do a crosswalk between these two types of practices. Where do you see overlap? Divergence?
17. Are your MLWDs receiving high quality Integrated and Designated ELD? If not, what are some next steps?



Conclusion

Building Systems That Support the Whole Child

If we are to improve outcomes for MLWDs, we must create schools that collaborate across stakeholders—from classroom teachers, staff, and administrators to families and communities—to centralize the needs of the whole child. Classroom teachers and their students thrive when multilingual, culturally sustaining supports and services wrap around them. Educators need access to culturally and linguistically sustaining HQIMs and PD that are designed to meet the needs of this important group of students. Most schools and districts already have some activities and structures in place to support MLWDs, but many are seeking more effective approaches.

Continuing the Work Together

As SEAL continues learning alongside educators, families, researchers, and partners, we join you in committing to strengthening multilingual, culturally sustaining, and inclusive learning environments where multilingual learners with disabilities can thrive. We hope the strategies, vignettes, and resources given in this brief provide useful guidance to educators who want to enhance their ability to meet the needs of MLWDs. Please share this brief widely and use it in your school community.

We encourage you to share this brief with colleagues, use it to spark professional learning and discussion, and adapt its strategies to strengthen support for multilingual learners with disabilities in your own classrooms, schools, and districts.



APPENDIX A

Sample Journey Map: Introduction to Shadow Lesson, Taught in Spanish

Journey Mapping a Lesson

Use this map to explore students' learning experience over time. It helps to visualize the key moments and barriers, and to identify patterns, uncover hidden challenges, and consider what supports might remove obstacles and promote growth.

LESSON GOALS

Content

Students will be able to observe and track how shadows change position throughout the day by playing an outdoor game and working in pairs to create labeled sketches that include the position of both the sun and the shadows.

Academic Language

Students will be able to describe the sun's effect on shadows during the whole-class discussion by using basic scientific vocabulary (direction, pointed, away from, shadow, light) and structured cause-and-effect sentence frames (e.g., "If the sun is..., then the shadow...").

Social Language

Students will be able to take turns and negotiate play with a partner during the morning and afternoon activities by using cooperative language frames such as "Your turn," "You go next," or "Can I...?".

Activities & Methods

What will learners and educators do in the lesson?

Students gather on the carpet and sing the shadows song .	The teacher shares the rules for the game. Students turn to their partners and share the rules.	Students play the game in the morning in the schoolyard.	Students work in pairs to make a labeled sketch of the game and are guided to think about which way the shadows pointed. Include the sun in the sketch.	The teacher reminds students of the rules and results from the morning.	Students play the game after lunch in the yard.	Students work in the same pairs to sketch the afternoon game with the sun.	Class debrief: What did you notice about shadows across the day? The teacher guides students toward writing a sentence about the effect of the sun on shadows. The teacher takes notes on a big piece of paper.
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Materials & Tools

What materials will be available?

Markers, chart paper			Colored pencils, paper			Colored pencils, paper	Markers, chart paper
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Language Demands

What language skills are required?

☐ Reading ☒ Listening ☒ Speaking ☐ Writing	☐ Reading ☒ Listening ☒ Speaking ☐ Writing	☐ Reading ☒ Listening ☒ Speaking ☐ Writing	☒ Reading ☒ Listening ☒ Speaking ☒ Writing	☐ Reading ☒ Listening ☐ Speaking ☐ Writing	☐ Reading ☒ Listening ☒ Speaking ☐ Writing	☒ Reading ☒ Listening ☒ Speaking ☒ Writing	☒ Reading ☒ Listening ☒ Speaking ☒ Writing
Complex academic vocabulary	Repeating back a multistep process	"Tag"; "you're it"; "time out"; "I'm not playing"; "I noticed"	Language of collaboration: "Your turn"; "you go next"; "can I ...?"	Remembering and repeating back a multistep process	"Tag"; "you're it"; "time out"; "I'm not playing"; "I noticed"	Language of collaboration: "Your turn"; "you go next"; "can I ...?"	Cause-and-effect language: "If the sun is overhead, then ..."
Pronouncing the words and connecting them to gestures			Scientific language: direction, pointed, away from, shadow, light			Scientific language: direction, pointed, away from, shadow, light	

Language Supports

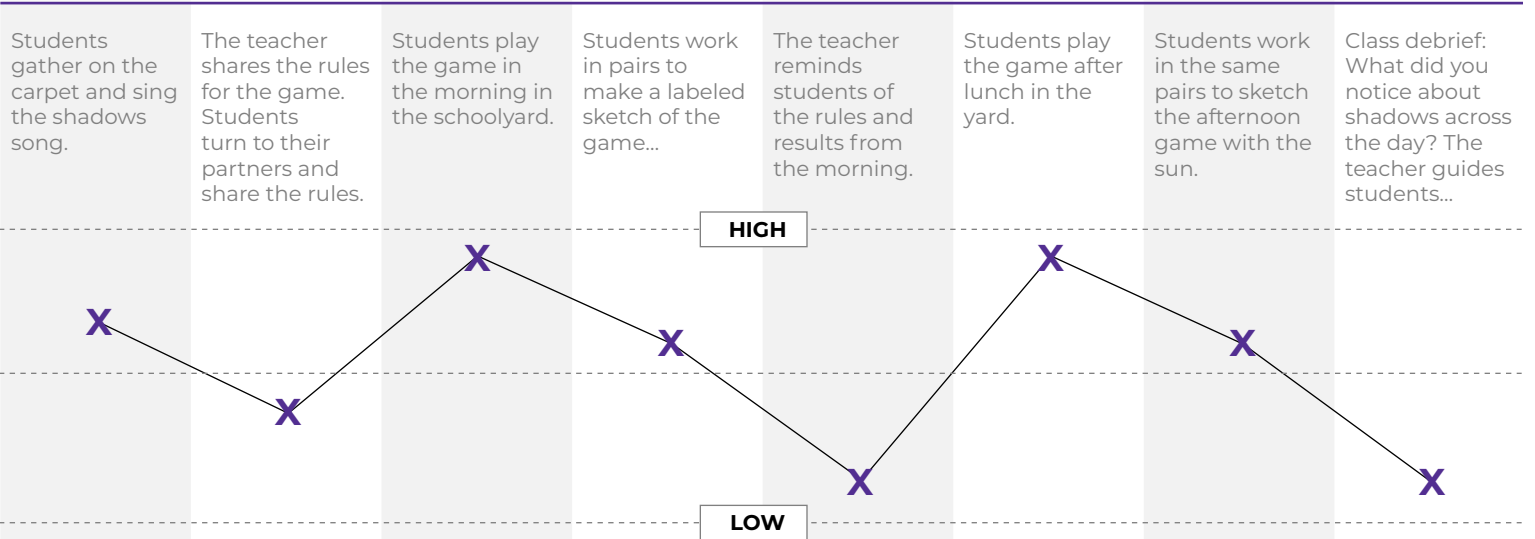
What language and vocabulary supports are available?

Home language	Home language	Home language	Peer partner support Home language	Home language	Home language	Peer partner support Home language	Home language
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Journey Map template courtesy of CAST (cast.org). Student persona and analysis developed by SEAL.

Learner Engagement

How engaged is the learner in service of the learning goal?



If engagement is low, why might this be?

He loves to sing, but it can be hard to focus during whole-class gatherings, and academic discourse may be challenging for him.	He likes rules but may have some anxiety around following them.		He loves drawing but can find it difficult to work with peers.	He has difficulty focusing during whole-class carpet.			He has difficulty articulating this kind of academic discourse.
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Possible Barriers

What are some potential design barriers to engagement?

Lots of complex vocabulary.	Lots of information to absorb.	It can be challenging for him when he is "caught" or "tagged." He sometimes has trouble following the "unwritten" rules of play.	Turn-taking and peer negotiation can be challenging.	It is hard to focus and absorb information passively.	It can be challenging for him when he is "caught" or "tagged." He sometimes has trouble following the "unwritten" rules of play.	Turn-taking and peer negotiation can be challenging. Lots of academic and social language	Challenging academic language. It can be hard to focus in whole-group activities.
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Minimize Barriers

What options could be offered to minimize barriers?

Front-load some of the vocabulary; practice having him say it.	Provide a written guide to the rules with pictures.	Role-play what to do when you are tagged or get mad.	Option to draw on his own Strategic pairing Sentence frames for collaboration Premade labels	Elicit what he knows beforehand in a small group.	Role-play what to do when you are tagged or get mad.	Front-load language of collaboration.	Use lots of sketches when writing up what students know.
Provide vocabulary picture cards to make concepts more concrete.	The teacher models the game with two students ahead of time and shares some language.	Front-load some of the play vocabulary.	Show students how to find scientific language in the song they learned earlier.	Provide vocabulary or pictures to make concepts more concrete.	Front-load some of the play vocabulary.	Front-load scientific vocabulary	Provide sentence frames for cause and effect.
Attach gestures to some of the new vocabulary.						Provide written sentence frames and vocabulary.	Front-load vocabulary.

Journey Map template courtesy of CAST (cast.org). Student persona and analysis developed by SEAL.

Glossary of Terms

biliteracy (or multiliteracy). The ability to speak, read, and write in more than one language.

culturally responsive teaching. An instructional approach that leverages the cultural and linguistic experiences of students to make learning more relevant and effective.

designated English language development (dELD). Instruction provided during a time set aside in the regular school day to focus instruction on the state-adopted English language development (ELD) standards to assist English learner (EL) students in developing critical English language skills necessary for academic content learning in English.

English learner (EL). A student who enrolls in a California school beginning in any grade from transitional kindergarten through Grade 12 with a home language other than English and with levels of English proficiency that indicate they require programs and services until they are English proficient.

home language. A language spoken in a student's family or home as reported on the Home Language Survey.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP). A written plan for each child who receives special education services. The IEP includes the following: statements of the present level of the child's functioning, annual goals, specific educational services needed, dates of service, a description of the recommended degree of participation in regular education programs, and procedures for evaluating the child's progress. The IEP must be signed by the child's parents (or legal guardians) and the educational personnel working with the child, including the general education teacher.

integrated English language development (iELD). Instruction in which the state-adopted ELD standards are used in tandem with the state-adopted academic content standards. Integrated ELD includes specially designed academic instruction in English.

long-term English learner. An EL student who is enrolled in any of Grades 6–12, inclusive, has been enrolled in schools in the United States for six years or more, and has remained at the same English language proficiency (ELP) level for two or more consecutive prior years, or has regressed to a lower ELP level, as determined by the ELPAC.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). An integrated, comprehensive framework for local educational agencies (LEAs) that aligns academic, behavioral, and social-emotional learning in a fully integrated system of support for the benefit of all students. MTSS offers the potential to create systematic change through intentional integration of services and supports to quickly identify and meet the needs of all students. Instruction is categorized into three tiers:

- **Tier 1—Universal Support.** Evidence-based practices that are accessible by *all* students where the integration and implementation of Universal Design for Learning and differentiated instruction support academic, behavior, social-emotional, *and* mental health development.
- **Tier 2—Supplemental Support.** Additional services are provided to some students to support academic, behavior, social-emotional, and/or mental health through the integration and

NOTE: Definitions adapted from the California Department of Education.

implementation of Universal Design for Learning and differentiated instruction. Supplemental supports are provided in addition to, not in place of, universal supports and available to all students regardless of identification for specialized services based on need through the use of diagnostic and progress monitoring assessments.

- **Tier 3—Intensified Support.** Targeted supports are provided to students with greater needs to support academic, behavior, social-emotional, and/or mental health through the integration and implementation of Universal Design for Learning and differentiated instruction. Intensified supports are provided in addition to, not in place of, universal supports, via specialized services providers, and available to all students regardless of identification for specialized services based on need through the use of diagnostic and progress monitoring assessments.

multilingual learner. A student who is actively developing proficiency in multiple languages, including children whose primary or home language is not English. For more information on how we use this term in this brief, see [Endnote 1](#).

newcomer student. A foreign-born student who has recently arrived in the United States.

translanguaging. A student's use of their full language repertoire, or all of their knowledge about language, in classroom learning without separation of the languages.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL). An approach to building instruction that is accessible for all learners. It aims to give all students an equal opportunity to access and make steady progress toward California grade-level content standards regardless of the students' language acquisition levels, disability, or other learning needs.

APPENDIX C

Resources

Resources for families:

Center for Parent Information and Resources, <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/>

La sopa de la abuela, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLFnGrWhzeGGC9eF0nIt92cfnhqZIKtF>

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, Family Toolkits, Chapter 3—Other Educational Programs and Services for Your Child, <https://ncela.ed.gov/educator-support/toolkits/family-toolkit>

Seeds of Partnership—Family Engagement and Professional Development in Special Education, <https://www.seedsofpartnership.org/>

Warmline Family Resource Center, <https://warmlinefrc.org/what-we-do/special-education-fec.html>

Resources for educators and support staff:

Arraya, UC-CSU Collaborative for Neuroscience, Diversity, and Learning, <https://www.arrayalearning.org/>

Biography-Driven Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, <https://coe.k-state.edu/academics/departments/center-for-intercultural-multilingual-advocacy/biography-crt/>

Bookshare, <https://www.bookshare.org/>

CAST, Supporting Multilingual Learners Through Journey Mapping, <https://www.cast.org/connect/events/udl-con-2026-free-webinar-supporting-multilingual-learners-through-journey-mapping/>

Content-Based Second Language Instruction, <https://archive.carla.umn.edu/cobalt/modules/strategies/gorganizers/EDITABLE.HTML>

Colorín colorado, Special Education and English Language Learners, <https://www.colorincolorado.org/school-support/special-education-and-english-language-learners>

Creating Inclusive Classrooms for Emergent Bilinguals With Disabilities: Strategy Handbook, https://www.canva.com/design/DAGqLL2vtMI/Qfgz44_aFXy2G8Ey8XTOgw/edit

The Dual Capacity Framework for Family–School Partnerships <https://www.dualcapacity.org/>

Interventions and Supports to Ensure That Multilingual Preschoolers With Disabilities Can Thrive, <https://starnet2and6.org/interventions-and-supports-2/>

Iris Center, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University, <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/>

Teaching Bilinguals (Even if You’re Not One) video series, <https://www.cuny-nysieb.org/teaching-bilinguals-webseries/>

Understood, <https://www.understood.org/en>

WestEd, When an English Learner Struggles Academically: Telling the Difference Between Second Language Acquisition and a Possible Learning Disability, <https://www.wested.org/resource/when-an-english-learner-struggles-academically/>

Resources for support staff and administrators:

California Practitioners' Guide for Educating English Learners With Disabilities, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/ac/documents/ab2785guide.pdf>

CAST, The UDL Guidelines, <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>

Center for Applied Linguistics, Welcoming Bilingual Learners With Disabilities Into Dual Language Programs, <https://www.cal.org/publications/welcoming-bilingual-learners-with-disabilities-into-dual-language-programs/>

Determining Special Education Eligibility of English Learners Practitioner Brief, <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/northeast/pdf/DeterminingSpecialEducationEligibilityofEnglishLearners.pdf>

Ideology, Pedagogy, Access, and Equity: A Critical Examination of Dual Language Educators, https://www.academia.edu/23928926/Ideology_Pedagogy_Access_and_Equity_A_Critical_Examination

Improving Outcomes for Multilingual Students With Exceptional Needs, <https://multilingual-swd.org/>

Multitiered System of Supports for English Learners, <https://mtss4els.org/>

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, Chapter 6—Addressing English Learners With Disabilities, <https://ncela.ed.gov/educator-support/toolkits/english-learner-toolkit>

Operationalizing High-Quality Dual Language Programming From the Early Years to the Early Grades, <https://cep.asu.edu/sites/g/files/litvpz916/files/2024-04/DLI-quality-indicators-032924.pdf>

Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures, Chapter 10—Dual Language Learners and English Learners With Disabilities, <https://www.nationalacademies.org/read/24677/chapter/12>

Systems Improvement and Equity for English Learners and Dually Identified Students infographic, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mHQYGgPhGAj0Q1TK8O4Mdlf_Flzc3rt-/view

U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, Equal Access to Elementary and Secondary Education for Students Who Are English Learners With Disabilities, <https://www.ed.gov/media/document/ocr-el-disability-factsheet-108406.pdf>

WIDA, Supporting Multilingual Learners with Disabilities, <https://wida.wisc.edu/teach/disabilities>

Endnotes

¹ *Multilingual learner* is an asset-based term that recognizes the full linguistic repertoires of students from homes where at least one language other than English is spoken and who are developing English proficiency. While we prefer the term *multilingual learner* for its focus on linguistic assets, we acknowledge that it is not a legal term or designation. When necessary for clarity, we use the legal term *English learner (EL)* to refer to MLs in elementary or secondary schools who are officially classified as ELs based on state criteria.

² While we use the legal term *disability* in this brief, we affirm the importance of recognizing the assets that every student brings to the classroom. The growing use of terms such as *neurodiverse* encourages educators to leverage the assets of students with different abilities.

³ Upon entering elementary school, many MLs are officially classified as ELs based on an English proficiency test. Some of these children enter elementary school already having a designated disability; many others will be identified as having a disability in late elementary or middle school.

⁴ We are deeply grateful to the following teachers and coaches for opening their classrooms to us and providing valuable insights for this brief: Veronica Altamirano, Lucia Arroyo, Sandra Lopez, Linette Miranda, Katia Berrocal Perlacios, Kerry Sommer, and Karin Vieira.

⁵ A sincere thank you to our expert panel: Dr. Lillian Durán, Professor of Special Education and Clinical Sciences at the University of Oregon; Graciela Garcia-Torres, Director of Multilingual Education, Sacramento County Office of Education; Izela Jacobo, Senior Director of Multilingual Education and Global Achievement, San Diego County Office of Education; Vanessa Lopez, Coordinator of Inclusionary Practices at Imperial County SELPA, Project MuSE; Dr. Edith Mancera de González, Coordinator of Impact and Belonging, Santa Clara County of Education; Celeste Martinez, PhD candidate, University of Texas at San Antonio; Dr. Melina Melgarejo, Assistant Professor, Department of Special Education and Department of Dual Language and English Learner Education, San Diego State University; Lisa Moncayo, Special Education Coordinator and Compliance Officer, Hacienda La Puente Unified School District; Dr. Luis Pérez, Senior Director of Disability and Accessibility, CAST; Cristina Sanchez-Lopez, Co-president, Paridad Education Consulting; Andrea Soto, Resource Specialist Program teacher, Davis Joint Unified School District; and Dr. Xigrid Soto-Boykin, Director and Research Assistant Professor, Arizona State University.

⁶ *Ableist beliefs* are the assumptions that able-bodied and neurotypical people are the “normal” standard and that having a disability makes a person inherently inferior or less capable. *Deficit orientations* occur when certain student characteristics or designations, such as MLWD, are framed primarily as “problems” rather than recognizing that each student brings assets that can be leveraged to support their learning.