

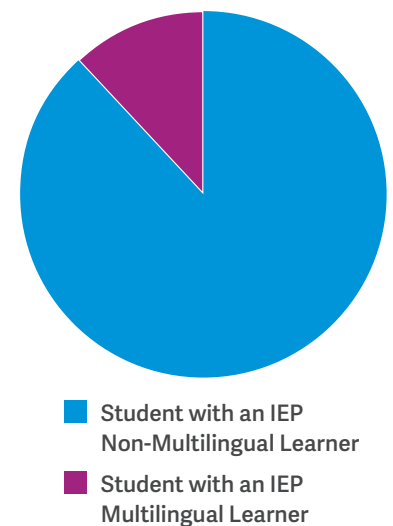
Pathways to Progress: Promoting Success for Multilingual Learners with Disabilities

By Jacob Klett

Multilingual learners—students whose home language(s) are not English and who are developing English proficiency—represent a rapidly growing segment of the U.S. public school population, totaling 5.6 million as of 2021. Additionally, multilingual learners represent more than 10 percent of public school students in 13 U.S. states including Alaska, California, Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Texas, and Washington. In 32 states, between 3 and 10 percent of students served in public schools are multilingual, while multilingual learners make up less than three percent of students in only five states.¹ Corresponding to the rising population of multilingual learners in U.S. public schools overall, the number of students with disabilities who are also multilingual in the U.S. grew by approximately 30 percent between 2012 and 2020.²

Federal public education entitlements apply to multilingual learners with disabilities as both English learners as well as students with qualifying disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The U.S. Departments of Justice and Education have affirmed and jointly enforce the rights of students who are English Learners to participate meaningfully in the education provided by public schools.³ Additionally, the IDEA, as most recently reauthorized in 2004, requires all eligible students with disabilities to be provided with a free appropriate public education (FAPE) with a priority placed on educating students with disabilities alongside students who do not have disabilities to the greatest possible extent. For students who are English learners, the IDEA also mandates that schools consider language development needs relative to the student's IEP.⁴

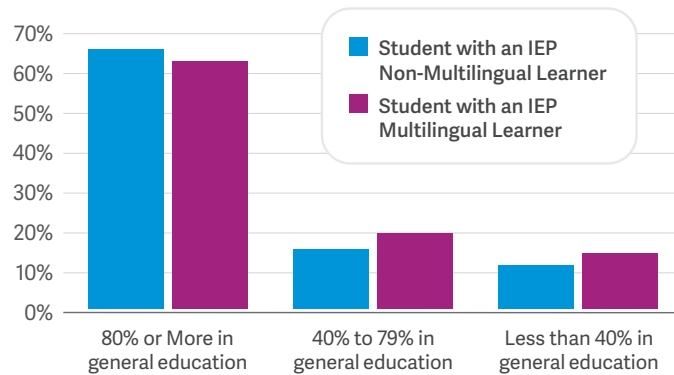
About 12% of IDEA eligible students in US public schools are also English Learners.



The Challenge for Districts and Schools

As the number of multilingual learners continues to grow nationwide, districts and schools must meet the holistic needs of these students – linguistically, culturally, academically, and socially/emotionally. Rising to this challenge is especially critical for meeting the needs of multilingual learners who have disabilities. Given the federal—and often state and local—considerations surrounding the education of English learners and students with disabilities,

Multilingual students with IEPs receive special education services and supports outside of general education environments at a higher rate than students with disabilities who are not identified as English Learners.



many school teams struggle to balance compliance with policy and regulatory requirements and the implementation of best practices for serving students. Unfortunately, federal data suggest that students with disabilities who are also multilingual tend to be served in settings outside of general education classrooms at higher rates than their monolingual IDEA eligible peers.⁵ Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams must take steps to ensure the right staff members are collaborating to design and implement educational plans, engage

effectively with the families of students who have diverse language and cultural backgrounds, and interpret and use student data in meaningful ways when developing IEPs. These student data include language proficiency in the student's home language(s) as well as in English.

How School Districts Can Lead the Way

As the entity responsible for ensuring the provision of a FAPE for IDEA-eligible students, school districts play a critical role in ensuring the success of multilingual learners with disabilities. Districts can establish local procedures, in alignment with federal and state regulatory requirements, that provide a blueprint for school teams when developing an IEP for a multilingual learner who has a disability. Local procedures should:

- Consider available qualitative and quantitative data (e.g., IEP compliance trends, IEP quality themes for multilingual students who have disabilities, and needs expressed by educators)
- Be mindful of the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students and families served by the district, including commonly held cultural understandings about disabilities
- Identify opportunities for school leaders and educators to provide input on district procedures
- Keep procedural guidance user-friendly, for example, by providing schools resources such as checklists or sample forms

Once school districts establish local procedures to support school-based teams with the IEP process for multilingual learners with disabilities, they must also take steps to ensure consistency of understanding across schools and personnel through aligned professional learning programs. As districts are developing their plans for professional learning, they should:

- Develop a sustainable training plan that considers multiple audiences and anticipates annual staff turnover as well as ongoing staff needs
- Provide training to district and school site leaders first
- Consider cross-disciplinary training between general educators, bilingual/English language development educators, and special educators to facilitate collaborative partnerships
- Leverage cross-functional collaboration and subject-matter expertise across special education and multilingual education to design and deliver professional learning to staff

Creating High-Impact IEPs for Multilingual Students with Disabilities

When developing appropriate IEPs for multilingual learners with disabilities, teams should consider relevant linguistic and cultural factors. To do so effectively, IEP teams must consider a student's current levels of academic and functional proficiency including the student's performance in their home language(s) as well as current levels of English development in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. IEP teams must also establish and maintain collaborative partnerships with the families/caregivers of multilingual learners as well as across general education, special education, and bilingual education within schools. Through collaborative partnership, the IEP team can ensure IEP goals and aligned special education supports and services are culturally and linguistically relevant to the individual student. This includes determining the language(s) necessary for the implementation of students' annual IEP goals and aligned services. The key considerations below address actions for schools when convening an IEP team, determining the content of the IEP, and collaborative implementation that can facilitate student success.

When assembling and facilitating a student's IEP team, school teams should:



Translate relevant evaluation and IEP documents into the family/caregiver's primary language to support their participation as critical members of the IEP team.

Student IEPs and associated records are vital documents that enable families of multilingual learners to understand their child's educational placement and programming.⁶



Include an IEP team member who understands the stages of language development and can share strategies to support the student's second language development.

Including staff such as bilingual specialists, English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) teachers, and speech-language pathologists who can differentiate between language development and disability-related needs help ensure appropriate goals and services are outlined for the student.⁷



Provide an interpreter to support the family/caregiver with engagement during the IEP team meeting.

Parents/guardians are required and crucial members of IEP teams; providing an interpreter in the home language of the family ensures they can engage meaningfully in the IEP meeting for their child.

Regarding the content and implementation of a student’s IEP, the team should:



Include data that reflects the student’s current levels of language development that address how the student currently uses their home language(s) as well as English.

Language development data supports IEP teams in determining language learning needs and disability-related needs. Understanding how the student performs in their home language(s) and in English supports the development of appropriate annual goals and instructional approaches needed by the student.



Develop strategies to support the student’s language development with consideration to the need for special education and related services.

Teams can align language development strategies and specially designed instructional strategies to ensure the student receives reasonable benefits from special education and related services.



Identify the language(s) and performance targets in those languages within the student’s annual IEP goals (and short-term benchmarks/objectives where appropriate).

IEP goals that address language needs and specific targets ensure accurate collection of student data and progress reporting.



Indicate the language(s) in which special education and related services will be provided.

Special education and related services may be provided in the student’s home language(s), in English, or in multiple languages depending upon the student’s individual needs and goals.



Consider the family’s home language(s), cultural values, and beliefs.

Families have diverse cultural understandings and beliefs about disabilities that may vary from the U.S. medical model. When school staff accept family understandings and are open to learning more about them, IEP teams can determine approaches to services and supports within the context of cultural belief systems.



Include linguistically and culturally relevant post-school goals and aligned services for students who are transition-age.

Post-secondary goals and services for transition-age students should consider the language(s) the student will need to use to attain their identified post-school outcomes and focus on building proficiency in transition skills within the context of those language(s).

IEP teams should also consider the student and family’s cultural values and community memberships to ensure the alignment of meaningful supports such as the role of family and agency involvement to facilitate the student’s effective transition from K12 to post-school life.

Using these considerations as a guide, IEP teams can establish a holistic plan that outlines how a student is to be collaboratively supported by general education, special education, bilingual or English-as-a-second-language instruction, and related services and ensure the student is able to participate meaningfully in the educational experience with peers who do not have disabilities. While these considerations are not an exhaustive list, they offer school teams a set of priorities for working across disciplines to promote the success of multilingual learners with disabilities and therefore ensure the promise of the IDEA for each learner with a disability within the evolving educational landscape of the 21st century.

How Can PCG Help?

For more than 35 years, PCG has provided districts and states across the country with innovative, customized solutions designed to raise organizational performance, enhance the quality of teacher instruction, improve special education services, and most importantly, position all students for success. Our approach is collaborative and holistic; we work in partnership with our many district and state clients to understand their unique needs and then leverage our extensive experience to design and deliver evidence-based solutions to meet those unique needs. As a thought partner to our clients, we focus on building strong, lasting client relationships by engaging in ongoing and meaningful communications.

About the Author

Jacob Klett is a Senior Managing Education Advisor at Public Consulting Group (PCG) with over 16 years of experience in education and a proven track record of developing impactful policy solutions, improving the efficiency of systems, and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders. Mr. Klett earned his MA in Educational Psychology from the University of Northern Colorado, a BA in English from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and previously served in leadership roles with Denver Public Schools and the Texas Education Agency before joining PCG. As a Senior Education Advisor, Mr. Klett supports state education agencies and school districts to continuously improve outcomes for students served by special education by providing leadership in special education policy, compliance, operations, and instructional practices. While serving as a director at the Texas Education Agency, Mr. Klett led the state's efforts to design and implement a state special education monitoring system that balanced compliance and student outcomes within school districts and public charter schools as well as statewide technical assistance efforts to expand inclusive practices for students with disabilities, address significant disproportionality, and improve special education systems. Additionally, Mr. Klett has designed and facilitated successful pre-service training programs for alternate licensure special education teachers in Denver Public Schools and taught graduate-level courses at the University of Denver on the psychology of the exceptional child, educational assessment, and post-school transition.

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Endnotes

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- ⁵ U.S. Department of Education. (2022). *OSEP fast facts: Students with disabilities who are English learners*. Retrieved 12 November 2024, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/osep-fast-facts-students-with-disabilities-english-learners>
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