

SB 560 Will Help More English Learners Become Strong Readers by 3rd Grade and Overcome COVID Learning Loss

Testimony to the Senate Education Committee in Support of SB 560

Texas Needs a Strategic Plan to Expand Access to Dual Language Immersion and Ensure English Learners Succeed in School

In order to align state strategies to improve and expand high-quality bilingual education, the state should set tangible goals and timelines to increase the number of certified bilingual educators, the number of quality Dual Language Immersion (DLI) programs, and the number of students who graduate with a Seal of Biliteracy. SB 560 directs the Texas Education Agency, in coordination with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Texas Workforce Commission, to create a strategic plan to improve bilingual education and expand DLI programs in Texas. In establishing a coordinated statewide strategy, local districts and state leaders will be better equipped to ensure Texas English Learners will receive the quality education they need for success in school and beyond.

Expanding Dual Language Immersion is Critical for Texas' Academic Goals

By educating children in both English and another language, **Dual Language Immersion programs (DLI) have proven to be the most effective educational model for teaching English and cultivating bilingualism.**

Based on a review of longitudinal academic research, TEA concluded:

"English learners served through well-implemented DLI showed, on average, higher academic outcomes than their English learner peers served through any other language program and were the only group in the study to achieve full gap closure with their English proficient peers, which occurred by the middle school years."¹

¹ Texas Education Agency (2016). Effective Practices in Bilingual Education Program Model Implementation: A Review of the Literature. Retrieved at: <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/Bilingual%20Education%20Programs%20Literature%20Review%20Jan%202019.pdf>

The Legislature recognized the importance of better supporting Dual Language Immersion Programs by creating the Dual Language Allotment in 2019, which provides weighted funding to incentivize the provision of DLI programs to improve students' reading ability by third grade.

Regardless of the language spoken at home, helping students become bilingual has well-documented cognitive benefits for children and strengthens the ability of the state to compete in a global, multilingual economy. When young children develop their literacy skills in their home language, it speeds up their ability to learn English and other subjects. Importantly, pre-k and elementary school teachers can cultivate English skills while ensuring that children's first language continues to flourish.

Unfortunately, despite the Legislature increasing funding for Dual Language Immersion programs in 2019, there remain significant barriers to educating English Learners across the state:

- Only about one in five English Learners are being educated in Dual Language Immersion classrooms.²
- Texas has a longstanding shortage of certified bilingual educators, meaning that districts often do not have the personnel needed to operate a high-quality Dual Language Immersion program and effectively educate English Learners.³
- These shortcomings undermine the education of English Learners: Only 1 out of 12 English Learner students is considered college-ready by graduation; compared to about 1 in 3 students overall.⁴

COVID-19 has Disproportionately Impacted English Learners and Dual Language Education

English Learners have been missing out on in-person learning and even distance learning if they lack quality internet access and devices, and many of these children have experienced traumatic stress and social isolation.

The lack of structured learning is particularly detrimental to these learners because online learning does not effectively address all four domains of language development (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). A big part of language development is the back and forth interaction between students and teachers, which is very difficult to replicate online.

The Texas Education Agency report found that pre-k and kindergarten students and children of color and lower-income kids were less engaged in virtual learning.⁵ **To ensure that English Learners are able to recover**

² Every Texan (2021). Creating a More Bilingual Texas. Retrieved at: https://everytexan.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2021_ELL_Primer_Final.pdf

³ U.S. Department of Education. (2020). Teacher Shortage Areas. Retrieved at <https://tsa.ed.gov/#/reports>

⁴ IDRA (2020). Ensuring Excellent Educational Opportunities for English Learners. Retrieved at: https://www.idra.org/education_policy/ensuring-excellent-educational-opportunities-for-english-learners/

⁵ Texas Education Agency (2020). Summary of Student Engagement in Virtual Learning in School Year 2019-2020. Retrieved at <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/covid/covid19-Student-Engagement.pdf>

from lost learning opportunities, Texas should ensure state strategies include expanding access to academically enriching Dual Language Immersion programs.

SB 560 is a Top Recommendation of the Texas Early Childhood English Learner Initiative Based on a Year of Statewide Research

To ensure more Texas children are successful both inside and outside the classroom and to maximize the impact of the historic education investments in House Bill 3 from the 2019 Texas legislative session, Texans Care for Children, along with a variety of partners and stakeholders, launched [the Texas Early Childhood English Learner Initiative](#) in early 2020.

The Initiative’s goals are to ensure more English Learner (EL) students become **strong readers by third grade**, become **fluent and literate in both English and their home language**, and are learning in settings where **educators, principals, child care directors, and parents have the tools they need** to support them during this precious period of childhood. Early childhood experiences – in the home, child care, pre-k, and other early grades – provide the foundation for success in later grades and later in life.

From January through October 2020, we developed the recommendations through a statewide survey of 185 experts in bilingual and early childhood education, three virtual workgroup convenings with community leaders from around the state, and numerous conversations with education program leaders and stakeholders. Stakeholders felt that a state plan would be the best way to bring state leaders from different sectors together to address the most enduring challenges facing English Learners and the expansion of DLI across the state.