



From Practice to Policy: English Learners and Multilingual Learners in California

Introduction

UnidosUS has advocated for English Learners* for over three decades through our unique combination of research, advocacy, programs, and a national network of nearly 300 community-based Affiliate organizations across the country, which includes over 65 community-based organizations in California.¹ The Affiliate Network continues to bridge the gap between practice and policy through its direct engagement with students, families, and their local communities. UnidosUS education policy recommendations have historically been rooted in the experiences of our network’s practitioners,[†] families, students, and advocates since the organization’s inception.

In first quarter of 2023, UnidosUS conducted a series of interviews with members of the UnidosUS Affiliate Network to learn more about their experiences supporting and serving English Learners following multiple years of disrupted learning in California.[‡] By the time of the interviews, the practitioners had completed the first academic semester back in the classroom with their students during the 2022-2023 academic year.

UnidosUS’s previous research² began to paint a picture of the inequities English Learners and their families faced during the pandemic. Still, we knew that diving deeper during this phase of learning recovery is critical, given that the Golden State is home to the highest number of English Learners and Dual Language Learners in the nation. We found it essential to hear from diverse practitioners throughout the state soon after they completed an academic semester with minimal interruption[§] working under everyone’s new normal.

* In this brief, UnidosUS uses the terms “English Learner” (“EL”), “Dual Language Learner,” and “Multilingual Learner” interchangeably.

† In this brief, “practitioner” refers to teachers, school administrators, district administrators and/or service providers.

‡ In this brief, the phrase “disrupted learning” refers to a situation in which the normal process of education or learning is interrupted or negatively impacted by external factors. These factors could include unexpected events such as natural disasters, technological issues, health crises like pandemics, social unrest, or any other situation that makes it difficult or impossible for individuals to engage in typical learning activities.

§ In this brief, minimal interruption refers to a time where school buildings reopened to in-person instruction, but periodic quarantines, social distancing, and canceled events were less common than in previous academic years.

The listening sessions aimed to connect with our network of practitioners in order to:

1. Identify the inequities that English Learners face that may have been exasperated during COVID-19.
2. Learn how Latino* students, specifically English Learners, are doing academically and socially through the perspective of their educators, school administrators, and staff.
3. Identify policy recommendations for English Learner students grounded in practice.

Background

California has the highest number of English Learners (ELs) in the nation, comprising 18% of the state's total public elementary and secondary school enrollment in fall 2021—over one million students.³ While not all ELs are Latino, among California's population, 82% speak Spanish.⁴ There has been progress over the years regarding the academic achievement of ELs, yet they still graduate at lower rates than their peers—68% of ELs in California graduated from high school in 2017 compared to the statewide average of 83%.⁵ Furthermore, 59% of high school students identified as English Learners are identified as Long-Term English Learners (LTEs), meaning they have been in U.S. schools for more than six years without sufficient English proficiency to be reclassified.⁶

Ensuring EL students have an equitable opportunity to succeed will involve critical action to address the barriers created and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic that led California's public schools to physically close for a significant portion of the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years. Schools across the state continue to face crises in student attendance, engagement, and academic performance.⁷ Without targeted intervention, the state risks having thousands of young Californians face diminished opportunities, outcomes, and incomes.⁸

The interviews conducted for this brief provide us with a better understanding of the issues and challenges that are of top priority for practitioners serving large EL populations. Based on the information obtained from interviews, policymakers must understand that learning recovery is more than academic indicators and in-person learning. Learning loss is only one of the multiple barriers impacting California's English Learners. Because of that, a multipronged approach rooted in research-based practices is needed to move students out of learning recovery.

Multiple themes were elevated during the interview analysis, where UnidosUS practitioners used their learnings and experiences to better advocate for their student's needs when talking to the research team. Every interviewer asked the Affiliate Network, "What are the top three issues the state of California must prioritize regarding English Learners?" The interviews also elevated multiple bright spots and potential priority areas for English Learners in California. Various common themes arose across interviews. Themes included the importance of culturally relevant and responsive curricula, language development and proficiency, access to rigorous pathways, reclassification,

* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This document may also refer to this population as "Latinx" to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

newcomer student supports, targeted funding, college readiness and access, teacher shortage, targeted support, data transparency, and out-of-school time. In this brief, we will focus on the top two concerns: students' mental health and the school workforce.



Students' Mental Health

All participants elevated the importance of their students' mental health and shared that their students struggle with more than what meets the eye. Many practitioners shared that learning what a student is balancing outside their academic requirements takes time. According to the practitioners, the factors impacting students' mental health included but were not limited to responsibilities outside of the classroom and stress connected to finances, academics, and/or social environments.

One educator shared that it takes time to realize when students are struggling with more than school because, in their experience, students do not want others in their life to know what is happening. This educator shared that it was not until after multiple missed assignments and absences that they were able to put together that, in addition to struggling academically, their student was coming to school exhausted after working nights. This was not an isolated story. Many times, educators do not have a full picture of what is impacting their students' mental health.

Spring 2020 marked a time of fear and change for the world. Three years later, our practitioners describe their everyday experiences in similar ways; “new, concerning, exhausting, unclear,” sharing that they had never witnessed what they see in schools today. Practitioners reiterated the importance of English Learners' academic success but many worried about what untreated mental health issues can lead to. Research shows that students who feel safe, supported, and connected at school are more likely to engage in learning and achieve academic success. Untreated mental health issues can lead to various adverse outcomes, including lost education, absenteeism, dropout, substance abuse, and suicide. Therefore, addressing students' mental health needs is essential to ensure they can achieve their full potential and lead healthy and productive lives. Addressing students' mental health can create a positive and supportive learning environment that promotes academic success and emotional well-being.⁹

When students feel supported and understood, they are more likely to engage in learning, develop positive relationships with their peers and teachers, and feel a sense of belonging in the school community.¹⁰ Students' mental health is critical for promoting their overall well-being, academic success, and future life outcomes.



Schools and educators can implement various strategies to support California's English Learners' mental health, such as:

1. Providing access to mental health services and support for students experiencing emotional or behavioral difficulties.
 - a. Invest in mental health to fund counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals.
2. Creating a welcoming and inclusive school environment where English Learners feel valued and supported.
 - a. Uphold and protect the constitutional rights of students to a free public education regardless of the citizenship or immigration status of students and/or their parents, as established in Plyler v. Doe.
3. Providing cultural and linguistic competency training for teachers and staff to understand English Learners' unique needs better.
4. Promoting cross-cultural programming that supports social connections among students.
5. Providing opportunities for English Learners to develop language skills through interactive and engaging activities that build confidence and self-esteem.
6. Communicating with families and students about partnerships with community-based organizations (e.g., UnidosUS Affiliates) and referring them to additional resources in the community.
 - a. Building on new collaborative, wraparound services models to continue what is working.

The Golden State's Education Workforce

The education workforce shortage in California has impacted all sectors of our K-12 schools, leading to ripple effects throughout student learning. According to our interview series, the workforce has been affected by a lack of teachers, counselors, paraprofessionals, and individuals supporting multiple roles within the school. Not only has California been challenged by a teacher shortage for many years, but the interviewed practitioners also shared that they are incredibly concerned about the education workforce in general. Multiple examples included the need for additional support to address the teacher shortage and staff turnover rates for school nurses, teacher librarians, counselors, psychiatric social workers, student services and attendance counselors, and school psychologists.

The interviews elevated multiple roles that impact the everyday lives of their students and underscored the various impacts this has on English Learners. With a shortage of qualified teachers, English Learners are often impacted by the limited access to the instruction they need to develop their language skills. The practitioners shared that schools cannot hire enough teachers to meet the needs of their students and are concerned class sizes may increase, making it more challenging for English Learners to receive the individualized attention needed to succeed.

Teachers who work with English Learners often need specialized resources and materials to support students effectively. With a teacher shortage, schools may struggle to provide these resources, further hindering English Learners' progress. Teachers who work with English Learners should also have a strong knowledge of their students' cultural backgrounds and experiences. When there is a teacher shortage, schools may hire educators who lack cultural sensitivity and understanding, to the detriment of English Learners. In short, the teacher shortage can make it more challenging for English Learners to receive the instruction and support they need to develop their language skills and succeed academically.

During the interviews, practitioners shared that their schools are experiencing high turnover rates leading to multiple long-term substitute teachers stepping in to fill the workforce gaps on their campuses. They reiterated how critical it is to provide additional support for educators for the success of their students. One school principal shared that they are grateful that multiple stakeholders and leaders are talking about the teacher shortage. Still, they wanted to clarify that the workforce issue is not limited to teachers but extends to the various roles they need to fill within their school community.

Research shows that students perform better with access to qualified teachers, high-quality learning materials, and schools with adequate financial resources. As we emerge from the shadow of the pandemic, our goal should be to create educational experiences that build on each student's unique strengths and allow students to achieve their full potential.

While the education workforce shortage elevated in the multiple interviews encompasses more than just California's teachers, UnidosUS policy recommendations primarily focus on teachers, given our longstanding research and advocacy on the topic. California's teacher shortage has been an ongoing concern, especially in areas where teacher demand outpaces supply.



Policy recommendations that could help address the education workforce shortage in California:

1. **Increase education workforce recruitment and retention funding:** California should provide additional funding to recruit and retain the education workforce, especially in high-need areas such as bilingual education.
 - a) Increasing the supply of adequately trained bilingual education teachers who can support students on their biliterate journey is essential to meet the demand for bilingual workers.¹¹ This could include state loan forgiveness programs and other incentives to encourage people to pursue the education profession.
 - b) Support programs that prioritize the commitment to work in high-need areas for students currently enrolled in a professional preparation program approved by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) working towards earning their preliminary teaching or pupil personnel services credential.
2. **Provide more pathways to teaching:** California should create more pathways to becoming a teacher, including alternative routes for individuals with bachelor's degrees in another field who want to become teachers.
3. **Competitive salary and benefits:** California should offer competitive salaries and help make teaching more attractive. This could include offering better healthcare benefits, retirement plans, or other incentives to encourage teachers to stay in the profession.
4. **Support professional development opportunities:** California should provide ongoing professional development opportunities for the education workforce to improve their skills and knowledge to support ELs. This could include funding for continuing education courses, mentorship opportunities, workshops, and conferences.
5. **Address the teacher pipeline:** California should work to address the pipeline issue by encouraging more students to pursue teaching as a career. This could include outreach efforts to high school students and partnerships with community colleges and universities to provide more support for bilingual teacher preparation programs.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, students' mental health and the educator workforce are just a few of the barriers impacting English Learners during this time of pandemic recovery for the state. Removing these obstacles requires a concerted effort from California's education system and policymakers.

The findings in this brief are limited to this one study of multiple interviews with practitioners and hours of discussion. In offering policy and practice recommendations, our findings should not be overgeneralized. Nevertheless, the experiences of the interviewed practitioners elevate critical needs they see in their districts, classrooms, or charter network. We urge policymakers to recognize and address the unique needs of English Learners in the educational recovery from the pandemic.

Word Bank	Definitions
Multilingual students	Students who use a language other than English, including students with fluent English proficiency and students who are developing English proficiency
English Learners	Students who have yet to demonstrate English proficiency, are eligible for language services, and have not attained fluent English proficiency.

UnidosUS has advocated for historic federal legislation and funding with the support of the Affiliate Network, such as [Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act \(ESEA\)](#), [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#), and [the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief](#). All have increased financial support and the prioritization of California's English Learners.

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About UnidosUS

UnidosUS is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that serves as the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Since 1968, we have challenged the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos through our unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an [Affiliate Network](#) of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico. We believe in an America where economic, political, and social progress is a reality for all Latinos, and we collaborate across communities to achieve it.

For more information on UnidosUS, visit www.unidosus.org or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).

Endnotes

- 1 UnidosUS, “UnidosUS Affiliates,” <https://unidosus.org/blog/category/affiliates/>.
- 2 UnidosUS, “Learning from Latinx Families: Policy Considerations to Better Support Multilingual Learners During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” https://unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/unidosus_learningfromlatinxfamilies_policybrief.pdf.
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- 11 Jonathan Kaplan and Aureo Dias Mesquita, “California’s Bilingual Opportunity: Meeting the Demand for Bilingual Education Teachers to Help Students Achieve Biliteracy,” California Budget and Policy Center, November 2019, https://calbudgetcenter.org/app/uploads/2019/11/CA_Budget_CenterEL-Fact-sheet-3_1119.pdf.