



Illinois responds to growing diversity of its youngsters with initiatives to increase workforce skills.

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Serving Young Dual Language Learners in Illinois

Between 2000 and 2010, the foreign-born population in Illinois increased by over 200,000, and the number of young dual language learners (DLLs) also grew. By 2015, DLLs were thought to account for more than a quarter of the state's three- and four-year-olds.¹ In addition, more K-12 children in Illinois were being designated as English learners and were performing at persistently low levels on standardized measures of grade 4 reading and mathematics. In this context, the Illinois General Assembly approved legislation in 2008 that for the first time made three- to five-year-olds who were enrolled in preschool classrooms funded by the Illinois State Board of Education eligible to receive language support services.

Illinois has not been alone in experiencing demographic shifts. Nationally, a third of children between birth and age 5 grow up hearing a language other than English at home, and more than a quarter of children attending Head Start

and Early Head Start live in homes where other languages are spoken. Additionally, one in seven children entering kindergarten has a primary language other than English, and as many as 40 percent of the nation's English learners are between ages 3 and 8.²

There are many potential benefits associated with early bilingualism (see box 1). However, many DLLs start kindergarten behind their monolingual counterparts and struggle to close this gap through much of their school career.³ The National Center for Education Statistics reports that English learners nationally have fared consistently below their non-EL counterparts in standardized measures of grade 4 reading and math over the last 18 years.⁴ The persistence of this gap is noteworthy, although disregard for the impact of English language proficiency on the scores of standardized measures has made these results controversial.

DLLs are more likely than monolinguals to grow up with certain factors that are believed to hinder educational achievement—for example, living in poverty and having parents with limited formal education. It may be inferred that these risk factors contribute to school achievement challenges and arguably supersede the cognitive benefits of early bilingualism.⁵

In addressing the learning needs of this population, state policymakers also have to reckon with the fact that DLLs are a far from homogeneous group. They differ significantly with respect to the development stage when dual language exposure began, the contexts where the home language and English are used, the English proficiency of their family members, and the balance of their exposure to their two languages. All these variables have

implications for DLLs' early language development and have also been associated with their long-term school trajectory.⁶

There is considerable evidence on the benefits of extending access and improving quality of early care and education. Empirical data suggest that quality early childhood education improves early elementary school performance in general, but there is also growing evidence that emergent bilinguals see improved school performance later on, especially when early education programs respond to their particular needs and strengths.⁷

Importance of Cross-Agency Collaboration

Early care and education programs and services are significantly more dispersed across multiple agencies than K-12 systems are, which

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Box 1. Benefits of Dual Language Learning

At birth, humans have the neurological capacity to learn multiple languages simultaneously, and key language production milestones in young DLLs mirror that of monolinguals.^a In other words, learning two languages from birth per se does not cause confusion or delay in the development of either.

On the contrary, exposure to and use of two or more languages during the early developmental years can aid the social, linguistic, or cognitive development of DLLs, who often outperform monolinguals in their capacity to store and retrieve information from working memory, a key competency in reading comprehension and mental math.^b The cognitive benefits of bilingualism can appear quite early, as certain executive functioning advantages are present in young infants.^c Early bilingual exposure has also been associated with stronger self-regulation and socioemotional competence at kindergarten entry.^d Although the mechanisms are not yet absolutely clear, initial evidence links these advantages to the demands implicit in acquiring and using two distinct language systems.

^aBarbara Albareda-Castellot et al., "The Acquisition of Phonetic Categories in Bilingual Infants: New Data from an Anticipatory Eye Movement Paradigm," *Developmental Science* 1 (2011): 395–401; Krista Byers-Heinlein et al., "The Roots of Bilingualism in Newborns," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 3 (2010): 343–48; Adrian Garcia-Sierra et al., "Bilingual Language Learning: An ERP Study Relating Early Brain Responses to Speech, Language Input, and Later Word Production," *Journal of Phonetics* 39 (2011): 546–57; Naja Ramirez and Patricia Kuhl, "Bilingual Learning in Children," Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences, University of Washington, June 2, 2016; Dina C. Castro et al., "Dual Language Learners: Research Informing Policy," (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 2013).

^bCatherine Sandhofer and Yuuko Uchikoshi, "Cognitive Consequences of Dual Language Learning: Cognitive Function, Language and Literacy, Science and Mathematics, and Social–Emotional Development," in *California's Best Practices for Young Dual Language Learners: Research Overview Papers* (Sacramento: Governor's State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care, 2013).

^cÁgnes Melinda Kovács and Jacques Mehler, "Cognitive Gains in 7-Month-Old Bilingual Infants," *Proceedings of the National Academies of Science* 106 (2009): 6556–60.

^dTamara G. Halle et al., "The Social-Emotional Development of Dual Language Learners: Looking Back at Existing Research and Moving Forward with Purpose," in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 29 (2014): 734–39.

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makes it harder to further common agendas and actions that effectively target a particular purpose or goal. Nevertheless, cross-agency collaboration can be an effective pathway to better quality and access for young children and their families.⁸ The experience of Illinois exemplifies this potential.

Such collaborations face challenges associated with insufficient funding, regulatory differences among funding streams, discrepancies in program standards, and disparities in how the workforce is compensated.⁹ Yet the benefits far outweigh the difficulties. As early learning experts Sharon Lynn Kagan and Kristie Kauerz write, “Whether dubbed system efforts, partnerships, linkages, coordination, or collaborations, such efforts are designed to stimulate new thinking and new actions that will expand services, improve quality and outcomes, and reduce inequities in access.”¹⁰

Expanding Access and Tackling Quality

Partially in response to the growth of linguistic diversity in the state, in 2008 the Illinois General Assembly approved legislation that led the Illinois State Board of Education to change the school code. The board stipulated that three- to five-year-old DLLs in Preschool for All (PFA) classrooms were eligible for the same language support services as K-12 English learners enrolled in public schools.¹¹

In addition, teachers in PFA classrooms serving DLLs were required to obtain an endorsement—granted according to provisions specified by the Illinois State Board of Education—that certifies them to be effectively prepared to serve these students. Because PFA students are found in community-based organizations as well as public schools, the new directives apply to any organization that receives PFA funding independently of whether it operates under the umbrella of the board or of other agencies. These measures represented a significant innovation. Nearly a decade later, only three other states—Alaska, New York, and Texas—have similar policies.¹²

The new legislation generated vigorous debates on teacher qualifications and whether it would be possible to meet the ensuing workforce demand, and these debates persist. Currently, numerous early childhood programs

with PFA funding have yet to comply fully with the teacher preparation mandate. Yet changes in legislation and corresponding school code succeeded in raising programs’ awareness of the unique needs and strengths attached to early bilingualism—a far from negligible achievement. Another valuable consequence was that institutions of higher education with early childhood teacher preparation programs revised and updated their programs of studies to better prepare teacher candidates to serve DLLs.

Illinois engaged in two other programs of studies to increase the quality of its services to young DLLs. In 2013, the state’s early childhood Quality Rating and Information System, which started in 2008, transitioned into ExceleRate Illinois. The Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies administers ExceleRate under the joint direction of the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development, the Illinois Department of Human Services, and the Illinois State Board of Education.

Under ExceleRate Illinois, early care and education programs voluntarily opt to receive quality ratings. Head Start and PFA programs are eligible to opt for the two highest levels of quality in the system, the Silver and Gold Circles of Quality. The standards defining each of four levels of quality incorporate at least one indicator of culturally and linguistically appropriate practice, and the evidence required to substantiate this claim varies by quality level. Programs that have achieved the Gold Circle of Quality are subsequently eligible to apply for one or more awards of excellence, one of which is the Linguistically and Culturally Appropriate Practice Award of Excellence. This award recognizes early care and education programs that maintain such exemplary practices as developing individual dual language learning goals that incorporate family input, using culturally and linguistically appropriate assessments, and offering the option of parent and family conferences in the home language. The Linguistically and Culturally Appropriate Practice Award also acknowledges other efforts, such as hiring practices that recruit and retain staff that reflects the language and culture of children and families, and special education services delivered in accordance to linguistically and culturally responsive tenets.

A second initiative, the LC Excel Project, was created to provide individualized support to the first programs seeking the ExceleRate Linguistic and Culturally Appropriate Practice awards of excellence. Interested programs engaged in self-assessment to ascertain how program practices aligned to the award standards and identify evidence of this alignment. When programs determined that a particular practice standard was not fully in place, they tapped LC Excel resources such as online modules, coaching, communities of practice, and technical assistance to develop and implement an action plan to meet the standard.

The LC Excel team strived to provide supports that were responsive to the needs of each site. For example, one site identified bilingual speech and language services as an area of need, so the coach suggested a book study to guide the team in redesigning their procedures. All the sites had different strengths and opportunities for growth, making the multiple support options available through LC Excel particularly effective in tailoring assistance to program needs.

After self-assessment, and ensuing learning and professional development, each site made pertinent changes. Evidence demonstrating implementation of the standards of the Linguistically and Culturally Appropriate Practice Award of Excellence was compiled in a portfolio, which included pictures, videos, written policies, transcripts of meetings, and other documentation. Portfolios that met or exceeded 80 percent of the standards received the award.

While achieving that distinction was important, program improvement was the core goal. Eleven of 23 applicants achieved the award between 2014 and 2016. Initially, 43 sites began applications and engaged with the LC Excel resources and team, but 20 of them did not feel they were prepared to submit portfolios. These 20 nonetheless said that the process raised their awareness of linguistically and culturally appropriate practices, led to some positive changes, and motivated them to continue advancing their work with DLLs and their families.

Lessons Learned

While Illinois's 2008 law and changes in code signaled recognition of demographic shifts, it

also acknowledged the particular learning needs and potential cognitive and socioemotional strengths associated with DLL status. Moreover, it highlighted the importance of cross-agency collaboration in maximizing quality coverage for young emergent bilinguals.

Although some stipulations of the new school rules have yet to be fully realized, endorsing the right of DLL preschoolers for early education responsive to their developmental needs and competencies prompted changes in higher education. Illinois's state board subsidized a series of initiatives to help teacher education programs improve pertinent content and teaching methods coursework. Currently, a workgroup representing the early care and education field, accrediting agencies, and institutions of higher education is generating recommendations on how to translate knowledge of DLL development and learning into coursework leading to an associate's degree. This effort is meant to expand the early childhood workforce's access to knowledge and skills about linguistic and cultural diversity.

As one of us was a lead member of the LC Excel Project, we can attest to the potential of the award for excellence in recognizing and showcasing linguistically and culturally appropriate practices. There are caveats, the first dealing with the linguistically and culturally appropriate practice standards at each level of quality. Ideally, achieving standards at one level should prepare a program to attempt the next-level standard, but there was evidence that this was not the case. Adding more indicators to the standards at each level might provide a more viable pathway to incremental improvement.

Another lesson learned pertains to the process itself. Participants reported that embedded professional development was by far the most powerful tool for supporting change. However, many reported that the transformation of their practice was ongoing, and thus support and resources for sustained program quality need to continue beyond receiving the award.

Programs' capacity to serve DLLs varied widely, even among those receiving the gold level, revealing the complexity of linguistically and culturally appropriate early childhood practice across contexts. Programs displayed different levels of knowledge on the modes for serving DLLs, skills in implementing best

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practices in instruction, use of the workforce's bilingual and bicultural abilities, and differences in the recruitment and retention of bilingual and bicultural staff. To address some of these variations, the ExceleRate website now includes exemplary portfolios that contextualize best practices across childcare, state-funded pre-K, and Head Start settings. LC Excel modules and coaches continue to be available to site teams.

At present, the 11 sites that received the Linguistically and Culturally Appropriate Practice Awards of Excellence have become models for others. Staff at these sites frequently welcome visitors, suggesting that peer-to-peer mentoring could be another tool for programs that want to serve DLLs better.

In sum, Illinois has invested in strengthening the foundation of quality for culturally and linguistically diverse children with initiatives that represent the potential of interagency collaboration. The challenge, as always, is to keep the momentum going. ■

¹DLLs are typically defined as children between birth and age 5 who are simultaneously learning English and another language or are starting to acquire English as a second language while they continue to develop their home language. Keira Gebbie Ballantyne et al., "Dual Language Learners in the Early Years: Getting Ready to Succeed in School" (Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2008), http://www.ncele.ed.gov/files/uploads/3/DLLs_in_the_Early_Years.pdf. See also W. Steven Barnett et al., "The State of Preschool 2015: State Preschool Yearbook" (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2016); Alexandra Figueras-Daniel and W. Steven Barnett, "Preparing Young Hispanic Dual Language Learners for a Knowledge Economy," *NIEER Policy Brief 24* (New Jersey: Rutgers Graduate School of Education, 2013).

²Julie Sugarman and Maki Park, "Quality for Whom? Supporting Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Children and Workers in Early Childhood Quality Rating and Improvement Systems" (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2017); Keith McNamara, "Dual Language Learners in Head Start: The Promises and Pitfalls of New Reforms" (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, Sept. 8, 2016); Barnett et al., "The State of Preschool 2015" (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2016); Figueras-Daniel and Barnett, "Preparing Young Hispanic Dual Language Learners"; Dale Russakoff, "PreK-3rd: Raising the Educational Performance of English Language Learners (ELLs)," *PreK-3rd Policy to Action Brief* no. 6 (New York: Foundation for Child Development, 2011).

³Linda M. Espinosa and Miriam Calderon, "State Early Learning and Development Standards/Guidelines, Policies, and Related Practices: How Are They Responsive to the Needs of Young Dual Language Learners?" (Build Initiative, 2015), <http://buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/BuildDLLReport2015.pdf>; Eugene E. Garcia and Jose E. Nájuez Sr., *Bilingualism and Cognition: Informing Research, Pedagogy, and Policy* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2011).

⁴National Center for Education Statistics, "Comparative Performance of English Learners (ELs) and non-ELs in 4th Grade Reading and Math Scores," NAEP Data Explorer, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/dataset.aspx>.

⁵National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.17226/24677>; Catherine Tamis-Le Monda and Fred Genesee, "Promoting Educational Success for English Learners: Capacities and Influences," webinar, <https://nasevents.webex.com/nasevents/onstage/g.php?MTID=e76f9a76d5476429ca20fc7e9be0160f8>.

⁶Barbara Conboy, "Neuroscience Research: How Experience with One or More Languages Affects the Developing Brain," in *California's Best Practices for Young Dual Language Learners: Research Overview Papers* (Sacramento: Governor's State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care, 2013); Linda M. Espinosa, "Challenges and Benefits of Early Bilingualism in the United States' Context," *Global Education Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 40–53.

⁷Barnett et al., "The State of Preschool 2015"; Claudia Galindo, "English Language Learners' Math and Reading Achievement Trajectories in Elementary Grades," in E.E. Garcia and E.C. Frede, eds., *Young English Language Learners: Current Research and Emerging Directions for Practice And Policy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010); Helen F. Ladd et al., "From Birth to School: Early Childhood Initiatives and Third-Grade Outcomes," *North Carolina Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 33, no.1 (2014): 162–87; Child Trends, "Dual Language Learners: Indicators of Child and Youth Well-Being," Child Trends Data Bank, 2014, https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/127_Dual_Language_Learners.pdf; Allison Sidle Fuligni and Carollee Howes, "Experiences of Low-Income Dual Language Learning Preschoolers in Diverse Early Learning Settings," in C. Howes et al., eds., *Dual Language Learners in the Early Childhood Classroom* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2011); Claude Goldenberg et al., "Dual Language Learners: Effective Instruction in Early Childhood," *American Educator* 37, no. 2 (2013): 26–29; Carollee Howes, *Culture and Child Development in Early Childhood Programs: Practices for Quality Education and Care* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010); Jin Sook Lee, "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy for Immigrant Children and English Language Learners," *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* 109 no. 2 (2010): 453–73.

⁸Diana Schaack et al., "Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: Framework for Early Care and Education Systems Change," in Sharon Lynn Kagan and Kristie Kauerz, eds., *Early Childhood Systems: Transforming Early Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012).

⁹Patricia Del Grosso et al., "Early Care and Education Partnerships: A Review of the Literature," *OPRE Report #2014-64* (Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2014).

¹⁰Sharon Lynn Kagan and Kristie Kauerz, "Early Childhood Systems: Looking Deep, Wide, and Far," in Kagan and Kauerz, *Early Childhood Systems*, 5.

¹¹Maggie Severns, "Starting Early with Dual Language Learners: First Lessons from Illinois" (Washington, DC: New America, April 11, 2012).

¹²Micha Ann Wixom, "ECS and National Experts Examine State-Level English Language Learner Policies," *Policy Brief* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, March 18, 2015).