

The Rising Focus on ELLs in the Early Years

by [*Karen Nemeth*](#)

As one of the most rapidly growing sections of the U.S. population, English language learners (ELLs) under the age of 8 have been the subject of increasing focus in U.S. government policy, research, and national advocacy. Though many publications and reports continue to use the term “K–12,” most school districts in the United States include some preschool classes. Teaching linguistically diverse children as young as 3 years old is important yet unfamiliar territory for many TESOL educators.

New awareness of the unique developmental needs of young language learners has spurred the adoption of the term “dual language learner” or “DLL” to include every child under the age of 8 who uses a language other than English at home. Even if they enter school speaking some English, DLLs need specialized supports for both of their languages as described in the federal policies and guidance documents outlined in this article. Given the varying terms used within these documents, we’ll use the term that fits each document, and “ELLs/DLLs” elsewhere.

Federal Policy Defines Young DLL Educational Best Practices

In June 2016 (updated January 2017), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and U.S. Department of Education (DOE) released their joint [“Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs.”](#) This statement includes 11 recommendations that focus on preparing early care and education programs for diverse populations and meeting the learning needs of each student. Based on a thorough review of the research, the statement recommends that all early childhood schools should:

- use a strength-based approach that embraces diversity,
- partner with families,
- identify and implement a plan for how languages will be used in the classroom,
- establish a culturally responsive learning environment,
- prepare the workforce with competencies to support DLLs,
- ensure that screenings and assessments are culturally and linguistically appropriate,
- use linguistically and culturally appropriate curriculum,
- promote positive teacher-child relationships,
- support monolingual staff in serving children who are DLLs,
- accurately identify and serve children with disabilities who are DLLs, and
- facilitate smooth transitions within and across programs.

Though many of these recommendations may seem familiar, this document is newsworthy because it establishes a unified vision of how all early childhood programs should work with DLLs/ELLs with a strong focus on careful planning, individualized implementation, and research-based practice. The details supporting each of these recommendations add a new level of depth with expectations that policies and practices will go beyond superficial or general approaches to focus on supporting individual DLLs and their families.

The recommendations of this policy statement have subsequently been strengthened by the groundbreaking review of research and policy released on 28 February 2017 by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine that calls on federal and state policymakers to ensure support for improved professional development, more detailed planning, support for both home language and English development, and increased accountability for program quality and effectiveness.

To help local and state efforts to address the recommendations, the joint policy statement is accompanied by a [toolkit of resources](#) published by Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center with sections for administrators, teachers, and families.

Leading up to this policy statement, the 2015 report from the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, “[Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation](#),” stated that all early childhood teachers need the “ability to advance the learning and development of children who are dual language learners” (p. 338). The report highlights “the importance of building a workforce with a deeper understanding of first and second language development and the need to support the home language” (p. 338).

Together, these reports reveal a need for changes in the field of teacher preparation and professional development. Early childhood education majors need to include content on serving linguistically and culturally diverse children. English as a second language majors now need to address the specific developmental and learning needs of children under age 6. Professional development providers need to update their content to address the full range of ages and languages teachers will encounter. A recent study actually found that only 16% of participating principals believed education schools prepare teachers to address the needs of students with limited English proficiency (Stevens, 2015).

As a leading professional association, TESOL can play an important role in helping teachers, college faculty, and administrators develop the awareness, knowledge, and skills to fill the demand created by these national trends. A well-prepared workforce can be advanced with strategies such as creating interdisciplinary college coursework, supporting collaborative teaching, embedding ELL/DLL supports in all professional development, and informing administrators through professional learning communities.

Non-regulatory ESSA Guidance: The Importance of Preschool for ELLs

The term “preschool” is mentioned more than 30 times in the 2016(b) “[Non-Regulatory Guidance: English Learners and Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act \(ESEA\), as Amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#).” Clearly, the U.S. DOE expects that schools will devote significant attention and resources to the youngest ELLs. This guidance document contains an entire section (Section F) that covers early learning (p. 31) and clarifies the importance of including preschool in district-wide plans for ELLs.

The report states that Title III funds can be used to serve ELLs/DLLs as young as age 3, and the new amendments specifically promote the inclusion of ELLs in preschool programs under Title III as well as support of and professional development for preschool teachers. Programs are

encouraged to use Title III funds to develop and implement effective programs for ELLs in Pre-K–12. Though this is an important step, it creates a significant gap between what district administrators and educators are prepared to do and what they are expected to do. So, for example, if professional development providers are expected to include preschool teachers, they may have to update their own knowledge to provide appropriate content.

Head Start Updates Program Performance Standards

Further strengthening the case for preparing teachers and programs to better serve ELLs/DLLs in preschool, the Office of Head Start has updated their [program performance standards](#) (U.S. DHHS, 2016), which programs must meet to keep their funding. The standards state that programs “must recognize bilingualism and biliteracy as strengths” (sec. 2) and that they must support their development with “research-based teaching practices” (sec. 2), including:

- (2.ii) For a preschool age dual language learner, include teaching practices that focus on both English language acquisition and the continued development of the home language; or,
- (2.iii) If staff do not speak the home language of all children in the learning environment, include steps to support the development of the home language for dual language learners such as having culturally and linguistically appropriate materials available and other evidence-based strategies. Programs must work to identify volunteers who speak children’s home language/s who could be trained to work in the classroom to support children’s continued development of the home language.

Many school districts currently contract or partner with Head Start preschool programs. In addition to local district rules and state regulations, these districts must also support their preschool programs in complying with the Head Start standards. State and local agencies may need to make adjustments to bring all of these expectations together.

States are required to establish State Advisory Councils on Early Childhood Education and Care (SACs) under Head Start regulations. These governor-appointed SACs are meant to build a collaborative system for ensuring quality preschool services not only for Head Starts, but for all aspects of the state’s early care and education system. A new set of guidance was released in 2016: “[State Advisory Councils: Advancing Work Beyond Federal Financing](#)” (U.S. DOE & U.S. DHHS).

This statement emphasizes the importance of specifically addressing the needs of DLLs and their families in all aspects of early childhood care and education planning for every state. This includes expectations that states will continue to assess needs and update statewide plans accordingly. These plans should address

- equitable access for families,
- professional development for administrators and teachers,
- a focus on including children with disabilities, and
- specific policies to support children who are DLLs as well as bilingual educators.

This guidance provides detailed recommendations on promoting bilingualism and biliteracy with strong supports for each child’s home language. With this new guidance, TESOL members can learn more about federal expectations and find a role they can play in their own state’s advisory council activities.

Resources to Support Participation of Immigrant Families

January 2017(b) saw the release of the U.S. DOE’s “[Resource Guide: Building a Bright Future for All: Success in Early Learning Programs and Elementary School for Immigrant Families](#).” Key recommendations for early childhood education programs include strengthening outreach and recruitment of immigrant families and structuring programs to support home languages along with English learning. A wealth of resource links are provided to help districts and programs work more effectively to include immigrant families in their children’s education and prepare their children for school success.

Also new in 2017(a) is the graphic depiction of the U.S. DOE’s “[Framework for Developing Global and Cultural Competencies to Advance Equity, Excellence and Economic Competitiveness](#).” With sections for early learning, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education, this framework highlights the importance of the foundational learning that happens before elementary school. Components include social emotional skill-building, exposure to different languages and cultures, and learning about the local community.

Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness

ELLs/DLLs were specifically addressed in the new U.S. DOE “[Guiding Principles for Use of Technology in Early Childhood Programs](#)” (2016a). The section under Guiding Principle #2, under the heading “Dual language learners,” offers some specific examples for appropriate use.

The following reports from 2015 and 2016 also recommend cultural and linguistic responsiveness in guidance about meeting the needs of young children:

- [Tools and Resources for Ensuring Meaningful Communication With Limited English Proficient Parents](#) (U.S. DOE, 2016)
- [Policy Statement on Suspension and Expulsion Policies in Early Childhood Settings](#) (U.S. DHHS & U.S. DOE, 2016)
- [Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs](#) (U.S. DHHS & U.S. DOE, 2015)

With the strength of a dedicated and caring profession, these resources support the creation of an early foundation that can move the entire field of education forward. They illuminate a path that can unify our efforts to ensure that each child enters school ready to learn, eager to explore, and prepared for lifelong success. Educators from all areas of the field can join forces in celebrating the children of today and building the workforce of tomorrow by including all the diverse cultures, languages, and traditions that enrich us all.

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Additional Resources

- [Dual Language Learner Toolkit](#) (Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, 2017)
- [Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs](#) (U.S. DHHS & U.S. DOE, 2015)
- [Policy Statement on Suspension and Expulsion Policies in Early Childhood Settings](#) (U.S. DHHS & U.S. DOE, 2016)
- [Tools and Resources for Ensuring Meaningful Communication With Limited English Proficient Parents](#) (U.S. DOE, 2016)

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