

A New Day in California: Training Teachers to Support Bilingualism

After policy change, new models like SEAL are training California teachers to support the state's large population of young dual language students.

BLOG POST



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Kindergarteners at Maple Primary Center in Los Angeles learn half the day in English and half the day in Spanish. Many of these students are dual language learners and like 60% of children under 5 in California, they speak a language other than English at home.

Their teacher, Martiza Bringas, is participating for the first time this year in a unique partnership designed to strengthen instruction for this group of students through bilingual education models that centralize and prioritize the needs of dual language learners.

In 2016 California had a [major policy shift](#) with the passage of [Proposition 58](#), which repealed the state's 20-year-old English-only education law and recognized the value of bilingualism. The law opened the door for the development of bilingual programs—that many educators in the state had been advocating for for years.

“We had previously been under the misconception in schools that kids need to learn English first, before they can learn content,” said Heather Skibbins, a lead trainer for the [Sobrato Early Academic Language](#) model (SEAL), that Bringas is participating in. “What we know now is that we can’t wait.”

Instead of teaching language development in isolation, SEAL’s mission is to integrate language development into hands-on science and social studies curriculum. Along with her colleagues, Bringas is taking part in workshop sessions, coaching, demonstration lessons, collaborative reflections and time for planning—all designed to strengthen early literacy instruction for bilingual children starting in preschool.

“I like this model because it’s very student engaged,” Bringas said. “Children who are 5, 6 years old, they learn through play.”

Bringas’ students are studying the weather, and she says she watches them using their new vocabulary—words like “meteorologist” and “forecasting” during their imaginary play. [Research shows](#) that language development is most successful when children have many opportunities to use language in context throughout their day.

The SEAL model has been successful because of its intense professional development that supports teachers over time—an emphasis on involving families and curriculum designed to build children’s oral language skills.

Educators at Maple Primary say it is working. “With this model, we’ve seen our kids just blossom,” says Principal Sharyn Clark, “in vocabulary development, their writing has improved and we have been able to reclassify students earlier than in times past.”

Loyola Marymount University’s School of Education received a [federal grant](#) to support this work with Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and the Sobrato Family Foundation. The funding is supporting professional development for teachers at schools with large populations of English learners in TK through 3rd grade. The goal is to increase the use of evidence-based strategies in the early grades as well as to improve outcomes for English learners and other students.

In addition to the passage of proposition 58, California also has a new [English Learner Roadmap](#), a policy released in 2017 designed to enhance the state’s standards for English-language development, and [Global California 2030](#), an initiative aimed at helping more students become proficient in more than one language. Bilingual programs are expanding; LAUSD will have 44 schools with dual language programs next school year. And the state has also allocated 5 million dollars to [support training for teachers](#) to work with this population of students—through SEAL and other innovative models.

“We have clear direction on bilingualism and the value of multilingualism that really sets the direction for our state,” said SEAL’s executive Director Anya Hurwitz. “It’s a totally new day in California.”