



BY JONATHAN KAPLAN AND AUREO MESQUITA

California's Bilingual Opportunity: Supporting Students' Home Languages

Every day, millions of California students come to school with an invaluable asset: living in homes where a language other than English is spoken. However, this asset is often squandered as many of these students do not become literate in their home language. Achieving biliteracy benefits the students who are proficient in more than one language, the schools and colleges they attend, and the communities where these bilingual Californians live and eventually work. A large body of research, including studies cited in last year's *Getting Down to Facts II* report, shows that "bilingual education, on average, benefits English Learner (EL) students, resulting in improved outcomes in English proficiency, target language proficiency, reclassification, academic performance, and social outcomes." The report also cited research that points to the "important economic, cognitive, and cross-cultural benefits" of bilingualism, including the economic demand for bilingual workers. California has an opportunity to meet this demand given its large number of students who speak a language other than English at home. The question is whether the state can leverage that opportunity to improve the lives of these students, and also the state's competitiveness in an increasingly globalized economy.

California's K-12 schools educate a large number of students who live in a home where a language other than English is spoken. The state labels these students by three categories early in their education:

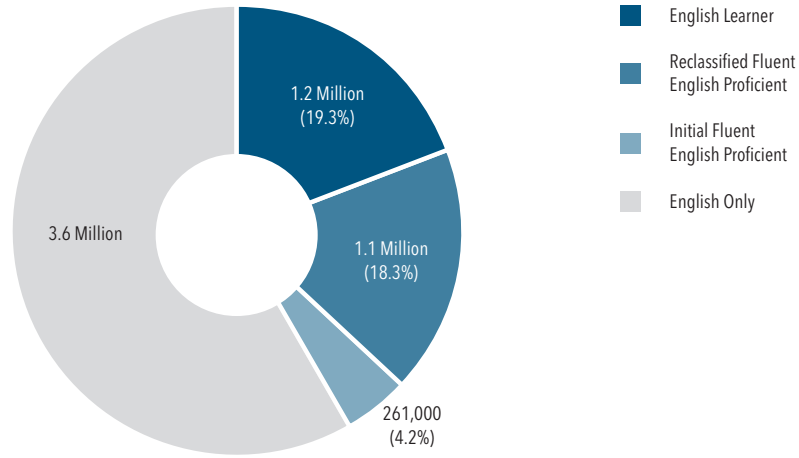
- 1. English learner** – students who have yet to demonstrate English proficiency;
- 2. Reclassified fluent English proficient** – students who previously were English learners and have been reclassified; and
- 3. Initial fluent English proficient** – students who demonstrate English proficiency when they enter school.

Grouped together, this universe of students is nearly 2.6 million in California's public schools (41.8% of K-12 public school enrollment). By the state's categories it's: 1.2 million students who are classified as English learners (19.3%), 1.1 million students reclassified fluent English proficient (18.3%), and 261,000 students classified as initial fluent English proficient. (4.2%). (See chart on next page)

Few question the need for all California students to become literate in English and the 1.1 million English learners who have been reclassified as fluent English proficient signal progress toward that goal. However, labeling these students based on their English proficiency indicates their home language may be seen as a challenge to overcome rather than an asset. This may help explain why many of the state's students who live in a home where a language other than English is spoken often are not provided the education required to achieve literacy in their family language. While

More Than 4 Out of 10 California K-12 Students Live in a Home Where a Language Other Than English Is Spoken

2018-19 K-12 Public School Enrollment = 6.2 Million



Note: Reclassified fluent English proficient students were once designated English learners and have demonstrated English proficiency. Initial fluent English proficient students demonstrate English proficiency when they enter school.
Source: California Department of Education

students who speak more than one language are bilingual, they are not biliterate if they can't read and write in more than one language. Until California prioritizes quality bilingual education for these students, the state will continue to miss opportunities to help Californians achieve biliteracy and leverage their language assets in our schools and workplaces.

California has taken some important steps in recent years to help bilingual students achieve biliteracy. Voters approved Proposition 58 in November 2016, which ended restrictions to bilingual programs that had been in place for nearly two decades and hindered students' ability to become biliterate. The following year, the State Board of Education adopted the California English Learner Roadmap that intends to strengthen policies, programs, and practices for students classified as English learners. One key principle of the Roadmap includes building the capacity of educators to leverage the strengths and meet the needs of these students. Paradoxically, a key obstacle to leveraging the language assets of California's students is a shortage of bilingual educators. A 2017 survey conducted by Californians Together indicated a majority of K-12 districts (58%) planned to expand their bilingual programs. However, a large share of these districts (86%) said that their supply of bilingual teachers was insufficient to meet the staffing needs of those planned expansions.

Policymakers should look to students who speak languages other than English as an opportunity to help more Californians become biliterate, prepare for the workforce, and improve the state's competitiveness in an increasingly globalized economy. With quality educational programs and adequate support, students who speak languages other than English can achieve biliteracy and improve knowledge and expertise in our workplaces and communities.

Support for the California Budget & Policy Center's research and analysis of K-12 education issues is provided by the Sobrato Family Foundation and the Stuart Foundation.