Empowering Multilingual Learners: Philanthropy's Role in Advancing Culturally and Linguistically Affirming Education

Young multilingual learners—students developing proficiency in multiple languages are a diverse population with rich linguistic and cultural assets. Beginning in 2019, a group of foundations began working together as the Emerging Bilingual Collaborative to tackle a pressing challenge: Multilingual learners are often underserved and overlooked in California's education system.

The goal of the Emerging Bilingual Collaborative is to ensure all young multilingual learners receive a high-quality education in an environment that values them. The Collaborative does this by investing in California's public education system to support PreK through 3rd-grade educators and administrators to ensure high-quality instruction for our state's multilingual learners. When we create an environment where young multilingual learners can thrive in school, everyone wins: The success of multilingual students in the early years has lasting benefits for all students and ultimately leads to a thriving, multilingual economy in California.

In 2021, the Emerging Bilingual Collaborative partnered with Education First to design, launch and manage the Implementing High-Quality Instructional Practices for Multilingual Learners Grant Opportunity and Community of Practice (ML HQIP CoP) to support a select number of California education systems to implement high-quality instructional practices for multilingual learners. This report offers recommendations from Education First to the philanthropic community on areas to support strengthening, continuing and scaling of successful practices based on the ML HQIP grants and CoP.

Why are multilingual learners centered in this work?

California is home to the nation's largest population of multilingual learners (MLs), with over 1.8 million dual language learners (DLLs, students who are learning two or more languages at the same time) and 1.1 million English learners (ELs) in the TK-12 system.[1,2] Historically, the state has struggled to adequately serve all ML students. English-only policies have left many of California's PreK-3 educators without the necessary knowledge and capabilities to provide high-quality education to ML students, and the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted the state's most vulnerable communities and student groups. These factors have exacerbated existing inequities and widened the educational outcome gaps between MLs and their English-only peers.

In 2019, a group of funders came together to build upon the work that California has done to address policies and practices that have negatively impacted ML student needs.[3] Specifically,

six foundations established the Emerging Bilingual Collaborative (EBC), which conducted qualitative research, including interviews with stakeholder focus groups and education leaders, to determine how best to equip PreK-12 educators and systems to implement high-quality, ML-focused instructional practices. The research indicated that support for educators should focus more on the "how" than the "why." Educators desired more support on the nuances of implementing best practices in their classrooms, given students' varying levels and capabilities. In response, the EBC supported Early Edge California, in partnership with stakeholders across the state, to develop the [Multilingual Learning Toolkit: Resources for Supporting PreK-3 Multilingual Children (ML Toolkit)](#), which collects evidenced-based instructional strategies and practices that are critical for teachers and administrators to know when supporting multilingual learners (MLs) PreK through 3rd grade. Simultaneously, the EBC launched the **Implementing High-Quality Instructional Practices for Multilingual Learners Grant Opportunity and Community of Practice** (ML HQIP CoP) in 2021, a consortium of 11 education agencies from across California of various sizes and types that received funding, technical assistance and peer support.

Through the ML HQIP grants and CoP, the EBC set out to accomplish four goals:

■ Implement the instructional practices and corresponding resources found in the ML Toolkit through high-quality professional learning for PreK-3 educators

■ Generate lessons learned from implementation efforts to support ongoing refinement of ML Toolkit tools and resources to support PreK-3 educators

■ Share examples of effective instructional models and supports (documentation and exchange of lessons learned, etc.)

■ Build an understanding of the unique needs and assets of ML students, which are central to the work of being a California teacher

Considerations for Philanthropy

Funders should consider the investment areas below as opportunities to provide all young MLs with a high-quality education. We developed a report, [Empowering Emerging Bilinguals: Policy and Leadership Recommendations from a Community of Practice](), where we provided recommendations for policymakers and education system leaders to address successes and challenges surfaced from our work with the ML HQIP CoP. However, we know that philanthropy can take specific, powerful roles—as investors, conveners, capacity builders and advocates, among others—to create awareness of pressing issues. The EBC's support of 11 education systems across California drew attention to the pressing needs of MLs in the state and the impact that high-quality instructional practices have on ML success. Investment in the following four areas will have a direct impact on our education systems, improving their capacity to identify and meet ML needs, alongside a collateral effect of messaging the importance and impact of high-quality ML education:

1. Prioritize investing in education systems where funding and resources are limited, particularly smaller or rural systems.

California's education funding system uses unduplicated student counts, meaning students are counted only once for funding purposes despite possible multiple classifications. This means that education agencies that serve MLs who are also low-income—which is often the case—receive monies under one classification and are left to provide services and support for the other classification from funding somewhere else in their budgets, which are often restricted. Smaller or rural systems, already struggling with limited funding and limited resources like highly-qualified educators--who are difficult to attract due to location and, frequently, the inability to offer competitive wages--are differentially impacted. The EBC first experienced this capacity challenge with rural applicants at the letter of inquiry stage (LOI) for this ML HQIP grant opportunity. Few smaller and more rural districts responded to the LOI and, once selected to submit a full proposal, lacked the human capacity to finalize the grant application. To ensure the process was inclusive of rural applicants, the EBC extended the grant deadline and provided additional capacity to recruit applicants, alongside support to finalize proposal documents.

In addition, one grantee shared that "small, rural districts need considerable support for any sort of professional learning endeavor. There is simply not enough capacity to engage in professional learning experiences that are more traditional in medium to large districts." When supporting the design and implementation of high-quality professional learning, funders can be attuned to and advocate for the alignment and access to this professional learning for smaller and rural systems. In rural communities, such as Kern County and Merced County, funders can leverage county offices of education to provide professional development across rural districts

that typically do not have the resources for robust, high-quality professional development focused on MLs. If high-quality ML practices are going to happen in small districts, there needs to be adjustments in how authorizers provide funding (e.g., be open to more expensive cost-per-pupil formulas in small and rural contexts and/or provide general capacity and infrastructure support). Philanthropic giving helps mitigate the effects of these challenges by infusing unrestricted dollars that education systems can then use to address specific needs, including funding ML-focused efforts that make a difference.

2. Fund the creation of spaces and mechanisms for innovating, sharing knowledge and improving practice.

Philanthropic organizations are well-positioned to convene stakeholders and drive systemic change through the organization and facilitation of communities of practice and by building networks. EBC funders found that convening leaders and stakeholders to share data, insights and successful strategies created a cohesive approach to supporting MLs. Learning networks and communities of practice are especially important to developing and implementing innovative practices and instructional resources within and across systems. These often lead to efficiencies (such as shared procedures, protocols, resources and infrastructure) that increase both productivity and impact while driving down costs, resulting in a higher return on investment for big and small, urban and rural education systems alike. Funders can promote buy-in from participants by promoting long-term commitments (ML HQIP CoP grantees were provided three-year grants) and encouraging school and/or district leader participation (based on the purpose of the CoP). Through participation in the ML HQIP community of practice convenings, grantees shared their lived experiences and explored mutual interests while learning from each other. Peer-to-peer learning spaces encourage innovative thinking, the development of efficiencies to meet common needs and build strong connections among ML leaders. By promoting a focus on fewer priorities, funders can foster coalescing around best practice (e.g., focusing on the evidence-based practices developed as part of the ML Toolkit) and the deepening of learning.

3. Support (and advocate for) building strong data systems that enable practitioners to identify and efficiently and effectively respond to the needs of MLs.

ML HQIP grantees consistently expressed the need for increased investment from funders and policymakers for creating and sustaining data systems to identify and assess ML needs, develop and implement appropriate services, monitor ML progress and hold educators accountable for high-quality instruction. One ML HQIP CoP member specifically requested help with "identifying different ways of collecting data, how we can use it to demonstrate the benefits of the [ML] work we're doing, and identifying what isn't working." Well-funded,

comprehensive data systems allow education leaders to track the progress of MLs and evaluate the success of interventions, resources, professional learning and other efforts to support high-quality instruction for MLs, ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently and effectively. Philanthropic giving provides the resources necessary to develop and implement data systems across different education entities, enabling those entities to work together to provide coherent support for MLs. Targeted investment in the creation of data gathering mechanisms at individual sites that have the opportunity for scaling would allow highly effective practices to be quickly shared with other agencies and increase the support of MLs.

4. Enable educators to effectively lead change efforts within their systems that shift mindsets and improve student outcomes.

Beyond creating the spaces for education leaders to convene, funders can elevate the voices of those most proximate (such as ML students, families and educators) through funding what they value and believe will effect change. ML education and the students served are often perceived as a dedicated, if not isolated, program as opposed to a systemwide responsibility. As an EBC CoP member wondered, "How do we get all of our teachers to love MLs? How do you actually make ML education important [to teachers]? We need asset-based modeling so that all teachers see MLs in a [positive] light." By funding the change efforts necessary to improve instruction and provide student services and supports, philanthropy messages the importance of ML education and can elevate the assets and needs of MLs within education systems. Through the ML HQIP grants, the EBC funders engaged Education First to develop individualized communication supports, leading to impact stories and other resources that CoP members used to share and promote ML efforts and gains made under the grant program, and to inspire additional buy-in and funding to sustain those efforts and gains.

Free of the limitations of restricted funding and formal structures and procedures of public education, foundations are well positioned to provide opportunities for education systems and leaders more flexibility to innovate. Based on what was learned over the three-year grant program, ML education in California would benefit from additional philanthropic focus on efforts that: increase educator capacity to develop and deliver high-quality ML instruction, especially in small, rural settings where resources are limited; shift mindsets, from seeing ML education as a programmatic obligation to valuing MLs systemwide; and create data systems that identify MLs, their abilities and their needs, allowing education systems to respond with appropriate services and support. Working together, philanthropy and public education can effect the change that California's education system needs and the state's multilingual learners deserve.

Endnotes

1 *First 5: Dual Language Learner Pilot Fact Sheet*
2 *The State of English Learners*
3 *California English Learner Policy Field Scan - Executive Summary - May 2019.docx*

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