



How States Can Strengthen Education Services for Bilingual and Multilingual Students with Disabilities

IDRA Policy Brief



By Lizdelia Piñón, Ed.D. • October 2026

All students deserve access to excellent public schools and educators who understand and support their unique learning and social needs. Multilingual students with disabilities have complex needs that are often overlooked in policy and practice. The population of multilingual students with disabilities is growing, but many states still lack the policies and resources needed to serve these students effectively.

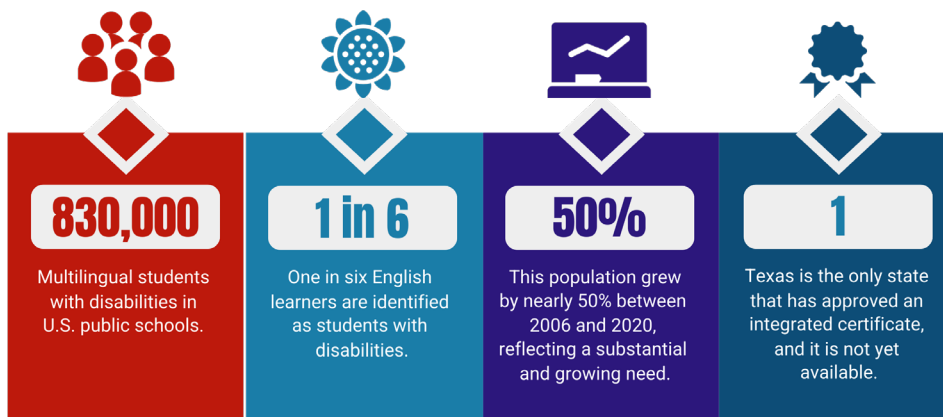
Multilingual students with disabilities are learning school content while learning English and also requiring special education services. Because two separate systems within schools are meant to serve these students, their needs frequently fall through the cracks.

Research shows that schools often struggle to correctly identify multilingual students with disabilities and place them in the right programs.¹ Even when students are correctly identified, many face long delays before receiving the support they need. In some cases, schools do not offer programs that address both language needs and disability needs, forcing families to choose between special education and bilingual education services.

Compounding these challenges, schools face severe teacher shortages in both bilingual education and special education, leaving too few educators prepared to address the intersecting language- and disability-related needs of multilingual students with disabilities.²

Teacher preparation programs for working with multilingual students and special education students may be siloed. Teachers often lack a shared knowledge base or professional organizations, making it difficult for them to serve this population of students.

State leaders must take proactive steps to ensure every teacher is equipped, trained and empowered to serve multilingual students with disabilities in both their language development and their disability-related needs.



IDRA Model Policy Package – Bilingual Special Education, October 2026

These problems lead to lower academic outcomes and lower graduation rates for multilingual students with disabilities compared to their peers.

To address these challenges and ensure that every child receives appropriate services, states must adopt policies that build and support a strong bilingual special education workforce. A critical first step is establishing a bilingual special education teacher certification.

Texas recently approved standards for a new bilingual special education supplemental EC-12 certificate, demonstrating that states can create specialized educator pathways to address the intersecting linguistic and disability-related needs of multilingual learners with disabilities. The certification emerged from years of advocacy, coalition-building, advisory committee work and stakeholder engagement, with IDRA helping to shape both the policy and the educator standards.³ Texas' experience offers a promising model for other states seeking to strengthen their educator workforce through community-informed policymaking.

This issue brief addresses the following:

- Why quality education services for bilingual and multilingual students with disabilities matter
- Legal and policy background for serving this population
- An overview of key challenges and policy solutions to build qualified, fairly funded bilingual special education programs.

Key Terms

multilingual students – students identified by states as English learners, emergent bilingual students, dual language learners, multilingual learners, and other linguistically diverse students. Terminology varies across states and educational contexts, but throughout this issue brief, we use the term **multilingual students** to encompass all of these student populations and avoid confusion in states where “dual language” is a type of bilingual education program rather than a student characteristic.

multilingual students with disabilities – multilingual students who are identified as eligible for both bilingual education or English as a second language (ESL) services, as applicable under state law and eligible special education services under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). Researchers and federal policy literature also commonly refer to these students as **dually identified students**.

Some States Provide Related Pathways for Bilingual Special Education



California

Educators may earn both an education specialist credential and a bilingual authorization. Some universities offer coordinated dual programs, but California does not appear to issue one combined “Bilingual Special Education” credential.

[Learn more](#)



Connecticut

The state expressly says: “There is no bilingual special education endorsement.” Districts determine whether a special education teacher has sufficient language skills.

[Learn more](#)



Illinois

A special education teacher may add the state's PK-12 bilingual endorsement, but the bilingual and special education endorsements remain separate.

[Learn more](#)



Texas

Texas is the only state to have approved standards for an integrated bilingual special education supplemental EC-12 certificate.



New Jersey

Educators can combine a special education endorsement with the separate Bilingual/Bicultural Education endorsement.

[Learn more](#)



New York

Teachers can combine a special education certificate with a Bilingual Education Extension. These remain separate credentials rather than one integrated bilingual-special-education certificate.

[Learn more](#)

Other States

Many states allow teachers to hold separate bilingual/ESL and special education endorsements, but that is dual credentialing, not an integrated bilingual special education certificate.

School Challenges in Serving Multilingual Students with Disabilities

The population of English learners in U.S. public schools is large and growing. In fall 2021, public schools enrolled approximately 5.3 million English learners, representing 11% of all students.⁴

In 2022-23, 7.5 million students ages 3 to 21 received special education and related services under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), representing 15% of public-school enrollment.⁵

At the intersection of these populations are multilingual learners with disabilities, who require educators prepared to address language development, academic instruction, and disability-related needs together. Yet many educator-preparation and certification systems continue to treat bilingual education and special education as separate areas of expertise. This divide contributes to persistent challenges in identifying students appropriately, delivering integrated services and ensuring access to educators with specialized preparation.

Misidentification of Student Needs

In schools without trained bilingual special educators, multilingual students with disabilities are often misdiagnosed in both directions. Some true disabilities go unrecognized because educators assume a student's struggles are "just a language issue." Conversely, other students are wrongly placed into special education when normal English acquisition is mistaken for a disability.

Research has documented a temporal pattern in which multilingual learners are underrepresented in special education in the early grades but face increased – and sometimes disproportionate – identification in later grades, particularly during the middle grades.⁶

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) – sometimes called Response to Intervention (RTI) – is a structured, evidence-based framework that provides students with increasingly intensive levels of academic, behavioral and social-emotional support based on their individual needs. Using ongoing progress monitoring and multiple data sources, MTSS helps educators identify students who need additional intervention while ensuring instructional decisions are driven by evidence rather than assumptions.

For multilingual students, however, MTSS is only effective when educators intentionally incorporate the stages of second language acquisition, culturally and linguistically responsive instructional practices, and valid assessments in both the student's home language and English. Educators implementing MTSS must be trained to distinguish between language acquisition, interrupted or limited formal education, cultural differences and indicators of a potential disability. When language development is explicitly embedded into the framework, MTSS becomes a critical tool for preventing inappropriate referrals to special education while also ensuring that students with disabilities are identified in a timely manner.

Conversely, when MTSS is implemented without a language-informed lens, multilingual students are at greater risk of both *over-identification* (mistaking typical language development for a disability) and *under-identification*, where genuine disabilities are overlooked because academic struggles are incorrectly attributed solely to English learner status.

Embedding language-responsive practices throughout every tier of MTSS strengthens instructional decision-making, promotes equitable access to interventions, and helps ensure that multilingual students receive the right support at the right time. Without

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this intentional integration, the patterns of misidentification described above are likely to persist, and students will continue to be either overlooked or over-referred to special education services. (See Policy Solutions on Page 9.)

Delayed Services

Even when multilingual students with disabilities are eventually recognized, it frequently occurs after years of delay. Schools that lack expertise in evaluating English proficiency may postpone special education evaluations until students' English "improves," wasting critical early intervention time.

These delays violate IDEA's child-find requirements, which mandate timely evaluation regardless of language status. Lost time in a child's early years can have lasting academic and developmental consequences.

Delayed identification and services violate the child-find requirements of IDEA.

The Power of Bilingual and Dual Language

Multilingualism is an educational asset, including for students with disabilities. Research on bilingual education demonstrates the importance of instructional approaches that intentionally develop students' English proficiency while building upon their home-language knowledge and skills. IDRA's own research and reviews of other research on bilingual education highlight bilingual education approaches, effective program design and instructional practices that recognize students' linguistic assets and support learning across languages.⁷

A disability diagnosis should not result in the loss of opportunities to develop bilingualism and biliteracy. Multilingual students with disabilities should have meaningful access to high-quality bilingual and dual language instruction while also receiving the individualized special education and related services they need.

Students and families should not be required to choose between developing and maintaining a home language and receiving disability-related support. Instead, schools should design services that build upon students' full linguistic repertoires while addressing their academic and disability-related needs.

Inadequate Support Once Identified

Perhaps the most painful trade-off for families is being forced to choose between language support and disability support. In many areas, no program exists that fully addresses both needs. A family may have to choose either a bilingual program with no special education services or an English-only special education class.

As a result, multilingual students with disabilities often do not receive a *free appropriate public education* (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment that addresses all their learning requirements.⁸ FAPE is the legal right in the United States that guarantees children with disabilities access to public elementary and secondary education tailored to their unique needs at no cost to families.

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Inadequate Transition Planning

Transition planning for multilingual students with disabilities is frequently insufficient.⁹ Although IDEA requires transition planning to begin no later than age 16,¹⁰ many students do not receive culturally and linguistically responsive transition services as they prepare to exit K-12 special education and move into postsecondary education, employment, independent living and adult services.¹¹

While IDEA establishes age 16 as the federal minimum for transition planning, states such as Texas require transition planning to begin at age 14. Starting earlier gives schools, families, and community agencies more time to coordinate culturally and linguistically responsive supports, align coursework with students' postsecondary goals, and connect students to adult services before they exit school. For multilingual students with disabilities, this additional planning time is especially valuable for addressing language access, family engagement and cross-system coordination.¹²

Transition plans that fail to account for students' linguistic backgrounds, immigration status, family engagement, or cultural context leave many multilingual students unprepared for adulthood.¹³

Culturally and linguistically responsive transition planning is a federal obligation under IDEA that is rarely addressed in bilingual special education policy.¹⁴ Beginning not later than the first individualized education program (IEP), which is a written plan describing the student's educational goals, to be in effect when a child turns 16 and updated annually thereafter, the IEP must include appropriate measurable postsecondary goals related to training, education, employment and, where appropriate, independent living skills.

Severe Shortage of Qualified Teachers and Ancillary Staff

A fundamental cause of these problems is the lack of educators certified in both bilingual and special education. Many schools do not have even a single teacher with dual expertise, especially in high-need regions.

Nationally, bilingual and special education are two of the most acute teacher shortage areas; the combination is even more rare.¹⁵ Illinois reported in 2023-24 that bilingual special education teacher positions had the highest vacancy rate of all teaching categories at 13%.¹⁶

The shortage extends beyond classroom teachers to ancillary professionals, including bilingual speech-language pathologists, school psychologists, and diagnosticians. The absence of these professionals compounds identification and service gaps for multilingual students with disabilities.

Texas Shows What is Possible

Although most states lack a specialized certification pathway for educators serving multilingual learners with disabilities, Texas demonstrates that states can take meaningful action to address this workforce gap. Texas recently approved standards for a new Bilingual Special Education Supplemental EC-12 certificate, establishing a specialized pathway for educators serving students who are both emergent bilingual and receiving special education services.

The certification emerged from years of advocacy, coalition-building, advisory committee work and stakeholder engagement. Texas House Bill 2256, enacted in 2021, directed the state to develop standards for the new credential. The legislation grew out of the Texas Early Childhood English Learner Initiative, for which IDRA served as a steering committee co-leader alongside other education and advocacy partners.

After the legislation passed, the Texas Education Agency convened a statewide advisory committee of educators, researchers, administrators, advocates, and bilingual and special education experts. Over several years, committee members developed and refined the standards through working sessions, subgroup analyses, and stakeholder roundtables. IDRA contributed throughout the process by supporting the original policy initiative, convening bilingual special education professionals, providing testimony and serving on the state advisory committee.¹⁷

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In 2025, the State Board for Educator Certification adopted the certificate rules, and the State Board of Education approved the standards.¹⁸ The certification examination is in development.

The standards are designed to prepare educators to integrate bilingual and special education practices, use evidence-based instructional approaches, recognize students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds as assets, support informed decision-making and advocate for multilingual learners with disabilities.

Texas' experience demonstrates that states can move from recognizing a workforce gap to establishing a specialized educator pathway when policymakers meaningfully engage educators, researchers, advocates and community partners. It also shows that advocacy cannot end with passing legislation. Stakeholders must remain involved during standards development, assessment design, implementation and evaluation.

The Legal Landscape for Educating Multilingual Students with Disabilities

Several federal laws protect the rights of multilingual students and students with disabilities; however, none fully address the needs of students who are both. Together, these laws make clear that schools must meet both the language and disability-related needs of multilingual students with disabilities, but they stop short of providing clear guidance on how to do so.¹⁹

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

IDEA is the main federal law guiding special education. It guarantees students with disabilities the right to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment.²⁰ For multilingual students, IDEA requires that assessments be non-discriminatory and, unless clearly not feasible, conducted in the child's native language.²¹

IDEA also establishes child-find obligations, mandating timely evaluation regardless of language status,²² and requires that transition planning begin no later than age 16.²³

However, IDEA does not clearly explain how to provide bilingual instruction within special education, leaving states and school districts to decide how to interpret and implement services.²⁴

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

ESSA includes requirements for supporting English learners under Title III and holding schools accountable for the performance of student subgroups under Title I.²⁵ While ESSA requires states to set English language proficiency standards and include both multilingual students and students with disabilities in accountability systems, it only narrowly requires disaggregated reporting on multilingual students with disabilities and only in LEAs that receive Title III funds.²⁶

Civil Rights Laws: Title VI and Section 504

Title VI of the *Civil Rights Act* prohibits discrimination based on national origin, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination based on disability.²⁷

The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights has clarified that multilingual students with disabilities are entitled to both sets of services.²⁸ Schools shall not deny language services because a student has an IEP, special education services and necessary

No federal law requires states to create bilingual special education credentials, train teachers with dual expertise, or collect and publicly report on multilingual students with disabilities.

Oversight is also fragmented. Special education and English language programs are monitored separately, with few means to check how well schools serve students at the intersection.

supports or deny special education services because a student is learning English. Such practices violate federal civil rights laws.

Families who believe their child has been denied services or who experience retaliation for advocating for their child have several possible avenues for relief. Depending on the nature of the violation, families may file a complaint with their state education agency, request mediation or a due process hearing under IDEA, use the school district's grievance process, or file a discrimination or retaliation complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.

Families may also seek assistance from a parent training and information center, a protection and advocacy organization, or an attorney. Each process has different requirements and deadlines, and families may be able to pursue more than one option.

Drawing on lessons from Texas and broader efforts to strengthen educator preparation, states should consider the following policy solutions.

Policy Solutions: A Roadmap for States

Policymakers can take decisive action to improve outcomes for multilingual students with disabilities. The following recommendations offer a roadmap for states to develop and implement a bilingual special education teacher certification system alongside supporting policies.

- ◆ **Create a bilingual special education teacher certification.** Establish a dedicated state certification covering early childhood to 12th grade.
- ◆ **Strengthen teacher preparation, training and support.** Require preparation programs to incorporate bilingual special education competencies and fund professional development pipelines.
- ◆ **Strengthen accountability and data systems.** Treat multilingual students with disabilities as a distinct, reportable accountability subgroup.
- ◆ **Foster interdisciplinary collaboration.** Require bilingual or ESL specialists on IEP teams, fund co-teaching models, guarantee language access for families.
- ◆ **Build and fund the workforce pipeline.** Establish scholarships, paid residencies, Grow Your Own programs that recruit and prepare bilingual educators for dual certification, and financial incentives to recruit and retain qualified professionals.
- ◆ **Integrate Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)/ Response to Intervention (RTI) frameworks.** Require that multi-tiered support systems account for language acquisition stages to prevent misidentification.
- ◆ **Ensure transition services.** Require that transition plans for multilingual students with disabilities be culturally and linguistically responsive.
- ◆ **Expand the bilingual ancillary workforce.** Address the shortage of bilingual speech-language pathologists, school psychologists, educational diagnosticians, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and other related service providers by investing in scholarships, paid clinical placements, university partnerships, and financial incentives to recruit, prepare, and retain bilingual specialists.

Implementation Resources

Potential Implementation Timeline

This potential implementation timeline provides states with a phased, five-year roadmap to build a sustainable, accountable system of support for multilingual students with disabilities.

Rather than expecting schools and educator preparation programs to make significant changes all at once, the timeline sequences the development of certification standards, educator preparation pathways, workforce investments, district responsibilities, data systems, accountability measures, and continuous program evaluation.

States may adapt the timeline to reflect their legislative processes, existing certification structures, workforce capacity, and possible local needs.

The timeline is intended to support state education agencies, legislatures, state boards of education, educator preparation programs, local education agencies, school leaders, professional associations, community advocates, and families.

Implementation will benefit multilingual students with disabilities and their families by increasing access to educators and related-service professionals prepared to address language development and disability together.

It also will help teachers and school systems make more appropriate instructional and referral decisions, strengthen meaningful language access during IEP and Section 504 processes, reduce fragmentation between bilingual education and special education programs, and create clearer systems of responsibility and accountability.

Ultimately, this phased approach can help states build the workforce and infrastructure necessary to ensure that multilingual students with disabilities receive appropriate, effective, and culturally and linguistically responsive services.

Fiscal Considerations, Funding Strategies and Long-Term Impact

Implementing a statewide bilingual special education framework will require both initial investment and sustained funding. Major cost areas may include

- developing certification standards and assessments,
- expanding educator preparation programs,
- supporting scholarships and paid residencies,
- recruiting bilingual professionals,
- providing technical assistance, and
- establishing systems for data collection and program evaluation.

States can phase in these investments, begin with pilot programs in high-need regions, and use available state and federal resources to support implementation.

Phased implementation and pilot programs: States may begin with pilot programs in high-need or underserved regions before expanding statewide. Initial appropriations can support program planning, scholarships, paid residencies, Grow Your Own programs, and alignment among educator preparation programs and local education agencies (or school districts).

Startup and ongoing costs: Policymakers should distinguish between one-time startup expenses, such as developing certification standards, assessments, guidance, and data systems, and recurring costs associated with scholarships, staffing incentives, program administration, technical assistance, and annual reporting.

The cost of inaction is high. Without proper services, multilingual students with disabilities often repeat grades, require more intensive interventions or trigger legal costs when services are challenged.

Investing upfront in teacher capacity and program infrastructure saves money by delivering appropriate services early.

State investment: State appropriations may be needed to establish and sustain certification pathways, preparation-program grants, workforce incentives, regional partnerships, and accountability systems. Funding formulas should reflect differences in district size, geographic location, workforce availability and student needs.

Potential long-term cost savings: Earlier, more accurate identification, appropriate services, and a better-prepared workforce may reduce inappropriate placements in overly restrictive settings, due-process issues, staff turnover, and the costs associated with delayed or ineffective interventions. Improved services also may contribute to stronger graduation, transition and postsecondary outcomes.

Federal funding opportunities: States and local education agencies may be able to coordinate eligible activities with funding available through Title III, Part A; IDEA Part B; Title II, Part A; and applicable federal or state set-asides. Any use of federal funds must comply with the program's allowable-use, supplement-not-supplant, and other fiscal requirements.

Targeted grants: Competitive or formula-based grants can help rural, small and low-incidence local education agencies develop regional service-sharing arrangements, Grow Your Own programs, professional learning opportunities and partnerships with educator preparation programs.

Investment in bilingual specialized personnel: Scholarships, paid clinical experiences, loan-repayment assistance and retention incentives can help increase the number of bilingual speech-language pathologists, educational diagnosticians, school psychologists, counselors, interpreters and other specialized professionals. Building this workforce may improve the timeliness and accuracy of evaluations and reduce costs associated with inappropriate identification, delayed services and misplacement.

Fiscal accountability and evaluation: States should monitor expenditures, workforce growth, certification completion, staff retention, service availability and student outcomes. Regular public reporting can help policymakers determine which investments are effective and where to adjust funding or implementation strategies.

Potential Implementation Timeline

Key Actions

Year 1	• Adopt bilingual special education teacher certification standards. • Launch scholarships, loan assistance, Grow Your Own programs and paid residencies. • Award grants to educator preparation programs (EPPs) to develop bilingual special education coursework and clinical partnerships. • Issue guidance for early childhood (ages 3 to 5) and transition services (ages 14 to 22). • Require every local education agency (or school district) to document language-access procedures for IEP and Section 504 meetings. • Designate a bilingual special education coordinator in each school district.
Year 2	• Require approved educator preparation programs to offer coursework and supervised clinical experiences that fulfill bilingual special education certification requirements. • Expand university-school district partnerships to increase practicum and residency placements. • Require every school district to submit a five-year bilingual special education workforce plan. • Launch MTSS guidance integrating stages of language acquisition. • Establish recruitment and retention incentives for bilingual ancillary professionals. • Begin annual public reporting of district staffing capacity.
Year 3	• Launch the first statewide cohorts of bilingual special education teacher certification candidates and expand Grow Your Own programs. • Implement statewide bilingual special education staffing benchmarks and require school districts to demonstrate annual progress toward workforce goals. • Publish the first statewide bilingual special education workforce dashboard. • Require districts to review outcomes for multilingual students with disabilities as part of district improvement planning. • Activate complaint and grievance procedures.
Year 4	• Administer the first bilingual special education teacher certification examination and certify the inaugural cohort of teachers. • Monitor implementation and annual workforce progress. • Provide targeted technical assistance and improvement plans for districts and educator preparation programs that are not meeting workforce or certification benchmarks. • Begin preparation for the five-year program review.
Year 5	• Complete and publicly release the first five-year statewide program review. • Evaluate educator preparation capacity, certification production, workforce shortages, implementation fidelity, and student outcomes. • Submit recommendations to the legislature or state board for program improvements and reauthorize or amend the program as needed.

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Key Supporting Research

The resources below are organized by topic and include the citation, a description of the resource and its relevance to the model policy, and a direct link.

Bilingual Education, Biliteracy and Dual Language Programs

Emergent Bilingual Learner Education – Literature Review

Reviews research and policy related to emergent bilingual education, including bilingual education approaches, instructional practices, program design, and educator preparation and recruitment. The review provides a research foundation for educational approaches that build upon students' home-language knowledge and skills while supporting English-language development.

Lizdellia Piñón, Ed.D., Sulema Carreón-Sánchez, Ph.D., & Sarah Bishop, M.A. (September 2022). *Emergent Bilingual Learner Education – Literature Review*. IDRA. <https://www.idra.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Emergent-Bilingual-Learner-Education-%E2%80%93-Literature-Review-IDRA.pdf>

Population Size and Prevalence

English Learners in Public Schools

This federal data report documents that over 5.3 million students (11% of total public school enrollment) were classified as English learners as of 2021. It provides state-by-state breakdowns and is the primary federal source for tracking this population over time.

NCES. (May 2024a). English Learners in Public Schools. *Condition of Education*. National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf/english-learners-in-public-schools>

How Can We Better Support Dual Language Learners with Disabilities?

Highlights that, nationally, over 832,200 students were estimated to be multilingual students with disabilities in fall 2021, representing approximately 15% of all English learners. Notes that between 2006 and 2020, this population grew by nearly 50%.

Loewenberg, A. (June 17, 2024). New America's Webinar Focuses on Dually Identified Learners. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/insights/new-americas-webinar-focuses-on-dually-identified-learners>

Identification, Misidentification and Academic Outcomes

What Do We Know About Dually Identified Students? An Emerging Research Agenda

Key findings include that misidentification runs in both directions. Under-identification is most common in elementary school, while over-identification is most prevalent at the middle and high school levels. The most common disability categories are specific learning disabilities and speech and language impairments.

Zamora, T. (October 2023). *What Do We Know About Dually Identified Students? An Emerging Research Agenda*. Stanford Sequoia K-12 Research Collaborative. <https://www.caedpartners.org/resource/what-do-we-know-about-dually-identified-students/>

Mathematics Pre- and Post-Pandemic Comparison of Emergent Bilingual Students by Their Special Education Status: A Texas Statewide Investigation

Finds significantly lower rates of multilingual students with disabilities meeting eighth-grade mathematics standards compared to their multilingual peers not receiving special education services. This is critical evidence of persistent academic gaps.

Torres, E., & Slate, J.R. (2025). Mathematics Pre- and Post-Pandemic Comparison of Emergent Bilingual Students by Their Special Education Status: A Texas Statewide Investigation. *American Journal of STEM Education*, Vol. 5, 77-97. <https://ojs.ajed.org/STEM/article/view/7580/3219>

Federal Legal Framework and Guidance

Tools and Resources for Addressing English Learners with Disabilities

Affirms that schools and state education agencies must ensure that multilingual students with disabilities receive both language assistance and disability-related services under

federal law. Clarifies that schools shall not delay special education evaluation “until English improves.”

OELA. (November 2016). *English Learner Tool Kit for State and Local Education Agencies (SEAs and LEAs): Chapter 6*. Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA), U.S. Department of Education. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/2020/10/elttool-kit.pdf>

Teacher Shortage and Workforce Gaps

‘A Unique Challenge’: What English Learners With Disabilities Need

Documents systemic service gaps facing multilingual students with disabilities and the teachers who serve them. Most teachers receive training in either ESL or special education but not both. The article also states that 6% of school districts surveyed do not provide translation at IEP meetings, even when they have students who need it, violating federal requirements.

The U.S. Department of Education reports that 25 states reported teacher shortages in English as a second language and bilingual education for 2025-26. Nearly 40 states and U.S. territories reported shortages in special education ([see data tool](#)). This highlights the gaps across both teacher subject areas.

Najarro, I. (May 13, 2024). ‘A Unique Challenge’: What English Learners With Disabilities Need. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/a-unique-challenge-what-english-learners-with-disabilities-need/2024/05>

Educator Shortage Report: Academic Year 2023-24

Bilingual special education teacher positions had the highest vacancy rate of all teaching categories in Illinois for 2023-24, at 13%. This is among the clearest available state-level evidence of the acute shortage of bilingual special education-certified educators.

Illinois State Board of Education. (2024). *Educator Shortage Report: Academic Year 2023-2024*. Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools, Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative, Goshen Consulting, ROE LeadHUBS. <https://iarss.org/2023-educatorshortage/EducatorShortageReportSY24.pdf>

Teacher Pipeline, Certification and Recruitment

Texas Gets Closer to Adopting a Bilingual Special Education Teacher Certificate

Tracks Texas’ progress in implementing House Bill 2256 (2021), the nation’s first state-level legislation to establish a framework for a bilingual special education teacher certificate. Describes the standards-development process and the competencies the new certification requires.

Piñón, L. (June-July 2024). Texas Gets Closer to Adopting a Bilingual Special Education Teacher Certificate. *IDRA Newsletter*. <https://www.idra.org/resource-center/texas-gets-closer-to-adopting-a-bilingual-special-education-teacher-certificate>

Strategies for Recruiting Bilingual Educators

Synthesizes proven strategies for recruiting bilingual educators, drawing on federally funded projects that prepared hundreds of teachers by partnering with more than 50 districts and universities. Key strategies include Grow Your Own programs and partnerships with Hispanic-serving institutions.

Piñón, L. (November-December 2022). Strategies for Recruiting Bilingual Educators. *IDRA Newsletter*. <https://www.idra.org/resource-center/strategies-for-recruiting-bilingual-educators/>

Bilingual License Opportunities for Teachers – \$5,000 Annual Stipend

Describes a financial incentive program under which current special education teachers who obtain dual certification in bilingual education receive additional compensation. This is one of the few concrete, district-level models for using financial incentives to grow the bilingual special education workforce.

NYC Public Schools. (October 2025). Updated: Bilingual License Opportunities for Teachers – \$5,000 Annual Stipend. New York City Department of Education. <https://nycdoetrq.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/28504721336091-Updated-Bilingual-License-Opportunities-for-Teachers-5-000-Annual-Stipend>

Additional resources, including a literature review, webinar videos, articles, podcasts and other resources, are available in IDRA's online assistance toolkit, **IDRA Serving Emergent Bilingual Students – Online Technical Assistance Toolkit**, available at <https://idra.news/EmergentBilingualEdToolkit>.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. For more information, contact Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., at chloe.sikes@idra.org.

Endnotes

¹ Burr, E., Haas, E., & Ferriere, K. (2015). *Identifying and Supporting English Learner Students with Learning Disabilities: Key Issues in the Literature and State Practice* (REL 2015-086). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. https://ies.ed.gov/sites/default/files/migrated/reel/regions/west/pdf/REL_2015086.pdf • Craven, M., & Piñón, L. (2024, April). Navigating Policy Landscapes for Linguistic and Cultural Equity. *IDRA Newsletter*. <https://www.idra.org/resource-center/navigating-policy-landscapes-for-linguistic-and-cultural-equity/>

² Mendoza, M.E., Serna, O., Przymus, S.D., & Sorrells, A. (2026). The State of Bilingual Special Education Research, A Quarter Way Through the Twenty-First Century. *Exceptional Children*, 93(1), 155-175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00144029261428929>

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⁷ Robledo Montecel, M., & Cortez, J.D. (2002). Successful Bilingual Education Programs: Development and Dissemination of Criteria to Identify Promising and Exemplary Practices in Bilingual Education at the National Level. *Bilingual Research Journal*, v26 n1 p1-21. <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ47787> • Piñón, L., Carreón-Sánchez, S., & Bishop, S. (2022). *Emergent Bilingual Learner Education – Literature Review*. IDRA. <https://www.idra.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Emergent-Bilingual-Learner-Education-%E2%80%93-Literature-Review-IDRA.pdf>

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maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities be educated alongside children without disabilities. • Federal guidance explicitly confirms that FAPE and least restrictive environment obligations apply fully to English learners with disabilities and that policies delaying evaluation or denying dual services based on a student's English learner status are impermissible under IDEA and federal civil rights law. See Lhamon, C.E., & Gupta, V. (2015). Dear Colleague Letter: English Learner Students and Limited English Proficient Parents. U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education. <https://www.ed.gov/media/document/dear-colleague-letter-english-learner-students-and-limited-english-proficient-parents-january-7-2015-35111.pdf>

⁹ A nationally representative study of English learners with disabilities using the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) found that, despite alignment between transition planning and courses taken, postschool employment was significantly lower for English learners with disabilities compared to their peers, highlighting the insufficient preparation these students receive as they age out of K-12 special education. See Trainor, A.A., Murray, A., & Kim, H.-J. (February 2016). English Learners With Disabilities in High School: Population Characteristics, Transition Programs, and Postschool Outcomes. *Remedial and Special Education*, 37(3):146-158. DOI:10.1177/0741932515626797. See also research on English learners with disabilities confirms that they simultaneously face multiple obstacles to achieving post-secondary benchmarks, such as college enrollment, degree completion, and employment, with research about their secondary education experiences, including access to general education, transition planning and instruction, and postschool outcomes, remaining sparse. See Trainor, A.A., Newman, L., Garcia, E., Woodley, H.H., Traxler, R.E., & Deschene, D.N. (2019). *Postsecondary Education-Focused Transition Planning Experiences of English Learners with Disabilities. Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 42(1), 18-30. [Academia.edu/35111111](https://www.academia.edu/35111111)

¹⁰ IDEA. (2004a). *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(i)(VIII); 34 C.F.R. § 300.320(b).

¹¹ IDEA. (2004b). *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, 20 U.S.C. § 1400(d)(1)(A); 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.43, 300.320(b), 300.324(c).

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¹⁴ Cioè-Peña, M. (2020). The Disability Experience of Multilingual Families: Children, Language, and Politics. *Multilingual Matters*. • Lhamon, C.E., & Gupta, V. (2015). Dear Colleague Letter: English Learner Students and Limited English Proficient Parents. U.S. Department of Justice & U.S.

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• IDEA. (2004c). *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(i)(VIII); 34 C.F.R. § 300.320(b). <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33/subchapter-ii/1414/d>

¹⁵ Among public schools reporting teaching vacancies that were difficult to fill for the 2024-25 academic year, special education and ESL or bilingual education ranked as the top two hardest-to-fill subject areas at the elementary level (74% and 59% of schools, respectively) and remained among the top three at the middle and high school levels (NCES, Oct. 2024). See also Aldeman (2024), finding that in 2023-24, more than half of school districts and 80% of states reported a special education teacher shortage.

¹⁶ Illinois State Board of Education. (2024). *Educator Shortage Report: Academic Year 2023-24*. Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS). <https://iarss.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/IWERC-Educator-Shortage-SY25-250313.pdf>

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¹⁸ Piñón, L. (September 2025). Breakthrough for Students – Texas State Board Approves Standards for New Bilingual Special Education Teacher Certificate. *IDRA Newsletter*. <https://www.idra.org/resource-center/breakthrough-for-students-texas-state-board-approves-standards-for-new-bilingual-special-education-teacher-certificate/>

¹⁹ *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, 20 U.S.C. §§ 1400-1482; *Every Student Succeeds Act*, 20 U.S.C. §§ 6301-6881; Title VI of the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964, 42 U.S.C. § 2000d; Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act* of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 794.

²⁰ 20 U.S.C. § 1400(d); 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.101, 300.114.

²¹ 34 C.F.R. § 300.304(c)(1)(ii).

²² 20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(3); 34 C.F.R. § 300.111.

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²⁵ 20 U.S.C. §§ 6311, 6826.

²⁶ 20 U.S.C. § 6311(h).

²⁷ 42 U.S.C. § 2000d; 29 U.S.C. § 794.

²⁸ Lhamon, C.E., & Gupta, V. (2015). Dear Colleague Letter: English Learner Students and Limited English Proficient Parents. U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education. <https://www.ed.gov/media/document/dear-colleague-letter-english-learner-students-and-limited-english-proficient-parents-january-7-2015-35111.pdf>

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