

Ending the Invisibility of Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Systems

A Framework for DLL Identification

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Executive Summary

One-third of young children in the United States live in a household where a language other than English is spoken by a parent or caregiver. Despite the size and growth of this Dual Language Learner (DLL) population, and their distinct linguistic assets and learning support needs, standardized policies for systematically identifying these children are non-existent beyond a few localized efforts and isolated, beginning steps in a handful of states. Gathering information about DLLs—at a minimum, the number in a given program or system—is critical in order to determine whether these young children are being effectively and equitably served in their early years.

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This issue brief offers a framework of the most critical elements that would ideally be included in standardized, comprehensive DLL identification and tracking processes for early childhood systems, based on program and policy needs. It is a companion piece to a report from the Migration Policy Institute's (MPI's) National Center on Immigrant Inte-

gration Policy, *Taking Stock of Dual Language Learner Identification and Strengthening Procedures and Policies*, which provides an overview of the research, obstacles to DLL identification, the few best practices from across the United States, and recommendations for creating or strengthening such policies.

The key elements of this framework are:

- ▶ identifying young children who have exposure to a language other than English in their home environment;
- ▶ collecting comprehensive information about DLLs' language environment and experiences;
- ▶ obtaining in-depth information about DLLs' individual language and preliteracy skills in English and in their home language(s); and
- ▶ making these data and other relevant information accessible to programs and policymakers across early childhood and K-12 systems.

These key elements—drawn from MPI's research and existing efforts by some early childhood systems—were affirmed by a group of experts convened by MPI to discuss and build consensus on this important topic. These research and consensus-building efforts also identified a set of foundational system elements that would need to be in place in order to

support the development and implementation of the framework. These include:

- ▶ comprehensive state early childhood data systems that are aligned with K-12 systems;
- ▶ adequate professional development and training for early childhood professionals related to DLL assessment, instructional needs, and family engagement; and
- ▶ effective, culturally relevant, and age-appropriate early childhood assessments and tools for use across the birth-to-age-five continuum.

Each state is unique in terms of its policy environment and the status of the development of its early childhood systems. As such, early childhood system leaders and stakeholders will be best positioned to determine the appropriate first steps and plan of action to establish an effective identification system for DLLs in their state—a foundational step toward improving services for this population. As early childhood systems gain increasing visibility and prominence, increasing their responsiveness to young children’s diverse needs and characteristics will be critical to developing systems that mitigate rather than contribute to existing gaps in child well-being and outcomes.

1 Introduction

Growing numbers of young children in the United States live in a household where a language other than English is spoken by a parent or caregiver. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau for 2015–19, these Dual Language Learners (DLLs) made up one-third of all children ages 5 and under nationwide and numbered more than 7.4 million.¹ Many of these DLLs may benefit from explicit English language instruction or supports, in the event that they have limited exposure to English at home in

their early years. Due to their language environment, these young children also have the potential to develop as multilingual and multiliterate individuals, given the appropriate supports.

However, early childhood programs and systems currently lack the information they need to ensure that DLLs receive the types of services and support that would most benefit them in early childhood and beyond due to insufficient and, in many places, nonexistent data protocols and systems. While federal recommendations around this topic have been issued, and some states have taken steps toward including DLL identification processes in their state pre-K programs, systemic efforts to identify DLLs and their language abilities, experiences, and needs across the birth-to-age-five continuum remain largely absent.²

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Collecting critical information about DLLs—at a minimum, the number in a given program or system—is necessary in order to determine whether these young children are being effectively and equitably served. Without these data, early childhood programs cannot successfully improve their instructional services by, for example, providing relevant training or professional development to teaching staff, offering necessary translation and interpretation for parents and families, or incorporating relevant language and literacy supports into instructional practices and design. Meanwhile, the limited data and research that are available demonstrate that, although DLLs benefit disproportionately from high-quality early learning opportunities,³ they are less likely

than other young children to be enrolled in such services⁴—a finding that raises concerns about barriers to access as well as program relevance and quality for this population.

Among the factors that challenge the systematic and standardized identification of DLLs are the limited and patchwork nature of early childhood data systems overall and the complex web of private and public, formal and informal programs that comprise most families' early childhood experiences. Each state, moreover, has its own unique environment and starting point for the development of early childhood systems, as well as its own political and societal contexts around support for bilingual education. While acknowledging these challenges and differences, this brief offers a framework of the most critical elements that would ideally be included in standardized, comprehensive DLL identification and tracking processes across early childhood systems, based on program and policy needs.

BOX 1 Why Is DLL Identification Necessary?

Identifying Dual Language Learners (DLLs) is important because data about the number and characteristics of these children are necessary to achieve equity and accountability for this population within early childhood systems. The process of making this population visible and better understood is needed for administrators and policy-makers to improve services and provide relevant supports for DLLs, including, for example:

- ▶ qualified instructors with linguistic and cultural competence and an understanding of home and second language development;
- ▶ home language support;
- ▶ translation, interpretation, and basic language access; and
- ▶ effective, culturally appropriate family engagement strategies.

2 Key Elements of a DLL Identification Process

In February 2020, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) convened a group of scholars and other early childhood experts to discuss a framework for DLL identification.⁵ During this convening, participants discussed what key elements are needed to institute a comprehensive DLL identification process, based on research as well as lessons learned from existing and historical efforts. A deeper dive into this information and overview of ongoing promising initiatives in several states are the subject of a report that accompanies this issue brief, *Taking Stock of Dual Language Learner Identification and Strengthening Procedures and Policies*.

Based on these expert discussions and related research, the following were determined to be the core elements of a comprehensive DLL identification process—one that would capture necessary information about young children's language learning experiences and needs.

- 1 **Identifying young children who have exposure to a language other than English in their home environment.** Through a home language survey or similar process, early childhood systems would determine whether a young child has exposure to a language other than English at home. This would be done through programs and services including but not limited to early learning, home visiting, and early intervention, thereby triggering identification of the child as a Dual Language Learner (see Box 2) based on the child's potential to develop proficiency in another language as well as English.⁶ In order for such an identification process to be successful, it must be conducted through authentic engagement and dialogue with parents

BOX 2 DLLs versus ELs

The process of identifying DLLs serves to capture the universe of all young children who have the potential to develop as bilingual. It marks a starting point, knowing that their language skills, dominance, and characteristics are likely to change significantly over time. DLLs are, therefore, distinct from English Learners (ELs) and some but not all DLLs may go on to be designated as ELs once they enter a public K-12 school setting that requires limited English proficiency to be determined and documented. DLL is a term that is typically used in the 0-to-8 age band, though this brief focuses primarily on young DLLs in their early childhood years (ages 0 to 5). Regardless of their future designation, students' DLL portfolios will continue to provide valuable information about their linguistic background for future teachers and administrators.

and families in order to capture accurate information that is not shaped by fear or misinformation. For those who are identified as DLLs, Steps 2 and 3 would follow.

2 **Collecting comprehensive information about young DLLs' language environment and experiences.**

Through active parent engagement and other methods, early childhood systems would collect accurate data about DLLs' language environment and experiences across all home languages as well as English to gain an understanding of their language strengths, goals, and learning needs.

3 **Obtaining in-depth information about DLLs' language and preliteracy skills in English and in home language(s).**

Once children are preschool age or older, early childhood systems would gather information, through appropriate assessments or protocols, about their language and preliteracy skills in English and home language(s), as well as overall language utilization. Some children, such as those enrolled in public preschool programs administered by school districts that are required to screen for limited English proficiency, may concurrently be designated as ELs at this time.

4 **Making data and other relevant information accessible to early childhood programs and policymakers.**

Early childhood systems would provide access to the information gathered in Steps 2 and 3 to all early childhood programs as well as to K-12 schools—with data privacy and security measures in place. They would also allow learners' profiles to be continuously updated as their needs and experiences evolve.

In order to develop and implement an effective DLL identification process that incorporates these elements, significant changes and improvements to early childhood system capacity would need to be made. Among the foundational elements that would need to be in place are:

1 **Comprehensive state early childhood data systems aligned with K-12 systems.**

These systems should involve the use of a protected, statewide unique identifier⁷ for each child across all early childhood programs from birth to age 5.

2 **Adequate professional development and training related to DLL assessment, instructional needs, and family engagement.**

These opportunities should be accessible, specific to early childhood, and appropriately incentivized for all early

childhood professionals. Efforts should also be made to increase the linguistic and cultural diversity of the early childhood workforce.

3 Effective, culturally relevant, and age-appropriate assessments and tools for use across the birth-to-age-five continuum.

Early childhood assessments, which provide important information about young children's growth and development, are often culturally normative and do not account for bilingual or multilingual development. Relevant, tailored assessment instruments and procedures are needed to understand and support DLLs' developmental trajectories.

Additional information about each of these framework steps and core elements, including rationale and considerations for implementation, is discussed in the subsections that follow.

A. *Identifying Young Children Who Have Exposure to a Language Other than English in Their Home Environment*

In its research, MPI defines a DLL as any young child who has at least one parent who speaks a language other than English in the home, as recorded in U.S. Census Bureau data. This serves to create estimates of the widest possible universe of young children who have the potential to develop as multilingual individuals and/or whose language learning needs warrant additional attention and support from early childhood programs.

Identifying DLLs based on their parents' or caretakers' home languages, which form these children's

early language environments, is advantageous for a number of reasons. First, it would enable early childhood systems to identify potential DLLs starting from infancy, despite the fact that young children's own emerging language skills are difficult to determine until years later. Because the very first years of a child's life are critical for language development and cognitive development, having access to this information early on would be highly beneficial. Second, this method defines DLLs based on their potential to develop multilingual skills, rather than a deficiency or lack of proficiency in English skills, as is the case with EL identification in the K-12 system (and in public preschools, in some cases). This inherently promotes a strengths-based view and approach toward this population. Finally, because information about the languages parents speak in the home is relatively easily collected through home language interviews or similar methods, this should be a highly feasible first step for programs and systems seeking to determine the number and linguistic characteristics of DLLs. Such interviews and exchanges with families must be conducted through trusted liaisons and in such a way that parents and other caretakers are aware of the purpose of the information they are being asked to provide, to avoid creating misunderstandings or fear that could lead to incomplete or inaccurate information. Once this universe of DLLs is identified, additional pertinent information about this population can be collected.

Some states already use home language surveys or other similar tools to gather this type of information in early learning programs, to varying degrees. While 23 states and the District of Columbia now use home language surveys to identify ELs in K-12 contexts,⁸ this is generally not done in a systemic or standardized way in the early childhood space, with surveys often limited to use in district-run preschools but not in other early learning programs.

B. Collecting Comprehensive Information about Young DLLs' Language Environment and Experiences

Going beyond the identification of home languages spoken, this second step would seek to illuminate and differentiate young DLLs' widely variable language experiences as such details about the quantity and quality of their language exposure are relevant for their learning trajectories. Ideally, this process would involve face-to-face interviews and conversations with young children as well as their families to ensure the collection of accurate and holistic information.

Collection of this important information would occur on an ongoing basis—at least annually, and whenever a child enters a new program—to account for changes in their language environments and experiences.

The information collected during this process would include, for example, how frequently different languages are used in the household, by whom, and for what purpose, as well as families' language development goals for their children. Examples of protocols for gathering this information can be found in the Emergent Multilingual Learners Language Profile Protocol (EMLLPP) initiative in New York State or the Fresno Language Project in California,⁹ which provide useful references and guidance for states and systems. Collection of this important information would occur on an ongoing basis—at least annually, and whenever a child enters a new program—to account for changes in their language environments and experiences.

C. Obtaining In-Depth Information about DLLs' Language and Preliteracy Skills in English and in Home Language(s)

By the time children reach preschool age (ages 3 and up), early childhood staff have access to important additional information about DLLs' language skills and preferences based on observations in care and classroom settings. Authentic assessments of DLLs' language skills to gain an understanding of their use of both English and home languages can be obtained through a variety of methods, including classroom observations and direct interactions with children, as well as ongoing engagement with families. In this way, a fuller portrait of DLLs' receptive and productive language skills across English and other languages can be obtained. These assessments would also be conducted on at least an annual basis, as children's language skills and preferences are fluid over time.

For public preschool programs that are administered by school districts, civil rights regulations require that students be screened for EL status, according to federal law.¹⁰ This process, however, differs significantly from the objectives for this step in the DLL identification framework as the goal in EL identification is limited to gaining information only about English language proficiency.

D. Making Data and Other Relevant Information Accessible to Early Childhood Programs and Policymakers

Given that the purpose of a comprehensive data protocol is ultimately the improvement of services

and programs for DLLs, the benefits of data collection cannot be realized unless this information is made available to teaching staff and program administrators as well as policymakers. Ideally, any early childhood or K-12 program that a DLL participates in would be able to access the child's DLL portfolio, giving them a detailed understanding of the child's language experiences and needs, and those of the DLL's family. This is not possible, of course, without aligned data systems—a foundational element of such a system that is discussed next.

E. Comprehensive State Early Childhood Data Systems Aligned with K-12 Systems

In order to allow early childhood and K-12 programs and systems to learn from and leverage the information gathered via the steps outlined above, comprehensive, aligned early childhood data systems would need to be developed. Such systems would ideally be highly inclusive and encompass not only pre-school and center-based care programs, but also, for example, family child-care programs, where a substantial proportion of DLLs are likely to be served, as well as home visiting programs, which are well positioned to gather in-depth information about young children's home language environments.

While the development of such systems remains a distant goal for many states, several have taken steps toward integrating data across early childhood programs in recent years, with support from the federal government through initiatives such as Race to the Top and Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems Grants.¹¹ Several states, for example, are already moving toward integrating some early childhood program data vertically into their K-12 data systems.¹² The Early Childhood Data Collaborative has put out a framework laying out fundamental

elements of an aligned system connecting early childhood programs and K-12 systems, beginning with a unique statewide identifier for each child that would enable data-sharing—with privacy and security measures in place—across disparate programs.¹³ Critically, this framework also includes a workforce database with linkages between program sites and the children they serve, which could provide a better understanding of service quality as it relates to child outcomes.¹⁴

F. Adequate Professional Development and Training Related to DLL Assessment, Instructional Needs, and Family Engagement

Ultimately, the quality of the interviews and assessments used to gain a better understanding of DLLs' language needs and experiences is dependent on having a qualified, linguistically and culturally competent early childhood workforce, including examiners who are themselves multilingual. The need for increased competence and capacity in these areas is well documented,¹⁵ as are limitations within institutions of higher education to provide relevant training opportunities and certifications.¹⁶ Furthermore, while the aim of collecting information about DLLs is to ensure that they are able to receive the supports that are most beneficial to their development, improved services for DLLs will remain out of reach until their teachers and caretakers have the training and skills to work successfully with this population. Foundational skills for early childhood staff that would be supported in this vision include but are not limited to cultural competence, knowledge of home language and second language development, as well as authentic family engagement strategies.

G. *Effective, Culturally Relevant, and Age-Appropriate Assessments and Tools for Use Across the Birth-to-Age-Five Continuum*

Historically, most learning tools and assessments have been developed with monolingual children taken as the norm and geared toward a monolingual paradigm, largely ignoring the United States' increasingly multilingual reality.¹⁷ As a result, culturally validated and age-appropriate assessments that would effectively capture the information discussed in the steps above are currently unavailable, presenting a critical challenge to the implementation of this framework.¹⁸ While many states now widely use kindergarten entry assessments, for example, these are rarely available in languages other than English (though they have in some cases been translated to Spanish), and similar tools for younger children are largely nonexistent. Such tools, validated for use across all languages and cultures, would need to be developed and made accessible in order to gather important information about DLLs' language skills in both English and in their home languages.

3 Opportunities to Advance This Framework

The framework articulated in Section 2 describes an ideal scenario, wherein an interlocking set of well-developed system capacities provides for and allows appropriate leveraging of DLL data. In reality, state early childhood systems would necessarily take different paths to create these capacities, depending on the strengths and weaknesses of their existing systems and the priorities they have set for investment and reform. Nevertheless, given the cross-cut-

ting nature of the capacities needed, opportunities abound across the federal, state, and local levels to move toward a comprehensive DLL identification system. Federal guidance and leadership through, for example, Head Start guidelines and documents such as a 2016 joint policy statement from the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services¹⁹ are valuable and influential in promoting change in state systems. Notably, funding awarded through the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge has also provided an impetus and the resources necessary for several states, such as Pennsylvania,²⁰ to push forward improvements in services and data collection specifically for DLLs.

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Ultimately, however, given the structure of early childhood service provision, states are best placed to develop and implement comprehensive, standardized data systems that capture important DLL characteristics. While collecting and reporting DLL information through the model framework outlined in this brief may appear daunting, championing a holistic framework such as this and its specific elements will be critical as efforts to strengthen early childhood systems hopefully continue to move apace in many states. The data that would result from the implementation of such a framework are essential to responding to calls to address disparities in access and outcomes, such as those facing many DLL children and their families.

Each state is situated in a unique context, both in terms of social and political attitudes toward DLL issues and in the development of an aligned and comprehensive early childhood system. Even so, improved DLL identification initiatives can be wo-

ven into a wide variety of system-building efforts or funding initiatives that are already a priority for state leaders. In addition, other policy levers and/or opportunities that generally exist across all states and funding environments and can be pursued immediately include:

- ▶ **Conducting a DLL policy scan.** Such a scan can build understanding of how a state compares to others in recognizing and supporting DLL needs in early childhood data systems, information that can subsequently be used to develop or advocate on behalf of policy changes.²¹
- ▶ **Ensuring that DLL-specific standards and language are included in all state early childhood documents and guidelines.** This should include state early learning guidelines, competencies for early childhood professionals, and quality rating and improvement systems.
- ▶ **Pushing for improvements to state kindergarten entry assessments.** While many states now use these assessments, they could be strengthened to ensure they gather information about children’s home environments, including language, in a way that engages parents and families as partners.
- ▶ **Continuing to advocate for data disaggregation and inclusion of DLL-specific indicators, such as home languages spoken.** Doing so across all early childhood programs is an important means

of continuing to raise awareness about DLL needs and opportunities and of gaining additional information about this population.

- ▶ **Taking a targeted approach that centers equity when calling for increased investments in early childhood services.**

Such an approach should ensure that voices from communities and families that have been underserved by existing policies and programs are included in all policy conversations.

4 Conclusion

Early learning and care systems are increasingly prominent in public consciousness and are gaining visibility among national and state legislators as critical supports for young children and their families. At the same time, the sharpened focus and emphasis on equity issues is creating an opportunity to re-examine how early education and care systems can mitigate rather than contribute to existing gaps in educational access, quality, and life-long outcomes. The young child population is at the forefront of the nation’s growing cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity. Developing responsive systems that recognize this diversity and are built to make fully visible the important characteristics, needs, and experiences of DLLs, which have to date remained largely invisible, will be critical to realizing early learning systems that help young children harness their strengths and give them the opportunity to thrive.

Endnotes

- 1 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), pooled for 2015–19.
- 2 Melissa Lazarín and Maki Park, *Taking Stock of Dual Language Learner Identification and Strengthening Procedures and Policies* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021).
- 3 Noreen Yajejian et al., "High-Quality Early Education: Age of Entry and Time in Care Differences in Student Outcomes for English-Only and Dual Language Learners," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 32 (2015): 23–39.
- 4 Maki Park, Anna O'Toole, and Caitlin Katsiaficas, *Dual Language Learners: A National Demographic and Policy Profile* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2017).
- 5 In addition to this convening in February 2020, MPI held a series of virtual convenings and consultations in Fall 2020 with state stakeholders and national experts in the early childhood and immigration fields to gather input and feedback on earlier drafts of this framework.
- 6 Some young children may have significant exposure to a language other than English not through their home environment but through, for example, enrollment in a language immersion program or through a caretaker who is not part of the household but who regularly provides care in another language. While this population will not be explicitly addressed in this issue brief, the authors recognize that this group also merits attention in the context of this broader policy discussion.
- 7 For more information about unique identifiers, including privacy protection considerations, see Missy Cochenour, Steve Duarte, Stephanie Irvine, and Jeff Sellers, "Unique Identifiers: Beyond K-12" (issue brief, Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems Grant Program, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, DC, March 2014).
- 8 Alison L. Bailey and Kimberly R. Kelly, "Home Language Survey Practices in the Initial Identification of English Learners in the United States," *Educational Policy* 27, no. 5 (2011): 770–804, 776; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Allocating Federal Funds for State Programs for English Language Learners* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2011), 80.
- 9 For more information, see Lazarín and Park, *Taking Stock of Dual Language Learner Identification*. See also Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, "Fresno Language Project" (fact sheet, Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, Fresno, CA, n.d.); Zoila Morell, *Emergent Multilingual Learners in Prekindergarten: A Protocol for Identification, Instructional Planning, and Programming* (New York: New York State Education Department, 2017), 1.
- 10 Lazarín and Park, *Taking Stock of Dual Language Learner Identification*.
- 11 Early Childhood Data Collaborative, *Building and Using Coordinated State Early Care and Education Data Systems: A Framework for State Policymakers* (Bethesda, MD: Child Trends, 2010); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and U.S. Department of Education (ED), *The Integration of Early Childhood Data* (Washington, DC: HHS and ED, 2016).
- 12 HHS and ED, *The Integration of Early Childhood Data*.
- 13 Early Childhood Data Collaborative, *Building and Using Coordinated State Early Care and Education Data Systems*.
- 14 Early Childhood Data Collaborative, *Building and Using Coordinated State Early Care and Education Data Systems*.
- 15 See, for example, Maki Park, Margie McHugh, Jeanne Batalova, and Jie Zong, *Immigrant and Refugee Workers in the Early Childhood Field: Taking a Closer Look* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2015); Danielle Guzman-Orth, Alexis A. Lopez, and Florencia Tolentino, *A Framework for the Dual Language Assessment of Young Dual Language Learners in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Services, 2017).
- 16 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2017); Antonia López and Marlene Zepeda, *Dual Language Learner Teacher Competencies (DLLTC) Report* (Los Angeles: Alliance for a Better Community, 2012).
- 17 Guzman-Orth, Lopez, and Tolentino, *A Framework for the Dual Language Assessment*.
- 18 Lazarín and Park, *Taking Stock of Dual Language Learner Identification*.
- 19 For more information, see HHS and ED, "Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs," updated January 5, 2017.
- 20 Lazarín and Park, *Taking Stock of Dual Language Learner Identification*.
- 21 For baseline information about Dual Language Learners in 30 states and the United States overall, see the MPI fact sheet series: Park, O'Toole, and Katsiaficas, *Dual Language Learners*.

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