

A Vision for California's Schools this Fall

Equity for Dual Language and English Learners in an Unprecedented Moment

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This brief is a joint publication of a group of organizations committed to educational equity for California's dual language learners (DLLs) and English learners (ELs):

Advancement Project California

California Association for Bilingual Education

Californians Together

Center for Equity for English Learners at Loyola
Marymount University

Early Edge California

Sobrato Early Academic Language

The Education Trust—West

Introduction

California's 2019–20 academic year just ended. It was harder than usual to notice, as most campuses closed in March and moved their instruction online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was not a normal school year for public education. Educators and administrators struggled to recreate distance learning opportunities for their classes without any clear standards or guidance, and it's clear that the prolonged school closures have had significant impacts on children's learning. Shamefully, predictably, national data suggest that the closures are exacerbating educational inequities: without access to schools, children of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and children from low-income communities are **likely** to suffer from widening opportunity gaps.

Many children will return to school this fall—online, in-person, or some hybrid of the two—carrying significant new stress and anxiety from the prolonged uncertainties of social isolation. Most children will return with unique academic needs after missing a significant amount of learning time in the spring.

In particular, schools must address the impact of the prolonged closures on the linguistic and academic development of California's dual language learners (DLLs) and English learners (ELs). Fully **44 percent of school-aged California children** speak a non-English language at home; for children ages 0–5, the proportion is **around 60 percent**. While it's still too early to know the full impact, preliminary data suggest that these students have disproportionately suffered from the shuttering of California's public education system. Nearly half of the families of ELs reached in an **April survey from the Parent Institute for Quality Education** reported that their children were *not* receiving the supports they needed after

schools closed. What’s more, while 93 percent of surveyed families received school communications about how to access online learning this spring, [nearly one-third of those families were unable to understand the instructions](#). Similarly, an [Education Trust-West poll](#) of families that speak non-English languages at home found that 25 percent had received learning materials solely in English. These gaps also parallel existing digital divides: gaps in access to digital learning technology and/or internet connectivity. [National](#) and [California data](#) both suggest that DLLs/ELs disproportionately lack access to digital learning technology and internet connectivity.

Worse, these remote learning challenges exacerbate pre-existing inequities within California public schools. The state’s schools have [struggled for decades to support](#) the linguistic and academic development of DLLs/ELs. In recent years, [analyses](#) from Californians Together and the Center for Equity for English Learners have [repeatedly found](#) that the state’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and corresponding Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) systems are ineffective at clearly tracking ELs’ progress and driving equitable resources and quality learning opportunities to ELs.

In April, [the Public Policy Institute of California found](#) that over 90 percent of Californians agree that ELs’ educational success is somewhat or very important to the state’s future. They’re right.

The particulars of precisely *how* schools will reopen, what learning opportunities they will offer, and what priorities will guide their instruction all remain to be decided. But as California educators, administrators, and policymakers prepare to design and implement a variety of possible hybrid learning models for students in the fall, it’s clear that they must prioritize the needs of DLLs/ELs. They must not allow the sudden transition to distance learning to reverse the recent state moves that recognize, celebrate, and uplift the assets each English learner brings to school. If they abandon California’s laudable recent policy shifts in the English Learner Roadmap, Global California 2030, and beyond, they could reproduce some of the damaging, harmful EL practices from the state’s past. This brief offers a series of concrete, actionable ideas for how local and state education leaders can ensure that California delivers for these students in the present—and, by extension, for Californians’ wellbeing in the future.

Dual language learners (DLLs)

are young language learners (0–5 years) acquiring English while developing proficiency in their home languages.

English learners (ELs) is a broader term that encompasses all students who are native speakers of a non-English language and are primarily receiving instruction in English and, in some cases, in their home language in biliteracy instructional settings.

Opportunity Gaps

Before the pandemic, California was paying increasing attention to the needs of DLLs/ELs. In 2016, voters passed Proposition 58, which repealed Proposition 227, the state’s misguided, ineffective, multi-decade experiment with English-only education for these students. State leaders committed to several key efforts to support DLLs’ and ELs’ multilingualism: California’s Seal of Biliteracy recognizes students who achieve oral and written proficiency in English and another language or languages by the time they graduate from high school, and the [Global California 2030 initiative](#) offers the promise of expanding access to multilingual PreK–12 instruction. In 2018, [the state committed additional resources](#) towards training early educators to work with DLLs. Finally, [California’s English Learner Roadmap](#) policies, adopted by the state in 2017, articulate research-based DLL/EL educational priorities to guide present and future birth through 12th grade policy reforms, programs, and practices across the state.

And yet, much of this momentum is fragile and risks being derailed by the COVID-19 crisis. Perhaps most importantly, California schools and early learning programs need sufficient resources to respond to a challenge this comprehensive and unprecedented. As the superintendents of California’s largest school districts put it in [a letter to state leaders](#), “Reopening our school campuses will require more—**not fewer**—resources to ensure and sustain proper implementation of public health guidance and the safety of all of those involved.” Again, California’s response to the crisis risks expanding pre-pandemic injustices. [A 2018 PACE analysis of California DLL/EL policies concluded](#) that the state’s approach to education funding is not effective at driving adequate resources to support DLLs’/ELs’ educational opportunities.

This fall, California schools must support DLLs/ELs’ [socioemotional wellbeing](#), build strong partnerships with families, ensure meaningful access to the full curriculum, and rely on research-based instruction. Since many children will have suffered significant stress and social isolation this summer, schools need to prioritize socioemotional learning and relationship-building as the fall approaches—even if campuses are not yet able to fully open.

Having access to data to make informed decisions will also be critical. Since the long—and unexpected—break in their education will likely have interrupted many children’s academic and developmental progress, schools need to prioritize data-gathering that will help them target instruction that advances DLLs/ELs’ linguistic and academic development. In the early years, educators will also need to [gather information on DLLs’ cognitive development](#).

Expectations for California’s State Education Leaders

- **State education leaders must provide adequate funding to support equitable access to high-quality learning opportunities for DLLs/ELs during—and after—the pandemic.** This must begin with targeted, sustained efforts to close digital divides that prevent DLLs/ELs from connecting with their schools’ online learning offerings with a device and free connectivity for every student in the house, but that’s only the beginning. In pre-pandemic times, [experts calculated](#) that adequate educational services for DLLs/ELs cost more than non-ELs. Given the staggering impacts of the school closures on children’s health, wellbeing, and academic progress, state leaders must—at minimum—maintain current funding levels for serving these students. If possible, they should expand support for schools and programs serving these children.

- **State education leaders must get a clear picture of the learning models and academic approaches that California schools and early learning programs used this spring—and how they are preparing for the fall.** The California Department of Education should survey all public schools and early learning programs to gauge how many students were able to access distance learning in the spring. The results should be sorted by student group, including DLLs/ELs, and published. The survey should also ask schools to explain how DLLs/ELs will be supported in their fall hybrid learning plans.
- **State education leaders must reaffirm California’s commitment to supporting DLLs/ELs’ bilingualism and biliteracy.** Before the pandemic, the state was developing and/or implementing a host of new bilingualism and biliteracy policies. The vision of the EL Roadmap and Global California 2030 must not be abandoned in favor of defaulting California schools back to ineffective English-only approaches. To that end, the California Department of Education should convene DLL/EL experts and stakeholders to provide guidance for how schools and early learning programs can continue these efforts.

Expectations for California’s Local Education Leaders

- **School districts must overtly address the needs of DLLs/ELs in their reopening plans.** These plans should include specific, concrete actions that local education leaders will undertake to ensure that DLLs/ELs have access to all elements of their hybrid learning models. How will they make certain that all children have access to digital technology, internet connectivity, and learning materials needed to access and participate in lessons?
- **Local education leaders must provide clear and detailed descriptions of how they will incorporate the needs of DLLs/ELs into their LCAP revisions.** District leaders should explain how they will spend targeted LCFF dollars meant for DLLs/ELs—to ensure that these funds are not rolled into general education programs. County offices of education should ensure that school districts make specific LCAP commitments to support ELs. Education leaders should take a structured approach to centering ELs, such as [the LCAP Toolkit published by Californians Together](#) and the [Center for Equity for English Learners at Loyola Marymount University](#).

Expectations for California Educators

- **Educators must maximize live instructional time for DLLs/ELs in all settings.** During distance learning, DLLs/ELs should have full access to schools’ academic offerings; they should also receive the language instructional services they are mandated under law. As schools reopen, these students should be prioritized in the first rounds of in-person attendance—note, for instance, that [the state of Virginia has put ELs near the head of the line](#) to begin receiving in-person instruction as public health conditions improve. These opportunity gaps can be addressed by differentiating instruction, services, and resource distribution.
- **Educators must group DLLs/ELs in non-segregationary ways and also in specific small groups to address language specific needs.** This fall, whether school days are predominantly in-person, online, or conducted via other forms of distance learning, educators must ensure that DLLs/ELs are regularly included in instructional groupings with English-dominant peers. They should also receive targeted support for learning in English and/or their target language with opportunities to continue developing in their home languages.

Hybrid Learning

During the period of school closures, individual California educators worked quickly—often heroically—to reshape their instructional approaches into a variety of distance learning models, usually with minimal guidance or support. Fortunately, the summer provides an opportunity for schools and policymakers to ensure that they are as prepared as possible to support all students under a number of possible scenarios. As it is unlikely that the state’s early learning settings and schools will open fully enrolled, fully in-person campuses this fall, education leaders need to prepare for at least some months of further distance and/or hybrid learning.

This planning is enormously important. Online or hybrid learning models may open up new educational possibilities, but they do not inevitably serve the cause of educational equity at all levels. Research on virtual K–12 instruction is largely discouraging—even when schools have implemented their online learning models *with the luxury of time and resources*. Distance learning is even more difficult in early learning programs, since younger children—DLLs and non-DLLs alike—rely on individual engagement that can be difficult to recreate in virtual settings.

Hybrid Learning: Instruction that blends in-person education offerings with distance learning models (often, but not always, incorporating online learning approaches).

At the most basic level, California education leaders must identify how digital divides are exacerbating educational inequity in schools, districts, and the broader state. They must then work creatively to bridge these divides and/or differentiate instruction so that all students either have access to online learning materials or are able to access materials in other (socially distant) ways.

And yet, as challenging as these steps may be, they are only the most basic hurdles for supporting equitable *access* to hybrid learning models. Once these are cleared, educators still need to ensure that hybrid learning models are effective at supporting the needs of diverse learners. Specifically, California schools and early learning programs need to intentionally incorporate DLLs/ELs’ needs into their fall preparations. This will necessarily include committing time and resources towards ensuring that DLLs/ELs are supported in accessing the full academic curriculum offered at their schools. They should also regularly receive content-rich language instruction that supports their ongoing development in their home languages and in English. In every instructional model, schools should maximize efforts to integrate linguistic and academic instruction.

Expectations for California’s State Education Leaders

- **State education leaders must provide explicit guidance and criteria for serving DLLs/ELs in hybrid and distance learning (e.g., grade-level standards and developmentally-appropriate materials, synchronous time when students engage with teachers in real time, etc).** Given the uncertainty surrounding public health conditions in California, it is critical that state leaders provide clear, direct expectations for how schools should relaunch in-person and/or online or distance learning options. It is similarly essential that they set baselines for hybrid learning so that schools understand what is expected of them as far as academic instruction and language instructional services for DLLs/ELs are concerned.

- **State education leaders must prepare teachers to support their DLL/EL students via hybrid learning models in the fall.** Teachers need guidance, training, and support before—and during—the school year if they are to succeed. California should provide funding to ensure that all teachers receive DLL/EL-specific professional learning opportunities this fall. To be most effective, this training should include preparations for teachers to conduct both distance and hybrid learning with DLLs/ELs while addressing social and emotional needs and technology and internet access.

Expectations for California’s Local Education Leaders

- **Local education leaders must establish designated planning time and structures for teachers and other support personnel to develop coherent, aligned plans for DLLs/ELs’ instruction.** As part of this work, they should repurpose roles and responsibilities of support personnel to focus on instructional support and continuity across in-person and distance learning.
- **Local education leaders must provide differentiated professional learning for teachers and educators, with explicit focus on EL and DLL students.** These opportunities should focus on context-specific teaching strategies: teachers who are delivering only online instruction to DLLs/ELs need strategies for that setting, while teachers who are implementing hybrid learning models should get support in learning how to succeed in both.

Expectations for California Educators

- **California educators must use their pedagogical options intentionally.** If schools are able to partially reopen, they must use in-person time for tasks that cannot be conducted online (e.g., DLL/EL screeners, ELPAC assessments, etc). When students have time with their teachers (in-person or virtually), schools should prioritize essential academic instruction and DLLs/ELs’ language development. Independent/asynchronous instructional elements (e.g., recorded videos of lessons, read alouds, or presentations) should reinforce essential instruction.
- **California educators must prioritize relationship building with DLLs/ELs.** Given the social isolation of the pandemic, children should have periodic check-ins with educators, counselors, coaches, and administrators at the school that are primarily geared towards monitoring and supporting their mental health and wellbeing.

Assessments and Accountability

As schools reopen in the fall, state and local education leaders must make plans to quickly assess social and emotional wellbeing, screen DLLs/ELs' language development, and monitor academic progress for the explicit purpose of tailoring instruction and providing other supports to meet students' needs.

Oversight of the hybrid learning models schools are offering will also be critical. Education leaders at all levels must ensure that DLLs/ELs have equitable access to schools' instructional models *and* that these models are high quality. They must ensure that DLLs/ELs have access to integrated and designated English Language Development (ELD) programming. If students are enrolled in any type of bilingual program, that model should be translated into all facets of the delivery system.

Expectations for California's State Education Leaders

- **State education leaders must develop guidance for how schools, districts, and early learning programs can demonstrate DLLs/ELs' continuous growth in learning English and the academic content being taught in English, and—when available—in the home language.** They should provide clear timetables and resources to allow schools to assess all ELs' linguistic and academic development against standardized benchmarks and DLLs' progress on the developmental continuum as soon as safely possible. They should also work creatively to ensure that delays in screening and assessment do not further delay implementation of the state's new academic growth and English language proficiency accountability metrics.
- **State education leaders must provide meaningful oversight of local distance and hybrid learning plans.** If local education officials make promises to provide DLLs/ELs with specific learning opportunities, technological supports, and language services, state leaders should make sure they follow through. State leaders should check in to confirm that local education officials are following [federal](#) and state guidance on how to administer assessments to DLLs/ELs while using distance and/or hybrid learning approaches.
- **State education leaders must collect and publish attendance data disaggregated by student groups for California schools and districts.** This will provide a benchmark for evaluating opportunity gaps inherent in hybrid learning models. If, for instance, DLLs/ELs in a given community attend in-person elements of their district's hybrid learning program at much higher rates than they log in to any online learning elements, education leaders should pursue adjustments to make access more equitable.

Expectations for California's Local Education Leaders

- **Local education leaders must commit, in their distance learning plans, to screening and assessment plans that will ensure that DLLs/ELs are correctly identified and reclassified from the student group this academic year.** Local leaders should work within [federal](#) and state guidance to ensure that the pandemic does not prevent schools from monitoring DLLs/ELs' linguistic and academic progress. Further, in their distance learning plans, local officials should explain how they will use data from these—and other—assessments to shape their hybrid learning models and guide educators' work.

- **Local education leaders must oversee schools' implementation of hybrid learning processes, particularly those related to DLLs/ELs.** School district leadership must regularly check in with schools to ensure that the promises made on behalf of DLLs/ELs in their distance learning plans are actually being carried out.

Expectations for California Educators

- **California educators must collaborate with school and district leaders to identify, implement, and use differentiated assessments during distance learning.** Data from these assessments will be critical for identifying DLL/EL students' academic strengths and needs during the hybrid learning period. Educators should also seek out digital platforms that permit them to assess students as they work and provide rapid feedback.
- **California educators must ensure that assignments for non-class time reinforce and/or apply what is taught in synchronous instruction.** Educators should collaboratively develop a system for monitoring and evaluating student work and holding students accountable for their assignments. This should be consistent across each grade level.

Family Engagement and Support

While the COVID-19 pandemic poses a threat to all Californians, its risks have not been equally felt. **Low-income communities** and culturally and linguistically diverse **communities** have borne the brunt of its impact. Members of these communities are more **likely** to face food, housing, and/or child care instability at present. Many are either facing the prospect of reduced wages or unemployment, while those who are working may face increased health risks and have minimal amount of time to support distance learning assignments as the pandemic continues to spread in the state.

These, and other, systemic challenges make it likely that many DLL and EL children are facing significant adverse childhood experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown. In April, **an Education Trust-West survey** found that families of young children who speak non-English languages are disproportionately likely to be struggling to provide their children with sufficient food.

Schools must keep these out-of-school challenges in the forefront of their planning for the fall. DLLs/ELs are likely to return to school with significant social and emotional needs. Every California K–12 campus should prepare teachers to recognize these concerns and respond with trauma-informed educational approaches. Schools must take a whole child approach to ensure that children’s holistic needs are addressed and that they feel safe and secure enough to build relationships and grow their academic skills.

To do this work, schools must also develop a comprehensive approach to family engagement and build parent leadership. During the lockdown, family members are uniquely important to students’ wellbeing and development, since they are able to work with students in person. They will be valuable partners as schools launch hybrid learning models in the fall; family members can provide educators with information on how students spent their summers, how they are feeling, what they are most anxious or excited about as school restarts, and much more. Distance learning provides a unique opportunity for DLLs/ELs’ families to actively support their children’s home language development, which also supports their overall academic development *and* acquisition of English—particularly in the case of DLLs. The better—and sooner—schools are able to engage families, the better they can understand and support students. For DLLs/ELs, many schools will need to **make a paradigmatic shift away from English-only family engagement** to translate communications and directions for work assignments for family members.

Schools will be more successful in this engagement if they develop and work intentionally with parent leaders. These individuals can speed school-family communication, support and guide other parents, contribute to decision making, and support students’ academic growth. Critically, they can also help bridge linguistic and cultural lines of difference to build unity and empowerment at the school and community levels.

Expectations for California’s State Education Leaders

- **California state education leaders must provide family engagement guidance that emphasizes the importance of intentionally prioritizing the families of DLLs/ELs.** This should provide clear expectations for local officials, particularly that they translate all communications (including directions for student assignments), overtly support DLLs/ELs’ bilingualism and biliteracy, and solicit community feedback on hybrid learning. When schools reopen, it should be standard for all California schools to provide apps that offer reciprocal translation between teachers and families and simultaneous translations for parent advisory meetings or trainings.

Expectations for California’s Local Education Leaders

- **Local education leaders must establish structures dedicated to centering the needs and voices of families during the COVID-19 response period.** This should begin with thorough needs assessments to help schools and districts identify whether—and which—social services would be most helpful for families. Specific district staff should be assigned the work of soliciting and sharing feedback from families on the efficacy of the district’s family communications efforts and hybrid learning models. Local leaders should also consider forming committees designed to provide an open channel of communication for families and teachers. These efforts should be aligned with schools’ and districts’ English Learner Advisory Committees (ELACs and DELACs).
- **Local education leaders must draft “family learning plans,” which provide families who did not significantly participate in distance learning with a detailed, clear set of data-driven, individualized priorities and goals for their children during the period of hybrid learning.** These plans should also propose learning activities that families can undertake with their children to support schools’ efforts.
- **Local education leaders must review and strengthen their approaches to multilingual communication with families.** Families can be uniquely helpful to hybrid learning models during the pandemic, since they are not always bound by the social distancing rules that necessitated the launch of these models. To effectively communicate with DLLs’ and ELs’ families, schools must be prepared to communicate multilingually. This should include creative thinking about translation approaches as well as procedures for using a wide range of communication strategies (phone calls, texts, emails, mobile app messages, paper packets, and more). In addition, districts should invest in district licenses for apps that allow simultaneous translation at meetings and parent conferences, as well as reciprocal translation for one-on-one communications.

Expectations for California Educators

- **California educators must commit to changing their family communication and engagement strategies to reflect the public health situation during hybrid learning.** While it is too early to know specifically how schooling will look in the fall, educators must be prepared to do things differently. This includes family outreach. As schools design and launch distance and/or hybrid learning approaches, educators must prepare to try new and different ways of connecting with their students’ families—particularly when this involves crossing linguistic and cultural lines of difference.
- **California educators should start school early to communicate with students and parents—and be paid for it.** If health and safety allow, elementary school teachers should make home visits to meet their new students and families to describe what the school year will be like and how they can work together. Secondary teachers should prioritize communicating with students and families that did not significantly engage with distance learning in the spring. If visits are not possible, then phone or digital connections should be made. Bilingual personnel should support teachers in their efforts to communicate in the language spoken by the parents. These outreach and engagement efforts should continue throughout the year.

Conclusion

Right now, millions of California students are suffering physically and emotionally under the uncertainty of the pandemic. It is impossible to speak of “silver linings” amidst a tragedy of this size and scope. Further, amidst this uncertainty—and after several exhausting months of scrambling to reinvent public education as a distance learning enterprise—it may be difficult for education leaders to begin planning for the fall.

But it is critical to recognize that this public health crisis—and the corresponding strain it has put on California’s economy and civil society—requires a comprehensive response that goes beyond returning to the pre-pandemic “normal.” This is especially true for California’s DLLs/ELs. These students have not always been well served in California schools. Further, data suggest that their families were disproportionately likely to be living below the poverty line before schools closed, making them uniquely vulnerable to the pandemic’s economic upheaval. This socioeconomic inequity also fuels the “digital divide.” Surveys indicate that ELs are less likely to have equitable access to schools’ distance learning.

To meet this challenge, schools need to begin their fall planning (and contingency planning) now. Local education leaders need to provide educators with guidance, resources, and oversight that focuses efforts on the historically underserved communities who have been hardest hit by the pandemic. State education leaders need to establish guidelines for how public schools should reopen and what they should prioritize when they do. Perhaps most importantly, state leaders need to provide schools with adequate funding to ensure that schools can deliver and meet those goals.

California schools cannot succeed with hybrid learning this fall unless they take substantive action to address DLLs’ and ELs’ needs in these plans. These students make up a large share of California public school students, and there is considerable evidence that—when supported—they are some of the state’s highest-potential students. To that end, California must deliver meaningful support—resources, energy, and attention—aimed at DLLs/ELs’ linguistic, academic, social, and emotional development as schooling resumes in the fall.

An unprecedented crisis demands an unprecedented response. The long-term future of California’s labor market, economy, and civil society hinges upon how well the state supports DLLs/ELs now.

