

TOPICAL BRIEF

EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SERIES

# The Case for Cultivating Dual Language Learners' Home Languages

April 2020



**MSG**  
MANHATTAN STRATEGY GROUP

[www.manhattanstrategy.com](http://www.manhattanstrategy.com)

## The Context and Research

The number of K-12 students in the U.S. for whom English is not their first or home language continues to rise.<sup>1</sup> Although the exact number of children under the age of five whose home language is not English is less certain, there have been steady increases in the number of young children speaking languages other than English who attend early care and education programs (e.g., Head Start,<sup>2</sup> state preschool programs,<sup>3</sup> childcare centers).

The term “dual language learner” has various definitions; in this paper it is used to identify children under the age of five who “are learning two (or more) languages at the same time, or learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language.”<sup>4</sup> Dual language learners (DLLs) constitute a diverse group; they speak different home languages, have different levels of first and second language proficiency, and come from different social backgrounds, circumstances, and cultures. Some DLLs immigrated to this country, but most DLLs were born here.<sup>5</sup>

The research on first and second language acquisition highlights young children’s facility for learning two or more languages.<sup>6</sup> It has also identified several cognitive advantages of bilingualism, including certain aspects of executive functioning (e.g., inhibitory control, working memory, selective attention). Executive functioning is associated with school readiness and academic success. These cognitive enhancements have been found when children are “balanced bilinguals.” These are “children who demonstrate roughly equal abilities in each of their languages and show greater [cognitive] advantages than those who are unbalanced, or more dominant in one language.”<sup>7</sup> Given the opportunity, children can further develop their home language and learn English without the need to sacrifice one for the other.

Young children have great facility for learning two or more languages. Dual language learners can continue developing their home language and learn English without needing to sacrifice one for the other. Research has indicated cognitive benefits of speaking two or more languages fluently.

## The Policy Landscape

In 2016, the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and of Education issued a *Joint Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs*.<sup>8</sup> This joint policy statement encourages early childhood programs to provide “systematic and deliberate exposure to English, paired with supporting home language development within high quality early childhood settings, [a practice that] can result in strong, positive outcomes for children who are DLLs, as well as positive outcomes for native English speakers.”<sup>9</sup>

The *Head Start Program Performance Standards*<sup>10</sup> recognize bilingualism as an asset and urge Head Start programs to implement practices that value children’s home languages and cultures, and engage with families in a culturally appropriate manner.<sup>11</sup> The findings from the extensive study the National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) conducted on the education of DLLs and English learners (ELs) led the committee to propose 13 recommendations for promoting students’ educational success. Among these is the recommendation that federal and state agencies with oversight of programs serving children from birth to age five “follow the lead of Head Start/Early Head Start by providing specific evidence-based program guidance, practices, and strategies for engaging and serving dual language learners and their families.”<sup>12</sup> The NASEM report also supports maintaining and developing DLLs’ home language and culture while they learn English.



A recently published guide<sup>13</sup> proposes a state policy agenda that aligns with the recommendations NASEM made in its *Promising Futures* report.<sup>14</sup> These include:

- Develop a clear statement of philosophy and goals for DLLs/ELs;
- Establish a clear process for identifying DLLs and assessing their progress in both the home language and English, and provide guidance on assessment tools and practices;
- Establish specific educator qualifications for teaching DLLs and ELs “to ensure that teachers are linguistically, culturally, and pedagogically trained to meet the needs” of DLLs and ELs;
- Develop guidance on instructional practices (e.g., language of instruction, curriculum choices);
- Provide guidance on evidence-based resources and practices for increasing family participation that are culturally responsive; and
- Establish “guidance on how to monitor both process and structural quality of program features that are specifically related to DLLs, supports for English acquisition, supports for home language maintenance, and cultural responsivity.”

There are several strategies early childhood educators, including monolingual English speakers, can use to support the continued development of DLLs' home languages.



## Supporting DLLs: *How to Best Move Forward*

How can all early childhood programs move forward to support the home language and culture of DLLs and their families? Doing so will require developing new state-level policies, disseminating accurate information about second language acquisition, and providing professional development to administrators and educators on evidence-based practices for supporting DLLs.

In terms of program implementation, the components of early childhood programs that have been identified as contributing to DLLs' success can be summarized as follows:

1. A quality early childhood program,<sup>15</sup>
2. The language of instruction: supporting children's home language and providing systematic and deliberate exposure to English,<sup>16</sup>
3. Specific instructional and assessment practices,<sup>17</sup>
4. Teacher qualifications and language abilities,<sup>18</sup> and
5. Home-school connections.<sup>19</sup>

There are two major approaches early childhood programs can take regarding the “language of instruction:” (1) a dual language program that provides balanced English and home language development, and (2) an English language development program with home language support. A dual language program seeks to promote bilingualism and biliteracy for all children, DLLs as well as native English speakers. The English language development program primarily uses English as the language of instruction; early childhood educators in these programs must use specific strategies that ensure DLLs understand what's being taught in English, and that are effective for DLLs to develop oral language skills in English.<sup>20</sup> Which model a program chooses will depend on factors such as the program's goals, the languages the children and families in the program speak, any state or local policies, and the linguistic abilities of staff.

## The Case for Cultivating Dual Language Learners' Home Languages

Regardless of the instructional approach early childhood programs adopt, there are several practices all early childhood educators, including monolingual English speakers, can use to address the needs of DLLs.<sup>21</sup>

1. Meet with the child's family early in the year to learn about the child's early experiences, including their language experiences.
2. Recruit family and community members to volunteer in the classroom and provide DLLs with opportunities to hear, speak, read, and practice their home languages.
3. Use visual displays to represent cultures, languages, and family practices of all children.
4. Incorporate individual and small-group language learning experiences for DLLs.
5. Use books and materials that authentically represent children's cultures and languages.
6. Introduce key vocabulary words in the child's home language.
7. Use cognates in the home language and English (e.g., "centers" and Spanish "centros").
8. Use experiences, pictures, and objects to communicate the meanings of words.
9. Use visual cues, signals, physical gestures and signals to convey meaning.
10. Assess and keep track of each child's knowledge, language skills, and general skills.

The above list is not intended as a complete list of evidence-based strategies programs can use to support DLLs. These are some of the practices that can support DLLs' home languages while they simultaneously acquire English.

The way forward to supporting DLLs is becoming clearer. Research has provided compelling insights on young children's ability to learn two or more languages. A child's home language is a strength that DLLs possess, and it is tied to their identity, culture, family, and community. Early childhood programs can nurture and build upon this strength while the child learns English.



### About MSG

Manhattan Strategy Group (MSG), founded in 2001, is a management and social science consulting firm that works with federal, state, and local government agencies and their programs to achieve performance excellence. MSG works to improve education, workforce development, and human services for individuals with barriers to employment, for underserved populations, and for low-income communities, including our efforts on behalf of federal programs serving children, youth, and their families. MSG core services include Technical Assistance, Research & Evaluation, Communication & Information, and Management & Technology.

MSG has refined capabilities in the areas of: assessing early care and education policy, program and practice needs, developing responsive grantee-centric technical assistance (TA) plans, aligning staff with the most appropriate knowledge and skills to implement TA plans, identifying the most viable TA delivery approaches, determining the suitable level of intensity for TA delivery, tracking and monitoring the provision of TA via our TotalTA platform, evaluating the impact of our TA delivery, and measuring and reporting on required client outcomes tied to performance improvements.

With early care and education experts on staff, access to many of the most influential thought leaders, researchers, and innovators in the early childhood field, and with direct experience working with states to increase access to high quality early learning programs and school readiness, MSG is poised and committed to making a positive difference for infants, toddlers, children, and their families.

4340 East-West Highway, Suite 1100  
Bethesda, MD 20814  
Office: 301.828.1515  
info@manhattanstrategy.com

[www.manhattanstrategy.com](http://www.manhattanstrategy.com)



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, *English Language Learners in Public Schools*, (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cgf.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgf.asp)
- <sup>2</sup> Office of English Language Acquisition, *Head Start Enrollment*, (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2020), [https://ncela.ed.gov/files/fast\\_facts/19-0108\\_Del4.4\\_HeadStart\\_021220\\_508.pdf](https://ncela.ed.gov/files/fast_facts/19-0108_Del4.4_HeadStart_021220_508.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> Office of English Language Acquisition, *Dual Language Learners and State-Funded Preschool*, (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2019), [https://ncela.ed.gov/files/fast\\_facts/19-0181-DualLanguage-StatePreschool-20191024-508.pdf](https://ncela.ed.gov/files/fast_facts/19-0181-DualLanguage-StatePreschool-20191024-508.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> Comment on various definitions in research & policy sectors. Reference is from ACF Policy statement p.2 [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/dll\\_guidance\\_document\\_final.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/dll_guidance_document_final.pdf)
- <sup>5</sup> Breiseth, L., *What You Need to Know About ELLs: Fast Facts*, (Colorin Colorado, 2015), <https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/what-you-need-know-about-ells-fast-facts>
- <sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, *Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs*, (2016), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/files/dll-policy-statement-2016.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> Espinosa, L.M., "Challenges and Benefits of Early Bilingualism in the United States' Context," (*Global Education Review*, 2(1), 44), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1055271.pdf>
- <sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, *Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs*, (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2016), <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/dll-policy-statement-final.pdf>
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, *Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs*, p.12.
- <sup>10</sup> Office of Head Start, *Head Start Performance Standards*, (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2016), <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/hspps-appendix.pdf>
- <sup>11</sup> McNamara, K., *Dual Language Learners in Head Start: The Promises and Pitfalls of New Reforms*, (Migration Policy Institute, 2016), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/dual-language-learners-head-start-promises-and-pitfalls-new-reforms>
- <sup>12</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*, p.472, (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2017) <https://doi.org/10.17226/24677>
- <sup>13</sup> Figueras-Daniel, A. *Practical Guide for State Education Agencies to Promote Success of English Learners PreK-Grade 3*, (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2019), <https://ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/Practical%20Guide%20for%20State%20Education%20ECE%20FINAL.pdf>
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*.
- <sup>15</sup> Yazejian, N., Bryant, D., Freel, K., & Burchinal, M. High-quality early education: Age of entry and time in care differences in student outcomes for English-only and dual language learners. (*Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 32, 23-39, 2015).
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, *Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs*.
- <sup>17</sup> Espinosa, L.M., *Getting It Right for Young Children from Diverse Backgrounds: Applying Research to Improve Practice with a Focus on Dual Language Learners*, Boston: Pearson, 2015, 2nd edition).
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid. Espinosa, L.M., *Getting It Right for Young Children from Diverse Backgrounds: Applying Research to Improve Practice with a Focus on Dual Language Learners*.
- <sup>20</sup> Espinosa, L.M., "Encouraging the Development and Achievement of Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood," (*American Educator*, Fall 2018), <https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2018/espinosa>
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid. "Encouraging the Development and Achievement of Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood," n.p.