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# Navigating the Past to Shape the Future of English Learner Education

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The education of immigrant and English Learner (EL) students in our nation has been indelibly shaped at the intersection of struggles over race relations, language policy, national identity, and even foreign policy. In these struggles, California has been a major player impacting EL education, and has been a central stage upon which those struggles have played out. Over the course of this history, there have been dramatic swings in EL education between eras of language, racial and cultural exclusion and backlash, and eras that have embraced diversity and resulted in major advancements toward increasing access and inclusion. Through it all, a movement for educational access and language justice for EL was built in California, establishing models of effective bilingual and EL education and winning major policy victories through the use of multiple tactics and strategies, landmark court cases, diverse activism, alliances, and the building of advocacy organizations and coalitions. As a result, there is now a strong knowledge base about effective practice and programs for EL access and success, and new policy models for promoting equitable, culturally, and linguistically sustaining practices.

Understanding this history is important because the scars of what came before are woven deep in the practices, attitudes, and policies of schools today. We must counter these patterns as part of movements to create equitable and inclusive public schools. Looking back at the successes of advocacy in establishing rights of educational access for language minority communities, and in changing policy and practice also serves as a powerful legacy to inspire and inform the efforts of those working towards educational access and equity today.



Lessons from this history include the importance of persistence and vigilance in monitoring every education reform and initiative through a lens of appropriateness for and impact on ELs. It affirms the importance of building broad and flexible coalitions and advocacy organizations, insisting on investments in capacity and commitments to accountability, and paying attention to the public narrative and political agendas that undergird responses to immigrant students and culturally- and linguistically-diverse communities. History also reaffirms the power of working from a vision – believing in, fighting for, and articulating what educational justice means and what schools should be.

Finally, California’s history, and what happens for ELs in the schools of this state, matters to the nation. A large proportion of the nation’s ELs reside in California. Also, what happens in California (both the advances and triumphs in building strong programs and policies for ELs, and the exclusionary English-Only movements bred in response to immigration and shifting demographics) have historically spread to other parts of the nation. California serves as a cautionary tale of the battles yet to come and has been and can be again a leader in building powerful, effective, equitable, culturally- and linguistically-sustaining schools for EL students.

This brief was authored by Laurie Olsen, Ph.D. We are grateful for review and input provided by Martha Hernandez, Executive Director, and Shelly Spiegel-Coleman, Strategic Advisor, Californians Together; Anya Hurwitz, Executive Director, SEAL (Sobrato Early Academic Language); and Conor Williams, Senior Fellow, The Century Foundation.



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## I. Overview

This brief shares key themes and lessons from the history of the movement for EL educational access and equity in California. Our goals are:

- To provide an overview of major themes in the history of the EL movement in California, and to share key lessons from that history that speak to the future of the work.
- To facilitate awareness of the ways in which EL issues have historically intersected with and are relevant to grassroots mobilization around educational access and justice, to work with families and communities, to racial justice movements, to initiatives to create more inclusive curriculum, and to equity-based school improvement efforts.
- To highlight the different roles that have contributed to and are essential in the EL movement, including the professional learning and technical assistance sectors, the research field, legal advocates, grassroots organizers, educators, and others – with a focus on the alliances and coalitions that have resulted in forward movement for EL education.



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Prop 187 in Fresno  
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Seven themes from the history of EL education are summarized as context for understanding issues facing EL education today, followed by seven lessons and implications relevant to today. Some historical detail is provided through a box on key events and through the footnotes, but it is far too rich and important a history to be conveyed in this short publication. The reader is encouraged to use the resources listed at the end of the brief to learn more about the struggles, battles, and incredible triumphs that transpired to get us to this moment in EL education.

We hope readers see themselves as part of the broader historic struggle to build a public schooling system that provides meaningful access, equal participation, and culturally- and linguistically-sustaining education for California's immigrant and language minority populations.

## II. Seven Themes from the History of EL Education that are Important to Know

**1. EL education has been a battleground for and has played a role in national social, economic, and political struggles.** The education of ELs is not just a matter of determining or implementing an educational approach designed for a specific group of students. The education of ELs always has been and still is at the crosshairs of battles over racial, national, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic exclusion. And EL advocacy has been a part of the nation's movements for cultural recognition, language rights, racial justice, and educational access.

Public school responses to children whose home languages are other than English have been particularly impacted during English-Only and anti-immigration campaigns, waves of nationalism, the cultural and political oppression of Mexican Americans, struggles over racial segregation in education, and campaigns of Chinese (and other Asian) exclusion. Times of increased immigration, international tensions, and economic depression have been particularly fraught for the rise of policies to exclude, narrow, and withdraw resources from the education of ELs.

**"The education of ELs always has been and still is at the crosshairs of battles over racial, national, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic exclusion."**

Access to equal educational opportunity has been central to the agendas of civil rights organizations for over a century as they have taken on language, racial segregation and exclusion in education, and have recognized the importance of access to literacy and education as central to economic mobility, racial justice, political power, and social access.<sup>1</sup> Lawsuits filed against school segregation won landmark court victories on behalf of Mexican American children in California that set precedents for ending school segregation nationwide. The Chicano movement of the 1970s and the United Farm Workers Union were inspirational and integral in the call for bilingual education and the push for bilingual education policies.<sup>2</sup> There have also been important links between the bilingual education movement in California and language rights movements internationally, recognizing the universal right of people to their language and culture.<sup>3</sup> The inclusion of language access and justice as part of civil rights and liberation movements was in response to a persistent history of discrimination, exclusion, mistreatment and punishment for using one's home language, and denial of resources for children and communities based on language. Until the 1970s, the focus of these movements was to end segregation, exclusion, and tracking of what were

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1 In 1929, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) was formed as the first national civil rights organization of Mexican Americans. Their goals were desegregation in the public schools, fighting the unfair labor conditions in the migrant camps, and access to the political process. A century ago, the movements for "English Learner" education focused primarily on access to schooling and to equal and integrated schools (Mendez v. Westminster lawsuit, the Lemon Grove Incident were California cases with national impact) and to end the practices of separate and inferior Mexican schools and Chinese exclusion from schools. Key legal battles and policy campaigns fought against the common practice of tracking ELs to separate and "lower" tracks and the common practices of English-Only assessments resulting in misidentification of English learners as "educationally retarded" (Diana v. California State Board of Education case).

2 Chicano student walkouts waved UFW flags as they called for "respect for our language and culture," an end to tracking, bilingual education, and an inclusive curriculum.

3 The work of Paulo Freire on liberation and critical pedagogy in Brazil, and of Tove Skutnabb-Kangas in Finland on "linguicism" (discrimination based on language) and international language rights are examples of international people and ideas that influenced the bilingual education movement in California. Freire, Skutnabb-Kangas, and other international language activists presented at annual California Association of Bilingual Education (CABE) conferences in the 1980s and 1990s, having a strong influence on many in the bilingual education movement by inserting issues of language justice, rights, liberation, cultural status and power into the building of a bilingual education field in California.





Fresno State ASI Members at Anti-187 March — photo by David Prasad from Welches, OR., United States; Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0

formally termed students of “national origin and language minority” communities.<sup>4</sup> Since then, the focus in policy and practice has been on addressing the English language barrier to meaningful instruction and access (e.g., the provision of English as a Second Language or ESL/English Language Development or ELD services, and bilingual programs).

**2. There have been dramatic swings in EL education reflecting eras of exclusion and backlash, as well as eras that embrace diversity and inclusion.** The past 120 years have seen swings between eras that embrace bilingualism to backlash eras of English-Only policies and sentiment.

The swing towards more exclusionary eras took place in the context of worsening economic conditions in the country, changing demographics (increased cultural, racial/ethnic, and language diversity), and were whipped up by politicians that seized upon school issues as a focal point for political agendas involving scapegoating immigrants and blaming increased demographic diversity for social and economic ills. The content of school curriculum, the use of resources, and presence of support services for ELs in public schools became flash points in those larger political dynamics. During eras of backlash, the research, program models, and effective bilingual and EL practices developed during more inclusive eras were actively disparaged, silenced, and forgotten. In the context of improving economic conditions,

<sup>4</sup> The terminology used in federal and state policy reflects these changes. From “national origin” and “language minority” as the focus of civil rights law in the 1960s with concerns over segregation and discrimination highlighted by an increasing political presence of Hispanic/Latinos in the country. A Chicano youth movement included a call for bilingual education as part of a broader education agenda including an end to tracking, access to curriculum that embraced the histories and contributions of diverse communities, a call for more teachers reflecting the Latino community, and “respect for our language.” As a result of court cases following federal civil rights law, policies and practices focused more on learning English as the path to overcoming the language barrier to equal educational opportunity, and the terminology was “limited English Proficient” in the 1970s, switched to just “English Learner” in the English-Only era of the 1990s and turn of the century. As bilingualism entered back into focus, the search for a more inclusive, assets-oriented term has landed on “Emergent Bilinguals” and “Multilingual Learners” in the 2020s.

and with persistent organizing and strategy on the parts of the movements for access and educational justice, those eras of backlash have slowly given way to more inclusive eras. However, the damage from the exclusionary eras, from English-Only attitudes lingering from backlash eras, and from entrenched beliefs that discredited the scholarship and work of building the bilingual education field have remained a persistent undercurrent throughout California politics and schooling making implementation of more assets-oriented and inclusionary policies challenging.

**3. The movement for educational access and language justice for ELs in California has thrived and has been built through multiple tactics and strategies, diverse activism, alliances, and the building of advocacy organizations and coalitions.** Parent and community organizing and student mobilization were essential in the 1970s and 1980s. Working with legal advocates, they filed lawsuits that pushed districts to end segregation and to institute services and programs for language access. Educators, horrified by the treatment of language minority students, stepped up to call attention to some of the exclusionary practices and harms occurring in schools. This was essential to identifying and documenting the ways in which language access was baked into the life and systems of schooling. Working in concert with advocacy organizations, these coalitions were able to focus on educating and pressuring policymakers to make changes in the system. Committed school leaders and teachers drew upon the ideas of linguists and theorists to pilot new approaches, relying upon researcher partners to study and evaluate what works – thus building a field of expertise on effective practices. Drawing together across these roles, new organizations and coalitions were formed to be a voice and a collective force for ELs.<sup>5</sup> Together, these forces have been able to inform and pass legislation, establish basic legal rights through the courts, demonstrate and establish what constitutes effective practice, win and leverage public dollars, and build networks of support that continue to be a lifeforce for those committed to creating the schools that are needed for ELs.

**There are moments and events that everyone who is an advocate for educational justice in California (and the nation) should know!** The stories of how a foundation of civil and legal rights has been established for ELs are inspiring and instructive. They include the mobilization of immigrant communities, EL parent organizing, groundbreaking lawsuits reaching all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, the piloting and development of new bilingual and EL models by educators working alongside researchers and theorists, advocacy for more inclusive language and EL education policy, and public campaigns to change attitudes. Protection and sustaining of the rights that were fought for and won in the past depends upon people today knowing about them and invoking them. Everyone in movements for educational access and justice in California should at least know the following key historical events that fundamentally have impacted public education overall, and have shaped EL education, not just in California, but nationally.

<sup>5</sup> Key organizations, coalitions and networks have included, for example, the Bilingual Coalition of the 1970s and 1980s including legal advocates such as California Rural Legal Assistance and educators such as CAFE. Following the devastating passage of Proposition 227 in 1998 Californians Together was formed as a coalition of dozens of organizations to be a voice and force to defend the rights of ELs (the 24 member organizations included educators, researchers, legal advocates, families and communities). The state's Bilingual Coordinator Network has served as a forum and mechanism (beginning in the 1970s) to identify problematic exclusionary practices and policies in schools as well as to brainstorm solutions and call for state attention to those issues. More recently, the Dual Language Learner (DLL) Advocacy Partnership has served as a mechanism for multiple organizations to share their work and align strategies in early childhood education.

## Key Events:

- *Mendez v Westminster* (1947): Mexican-American parents won a federal lawsuit against several Orange County California school districts that had segregated Mexican-American schoolchildren. For the first time, this case introduced evidence in a court that school segregation harmed minority children. This became an important precedent for the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* ending school segregation throughout the nation.
- *Pete Chacon's surprise upset election to the California state legislature* (1971): This win was a result of concerted organizing by the Chicano Federation and the Chicano youth movement in California. One of the first Latinos to be elected to the state legislature, he authored the groundbreaking Bilingual/Bicultural Education Act – one of the first and strongest in the nation.
- *Lau v. Nichols* (1974): Chinese parents sued the San Francisco Unified School District and won a Supreme Court victory in which the Court unanimously decided that the lack of supplemental language instruction in public school for students with limited English proficiency violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964 – thus setting the framework for the responsibility of schools to provide services to overcome the English language barrier.
- *The Theoretical Framework* (1981): A group of international linguists and bilingual researchers were brought together by the California Department of Education (CDE) to develop a Theoretical Framework to guide educators in serving language minority students, followed by funding five district Case Studies in Bilingual Education. These became foundational documents for efforts nationally to build a field of bilingual and EL education. That framework is still used, and it was the strongest era of CDE support in field building and monitoring.
- *Proposition 227* (1998): A California ballot initiative called "English for the Children" that changed the way ELs would be taught, virtually eliminating bilingual education. Passed by a two-to-one margin in a highly divisive and contentious campaign, it ushered in a devastating English-Only era in California schools that lasted for two decades.
- *The Seal of Biliteracy* (2011): This policy was adopted by the California legislature after a five-year advocacy campaign, as the first state in the nation to award high school seniors with public recognition for demonstration of proficiency in two or more languages. Now spread across the nation, the Seal of Biliteracy served to change the narrative and public paradigm to affirm the value of bilingualism.
- *Proposition 58* (2016): This policy, also called the Education for a Global Economy (EdGE) initiative, was a California ballot initiative that passed by a two to one margin repealing major aspects of Proposition 227 after almost two decades.
- *The English Learner Roadmap* (2017): This policy was unanimously adopted by the California State Board of Education, superseding the EL policy stemming from Proposition 227 in 1998. It provided a vision and direction for EL education that views the education of ELs as a system-wide responsibility, recognizes the need to provide EL students with a rich and challenging curriculum from early childhood to grade 12, and respects the value of ELs' primary language and culture. Together with the EdGE initiative, the EL Roadmap ushered in an era of state policy affirming bilingual education opportunities.



**4. While important strides towards educational justice for ELs have been made through court cases, policy, field experience and the amassing of research on effective practices, there yet exist significant barriers to meaningful access to equal education.** Insufficient capacity, lack of will, and persistent marginalization of EL issues have repeatedly and recurrently been major challenges in being able to implement a full agenda of EL responsive, inclusive, and sustaining education. The movement for EL education has relied upon law, the courts, and policy to set expectations and rights – but without addressing the fundamental problem of capacity and the enduring lack of will, educational access does not occur. Inadequate capacity to deliver appropriate and quality programs has been a major roadblock to implementing effective programs due to deficient investments in professional development, political compromises in the design of certificates and credentials, and too little attention to building a bilingual teacher workforce.<sup>6</sup> Lack of will or attention to EL issues has been accompanied by inadequate accountability mechanisms resulting in tremendous unevenness in access.

In the 1970s, it was federal mandates and court orders that defined the responsibility of the schools to overcome the language barrier and provide meaningful access for ELs. Through the federally-legislated No Child Left Behind (NCLB) years (2000-2010), the hammer of accountability kept a focus on ELs. However, in the absence of understanding ELs and the capacity to implement effective approaches, the interventions and responses were inappropriate.

**“... without addressing the fundamental problem of capacity and the enduring lack of will, educational access does not occur.”**

Once the yoke of NCLB was gone, and in the midst of an English-Only era, there was little will or accountability in policy and in districts for pursuing more research based and robust responses. A weakening of monitoring roles, and insufficient focus at the state and local leadership levels resulted in increasingly inadequate uptake of that responsibility. California’s 2015 move to local control at the very time of adoption of new, substantive, more inclusive policy for EL education, left it up to local leaders to make sense of the new policies and to lead implementation.

There currently is little awareness, serious attention to, or movement forward in many districts throughout the state as a result. The state’s accountability system and role in emphasizing responsibility for EL education are seriously weak. An “equity goal” of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) is meant to focus attention on the needs of ELs (among other target groups). However, there is no requirement that the dollars generated specifically by ELs and other target groups are actually used for those groups. Analyses of district Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) have repeatedly shown a lack of

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<sup>6</sup> Insufficient capacity: In the 1970s, California’s bilingual education policy required bilingual instruction. A major investment in building pipelines and career ladders, professional development, and instituting requirements of certificates (Language Development Specialist and Bilingual Competency Certificates) and credentials invoked backlash from teachers required to get training, backlash from districts who could not meet the requirements for trained teachers, and political compromises resulting in watered down certificates, credentials and preparation. and contributed towards backlash against bilingual education. In 2010, California adopted the Common Core ELA standards followed by new ELD Standards, and a new ELA/ELD Framework (2014) to replace far narrower and less research-based approaches to language and literacy. These have never been realized because of lack of investment in professional learning of teachers and administrators, coupled with lack of accountability. ELD is still a huge challenge to implement, and is a common area of “non-compliance” with federal law regarding EL access. While state policy (EdGE initiative, EL Roadmap, and Global CA 2030) set a vision and goals for building dual language programs, this vision is hampered in large part by lack of bilingual teachers.

sufficient attention to ELs and a lack of alignment with state EL policy.<sup>7</sup>

The California Department of Education has had a unit specifically focused on ELs (Multilingual Learners) since the late 1980s. That unit is funded solely with federal Title III funds tied to the implementation of federal mandates. No state support or leadership is funded to lead the usage of California's EL policies.

Some schools and districts with strong advocacy-oriented leadership have succeeded in creating effective programs and pathways for ELs. But others maintain old systems and patterns of weak or nonexistent supports. Overall, there has been no era in California history when the majority of ELs have received the support, the access, or the pathways needed to achieve equal educational opportunity.<sup>8</sup>

**5. There remains persistent threads and threats of an exclusionary and English-Only movement in California and nationally. The threads of anti-immigrant sentiment that feed exclusionary tendencies overall support the continuation of inadequate, under-resourced, and inequitable educational programs and services for ELs.** In response to the civil rights movements in the 1970s, California stepped forward with early bilingual-bicultural education legislation that was the

7 Every year since passage of the Local Control Funding Formula, the Center for Equity for English Learners at Loyola Marymount University and Californians Together have analyzed responses to ELs in the Local Control and Accountability Plans for districts throughout the state. Persistently, those plans have been found lacking in meaningful inclusion of goals and metrics for improvement of EL education, and inadequate in targeting funds to meet the needs of ELs. These reports included "Falling Short on the Promise to English Learners" (2015), "A Year 2 Review of LCAPS: A Weak Response to English Learners" (2016), "In Search of Equity for English Learners: a Review of 2021-2024 LCAPS", and "Masking the Focus on English Learners: Consequences of CA Accountability System" (2023). All of these were produced in partnership and published by Californians Together, Long Beach, CA.

8 Olsen, L. (March 2009). The role of advocacy in shaping immigrant education: A California case study. Teachers College Record, Volume 111, Number 3, Pp. 817-850.



Sylvia Mendez - USACE; photo by Richard Rivera



March Against Prop 187 in Fresno California 1994 — photo by David Prasad from Welches, OR., United States; Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0



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strongest in the nation. As an English-Only movement began to build momentum in California, and pushback against requirements of bilingual instruction grew, the “bicultural” part was dropped. Then, the law itself was allowed to sunset in 1986 when an English-Only ballot initiative was passed by California voters in the midst of economic recession and immigrant scapegoating.

The decade of the mid-1980s into the mid-1990s saw a series of anti-civil rights ballot initiatives in California. Proposition 187 was passed by California voters against the use of public funds for undocumented immigrants (including undocumented students in schools).<sup>9</sup> Proposition 209 passed ending affirmative action, followed in 1998 by Proposition 227 to end bilingual education. California’s approach to EL education became an English-Only and narrow, monolingual, inadequate approach. It took two decades to battle back against that policy – and there are still lingering scars, misconceptions about bilingual education, and monolingual vestiges from that brutal fight over Proposition 227 that characterize EL education in the state.

Common patterns remain: monolingual assumptions, reliance on a research base of “effective schooling” that hasn’t adequately embraced DLLs/ELs, adherence to a generic “all children” model based upon monolingual English-speaking children, resentments about resources used for immigrants when resources for education are tight, and resistance to culturally and linguistic inclusive curriculum and pedagogy.

The tendency in bureaucratic solutions to serving ELs in response to required federal and court mandates has consistently been to narrow the issue of EL access to education to the functional task of developing basic English proficiency. In that paradigm, the responsibility of schools becomes to “teach them English,” and it further narrows that focus to specific language skills. It has tended to result in a marginalized, narrow, and inadequate response that fails to embrace issues of full access to relevant and meaningfully diverse curriculum and the development of bilingualism and biliteracy (language and literacy for all of their worlds).

Even just ensuring compliance with the narrow mandates has been an advocacy challenge – and pushing for the broader vision and understanding of what appropriate education and meaningful access mean for ELs remains the ongoing and urgent task for those seeking to build an equitable and inclusive schooling system for culturally and linguistically diverse communities.<sup>10</sup>

**6. There exists a strong knowledge base about what effective practices and programs need to be for EL access and success.** Since the 1960s, research, theory, piloted approaches, and field knowledge have been amassed in the United States and internationally. As a result, a lot is known about culturally-responsive and sustaining instruction and curriculum. But that research (and researchers) has often been marginalized, sidelined, and ignored. The paradigm that all students are the same and that

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<sup>9</sup> This was struck down by the courts as “unconstitutional.” Its major impact was to increase anti-immigrant sentiment and focus attention on immigrant students as a drain on public education.

<sup>10</sup> Although the explicit conflicts between English-Only and bilingual education forces in California before, during, and after Proposition 227 were focused on EL program design – the language to be used for instruction, materials, and credentialing – this was and is an ideological struggle. Advocates for bilingual education were unprepared for fighting this battle in the public arena of a ballot initiative. In the course of the Proposition 227 campaign, advocates drew lessons that informed a revised strategy: to shift the basic paradigm within which immigrant education is framed beyond the framework of civil rights and a compensatory program to redefine immigration schooling in an affirmative, additive 21st-century global vision. The work since then – to establish a State Seal of Biliteracy recognizing the skills of proficiency in multiple languages, and to create the new EL Roadmap policy that superseded Proposition 227 in 2018 (two decades later) – is explicitly about an “assets-oriented” policy.

generic practices work for all students, plus an unwillingness to attend to the socio-cultural and political understandings about schooling have resulted in wave after wave of ignoring the research on ELs. There has been progress towards incorporating some of this content into state policy (e.g., the EL Roadmap policy of 2017), teacher preparation courses, and credential requirements. Yet the knowledge base is still not adequately understood or acted upon in practice.

**“... a lot is known about culturally-responsive and sustaining instruction and curriculum.”**

### **7. Public attitudes toward multilingualism have shifted to be more supportive of bilingualism.**

After almost 20 years of an English-Only era in California (1990-2010), demographic changes in the state resulted in a greater number and proportion of state leaders, education leaders, and voters who themselves had home or heritage languages other than English. In 2012, five years of an advocacy campaign emphasizing the benefits of bilingualism paid off and resulted (after three vetoes) in California adopting a State Seal of Biliteracy to award to high school seniors with proficiency in two or more languages. In 2016, over 73% of California voters voted for the passage of Proposition 58, the Education for a Global Economy (EdGE) initiative labeled *English Proficiency and Multilingual Education*, which undid the 1998 Proposition 227 legal requirements for English-Only programs for ELs. A recent Master Plan for Early Learning and Care (2019) and the state guidance for a rollout of Universal PreKindergarten explicitly speak to the importance of supporting dual language development.

The development of the very effective two-way dual language immersion program model that provided avenues for monolingual English students to become bilingual and biliterate alongside ELs meant more and more English monolingual families were speaking out about the desirability and their demands for dual language programs. The overall public narrative shifted to recognize that bilingualism has benefits. This has not necessarily resulted in more support for bilingual programs for ELs, however, nor in sufficient commitment of the resources needed to enable the expansion of dual language programs. But the narrative is positive. The policy is in place. It is now up to educators, researchers, parents, and advocates to push for the implementation of programs that will realize the promise of bilingualism for the students of California.



Photo courtesy of the Korean Resource Center (KRC)



### III. Implications for Our Collective Efforts Moving Forward

The purpose of looking at history is to glean understanding and implications for the work to be done today. While readers will draw their own connections, we offer seven reflections for consideration.

**1. Never say the work is done, and never take things for granted.** Over the past century of the movement for educational justice and inclusion for ELs, there have been times of major breakthroughs and there have been hard times of backlash and exclusion. Progress is not linear, and it's important to prepare for the long-haul – to avoid expecting quick fixes or giving up too quickly. No one “win” will be adequately implemented nor will it sufficiently be sustained without continued defense and support. This requires vigilance – monitoring, protecting, defending, building to sustain what has been accomplished, and warding off all that would undermine those wins. If one approach or one strategy doesn't work, find another way. Reflect often and revisit the drawing board whenever necessary.

**“The education of ELs cannot be separated then from issues facing immigrant students, students of color, and culturally- and linguistically-diverse communities.”**

**2. Only a broad and flexible coalition can advance the cause of educational justice for ELs, given the complex context shaping EL education.** The public education system is complex – serving multiple and sometimes competing interests. And the experience of ELs within public schools is shaped not only by dynamics related to language, but also race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and immigration. The vast majority of ELs are also students of color, living in households that are economically struggling, and are immigrants themselves or children of immigrants grappling with finding their way in a new land and forging identities that bridge cultures, nationality, and language. The education of ELs cannot be separated then from issues facing immigrant students, students of color, and culturally- and linguistically-diverse communities.

The education system must be impacted to ensure educational access for ELs involves federal, state, and local entities. And because educational justice is also a matter of civil rights and social justice, the system of education for ELs also involves the courts, non-governmental organizations, community, and movement entities. Furthermore, EL education is also immigrant education, so public and nonprofit entities involved in immigrant resettlement and immigration policy are part of the picture. Knowing where various decisions are made, how to influence various types of decisions, and understanding the interplay of politics and social forces on the different parts of the system is essential to being an effective advocate for ELs. The design and implementation of policy for ELs should incorporate the roles of these diverse entities. It is important to build relationships, coalitions, institutions and organizations, and formal mechanisms to support the work within existing institutions of the school system and also to augment those needed outside of the existing system.

**3. Insist on investments in capacity and commitment to accountability.** Recognize that there are specific strategies and supports needed to provide access for ELs, and to protect, embrace, and

leverage their dual language capacities for learning. Accompany any demands, recommendations, or guidance with calls for widespread investment in professional learning, the strengthening of credentials and certificates, the building of workforce pipelines to diversify the educator pool with culturally and linguistically proficient educators, and seek to center ELs in any new initiatives funded and promoted by the state. Be a voice for building a local and state accountability system that sets aspirational goals, monitors progress towards those goals, and focuses the educational system on providing meaningful access to quality, assets-based, culturally and linguistically sustaining, responsive schooling experiences for ELs.<sup>11</sup>

**4. Recognize what exclusion of ELs looks like in educational policy and practice so you can resist and counter it. Every reform and initiative should be analyzed through a lens of appropriateness for and impact on ELs.**

Consideration and design of major education initiatives and policies should include an EL Impact Analysis or an EL Equity Report. Reforms that do not adequately address the challenges, needs, and assets of multilingual learners, and that fail to draw upon research on effective practices, can do harm – exacerbating barriers to access and contributing to widening gaps in opportunity and outcomes. Guard against prevalent and persistent tendencies that ignore ELs and against the pervasiveness of monolingual and deficiency paradigms related to language and culture. Some of the big setbacks for ELs have resulted from things that did not explicitly address how ELs should be served (e.g. literacy reforms, new assessment systems, design of accountability approaches, and expansion of preschool). It is the silences and lapses that do huge harm to EL students, as well as poorly designed and monolingually-informed EL policy.

The following chart compares paradigms and approaches that result in exclusion or inequities for ELs, with paradigms and approaches that are responsive, inclusive, and equitable.



Photos courtesy of:  
SEAL and Grail  
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<sup>11</sup> See *The Accountability System English Learners Deserve*, (2021) a Californians Together publication setting forth an accountability framework and set of recommendations developed by twenty organizations including Catalyst California (formerly Advancement Project California), CABE, The Education Trust-West, Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL), and UnidosUS calling upon state leadership to build an accountability system ELs deserve and that will serve the state's goals of equity and quality education for all.



## Exclusionary policies and practices

Fail to recognize or respond to the specific needs and assets of ELs related to dual language development and second language development. ELs are addressed like everyone else, resulting in sink or swim.

ELs are invisible or marginalized and discounted.

English-Only instruction, assessment, and accountability.

There is no ELD (ELD is not mentioned or included), or it is inadequately linked to EL proficiency levels and the language demands of the academic curriculum.

Curriculum is void of the experiences, contributions, histories of the peoples and communities of ELs, or includes them marginally, inauthentically, or stereotypically.

The language focus for ELs is solely on the development of basic and functional English skills.

ELs do not get access to academic content until they have developed proficiency in English.

EL schedules are filled with EL interventions as pull-outs or during the school day in ways that result in missing out on other subjects.

Academic content is taught in ways that are neither accessible or comprehensible to ELs.

## Responsive, inclusive, equitable policies and practices

Recognizes, embraces, leverages, and develops home language along with English.

Is designed for dual language development including rigorous and evidence-based approaches to English as a second language, primary language development, cross-language connections, and translanguageing.

ELs are centered in planning and integrated in practice.

Scaffolding strategies and materials designed for ELs are provided offering support in accessing content and participating in learning activities taught in English.

High quality ESL/ELD is included as part of a comprehensive program (both designated ESL/ELD and ESL/ELD integrated across the curriculum).

Assessments that are used are culturally and linguistically valid.

Curriculum is inclusive of diverse communities and experiences; materials in home languages are authored by authentic voices from diverse communities.

The focus on language development includes basic and functional English skills, as well as academic English, and English for voice and expression.

There is a commitment to ensuring access for ELs to the full standards-based curriculum and educational opportunities – with supports facilitating participation, comprehension, and access.



Photo courtesy of SEAL

**5. Believe in and fight for educational access, justice, and the vision of what schools COULD and SHOULD be.** As part of an agenda of justice and access for a community, education plays a key role. Educational equity is a core part of an agenda of civil rights and liberation movements. Hold the vision of what could and should be central in our minds; hold it closely in our hearts. The call for dual language development and for honoring and supporting home language is not just about language development. It matters for ELs in ways that go far beyond the benefits of bilingualism or the academic advantages. Advocacy for ELs needs to speak to deep issues of identity, connection, voice, agency, and family empowerment. Being aware of the human stakes, and articulating the vision of what *should* be is the task of all.

**“Advocacy for ELs needs to speak to deep issues of identity, connection, voice, agency, and family empowerment.”**

**6. Knowing what has gone before is informative, inspiring, and can be empowering.** The specific history of battles over educational justice, campaigns for accessible and appropriate schools, and resilience in the face of backlash is needed as context for understanding and shaping current efforts to build inclusive, equitable schools. Creating ways to document that history and bring it to emerging leaders is a powerful foundational aspect of preparing leadership, enabling them to recognize the scars and legacies of that history in current times, and to build perseverance in working towards the schools ELs need and deserve.

**7. Seize the moment.** This is a moment in California history where policy has been achieved that represents a flowering and opening for new levels of educational access and justice for ELs – at



least regarding language support and bilingualism. The EL Roadmap vision and core principles are meant to guide the education of ELs throughout California, speaking to assets-based, culturally- and linguistically- responsive education that prepares ELs to succeed academically, thrive, and lead in and across the multiple cultural and language worlds of this diverse state, nation, and world. However, given the inadequate accountability mechanisms and remaining vestiges of exclusionary and monolingual paradigms, the EL Roadmap relies on people to respond to the call. This is a time to know, quote, and use the EL Roadmap as a tool – to fight for meaningful implementation of the state’s ELA/ELD Framework and implementation of our ELD Standards across the curriculum, and to heed the warnings from our history about the need to invest in capacity, build accountability, and counter the monolingual and English-Only tendencies still alive in our educational system. This is a time to continue to build the knowledge base to guide us and the broad coalitions to protect and defend not just educational access and opportunity, but the building of a schooling system that supports and honors the culturally and linguistically diverse students that are the future of California. This is the time!

**“This is a moment in California history where policy has been achieved that represents a flowering and opening for new levels of educational access and justice for ELs...”**

## **IV. What the Rest of the Country Can Learn from California’s History**

What happens in EL education in California matters to the nation. California has the largest number of ELs in the United States, and nearly one-third of the country’s districts with the largest EL populations are in California.<sup>12</sup> Almost 40% of all of California’s students are or were formerly ELs. Among the children under eight years old in the state, 60% have a home language other than English and are dual language learners with at least one immigrant parent. Simply from a numerical standpoint, California is a place where responses to the education of ELs matter to the nation. Beyond numbers, California is a Pacific Rim state that is a major receiving location for Asia and the Pacific, and it shares a southern border with Mexico and the path along which refugees and immigrants trek from Central America.

This has positioned California as a location of tremendous cultural and language diversity with a history and current intense reality of cultural, political, economic, and international dynamics. In this, public schools then and now have faced the challenge of creating schools that can appropriately serve such a diverse and changing mix of peoples and cultures and languages, and also accomplish the goals of a common schooling system. It is no wonder that California has a rich historic legacy of creating new models that have led the way in EL education nationally.

Since the 1960s, California has been a major source of expertise for the nation on EL education, whether it’s innovative policy, program models, new research, or effective practices. This includes the first and strongest bilingual bicultural education legislation in the 1970s, the development of the groundbreaking

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<sup>12</sup> The National Center for Education Statistics’ Digest of Education Statistics ([https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22\\_204.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_204.20.asp)) is a source of data on ELs nationwide.

But California has also been a ground zero and trial ground for some of the more ugly and exclusionary movements and policies in EL education, including the English-Only movement that started here and then swept across the nation. What happens in California is both an opportunity for innovation that can lead the nation and a setting where the mechanics of exclusion can be identified as a warning. The impacts of immigration and demographic change California has experienced are (or soon will be) impacting communities throughout the nation. With these shifts in population, the potential is real for similar exclusionary political responses in our nation. Lessons from California call upon advocates for educational access to recognize the importance of paying attention to the public narrative about immigration, and to building broad coalitions linking equity movements.





## VI. Resources for Learning More

Colon-Muniz, A. and Lavadenz, M. (eds.) (2015) ***Latino Civil Rights in Education: La Lucha Sigue***. Routledge Press. New York: NY.

This collection documents the experiences of historical and contemporary advocates in the movement for civil rights in the education of Latinos in the United States. These critical narratives and counternarratives discuss identity, inequality, desegregation, policy, public school, bilingual education, higher education, family engagement, and more, comprising an ongoing effort to improve the conditions of schooling for Latino children. Featuring the perspectives and research of Latino educators, sociologists, historians, attorneys, and academics whose lives were guided by this movement, the book holds broad applications in the study and continuation of social justice and activism today. Includes chapters on key California struggles such as the Mendez v. Westminster court case and the Lemon Grove desegregation struggle, the 1968 Los Angeles Chicano Student Walkouts, Proposition 227, and others.

Heineke, A.J. and Davin, K.J. (eds.) (2020) ***The Seal of Biliteracy: Case Studies and Considerations***. Information Age Publishing: Charlotte, NC.

The focus of the overall volume is national, including chapters written about the adoption and implementation of the Seal of biliteracy across the nation, chapters about the California story of how the Seal of Biliteracy came about. It is an important picture of an important part of California's movement for bilingual education, and how it impacted the nation.

Olsen, L. (2021) ***A Legacy of Courage and Activism: Stories from the movement for educational access and equity for English Learners in California***. Californians Together: Long Beach, CA. From movement-building to cultivating the next generation of leadership, this book examines nearly 70 years of EL history in California.

Olsen, L. (March 2009). ***The role of advocacy in shaping immigrant education: A California case study***. Teachers College Record, Volume 111: Number 3. Pp. 817-850.

This chapter describes the struggle over Proposition 227 and the formation of the Californians Together coalition in the late 1990s and turn of the century.

Olsen, L. (2019). ***The History of Bilingual and English Learner Education in California***. Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL): Milpitas, CA. <http://bit.ly/SEAL-HistoryofBilingualEdCA>

A five-part video series covering key eras in bilingual and EL education in California history leading up to the present. Parts one and two focus on the first half of the 20th century leading to landmark civil rights legislation. Part three tells the story of building the bilingual education field through court cases, research and new program approaches. Part four covers the era of backlash and the rise of the English-Only movement. Part five focuses on the dawn of the 21st century and the reopening of doors to bilingual education.

***This brief was authored by Laurie Olsen, Ph.D. We are grateful for review and input provided by Martha Hernandez, Executive Director, and Shelly Spiegel-Coleman, Strategic Advisor, Californians Together; Anya Hurwitz, Executive Director, SEAL (Sobrato Early Academic Language); and Conor Williams, Senior Fellow, The Century Foundation.***

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