

DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNING

What the research says about improving student outcomes



In the last decade, studies have provided dramatic new insights into how young children acquire language, and how this affects their brain development. And researchers have been intrigued to find that it is not just English learners who benefit from instruction in two languages—children from English-only homes enrolled in such programs had a distinct reading advantage over their peers in English-only programs.¹ Children who are learning two or more languages enter our education system with an enormous intellectual, social, and personal asset that can improve our national economy and security: their home language.²

WHAT THE NEW BRAIN RESEARCH SAYS

- Researchers have found that babies have an innate capacity to learn multiple languages from birth, and that this early exposure to both languages does not cause confusion, or delay development in either one.³
- In fact, neuroscientists who studied images of the human brain have found that learning a second language actually increases brain density.⁴
- Studies show that children and adults who speak a second language also have an advantage in their ability to think flexibly.⁵
- This means that they possess the kinds of skills that are increasingly critical to 21st century college and career success—focusing attention when there is conflicting information, selecting relevant over irrelevant information, and switching strategies if a solution is not forthcoming.⁶



IMPROVING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT BY SUPPORTING HOME LANGUAGE

- Supporting children's home language in the early years is critical to later academic achievement, and results in better outcomes than English-only approaches, multiple studies have found.⁷
- This is because literacy and other skills and knowledge likely transfer from one language to another. This means that if a student learns, for example, the concept of phonological awareness—that words are made up of smaller sounds—in one language, they will already know it in another.⁸



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- This may be why Spanish-speaking preschoolers' reading and math scores were higher when they received more instruction in Spanish, especially when they attended high-quality programs, according to a multistate study.⁹
- Students benefit when they have a strong foundation in their first language. Skills in the first language, and gains in the first language, are related to acquisition of skills in the second language. The level of language skills in a child's first and second language when they enter kindergarten positively predicted literacy skills in English.¹⁰
- In the long term, programs that teach students in two languages have fewer high school dropouts, and those students outperform other English learners who are taught in English only.¹¹



ENGLISH LEARNERS IN CALIFORNIA

- California is home to the largest population of English Language Learners in the nation.
 - California serves more than 1 in 4 of the nation's DLLs.¹²
- More than 2.3 million California public school students speak a language other than English at home.
 - 71% of those English learners are in elementary schools.¹³
 - Most English learners are not immigrants or recent arrivals; in fact, more than three-fourths of ELL elementary students are native-born.¹⁴
- California can—and must—do better.
 - 59% of middle and high school English learner students are “long-term English learners,” students who struggle academically, have been in our schools for more than six years and are still not proficient in English.¹⁵
 - English learners have the highest dropout rate—almost 24%—of any group in the state.¹⁶
- The achievement gap does not happen overnight—it has its roots much earlier. A national study found that to close the achievement gap between English learners and native English speakers, language support programs must be sustained for five to six years – about the time needed for students who have high-quality instruction to acquire the academic English proficiency necessary for long-term academic success.¹⁷

