



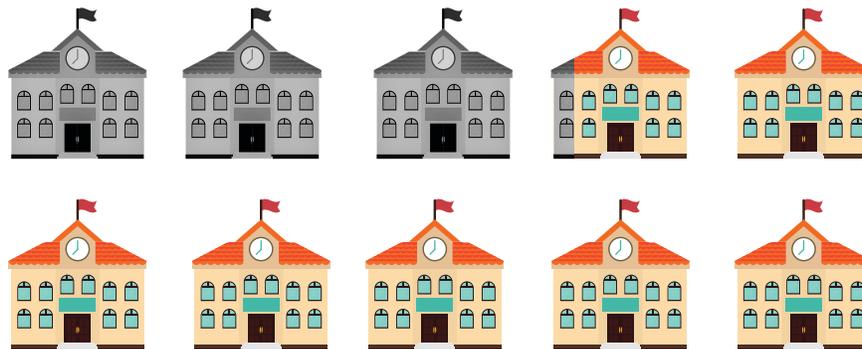
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California’s Bilingual Opportunity: The State Seal of Biliteracy for High School Students

California has a key advantage in meeting the increasing demand for a multi-lingual workforce: nearly 2.6 million K-12 public school students who live in homes where a language other than English is spoken. A majority of these students (1.4 million) have demonstrated English proficiency either when they started school or after being categorized as English learners. However, only a small share of these students have been able to demonstrate literacy in their home language – a sign that policymakers and education leaders are missing a key opportunity to leverage the language assets of the state’s students. Increasing the number of bilingual students who achieve biliteracy is a worthwhile goal that can improve their life outcomes and the state’s competitiveness in an increasingly globalized economy.

To encourage biliteracy and recognize students’ language skills, California established the State Seal of Biliteracy program in 2012. Any school district, county office of education, or charter school can offer the Seal of Biliteracy to high school graduates who achieve a high level of literacy and fluency in English and at least one other language. The State Seal of Biliteracy is free, voluntary, and schools can adopt it using an easy on-line form. However, while a majority of California school districts that issue high school diplomas offered the Seal of Biliteracy to their students in 2018-19, more than 3 in 10 (31.8%) did not.

More Than 3 in 10 School Districts Did Not Offer the State Seal of Biliteracy in 2018-19



Note: Includes high school districts, unified school districts, and county offices of education. Excludes state special schools and charter schools that receive their charters from elementary school districts or the State Board of Education.
Source: Budget Center analysis of California Department of Education data

Relatively few California students who live in homes where a language other than English is spoken receive the Seal of Biliteracy, despite the language assets they bring to the state’s classrooms. Any student who does not become biliterate represents a missed opportunity. But, this is especially true for students who live in homes where a language

5 in 6 “Qualified” California 12th Graders Did Not Receive the Seal of Biliteracy in 2017-18

Qualified Students Are Those Who Live in Homes Where a Language Other Than English Is Spoken and Are Also Proficient in English



Source: Budget Center analysis of California Department of Education data

other than English is spoken and are also proficient in English: Five in six – more than 146,000 – of these “qualified” 12th grade students did not receive the Seal of Biliteracy in 2017-18.

Why aren’t more students receiving Seals of Biliteracy? One reason may be that the State Seal of Biliteracy has not been adopted by their schools. The remedy for this problem is easy: All school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools that award high school diplomas should adopt the Seal and offer it to their graduates. Other causes may be more challenging to address. For example, California lacks the number of adequately trained bilingual educators needed to deliver instruction in the home languages of the state’s large number of bilingual students, especially given the diversity of those languages.¹ Ironically, the state could help meet its bilingual teacher shortage if even a small fraction of bilingual students who receive the Seal of Biliteracy became bilingual educators. The Seal is an important step toward identifying these students. But if California wants to employ bilingual students to address the state’s bilingual teacher shortage it will need to do a better job tracking those who receive the Seal of Biliteracy and providing them the support they need to become teachers. California’s State Seal of Biliteracy can encourage bilingual students to become biliterate, but unless schools adopt the program students will not be able to demonstrate biliteracy. Even if schools adopt the State Seal of Biliteracy, until they have qualified bilingual educators many students who are bilingual will not be able to achieve biliteracy.

Policymakers and education leaders can take key next steps in promoting California’s bilingual opportunities, including encouraging schools to adopt the Seal of Biliteracy, setting up tracking of students who receive Seal designations on their diplomas, and using this collective information to recruit and support qualified bilingual educators. This can all help leverage the language assets of the state’s large number of bilingual students to assist more Californians to become biliterate and strengthen our state’s workforce.

¹ Not graduating from high school is another reason students may not receive the Seal of Biliteracy.

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