

What We're Learning About Multilingual Literacy Across California's UPK-3 Landscape

These emerging findings reflect recurring themes across stakeholder interviews and are being tested and strengthened alongside research, policy, and market evidence.

EMERGING FINDINGS

What California Leaders Are Telling Us

30+

California education
leaders & practitioners

Interviewees spanned county offices of education, districts, state agencies, advocacy organizations, higher education, research, professional learning, philanthropy, and early learning and family organizations.

Their perspectives were considered alongside published and market research and an internal review of instructional materials.

1

GREATER COHERENCE CAN STRENGTHEN LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION

California has developed substantial policy, guidance, tools, and resources for early literacy. Across interviews, leaders emphasized the opportunity to make those pieces easier to connect across curriculum, assessment, ELD, and professional learning so local teams can translate guidance into practice.

2

MLL RESPONSIVENESS IS STRONGEST WHEN DESIGNED IN FROM THE START

Stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of integrating home language, oral language, cross-linguistic connections, and comprehensive language development into the core design of materials and instruction rather than treating them as separate supports.

3

DEVELOPMENTAL CONTINUITY REQUIRES DISTINCT, AGE-APPROPRIATE EXPERIENCES

Pre-K, TK, and K-3 benefit from stronger alignment, while still honoring the developmental needs of younger learners through play, oral language, exploration, and whole-child learning. Interviewees frequently described the opportunity to build upward from early childhood rather than simply extending later-grade approaches downward.

4

HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS (HQIM) ARE STRONGEST WHEN PAIRED WITH IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORTS

Stakeholders emphasized that strong materials have the greatest impact when educators also have curriculum-connected professional learning, coaching, collaboration time, leadership support, and opportunities to learn from implementation.

5

EDUCATOR AND LEADERSHIP CAPACITY SHAPE IMPLEMENTATION

Teacher preparation, P-3 expertise, administrator understanding of early learning, professional learning, and workforce stability all influence how effectively strong practices and materials reach children.

FAMILIES AS PARTNERS

Families and mixed-delivery partners are essential to continuity. Stakeholders highlighted the opportunity to more intentionally connect families, California State Preschool Program (CSPP), family child care, and family/friend/neighbor providers with the broader Pre-K to 3 instructional system.

Stronger connections can support local implementation

Local capacity shapes how implementation takes hold

Local control creates opportunity, and variation

Workforce capacity is essential to strong implementation

Stronger feedback loops can help spread what works

SPOTLIGHT • FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

Foundational Skills Are Essential, and Strongest When Connected to Language and Meaning

Across interviews, stakeholders emphasized the importance of explicit, systematic foundational-skills instruction alongside strong oral language, vocabulary, fluency, knowledge building, and comprehension. For multilingual learners, intentionally connecting word recognition with language and meaning, while drawing on home language and cross-linguistic resources, is especially important.

NATIONAL EVIDENCE SRI Education classroom studies

1 in 5

observed lessons gave students a chance to apply foundational skills beyond individual words. Word meaning came up once or not at all in more than half.

Bridging the Divide (2026)

~2 in 3

lessons in districts using highly rated, knowledge-rich curricula supported only surface-level understanding; about 24% reached robust understanding.

Beyond the Surface (2025)

Teachers were delivering clear, explicit foundational-skills instruction. The gap was the bridge to meaning — with fluency and vocabulary as the critical links between word recognition and comprehension. Because MLLs' reading comprehension is more often constrained by vocabulary and oral language than by decoding, a missing bridge to meaning costs them most.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE POINTS TOWARD

1

BUILD THE BRIDGE TO MEANING

Connect word recognition to fluency, vocabulary, oral language, and comprehension within lessons, not in separate blocks. Make sure students know what the words they decode mean and how to use them.

2

BUILD LANGUAGE IN

Address the language demands of foundational-skills lessons, and guide teachers on what to listen for as students talk and write so they can offer the right support in the moment. Treat home language, cognates, and cross-linguistic connections as assets toward biliteracy.

3

KEEP EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENTAL

In Pre-K and TK, root foundational skills in oral language, play, and exploration rather than developmentally inappropriate instruction.

4

SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION, NOT JUST ADOPTION

Pair materials with coaching and curriculum-based professional learning that equips teachers to guide learners beyond literal comprehension toward active meaning-making

WHAT'S NEXT

ELSF is testing these themes through a statewide UPK-3 field survey and will share fuller findings and resources for adoption and implementation this year. To share your perspective or get updates, contact Renae Skarin, rskarín@elsuccessforum.org.

