

As bilingual programs expand, let's keep an eye on equity for English learners

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The California Department of Education will soon announce the winners of a set of [grants](#) to local education agencies including schools, school districts, county offices of education and charter schools expanding or establishing dual language immersion programs.

As these programs increase in popularity, in California and nationally, education leaders, teacher education programs, communities and advocates must ensure English learners are prioritized and adequately served through these programs.

But we still have a lot of work to do to get there because:

- Teachers often lack the training and background to effectively identify and address inequities between groups of students.
- Many families that would benefit most from these programs do not access them because of misconceptions rooted in previous experiences.

The good news is that, with professional learning and support for bilingual teachers coupled with family partnerships and engagement, these challenges can be overcome.

Teachers are highly influential in creating inclusive bilingual classrooms, so it's critical they understand how their own beliefs and practices affect their students. But, too often, educators lack the professional support, resources and structures to be as effective as possible. By learning how to recognize the dominant beliefs held about their English learner students, they can better identify the harmful mindsets we are all deeply immersed in and that are still alive today. Bilingual teachers need “ideological clarity” — a concept from researchers Cristina Alfaro and Lilia Bartolomé — to surface deficit-based perspectives of English learners and help them teach in culturally responsive ways that allow all students to thrive.

Through research-based professional learning opportunities, bilingual teachers can engage in a variety of activities that help them connect their own lived experiences with that of their students and to put themselves in their English learner students' shoes. In one activity SEAL utilizes, we ask teachers to write their own stories, or bilingual autobiographies, that articulate the connection between their language and their personas in the classroom. Afterward, they dive into discussions about English dominance and share stories about individuals who have experienced language loss. Through these activities, teachers explore the relationship between language and power. The strength of this process is that it is not "one and done," but rather ongoing and collaborative, where teachers regularly connect with colleagues about these topics and report back to the group with insights and learnings.

Strong partnerships between schools and families of English learners are not common enough, yet they are critical for creating equitable bilingual programs and school systems for English learners.

Families of English learners play a critical role in preventing the loss of their home language and supporting students to become literate in both English and that home language. The schools we partner with find ongoing and creative ways to extend bilingual learning experiences into the family, community and home, as well as welcome their histories and cultures into the classroom throughout the school year.

Research shows that many families affected by a long history of racist education policies like Proposition 227, which banned bilingual education in California for two decades, may fear that placing their child in a bilingual classroom will limit their child's English development and their access to a quality education. This can lead to English learner families opting out of bilingual education programs, despite space to accommodate them. In addition, some families of English learners have expressed concerns that if their children are in a bilingual program, their English development will suffer.

Changing these perceptions starts with sharing the facts with parents. For example, we have partnered with the California Association for Bilingual Education to offer bilingual workshops to predominantly Spanish-speaking parents at their annual conference where we present families with research on the benefits of speaking two languages and inform families about various bilingual programs and their effectiveness. In addition, the workshops provide

families with tools and resources to advocate for their children and build support for these programs within their communities. This is something schools and school districts can and should do.

We are extremely proud to see equity-focused bilingual programs grow in California after an almost 20-year ban. We know it can be done and stand ready to partner with schools, communities and the California Department of Education to keep the focus on equity in bilingual education.

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Anya Hurwitz is the executive director of SEAL, an educational nonprofit dedicated to centralizing the needs of dual language learners.

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