

Best Practices in Supporting Multilingual Learners

Quality Education Commission Best
Practices White Paper Series

ODE Office of Equity Diversity and Inclusion -
Multilingual & Migrant Education

August 2025



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Executive Summary

Introduction

Creating equitable and supportive learning environments for multilingual learners (MLs) in Oregon requires a focus on research-based best practices. Drawing on resources from the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) Multilingual and Migrant Education team, including their [November 2024 presentation to the Quality Education Commission](#), this white paper addresses this need by presenting a framework of such practices, designed to maximize opportunities for ML success. Recognizing the significant and growing ML population in the state, this analysis explores the challenges they face and identifies key strategies for improvement, organized around four core areas: authentic community engagement, improved systems and instruction, transformative educators, and pathways to multilingualism.

Challenges and Opportunities

Multilingual learners represent a substantial portion of Oregon's student population, bringing a wealth of linguistic and cultural assets to the state's schools. According to data from the ESEA Title III: English Learner Collection for 2023-24, there were 65,965 students who are federally defined as English Learners. However, these students often encounter significant challenges that hinder their academic and personal success. These challenges are multifaceted and interconnected, stemming from various sources:

- **Systemic Inequities:** Historical and ongoing systemic issues within the education system often result in underfunding and under-resourcing of programs specifically designed to support MLs. This can manifest in limited access to qualified teachers specializing in multilingual education, inadequate instructional materials tailored to diverse linguistic needs, and insufficient support services for both students and families.
- **Lack of Awareness and Understanding:** A lack of understanding among educators and administrators regarding the unique linguistic, cultural, and academic needs of MLs can lead to ineffective instructional practices. This includes a failure to recognize and leverage students' linguistic and cultural assets as valuable resources in the learning process.
- **Communication Barriers:** Language barriers between schools and families can significantly impede parental involvement and limit families' ability to effectively advocate for their children's educational needs. This lack of communication can exacerbate existing inequities and create a disconnect between the home and school environments.

- **Limited Access to Resources:** MLs often face limited access to early childhood education programs, high-quality instructional materials in their native languages, and culturally relevant support services. This lack of access can significantly impact language development, academic readiness, and overall well-being.

These challenges have significant impacts on MLs, including:

- **Academic Achievement Gaps:** MLs often experience persistent achievement gaps compared to their monolingual English-speaking peers, leading to lower graduation rates and reduced post-secondary opportunities.
- **Social-Emotional Well-being:** Students who do not feel supported, included, and understood in their school environment may experience feelings of isolation, anxiety, and low self-esteem, all negatively impacting their overall engagement and well-being.
- **Limited Language Development:** Without adequate language support, MLs' English language development can be delayed, further impacting their academic progress and limiting their future opportunities.

Despite these challenges, there are also significant opportunities to improve outcomes for MLs. Oregon's existing commitment, demonstrated through weighted funding for ELs, Migrant Education Programs, and dual language initiatives, provides a solid foundation. However, a more strategic and comprehensive approach is necessary to fully realize these opportunities and ensure equitable outcomes for all MLs.

Key Areas for Improvement and Recommendations

- **Authentic Community Engagement:** Building strong, reciprocal relationships with ML families and communities is crucial. Districts should prioritize providing accessible communication channels, including high-quality interpretation and translation services, and actively engage families in decision-making processes that impact their children's education.
- **Systems, Instruction, and Assessment Improvements:** Implementing research-based instructional practices, such as sheltered instruction and differentiated instruction, is essential for making content accessible to MLs. Districts should also utilize accurate assessments that measure both language acquisition and content knowledge, ensuring equitable access to rigorous coursework and targeted support services.
- **Transformative Educators and Administrators:** Recruiting, training, and retaining a diverse educator workforce equipped to meet the unique needs of MLs is paramount. This includes providing ongoing professional development focused on culturally

responsive teaching, linguistically tailored instruction, and effective strategies for supporting MLs' academic and social-emotional growth.

- **Pathways to Multilingualism:** Expanding access to high-quality dual language programs and supporting Tribal language revitalization efforts are essential for promoting multilingualism and valuing students' linguistic and cultural assets.

Conclusion

Creating truly equitable and supportive learning environments for multilingual learners requires sustained commitment and collaborative effort from all stakeholders. By prioritizing the four key areas outlined above and ensuring transparent reporting of resource use and student outcomes, Oregon can create a more just and equitable educational system where all students, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background, can thrive and reach their full potential. This is not merely an investment in individual students; it is an investment in the future of Oregon's communities and its overall prosperity.

Introduction

Creating equitable and supportive learning environments for multilingual learners (MLs) in Oregon requires a focus on research-based best practices. Drawing on resources from the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) Multilingual and Migrant Education team, including their [November 2024 presentation to the Quality Education Commission](#), this white paper addresses this critical need by presenting a framework of such practices, specifically designed to maximize opportunities for ML success within the context of Oregon's diverse student population.

This white paper outlines the Oregon Department of Education's (ODE) strategic plan for supporting multilingual learners, also known as English learners (ELs), which provides the foundation for these best practices. The ODE's plan explicitly focuses on these four key priority areas:

- Authentic and Responsive Community Engagement and Partnerships,
- Systems, Instruction, and Assessment Improvements,
- Transformative Educators and Administrators, and
- Pathways to Multilingualism.

These areas are not mutually exclusive but rather interconnected and mutually reinforcing, working together to create a cohesive and comprehensive approach to supporting MLs. While acknowledging existing state efforts, including current funding and programs, this paper advocates for a more comprehensive and strategic implementation of these best practices to ensure all MLs have access to the high-quality education they deserve. This comprehensive approach recognizes that simply acknowledging the presence of MLs is insufficient. It will require active and sustained efforts to dismantle systemic barriers and create truly inclusive and equitable learning environments. By focusing on these best practices, we aim to move beyond simply addressing surface-level issues and instead address the root causes of inequity, fostering a more just and equitable educational system for all students in Oregon.

Background and Relevant Research

Multilingual learners represent a significant portion of Oregon's student population, yet they often face unique challenges that hinder their academic success (Oregon English Learner Report, 2025). These challenges are multifaceted, ranging from systemic issues within the education system to broader societal factors (Oregon SEED Report, 2024). This analysis will examine the root causes of these challenges, exploring issues such as underfunding, lack of educator training, and communication barriers with families (Oregon Multilingual Learner Strategic Plan, 2024). We examine the impacts on students, including academic achievement

gaps and social-emotional well-being, alongside the potential long-term consequences for individuals and the state. Finally, we acknowledge Oregon's existing commitment to multilingual learners, including current funding and programs.

Root Causes:

Systemic Inequities: Historical and ongoing systemic inequities within the education system often result in underfunding and under-resourcing of programs that support multilingual learners. This can manifest in limited access to qualified teachers, inadequate instructional materials, and insufficient support services (Fine et al., 2023; IES REL West, 2023; SB 940 Study Report, 2024).

Lack of Understanding and Awareness: A lack of understanding among educators and administrators about the unique needs of multilingual learners can lead to ineffective instructional practices and a failure to recognize students' linguistic and cultural assets (WIDA, 2023; Wang & Yan, 2024).

Language Barriers: Communication barriers between schools and families can hinder parental involvement and limit families' ability to advocate for their children's needs (Martínez Álvarez et al., 2024).

Limited Access to Early Childhood Education: Many multilingual learners may not have access to high-quality early childhood education programs, which can impact their language development and academic readiness (Education First, 2024).

Societal Factors: Factors such as poverty, discrimination, and limited access to healthcare can also negatively impact multilingual learners' educational experiences (Gándara & Escamilla, 2023).

Impacts:

Academic Achievement Gaps: Multilingual learners often experience achievement gaps compared to their monolingual peers. Data from the provided text indicates that ELs in Oregon had lower assessment scores and enrolled in fewer content courses than their peers. This can lead to lower graduation rates and limited post-secondary opportunities (Johnson, 2023; Cook et al., 2024).

Social-Emotional Well-being: Students who do not feel supported and included in their school environment may experience feelings of isolation, anxiety, and low self-esteem. This can

negatively impact their social-emotional well-being and their overall engagement in school (REL West, 2024; Johnson et al., 2025).

Limited Language Development: When students do not receive adequate language support, their English language development may be delayed, which can further impact their academic progress (Smith & Nguyen, 2023).

Reduced Opportunities: Limited access to rigorous coursework, enrichment activities, and career connected learning opportunities can restrict multilingual learners' future opportunities (Miller et al., 2024).

Potential Consequences:

Perpetuation of Inequities: If these challenges are not addressed, existing inequities will continue to persist, limiting the life opportunities of multilingual learners.

Economic Impact: A less educated workforce can have negative consequences for the state's economy.

Social Impact: Failure to support multilingual learners can lead to social isolation, marginalization, and a lack of civic engagement.

Data and Examples:

Oregon Data: In 2022-23, Oregon served 100,175 students who were currently or formerly designated as ELs, representing 18.4% of all Oregon students. This data underscores the substantial number of students who are impacted by these challenges (Oregon English Learner Report, 2025).

Language Diversity: The fact that multilingual learners in Oregon speak at least 254 different languages highlights the need for culturally and linguistically responsive practices (Oregon English Learner Report, 2025).

Mesoamerican Indigenous Languages: The growing number of speakers of Mesoamerican Indigenous languages in Oregon requires specific attention and resources to ensure these students' linguistic and cultural needs are met.

Dual Language Program Enrollment: The data showing that only 23% of ELs in elementary school and 6% in middle and high school are enrolled in bilingual programs indicates a significant gap in access to these effective programs.

By understanding the root causes, impacts, and potential consequences of these challenges, we can develop more effective strategies and policies to support multilingual learners and create more equitable educational opportunities for all students.

Oregon's Commitment to Multilingual Learners

Oregon currently provides weighted funding for ELs, with additional funds for current ELs enrolled in an English language development program. The state has a long history of Migrant Education Programs and leverages a binational partnership with Mexico. Oregon offers a Seal of Biliteracy/Multiliteracy program and has over 195 dual language programs across various districts. ODE has a dedicated Multilingual and Migrant Education team to support these initiatives.

Research-Informed Best Practices

Creating equitable and supportive learning environments for multilingual learners requires the implementation of evidence-based practices. This section highlights research-informed best practices drawn from ODE's latest [Oregon Multilingual Learner Strategic Plan](#), organized around four key areas of focus: fostering strong Community Engagement and Partnerships, implementing effective Systems, Instruction, and Assessment Improvements, developing Transformative Educators and Administrators, and establishing robust Pathways to Multilingualism. These practices are designed to promote student success and close opportunity gaps.

Authentic and Responsive Community Engagement and Partnerships:

- Provide high-quality interpretation and translation services: Ensure clear communication with families in their preferred languages (Schueler & Yergeau, 2023).
- Engage students and families in decision-making: Empower them to be active participants in their education (Wilson et al., 2023).
- Leverage family strengths: Recognize and value the knowledge, skills, and cultural experiences families bring to the educational environment (Coady et al., 2024).

Systems, Instruction, and Assessment Improvements:

- Implement research-based instructional practices: Utilize proven methods like integrated instruction that make content accessible to multilingual learners (Van Houten et al., 2021).

- Use accurate assessments: Employ assessments that capture both linguistic and content progress, providing a fair evaluation of students' abilities (Huynh, 2023).
- Ensure equitable access: Guarantee access to grade-level courses, accelerated learning, and enrichment opportunities for all multilingual learners (Miller, González, & Parker, 2024).
- Provide targeted support: Offer specialized support for newcomers, students with interrupted education, and long-term English learners (Rinaldi, 2017).

Transformative Educators and Administrators:

- Recruit and retain a diverse educator workforce: Increase the number of multilingual educators of color who mirror the identities of students (Childhood Education International, 2024).
- Provide high-quality professional learning: Ensure educators receive ongoing training in culturally responsive teaching and linguistically tailored instruction (Phillips et al., 2023).

Pathways to Multilingualism:

- Implement high-quality dual language programs: Expand access to dual language programs that prioritize English learners (WestEd R15CC, 2024).
- Offer and support Tribal language courses: Promote language revitalization and preservation efforts (Rhoades & Christie, 2023).
- Encourage earning the Seal of Biliteracy/Multiliteracy: Prepare and support students to earn the Seal of Biliteracy/Multiliteracy (Egnatz & Santos, 2021).
- These best practices, grounded in research and aligned with ODE's equity stance, aim to create a more equitable and supportive learning environment for all multilingual learners in Oregon.

Implementation Strategies

This section outlines how districts can implement the research-informed best practices previously identified, organized around four key areas: Community Engagement and Partnerships, Systems, Instruction, and Assessment Improvements, Transformative Educators and Administrators, and Pathways to Multilingualism. Each area will include practical examples, potential barriers, and mitigation strategies.

Fostering Strong Community Engagement and Partnerships:

Best Practices:

- Provide high-quality interpretation and translation services.
- Engage students and families in decision-making.
- Leverage family strengths.

Implementation Strategies:

- Establish a multilingual family advisory council: This council can provide input on district policies and programs and serve as a communication bridge between the district and multilingual communities.
- Offer workshops and training sessions for families in their native languages: These sessions can cover topics such as navigating the school system, understanding academic expectations, and supporting their children's learning at home.
- Create welcoming spaces for families in schools: This could include family resource centers or designated areas where families can connect with each other and school staff.
- Utilize technology for communication: Employ translation tools on websites and on communication platforms to ensure information is accessible to all families.

Example: A district with a large Spanish-speaking population could partner with a local community organization to offer workshops on topics such as understanding report cards, accessing school resources, and advocating for their children's needs.

Potential Barriers:

- Lack of funding for interpretation and translation services.
- Difficulty finding qualified interpreters and translators for less common languages.
- Low family participation due to work schedules, transportation issues, or cultural barriers.

Mitigation Strategies:

- Seek grant funding or explore cost-sharing options with other districts.
- Develop a network of volunteer interpreters and translators from the community.

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- Offer workshops and events at convenient times and locations and provide childcare and transportation if needed.
- Build relationships with community leaders and organizations to promote family engagement.

Implementing Effective Systems, Instruction, and Assessment Improvements:

Best Practices:

- Implement research-based instructional practices.
- Use accurate assessments.
- Ensure equitable access.
- Provide targeted support.

Implementation Strategies:

- Provide professional development for teachers on effective strategies for teaching multilingual learners: This could include training on sheltered instruction, differentiated instruction, and culturally responsive teaching.
- Implement a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) for multilingual learners: This system can provide targeted interventions and support based on students' individual needs.
- Use a variety of assessment tools to measure students' progress: This could include formative assessments, summative assessments, and language proficiency assessments.
- Ensure that multilingual learners have access to rigorous coursework and enrichment opportunities: This could include offering advanced placement courses, dual enrollment programs, and extracurricular activities.

Example: A district could implement a sheltered instruction observation protocol (SIOP) framework to ensure that content instruction is accessible to all multilingual learners.

Potential Barriers:

- Lack of resources for professional development and instructional materials.
- Resistance from some teachers to adopting new instructional practices.
- Difficulty finding assessments that accurately measure multilingual learners' progress.

Mitigation Strategies:

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- Prioritize professional development funding and seek out high-quality training programs.
- Provide ongoing support and coaching for teachers to implement new instructional practices.
- Collaborate with other districts or organizations to share resources and expertise on assessment.

Developing Transformative Educators and Administrators:

Best Practices:

- Recruit and retain a diverse educator workforce.
- Provide high-quality professional learning.

Implementation Strategies:

- Establish "Grow Your Own" programs: These programs can support local community members in becoming teachers, with a focus on recruiting multilingual individuals.
- Partner with local universities to offer specialized training programs for educators who work with multilingual learners: These programs can provide teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to effectively support these students.
- Offer mentorship programs for new teachers who work with multilingual learners: This can provide them with guidance and support from experienced educators.

Example: A district could partner with a local community college to offer a pathway program for bilingual paraprofessionals to become licensed teachers.

Potential Barriers:

- Difficulty recruiting and retaining diverse teachers, especially in rural areas.
- Lack of funding for professional development and mentorship programs.
- Limited availability of specialized training programs.

Mitigation Strategies:

- Offer competitive salaries and benefits packages to attract and retain diverse teachers.
- Seek grant funding to support professional development and mentorship programs.
- Develop online or hybrid training programs to increase access for educators in remote areas.

Establishing Robust Pathways to Multilingualism:

Best Practices:

- Implement high-quality dual language programs.
- Offer and support Tribal language courses.
- Encourage earning the Seal of Biliteracy/Multiliteracy.

Implementation Strategies:

- Conduct a community needs assessment to determine the demand for dual language programs.
- Develop a plan for implementing and sustaining dual language programs, including curriculum development, staffing, and professional development.
- Partner with Tribal nations to develop and implement Tribal language programs.
- Provide resources and support for students to prepare for the Seal of Biliteracy assessments.

Example: A district could implement a two-way immersion dual language program where both native English speakers and native speakers of another language learn together in both languages.

Potential Barriers:

- Lack of funding for dual language programs and Tribal language initiatives.
- Difficulty finding qualified bilingual teachers and Tribal language instructors.
- Limited resources and support for students to prepare for the Seal of Biliteracy assessments.

Mitigation Strategies:

- Seek grant funding and explore partnerships with other districts or organizations to share resources.
- Develop pathways for bilingual paraprofessionals and community members to become licensed teachers and Tribal language instructors.
- Provide professional development for teachers on how to integrate language learning into the curriculum.

By addressing these key areas and implementing the suggested strategies, districts can create more equitable and supportive learning environments for all multilingual learners. Continuous

evaluation and adaptation based on student outcomes and community feedback are essential for ongoing improvement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This white paper has examined the critical need for equitable and supportive educational environments for multilingual learners (MLs) in Oregon, drawing upon the Oregon Department of Education's (ODE) strategic plan. Key findings highlight the considerable number of MLs in Oregon, their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and the persistent challenges they face, including academic achievement gaps, social-emotional well-being concerns, and limited access to opportunities. These challenges stem from root causes such as systemic inequities, lack of awareness among educators, language barriers with families, limited access to early childhood education, and broader societal factors (also see Oregon English Learner Report, 2025).

Key Findings:

- Multilingual learners represent a substantial portion (18.4%) of Oregon's student population, speaking at least 254 different languages.
- These students experience academic achievement gaps and limited access to rigorous coursework and enrichment.
- Challenges are rooted in systemic issues, including underfunding, lack of educator training, and communication barriers with families.
- Access to dual language programs and Tribal language courses is limited, hindering opportunities for multilingualism.

Most Important Solutions:

- ODE's strategic plan identifies four priority areas with the corresponding best practices that offer the most promising solutions:
- Authentic and Responsive Community Engagement and Partnerships: Prioritizing meaningful engagement with families and communities through accessible communication and collaborative decision-making.
- Systems, Instruction, and Assessment Improvements: Implementing research-based instructional practices, accurate assessments, and equitable access to rigorous coursework and targeted support.
- Transformative Educators and Administrators: Recruiting, training, and retaining a diverse educator workforce equipped to support multilingual learners effectively.

- Pathways to Multilingualism: Expanding access to dual language programs, supporting Tribal language revitalization, and promoting the Seal of Biliteracy/Multiliteracy.

Actionable Recommendations:

To effectively implement these solutions and create truly equitable learning environments for multilingual learners, the following actionable recommendations are provided for various stakeholders:

For Policymakers:

- Increase and sustain funding: Allocate adequate and sustained funding for programs and services that support multilingual learners, including interpretation and translation services, professional development, and dual language programs.
- Promote data transparency and accountability: Establish clear metrics for tracking student outcomes and require districts to transparently report on resource allocation and program effectiveness, particularly within the context of integrated funding and local control.
- Support Grow-Your-Own programs: Invest in initiatives that support community members, especially multilingual individuals, in becoming licensed educators.
- Strengthen partnerships with Tribal nations: Support Tribal language revitalization efforts through funding and collaborative program development.
- Mandate and fund high-quality professional development: Ensure all educators receive ongoing training in culturally responsive teaching, linguistically tailored instruction, and effective strategies for supporting multilingual learners.

For Educators:

- Implement research-based instructional practices: Utilize strategies such as sheltered instruction, differentiated instruction, and culturally responsive teaching to make content accessible to all learners.
- Utilize accurate and varied assessments: Employ assessments that measure both linguistic and content progress and recognize students' diverse strengths.
- Actively engage families and communities: Build strong relationships with families, communicate effectively in their preferred languages, and involve them in decision-making processes.
- Advocate for equitable resources: Advocate for adequate funding, staffing, and resources to support multilingual learners in their classrooms and schools.
- Seek out professional development opportunities: Engage in ongoing learning to enhance their skills in supporting multilingual learners.

For Other Stakeholders (Families, Community Organizations, etc.):

- Actively participate in school and district decision-making: Engage in school board meetings, parent-teacher organizations, and other opportunities to advocate for the needs of multilingual learners.
- Partner with schools and districts: Collaborate with schools to provide support services, resources, and cultural expertise.
- Advocate for policies that support multilingual learners: Engage with policymakers to advocate for increased funding, equitable policies, and access to high-quality programs.
- Share cultural knowledge and experiences: Contribute to creating culturally responsive learning environments by sharing their unique perspectives and knowledge.

This white paper has explored the multifaceted challenges and promising opportunities related to supporting multilingual learners (MLs) in Oregon. By examining the root causes of existing inequities, including systemic issues, lack of awareness, and limited access to resources, we have highlighted the significant impact these challenges have on students' academic achievement, social-emotional well-being, and future opportunities. Oregon's existing commitment to MLs, through weighted funding, Migrant Education Programs, and dual language initiatives, provides a foundation upon which to build. Therefore, this white paper emphasizes the importance of implementing research-informed best practices across four key areas. These practices, when implemented with fidelity and supported by adequate resources, can address the root causes of inequity and create learning environments where every ML feels valued, respected, and empowered to succeed. Moving forward, it is crucial that policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders work collaboratively to prioritize these key areas, ensuring transparent reporting of resource allocation and student outcomes, particularly given the complexities of integrated funding and local control. This collaborative and transparent approach will not only maximize the impact of investments but also build public trust and contribute to a more just and equitable educational system for all of Oregon's students.

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