

Empowering Futures:

Improving College Access for Multilingual Learners

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Introduction

California has committed to both strengthening college pathways that empower students to build the future of their dreams and remaining an economic powerhouse by advancing its workforce. State leaders have set the goal of reaching **70% postsecondary attainment by 2030** and have begun to create the conditions for progress toward that goal by establishing **multiyear agreements with California's higher education systems** and making investments in **dual enrollment**, **financial aid access**, and **college access and completion** at the community college level. Unfortunately, students developing fluency in English, referred to as multilingual learners (MLLs),¹ are rarely included in the design of these initiatives. As a result, their access to higher education is severely and unnecessarily limited.

As California expands its college pathways initiatives, we must explicitly prioritize the needs of MLLs. Supporting these students benefits their future careers, their families, and California communities. Research shows **communicating in more than one language is an asset in multiple ways**, including meeting a rising demand for bilingual job applicants. In 2024-25, MLLs made up 17% of K-12 students enrolled in California's public schools — a significant portion of the state's 5.8 million students. Current and former MLLs together made up a third (33%) of the state's K-12 students. After Texas, **California is home to the second-highest number of MLLs in the country**, making it all the more surprising and unacceptable that this massive student group continues to be overlooked when it comes to college access and success initiatives.

It is past time for California to address the needs and aspirations of MLLs in its efforts to increase postsecondary attainment. Given that more than 9 out of 10 (94%) MLLs

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are students of color, with 80% of them identifying as Latinx, there is also a clear racial equity imperative to ensuring pathways policies no longer ignore these students.² Enhancing MLLs' access to and success in higher education will not only help ensure that California is adequately supporting its students of color but will also help the state reach its postsecondary attainment goals by 2030.

In this brief, we provide an overview of outcome gaps in college access and success that our systems create for MLLs in California and recommend five core considerations to support MLLs' access to higher education.

Although English learner classification continues to be used at the federal level and until recently in most research, state policy and practice advocates and state initiatives have started to stray from this label due to its focus on student deficits and instead use the term "multilingual learners." For the purposes of this brief, "English learner" (EL) and "multilingual learner" (MLL) are used interchangeably.

Understanding the Equity Gaps for Multilingual Learners

At the moment, data collection and publications that provide a view of MLLs' educational experiences stop abruptly after students leave the K-12 education system. College readiness indicators that are available — including high school graduation rates, A-G completion rates (percentage of high school graduates who meet University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) entrance requirements), and college-going rates — show clear disparities in outcomes between MLLs and their peers.

In the 2024-25 school year, roughly **12% of all high school students** in California were classified as an English learner (EL).³ Students who are not MLLs are supported to complete the A-G course sequence required for admission eligibility at the CSU and UC at more than twice the rate of students who are MLLs (Figure 1). This gap has remained completely stagnant since 2016-17.

Although there has been noteworthy progress as the graduation rate for MLLs has increased at a faster rate than that of non-MLLs, a large gap (11 percentage points) remains to be closed between MLL students' and non-MLL students' graduation rates (Figure 2). The available data makes it clear that California has failed to adequately support MLLs in pursuing higher education.

Finally, college-going rates are also **significantly lower for MLLs** than for their non-MLL peers, with only 44% of MLL graduates enrolling in higher education within 12 months of finishing high school compared with 64% of non-MLL graduates (Figure 3). MLLs are also less likely than their peers to be supported in participating in dual enrollment — a critical bridge to college — and they participate at lower rates.

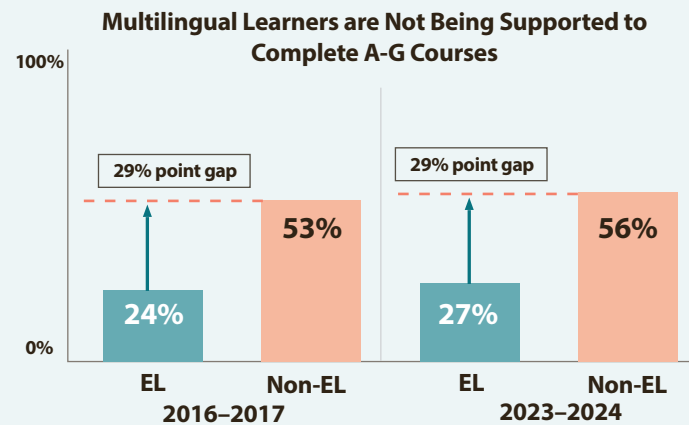


Figure 1. A-G Completion Rate for EL and Non-EL Students

Source: California Department of Education, [2023-24 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate](#)

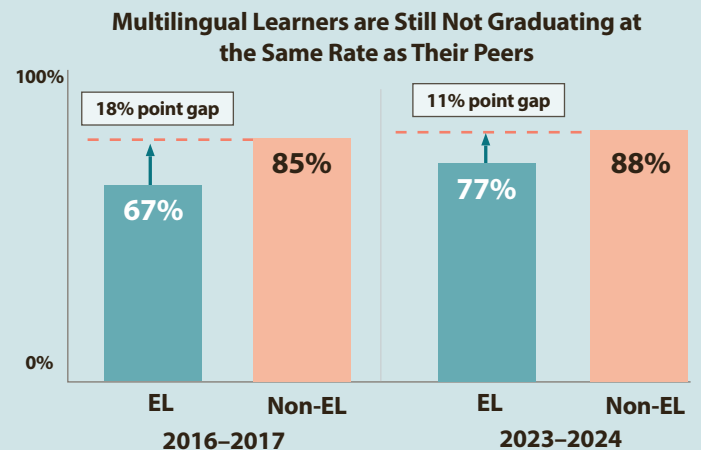


Figure 2. Four-year High School Graduation Rate for EL and Non-EL Students

Source: California Department of Education, [2023-24 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate](#)

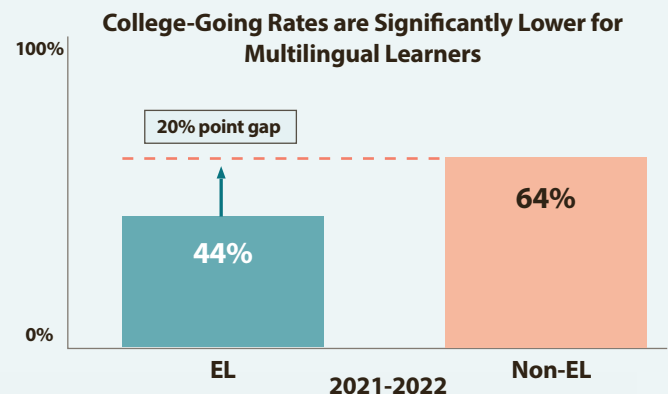
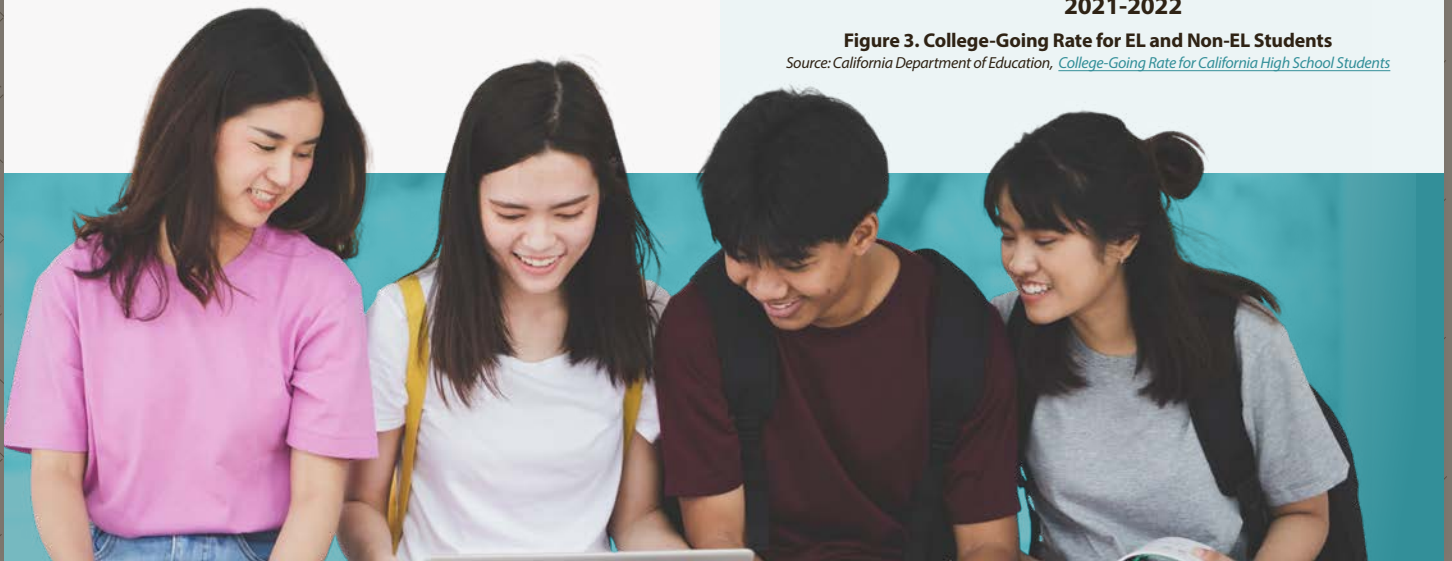


Figure 3. College-Going Rate for EL and Non-EL Students

Source: California Department of Education, [College-Going Rate for California High School Students](#)





A CALL TO ACTION:

Considerations for State Policymakers to Enhance College Access and Success for Multilingual Learners

MLLs have been historically underserved by state efforts to increase access to higher education. Better supporting MLLs in navigating pathways to postsecondary education is not only an equity issue for the sake of individual upward mobility, but it is also critical for the state's economic competitiveness.

Policymakers and state and local education leaders have a responsibility to address current barriers that affect college access for multilingual learners by urgently:

- 1 Improving data tracking systems and public access to better understand MLLs' college-going outcomes.**
- 2 Ensuring safe and inclusive TK-12 schools and district communities that foster and value multilingualism.**
- 3 Providing MLLs with fairer access to college preparatory courses and programs.**
- 4 Expanding access to in-state tuition and state financial aid to MLLs.**
- 5 Improving community college access and completion for MLLs.**



Consideration 1: Improve data tracking systems and publicly reported data to better understand multilingual learner students' postsecondary experiences and outcomes.

Multilingual learner is an umbrella term that captures students both in the TK-12 and postsecondary space. However, unlike the TK-12 education system, the postsecondary education system has **no standardized system for identifying and collecting data on these students**. Accurate and accessible data is essential for both state and institutional leaders to address the needs of MLLs. Without this data, MLLs are rendered invisible, and California is unable to allocate resources and provide tailored support systems for this student population.⁴ Therefore, state leaders should consider the following:

- ▶ **Requiring the California Department of Education to collect and publicly share disaggregated data** on students with different MLL classifications.⁵ Given the limited available data and the critical importance of disaggregated information, the state should, at a minimum, collect and publicly report data on:
 - Equitable access to rigorous coursework (such as dual enrollment classes, Advanced Placement classes, and the A-G course sequence) for **ELs, reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP) learners, long-term English learners (LTELs), and newcomers**
 - High school graduation for RFEPs, LTELs, and newcomers
 - College-going for LTELs and RFEPs⁶
- ▶ **Requiring public higher education systems to identify MLLs** in their campus data management information systems. Higher education institutions should begin identifying incoming students who were designated as ELs upon high school completion or were an EL at any point in high school (RFEPs) to capture enrollment, transfer, and college completion rates. College applications could be a mechanism for collecting this data.
- ▶ **Ensuring data is shared with the Office of Cradle-to-Career Data System** so that MLL data points can be included in upcoming dashboards (such as Pathway Diagram, College and Career Readiness, and Transfer Outcomes).



Consideration 2: Ensure safe and inclusive TK-12 school communities and district policies that foster and value multilingualism.

Having safe and inclusive school communities that value students' linguistic diversity and cultural backgrounds is crucial to academic success. Research shows that students who feel valued, supported, and cared for on their campus are **more likely to engage in their studies and have better academic achievement**.⁷ Therefore, MLLs need school environments that respect, value, and uplift their cultural and linguistic identities, including high-quality instruction and curriculum that students can connect to. Access to culturally relevant courses (such as Ethnic Studies) has **a positive impact on identity development and academic engagement for all students**.⁸ Therefore, state leaders should consider the following:

- ▶ **Setting and achieving the goal of issuing 2,000 new bilingual teacher authorizations annually by 2030**.^{9,10}
- ▶ **Ensuring TK-12 educators receive adequate professional development training** in culturally responsive teaching, with a focus on understanding the unique needs of MLLs.¹¹
- ▶ **Ensuring a high-quality, equity-minded approach** to the implementation of California's TK-12 Ethnic Studies graduation requirement.
- ▶ **Ensuring California reaches its goal of tripling the number of students who receive the State Seal of Bilingualism**¹² by requiring all eligible TK-12 school districts to offer the State Seal of Bilingualism and public higher education systems to develop a statewide system to recognize and give academic credit to incoming students with the State Seal of Bilingualism.¹³



Consideration 3: Provide multilingual learner students with fairer access to college preparatory courses and college access programs.

Students who engage in rigorous coursework are shown to have [increased engagement and attendance in school](#),¹⁴ [higher high school completion, and greater college readiness](#).¹⁵ Unfortunately, equity gaps persist for ELs in [A-G completion](#) and [dual enrollment access](#).¹⁶ Recent research suggests that although there has been an overall growth in dual enrollment participation, the [percentage of MLLs participating in dual enrollment has declined](#) in recent years.¹⁷ Additionally, although A-G gaps for MLLs exist, schools and districts that have already made [A-G the default curriculum have seen increases in A-G completion for MLLs](#). Moreover, students in college access programs such as SAPEP (Student Academic Preparation and Educational Partnership)¹⁸ from UC have [higher rates of academic achievement, college readiness, and college enrollment](#). Therefore, it is imperative that the state ensure that MLLs have fairer access to college preparatory courses and college access programs. State leaders should consider the following:

- ▶ **Establishing a universal dual enrollment policy** by requiring every California local education agency serving high school students, in partnership with their local community college districts, to establish high-quality dual enrollment California College and Career Access Pathways Programs and ensure MLLs are equitably accessing these courses.
- ▶ **Increasing investments in current state college preparatory programs and resources** to ensure that MLLs have equitable access. This should include ensuring statewide implementation of California College Guidance Initiative (CCGI)¹⁹ and requiring the UC's SAPEP programs²⁰ (Early Academic Outreach Program ([EAOP](#)), Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement ([MESA](#)), [Puente](#)) to collect and share data on the number of ELs served in these programs and their academic outcomes.
- ▶ **Requiring all high schools to make [A-G their default curriculum](#)** to guarantee that all MLLs can access and benefit from rigorous coursework and graduate eligible to attend a UC or CSU.



Consideration 4: Expand access to in-state tuition and state financial aid to multilingual learners.

Although more than half of California's MLLs were born in the United States, many MLLs are first-generation immigrants or come from immigrant families.²¹ This student population includes noncitizens who don't qualify for federal financial aid. For students to qualify for California's AB 540 Nonresident Tuition Exemption,²² they must complete three years of full-time attendance or attainment of part-time equivalent credits at a California school or California Community College (CCC). The current three-year requirement can delay a student's ability to pursue higher education, given the difference for California residents versus nonresidents. Additionally, students who qualify for AB 540 can get access to in-state aid, which further reduces the total cost of attendance. Therefore, state leaders should consider the following:

- ▶ **Updating AB 540 requirements** to include only a two-year requirement of full-time attendance or attainment of part-time equivalent credits at a CCC.
- ▶ **Ensuring that the implementation of California's [All In For Financial Aid Policy](#)** supports MLLs' access to financial aid.





Consideration 5: Improve community college access and completion for multilingual learners through the implementation of equitable assessment, placement, and completion policies.

Given that **80% of college-going ELs** are attending a California Community College, it is critical that they be supported in completing their program and/or transfer.²³ For MLLs, credit for English as a Second Language (ESL) courses can help them achieve their postsecondary goals. However, degree- or transfer-seeking MLLs have traditionally faced **ongoing variation in course placement practices across colleges** that result in multilingual students being placed in ESL courses when they don't need to be and/or in ESL course sequences that can take years to complete and affect their college trajectory. The recent passage of **AB 705 and AB 1705** aims to address these issues by requiring colleges to maximize the probability that students who enroll in credit ESL courses complete transfer-level English within three years and for U.S. high school graduates to be placed directly into college composition rather than ESL courses.²⁴ Unfortunately, challenges persist for MLLs due to uneven implementation of credit ESL under **AB 705 and AB 1705** as well as a lack of transparent public data on MLL outcomes. Therefore, state leaders should consider the following:

- ▶ **Ensuring the California Community College Chancellor's Office develops an ESL dashboard** (similar to the **Transfer-Level English and Math Completion Dashboard**) to monitor community colleges' impact of students' placement into credit-bearing ESL sequences and understand how credit-bearing ESL sequences affect students' completion of English college composition, the requirement for all associate degrees, and for general education requirements for transfer.
- ▶ **Incentivizing the California Community College Chancellor's Office to offer statewide professional development learning series on ESL and work closely with community college educators** to establish guardrails to ensure that placement assessments do not hinder students' opportunities to access transfer-level English courses.
- ▶ **Expanding student services to support MLLs' success in ESL and transfer-level English courses.**





Conclusion

MLLs make up a significant portion of California's student population, and supporting them in succeeding in higher education has positive implications for students and the state. Unfortunately, without more attention to their college access needs, MLLs will continue to face some of the most egregious opportunity gaps. As California works to increase postsecondary attainment, the state has an opportunity and obligation to include MLLs in these efforts and set the national standard. The five key considerations in this brief lay out steps the state can take to remove the barriers to postsecondary access and better meet the needs of this student population. EdTrust-West looks forward to working with state and institutional leaders and equity partners to advance equitable policies and practices aligned with these five core considerations that support MLLs' access to higher education.

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

- 1 Although English Learner classification continues to be used at the Federal level and until most recently in most research, state policy, and practice, advocates and state initiatives have started to stray from this label due to its focus on student deficits and instead use multilingual learners. For the purposes of this brief English Learner (EL) and multilingual learner (MLL) will be used interchangeably.
- 2 EdTrust-West analysis of 2024-25 enrollment and demographic data.
- 3 California Department of Education Annual. 2024-25 Enrollment by English Language Acquisition Status (ELAS) and Grade. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/DQCensus/EnrELAS.aspx?cds=00&agglevel=State&year=2024-25>
- 4 Getz, A., Keadle, V., & Lopez, G. (2023). *Translating opportunity: Improving postsecondary pathways for multilingual learners of English*. WestEd.
- 5 MLLs' educational experiences, opportunities, and outcomes differ depending on their EL classification. Some MLLs have received sufficient support to develop English language proficiency and reclassify, however, other MLLs remain English learners for extended periods of time.
- 6 Including information on the institutions students attend, such as University of California (UCs), California State Universities (CSUs), California Community Colleges (CCC), in-state private, out-of-state.
- 7 American Psychological Association. (n.d.). School connectedness. APA. Retrieved June 4, 2025, from <https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/programs/safe-supportive/school-connectedness>
- 8 EdTrust-West. (2025, February). *Seizing the opportunity: Three necessary dimensions of equity-minded ethnic studies implementation*. https://west.edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/EdTrust-West_2025_Seizing-The-Opportunity_ES_WEB.pdf
- 9 Programs include: (1) Golden State Teacher Grant Program, (2) National Board for Professional Teaching Standards Certification Incentive Program, (3) Teacher Residency Grant Program, and (4) Bilingual Teacher Professional Development Program (BTPDP).
- 10 Facilitating partnerships between Local Education Agencies and Institutions of Higher Education to increase and improve pathways for community members and paraprofessionals to become bilingual teachers.
- 11 Including increasing funding for the: (1) Bilingual Teacher Professional Development Program, and the (2) Educator Effectiveness Grant.
- 12 California established the State Seal of Biliteracy in 2011, which has now been adopted by all 50 states and the District of Columbia, to distinguish bilingual students for their proficiency in English and another language. The State Seal of Biliteracy is meant to signal an accomplishment to future employers and college admission offices. It was created with the purpose of providing universities with a method to give academic credit to incoming students, however, it has [yet to be incorporated into California's college admissions process](#).
- 13 The State Seal of Biliteracy is meant to signal an accomplishment to future employers and college admission offices; it was created with the purpose of providing universities with a method to give academic credit to incoming students, however, it has yet to be incorporated into California's college admissions process. Therefore, higher education institutions could use the State Seal of Biliteracy to waive English proficiency/English as a Second Language testing, fulfilling foreign language requirement, etc.
- 14 Patrick, K., Socol, A., & Morgan, I. (2020, January). *Inequities in advanced coursework: What's driving them and what leaders can do*. The Education Trust. <https://s3-us-east-2.amazonaws.com/edtrustmain/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/08183916/Inequities-in-Advanced-Coursework-Whats-Driving-Them-and-What-Leaders-Can-Do-January-2019.pdf>
- 15 Rodriguez, O., Payares-Montoya, D., Ugo, I., Gao, N., & Barton, S. (2023, August). *Improving college access and success through dual enrollment*. Public Policy Institute of California. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/improving-college-access-and-success-through-dual-enrollment/>
- 16 Hooker, S., Finn, S., & Niño, D. *Designing Dual Enrollment to Reach English Learners: Boosting College Success for California Students*. Jobs For the Future. https://www.jff.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/EL_Dual_Enrollment_Brief-FINAL_01052021.pdf
- 17 This is alarming given that MLLs were already participating at far lower rates with only 9.4 percent of English learners participating in dual enrollment in 2021-22 compared to 22.2 percent of overall students.
- 18 SAPEP exists to improve college preparation and access for historically underrepresented students, including English learners, through direct-service and systems-level interventions.
- 19 CCGI helps students and families by providing data-driven tools and infrastructure with student-focused curricula to help students transition from high school to college. Additionally, this platform will give high school counselors access to information so they can better provide students with one-on-one support in their college application process.
- 20 SAPEP programs serve high school students and community college students to increase student achievement and close equity gaps for historically underrepresented students, including English learners. Participants of SAPEP programs have shown to have higher rates of academic achievement, college readiness, and college enrollment. However, it is unclear what percentage of the students served are ELs and how they compare to ELs not enrolled in these programs.
- 21 Sugarman, J. (2019, June). *Legal protections for K-12 English learner and immigrant-background students*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/legal-protections-k-12-english-learner-immigrant-students>
- 22 For students to qualify for AB 540 Nonresident Tuition Exemption, which provides qualified students with in-state tuition and the ability to apply for and receive state and institutional aid at certain California public and private colleges, they must fulfill two requirements.
- 23 U.S. high school graduates make up nearly half of first-time, degree- or transfer- seeking MLLs in CCCs.
- 24 Recent research shows that MLLs have better academic outcomes when placed in transfer-level English courses rather than ESL.