

Policy Brief: Enhancing Multilingual Learning Programs in California

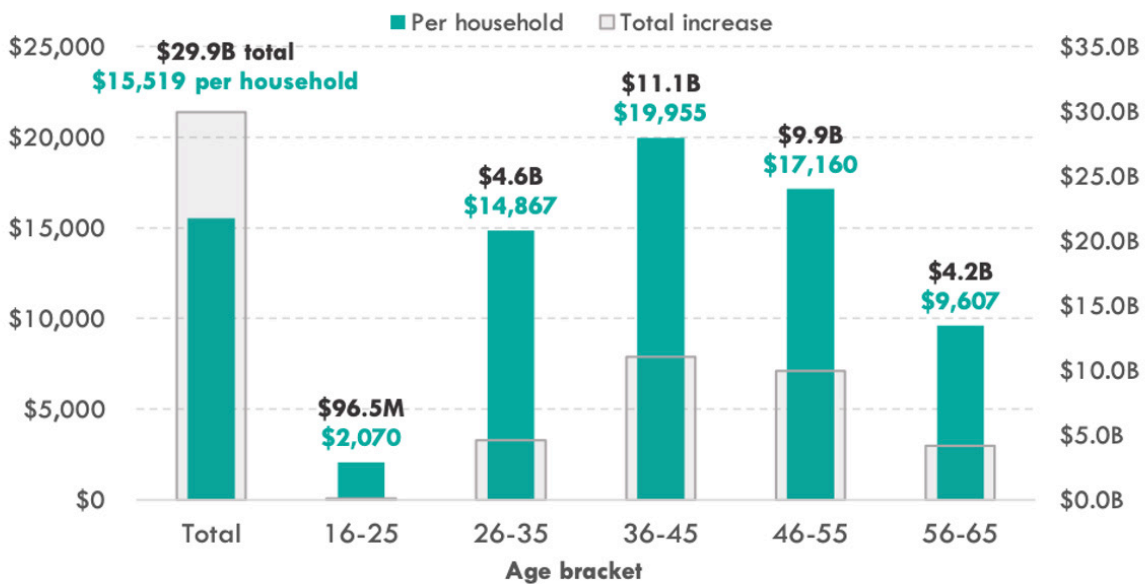
Key Takeaways

- In California, nearly 60% of children under the age of five have at least one parent who speaks a language other than English.
- Those same children are 160% more likely to live under the poverty level than peers with English-only speaking parents.
- Non-English-speaking households in California would collectively earn \$30 billion more, or \$15,519 more per household if they earned as much as their bilingual counterparts.

California is home to nearly a quarter of the nation’s foreign-born population, and multilingual children represent 40% of the state’s public-school enrollment, a number that only continues to grow among the state’s youngest children. Unlike programs that have traditionally pushed students to learn English above all else, programs designed to support students’ home languages in addition to English – also known as multilingual learning (MLL) programs – are increasingly gaining support. Supporting multilingual learning among California’s youngest children can improve educational outcomes, boost household incomes, and give California companies the edge needed to compete on the world stage.

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Total and Per Household Annual Increase in Wages if Wage Parity Existed Between Linguistically Isolated Households and Bilingual Households in California, 2019



Source: ACS 2019 1-Year Estimates

Note: Includes working aged population only (16-65). Incomes reflect household incomes.

Analysis: Bay Area Council Economic Institute

Multilingual Learning Programs: The Basics

Multilingual Learning (MLL) programs, sometimes referred to as Dual Language Learning (DLL) programs, offer a promising approach to address California’s linguistic diversity and improve outcomes for all students. The “multilingual learners” terminology is promoted by California has a broader encapsulation of related subgroups of language learners. By providing instruction in two languages through two-way dual immersion programs, combining multilingual learners and native English speakers together, these programs aim to foster bilingualism, biliteracy, and cross-cultural understanding. Despite the potential benefits, there are challenges that hinder the full realization of MLL programs in California. This policy brief highlights the importance of supporting and strengthening MLL programs, explores their benefits, argues the business case, and provides recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to enhance and expand upon these programs across the state.

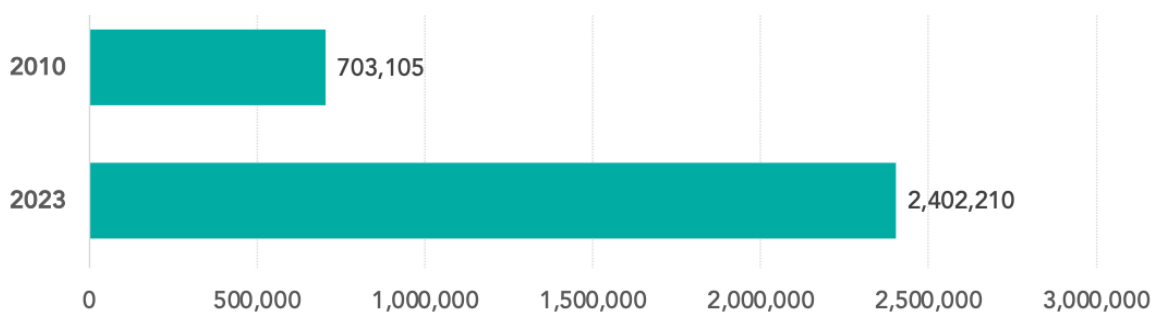
The Benefits of Multilingual Learning Programs

Multilingual learning is a rapidly evolving topic within the field of education. The benefits of multilingual learning and multilingualism are typically divided into three categories: economic, education, and health. Recently, studies have begun to show a positive trend emerging in both the direct and indirect economic benefits of multilingualism, with the primary advantages including higher wages, greater job security, and increased promotion opportunities.¹ Children of immigrants who developed strong multilingual and biliterate skills were less likely to drop out of high school, more likely to go to college, and earned an average of \$5,400 more a year compared to peers who lost their home language and speak English exclusively², closing the achievement gap. Health benefits from multilingualism include increased ability to concentrate and process information³, delaying the onset of dementia, improved cognitive development with higher problem-solving skills, higher test scores, and greater empathy.⁴

The Economic, Business, and Equity Case

There is a growing consensus amongst researchers and businesses that the labor market is increasingly globalizing – meaning a greater interdependence between economies, populations, and cultures – and therefore demanding more employees with multilingual experience. Once viewed as a deficiency, bilingualism is increasingly treated as an asset in the national job market. From 2010-2023, job postings in California requesting applicants with bilingual skills nearly quadrupled, with over 2.4 million postings, accounting for 68% of all bilingual job listings across the U.S. The healthcare industry dominates bilingual job postings, accounting for 43% of total bilingual postings in California from August 2022 through August 2023. By occupation, registered nurses account for the largest share of bilingual job postings at 4.1% (15,032 total postings). These occupational trends indicate the need for bilingual programs targeted at the healthcare sector, given its higher pay than the service or retail sectors and overall abundance in the current job market. If non-English speaking households earned the same income as bilingual households in California, they would collectively earn \$30 billion more annually, or \$15,519 more per household. This increase in income could a family one or multiple of the following living expenses in California: a year of childcare, a year of transportation expenses, a year of groceries based on the USDA’s low-cost food plan, and/or a year of medical expenses.

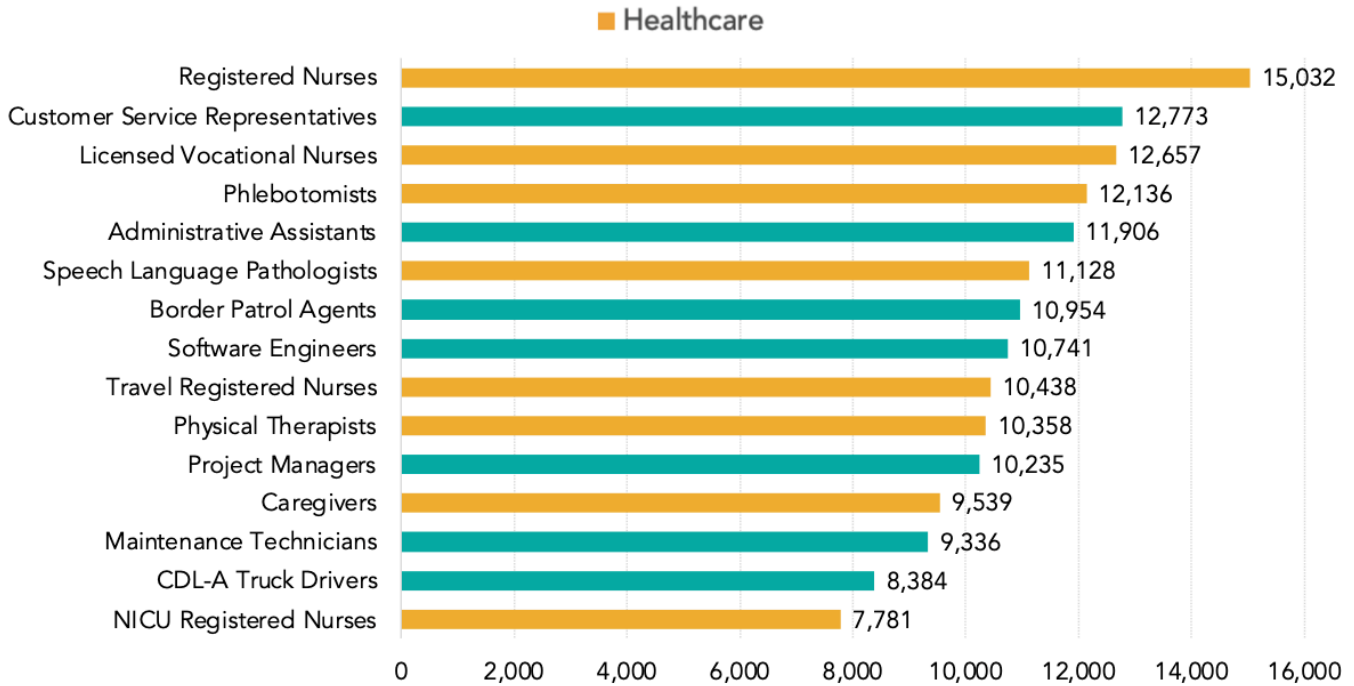
Job Postings Seeking Bilingual Skills in California (2010-2023)



Data Source: Lightcast Q3 2023 Dataset (2010 & 2023)

Analysis: Bay Area Council Economic Institute

Top Occupations Requesting Bilingual Skills by Number of Postings (2023)



Data Source: Lightcast Q3 2023 Dataset (Aug 2022-Aug 2023)

Analysis: Bay Area Council Economic Institute

Current and Proposed Policies

California has a long, wavering history in terms of its support for multilingual learning programs. Beginning in 1998, Proposition 227, approved by state voters, banned non-English instruction in California’s public schools, ultimately depleting bilingual instruction and support for students.⁵ Prop 227 was ultimately repealed in 2016 when voters approved Proposition 58, ending nearly two decades of restrictions to bilingual programs. The following year, the State Board of Education adopted the California English Learner Roadmap intended to strengthen policies, programs, and practices for students classified as English learners preschool through 12th grade.⁶ Finally, in October 2021, Governor Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill 1363, which established an asset-based process for identifying multilingual learners in California state preschool programs.⁷ The pandemic slowed the expansion and creation of new bilingual programs – but now, several school districts are resuming their plans, following the California Department of Education’s Global California 2030 initiative, which aims to enroll half of all K-12 students in programs focused on proficiency in two or more languages.⁸ Additionally, the state allocated \$10 million in its 2021 budget toward multilingual program expansion.⁹ Assembly Bill 1363 also paved the way for the state to begin collecting more data on how many multilingual learners are enrolled in the state’s preschool programs, as the state currently lacks the capability to track and report on multilingual learners, making it difficult to accommodate students as they advance through the public education system.¹⁰

In 2023, There were four bills introduced in the legislative session in California that were approved and signed into law by Governor Gavin Newsom that directly support MLL programs across the state:

- **AB 1127 (Reyes, McCarty) – Teachers: professional development:** Bilingual Teacher Professional Development: can help address the shortage of bilingual teachers across the state through grant funding, while creating a new timeline for grant recipients to report the number of participants affected by the program through 2029.

- **AB 714 (McCarty) – Pupil Instruction: newcomer pupils: curriculum frameworks: high school coursework and graduation requirements: exemptions and alternatives:** can provide resources and support for refugee and immigrant families and will equip schools and teachers with the tools necessary to meet the unique need of newcomers.
- **AB 393 (Rivas) – Childcare: Dual Language Learners:** can help identify DLL's in California's general childcare programs as a part of the Master Plan for Early Learning and Care.
- **AB 370 (Addis) – Pupil Instruction: State Seal of Biliteracy:** creates a new pathway for pupils from all primary language backgrounds to demonstrate their language proficiencies to obtain the State Seal of Biliteracy.

Current Challenges

Despite the recognized and potential benefits of Multilingual Learning Programs, the state faces several key challenges in leveraging the language assets of its students to meet a growing economic need for bilingualism and provide economic opportunity for immigrant/first generation children.

- **Limited Access:** Many schools in California lack the resources and infrastructure to implement MLL programs, limiting access for students across the state.
- **Shortage of qualified bilingual educators:** Insufficient professional development opportunities for teachers in bilingual education is a leading deterrent of well-staffed programs needed to deliver effective MLL instruction.
- **Lack of Available Data:** The lack of available data concerning multilingual learners' home language development makes it difficult to monitor a student's progress.¹¹
- **Funding Constraints:** Budgetary constraints impede the expansion and sustainability of MLL programs, feeding into the limited access challenge previously addressed.
- **Parental Perception and Limited Outreach:** Misconceptions about MLL programs may lead some parents to be hesitant about enrolling their children into the programs. Additionally, enrollment rates are impacted by the lack of outreach to families that could benefit from these programs.

Policy Recommendations

For California to thrive into the future, multilingual learning must be cultivated as an asset that will create opportunity for the next generation and fuel the state economy. The most effective way to ensure success of these students is for the state to support multilingual programs, which help students reach their full potential and families attain greater economic mobility, while simultaneously helping California companies remain on the cutting edge of innovation and globalization. The following policy recommendations can help fuel the full realization of MLL programs across the state:

- **Increase Funding:** Allocate additional funds to support the establishment and growth of MLL programs in schools throughout California.
- **Professional Development:** With a current shortage of teachers and instructors for MLL programs, investing in comprehensive and ongoing training for teachers to ensure they are equipped with the skills and certifications to effectively deliver MLL instruction.
- **Research and Evaluation:** With gaps in data collection and research on multilingual students and programs across the state, it's time to create a centralized database and conduct studies to assess the long-term impacts of MLL programs on academic achievement, language proficiency, and socioeconomic outcomes.

- **Collaboration and Partnerships:** Foster collaboration between educational institutions, community organizers, the private sector, the state, and additional stakeholders to create a comprehensive and sustainable ecosystem.
- **Statewide Support:** Establish a state-level task force or committee to oversee the implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement of MLL programs across California.
- **Outreach and Awareness:** Launch campaigns to raise awareness among families about the benefits of MLL programs, addressing misconceptions and encouraging higher participation.

Conclusion

Multilingual Learning Programs hold the immense potential to transform California's education system and prepare students to thrive in an increasingly connected world. By addressing the current challenges and implementing the suggested policy recommendations, California can create a robust framework for MLL programs that will benefit students, teachers, businesses, families, and communities, while fostering a more inclusive, diverse, and prosperous state.



Acknowledgments

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The brief was authored by Estevan Lopez, Research Analyst at the Bay Area Council Economic Institute.

Image Credits

1. Photo by Kenny Eliason on Unsplash
2. Photo by Elizabeth Jennings on Unsplash

Endnotes

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