



Getting Down to **FACTS**

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Supporting California's Multilingual Learners: Progress, Persistent Gaps, and a Path Forward

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Introduction

California is home to one of the largest populations of multilingual learners of English (MLEs) in the nation. Roughly one in three students in the state’s K–12 system has ever been classified as an English learner, and more than two million children speak a language other than English at home. As one of the defining features of California’s educational landscape, this population represents one of the most important tests of the state’s public education system.

Over the past two decades, California has pursued ambitious efforts to improve outcomes for MLEs. Significant policy reforms spanning teacher training requirements, funding structures, transitional kindergarten, and accountability systems have been enacted with that goal in mind. A synthesis of longitudinal research documents genuine progress: successive cohorts of kindergarten MLEs have shown improvements in English language acquisition and third-grade performance on state assessments in both English language arts and mathematics. The achievement gap between students who have ever been classified as EL and those never classified as EL has narrowed (Novicoff et al., 2024). These are meaningful gains, and they reflect real investment.

The students who have benefited most from California’s recent reforms tend to be those whose trajectories most closely resemble the modal MLE: entering school as a kindergartner, making steady progress toward reclassification, and eventually achieving English proficiency within a few years. The picture is considerably more complicated for students who acquire English more slowly, those with disabilities, and those concentrated in schools with fewer qualified teachers.

This brief draws on five recent research reports to examine where California’s progress has been strongest and where critical gaps remain. These reports tell a consistent story: California has built a serious, reform-minded system for supporting MLEs, but that system has not yet been designed with sufficient specificity to reach the students who need it most. The sections that follow describe what the research shows and what it suggests about where California’s policy attention might most productively go.

Key Findings

1

Progress is real and concentrated among students whose trajectories most closely match the typical MLE pathway.

California’s policy investments have improved outcomes for many MLEs, with earlier reclassification and stronger third-grade performance across successive kindergarten cohorts.

Positive outlier districts demonstrate that better outcomes are achievable within the existing system. But reclassification by the end of elementary school has changed little, the achievement gap between students who have ever been classified as EL and students never classified as EL has not closed, and a growing gap has emerged between when students attain English proficiency and when they are formally reclassified.

2 Long-term English learners represent a structural, not incidental, challenge.

Approximately one in three English learners remains classified for seven or more years, the majority of whom entered California schools in kindergarten. Students with disabilities who are also classified as MLEs face compounded disadvantages: by grade 12, one-third of these dually identified students have become long-term English Learners, compared to 12 percent of MLEs without disabilities, and their high school completion and college enrollment rates lag substantially behind all comparison groups.

3 Reclassification criteria are producing uneven, and potentially counterproductive, results.

California is unique among states in requiring four distinct criteria for reclassification. The academic criterion varies so substantially across districts that a student's likelihood of remaining classified as an English learner after achieving actual English proficiency depends more on where they attend school than on their language development. At the secondary level and in rural districts, this criterion is more likely than the English proficiency standard to be the binding constraint.

4 Teacher preparation has improved, but structural inequities in teacher quality persist.

The 2021 reforms to MLE credential preparation represent a meaningful return to a more specialized model. However, schools serving the highest proportions of MLEs, especially LTEs, continue to have systematically less qualified teaching staff. Districts and teachers also appear to lack adequate instructional materials for supporting multilingual learners, with fewer than one quarter of teachers reporting that their ELA materials are adequate for helping multilingual learners master standards. A geographic mismatch between where bilingual preparation programs are located and where bilingual teachers are needed remains unresolved, with high-need regions along the southern border and in the Central Valley most affected.

5 Other states provide relevant examples of alternative policy approaches.

Texas and Indiana outperform California on fourth-grade NAEP reading for MLEs, a gap that has

persisted since the late 1990s. Both states treat MLE instruction as a specialized professional domain with distinct certification pathways and externally verified competency requirements. Both also use more targeted funding mechanisms, including proficiency-differentiated weights and formula-based incentives for dual language programs that California has not yet tried.

The Evidence Behind These Findings

Progress is real and concentrated among students whose trajectories most closely match the typical MLE pathway

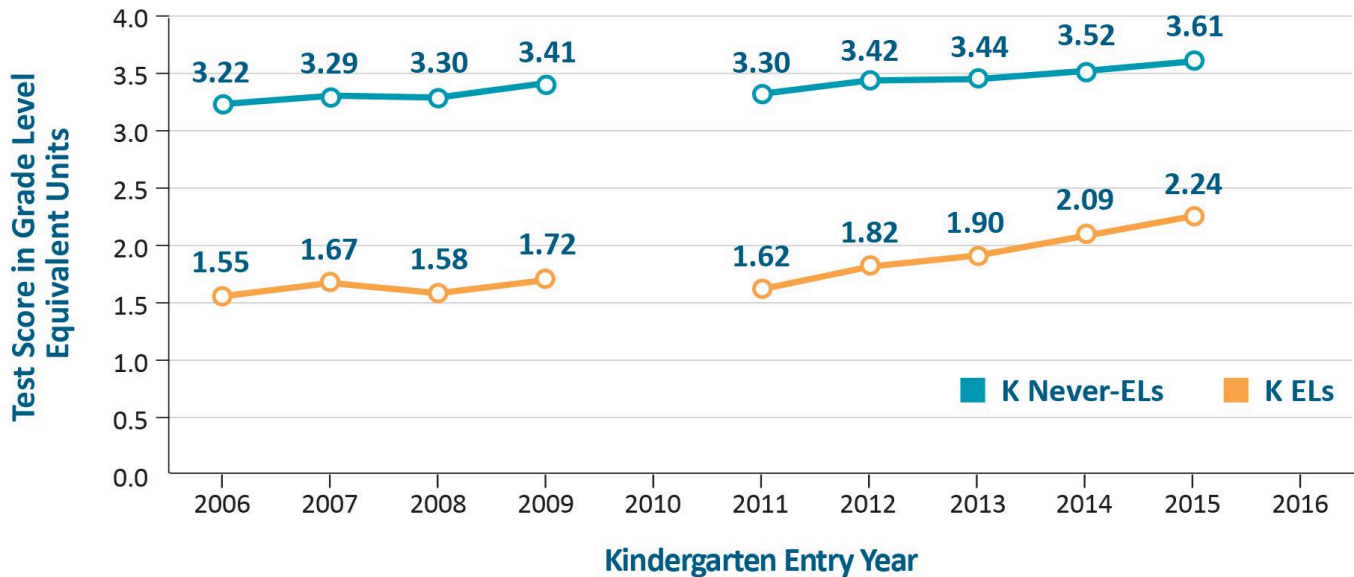
Longitudinal cohort data confirm that California's policy investments have moved the needle. For kindergarten-entering English learners, reclassification is happening somewhat earlier than in prior years, and academic performance at third grade has improved across successive cohorts. Positive outlier districts, those exceeding predicted growth rates for their MLE populations, offer consistent lessons: higher per-pupil expenditure, greater educator experience, lower principal turnover, lower chronic absenteeism, and higher student stability are repeatedly associated with better outcomes. That these factors appear across different analyses suggests they are not incidental but the conditions under which California's system works as intended. Research on statewide academic trends confirms that the achievement gap between high- and low-SES districts has grown by 40 percent since 2009, a pattern with direct consequences for MLE students given that approximately 85 percent also qualify as low-income (Reardon, 2026).

The critical caveat is that reclassification rates by the end of elementary school moved very little over this same period, even as earlier reclassification became more common. The achievement gap between students who have ever been classified as EL and those never classified as EL has narrowed but has not closed. The evidence also points to a specific policy-relevant disconnect: students are increasingly reaching English proficiency milestones before they are formally reclassified. That gap between attainment and reclassification is not simply an administrative delay. It has real consequences for course access and academic opportunity.

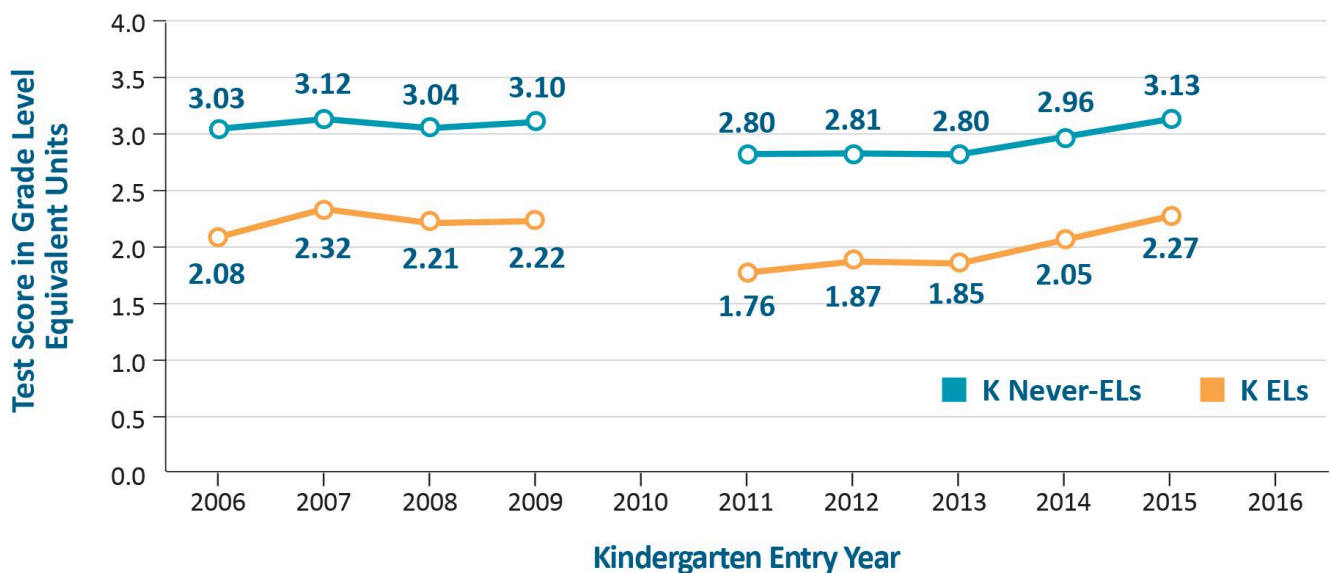
Figure 1 illustrates both the progress made by successive kindergarten-entering EL cohorts and the persistence of a sizeable gap relative to never-EL students.

Figure 1: Academic Achievement of California’s K-Cohort English Learners Compared to Never-ELs

Panel A: 3rd-Grade ELA, K- Never ELs compared to K ELs



Panel B: 3rd-Grade Math, K- Never ELs compared to K ELs



Source: Novicoff, S, Reardon, S., & Johnson, A (2024). California’s English Learners and Their Long-Term Learning Outcomes. Learning Policy Institute.

Long-term English learners represent a structural, not incidental, challenge

Approximately one in three English learners in California remains classified for seven or more years. The majority of these LTELs entered California schools in kindergarten, meaning their extended classification is not primarily an artifact of late arrival or interrupted schooling. They are, in many cases, students who have spent their entire educational lives in California's system and have not moved through it as the system anticipated they would. Boys, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities, and students with low initial English proficiency are disproportionately represented in this group.

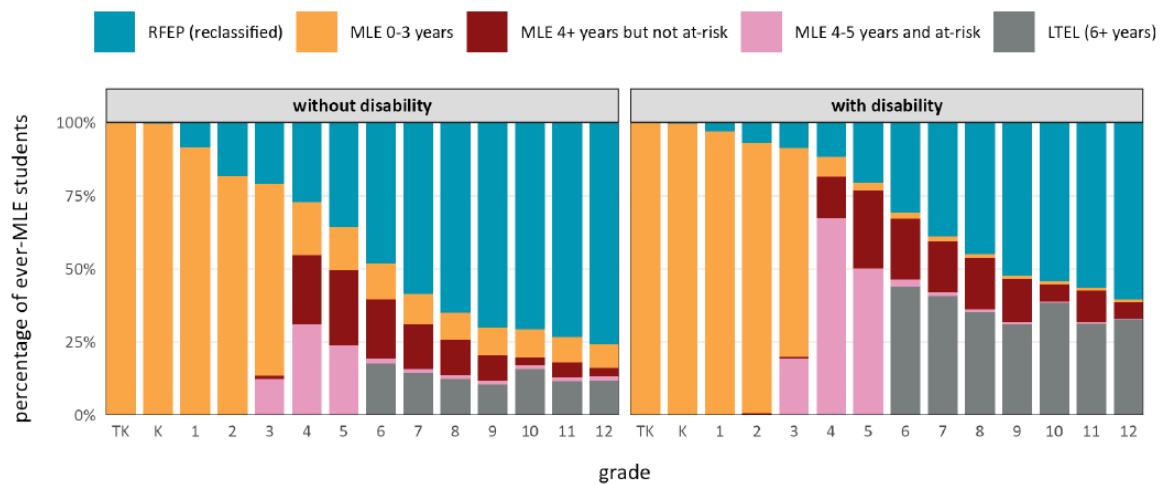
Students identified as both multilingual learners and students with disabilities, dually classified students, face compounded disadvantages that the data document with particular precision. By grade 12, approximately one-third of dually identified students have become LTELs, compared to 12 percent of MLEs without disabilities. Reclassification rates by the end of secondary school stand at 60 percent for dually identified students versus 75 percent for those without disabilities. That gap is not uniform: it begins widening around third grade and reaches approximately 15 percentage points by grade ten.

A notable and diagnostically important shift has occurred in where dually identified students are concentrated across grade levels. Historically most common in middle school, this population is increasingly being identified in kindergarten and first grade. This raises a question about identification practice: are early assessment instruments adequately distinguishing language development differences from disability? Early misidentification carries significant consequences for long-term trajectories, as does failure to identify genuine need promptly.

The outcomes data underscores the stakes. Dually identified students complete high school at a rate of 75 percent compared to 91 percent for students with neither classification and enroll in college at 44 percent versus 66 percent. One finding offers a policy-relevant counterpoint: counties where dually identified students comprise a larger share of enrollment show substantially better outcomes for that population, with each additional percentage point predicting roughly 3.5 to 4 points of improvement in high school completion and college enrollment, even after controlling for demographics and resources. Scale appears to enable specialized infrastructure and personnel that benefits students. Understanding what high-enrollment counties are doing to better serve these students' needs is itself a research and policy priority.

Figure 2 shows how MLE classification patterns differ by disability status and grade. The pink bars highlight the growing concentration of dually identified students among those at risk of long-term EL status.

Figure 2: MLE Status Composition by Disability Status and Grade, California Public Schools, 2024–25



Note:

RFEF = Reclassified Fluent English Proficient; MLE 0–3 = classified as MLE for 0–3 years; MLE 4–5 years and at-risk = classified as MLE 4–5 years and at risk of LTEL status; MLE 4+ years but not at risk = classified for 4+ years but not at risk of LTEL; LTEL = classified as MLE for 6 or more years.

Reclassification criteria are producing uneven, and potentially counterproductive, results

The process by which students are determined to have achieved English proficiency is itself a source of inequity. California is unique among states in requiring four distinct criteria for reclassification: language proficiency, academic performance, teacher evaluation, and parent consultation. The academic criterion, which requires students to clear a locally established language arts threshold, varies substantially across districts in its composition, difficulty, and implementation. A stratified sample of 76 California districts found wide variation in which assessments were used, where thresholds were set relative to non-EL norms, and how many pathways students had to clear them.

The practical effect from using three locally established criteria is that a student’s likelihood of being held in English learner status after achieving English proficiency as measured by assessment scores depends substantially on the district in which they attend school. At the secondary level, the academic criterion is more likely than the English proficiency criterion to be the binding constraint on reclassification. Students in rural districts are particularly affected, with pass rates on achievement tests falling well below English proficiency test pass rates. This dynamic creates structural barriers to course access and academic opportunity not grounded in students’ actual language development.

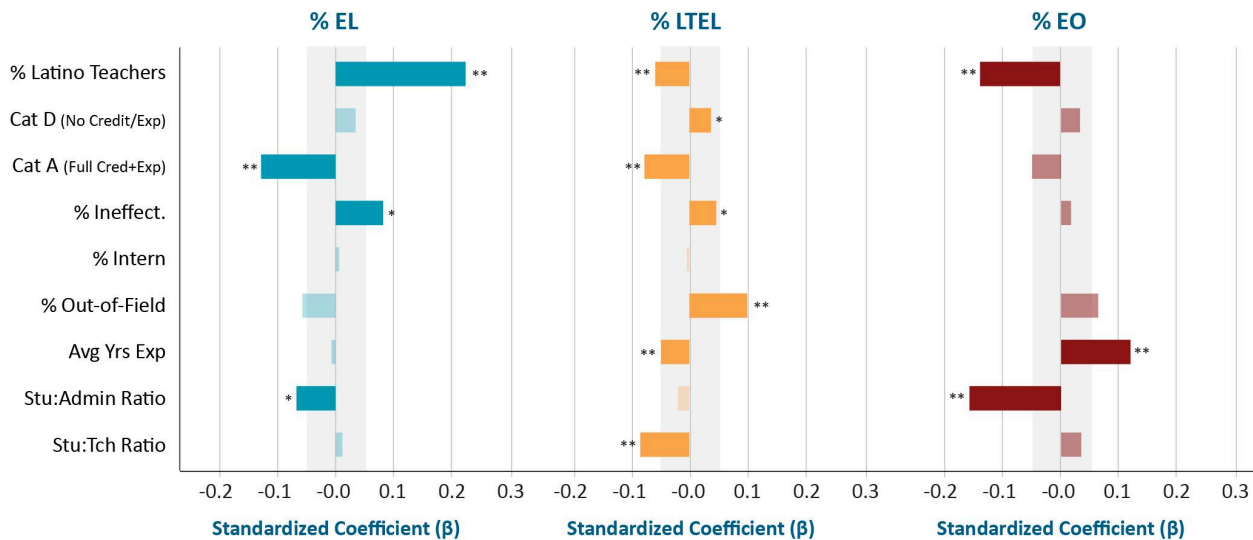
In districts with the most stringent academic criteria, students held in EL status due to narrowly missing the threshold perform somewhat better in the subsequent year than reclassified peers. This finding suggests that the loss of EL services at reclassification may itself negatively affect performance.

Across the full sample, the study finds no average effect of being held in EL status on subsequent academic outcomes. The academic criterion appears to produce inequitable variation, with effects that depend heavily on local implementation choices. Districts where reclassification is not associated with academic declines may offer useful lessons about the quality and accessibility of instruction and services for both EL and reclassified students.

Teacher preparation has improved, but structural inequities in teacher quality persist

The teacher preparation system for MLE instruction has undergone significant reform since 2020, representing a return to a more specialized credential model with the potential to strengthen what teachers bring to both English-language development instruction and bilingual classrooms. MLE preparation and bilingual preparation address related but distinct needs: all teachers of MLE students need preparation to support English language development and access to academic content, while bilingual educators also need preparation to teach academic content in two languages. The evidence suggests that the main challenge is overall supply, the geographic distribution of preparation capacity, and the unequal distribution of qualified teachers across schools. Schools serving the highest proportions of English learners, and particularly LTELs, continue to have systematically less qualified teaching staff across credential status, experience, and other markers of preparedness (see **Figure 3**). The pattern reverses for schools serving predominantly English-only students, and it has persisted through multiple rounds of reform.

Figure 3: Teachers by Credential and Experience Status, by EL, LTEL, and English-Only Students in School (Quartiles)



Note: Bars show standardized β coefficients with 95% confidence intervals. Dark-shaded bars indicate $p < 0.05$. Models include district fixed effects and controls for % low-income, % SWD, log enrollment, and charter status. Data from CDE, 2024/25 school year.

Instructional materials also appear to be a constraint. Polikoff and Haderlein find that fewer than one quarter of teachers reported that their ELA materials were adequate for helping multilingual learners master standards, suggesting that preparation and staffing challenges are compounded by limited curricular support.

Bilingual teacher preparation programs are geographically concentrated, leaving high-MLE regions, particularly along the border and in the Central Valley, underserved. The supply problem is not simply one of aggregate numbers: despite issuing enough bilingual authorizations on paper to fill planned vacancies, districts continue to issue hundreds of emergency permits each year. The mismatch is between where preparation capacity exists and where bilingual teachers are actually needed. Counties such as Imperial, Tulare, and parts of the Central Valley present the most acute gaps between student need and available preparation infrastructure. Other findings on the teacher workforce confirm that turnover is disproportionately concentrated in schools serving the highest shares of MLEs and that higher principal turnover, heavier workloads, and lower per-pupil spending drive attrition in exactly those schools, creating a cycle that credential reform alone cannot break (Leung-Gagné et al., 2026).

Preparation gaps also extend beyond language instruction itself. A review of California’s Teacher Performance Expectations found no mention of migration, immigration policy, or undocumented status, even though many MLE students are immigrant-origin students or live in mixed-status communities. Survey data from teacher candidates across California programs show that candidates

finish their preparation believing this knowledge matters while feeling largely unprepared to act on it (Sattin-Bajaj, 2026).

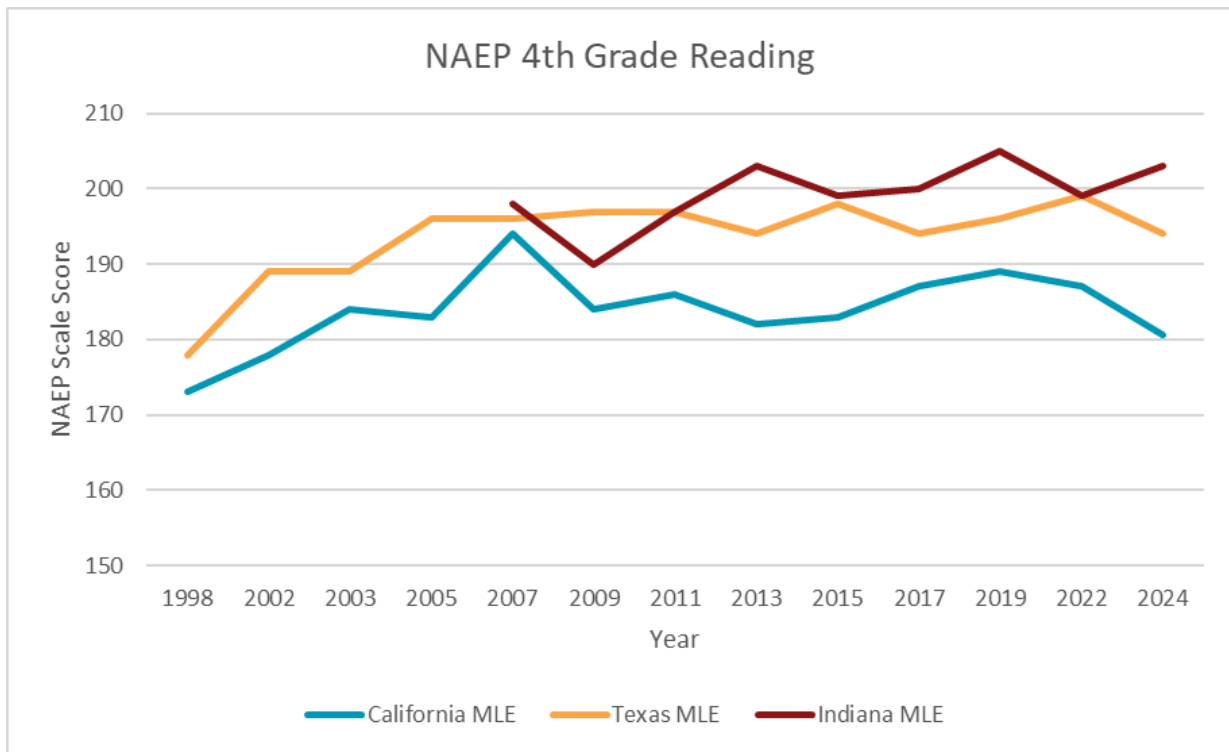
Other states provide relevant examples of alternative policy approaches

Texas and Indiana emerged as the most policy-relevant comparison cases for California based on strong MLE performance on high school graduation and academic achievement. On the 2024 NAEP fourth-grade reading assessment, the gap between California's MLEs and Indiana's reflected a moderate effect size ($d = .56$); the gap with Texas was smaller but still meaningful ($d = .33$). These differences have persisted across most NAEP administrations since 1998.

The difference in approach is structural. Texas and Indiana treat MLE instruction as a specialized professional domain, with distinct certification pathways, externally verified competency requirements, and defined role differentiation between MLE specialists and general classroom teachers. California embeds MLE preparation within universal authorizations as part of general teaching credentials, which has value in a state where MLE students are enrolled across many classrooms. However, California does not have a parallel statewide mechanism for verifying more specialized MLE instructional competencies or differentiating specialist roles. The evidence suggests that California may benefit from both broad preparation for all teachers and clearer pathways for specialized linguistic and pedagogical expertise.

On the funding and program side, Texas provides formula-based incentives for dual language programs, additional weights for non-MLE students in two-way bilingual programs, and tiered funding by program type. Texas also requires districts to offer bilingual education when they enroll 20 or more MLEs of the same language classification in the same grade level district-wide. Indiana uses proficiency-differentiated allocations that recognize students at different stages of acquisition require different levels of support. California has taken a different approach. After Proposition 58 removed restrictions on bilingual education, the state treated bilingual and dual language programming as an option for districts rather than a requirement or strongly structured expectation. California is also one of only five states using "unduplicated" pupil counts: a student who is both MLE and low-income generates supplemental funding under only one category, even though approximately 85 percent of California's English learners also qualify as low-income. Thirty-seven of 42 comparable states allow dual funding. The structures of teacher credentialing, program requirements, and student funding in Texas and Indiana illustrate alternative policy options for California to consider.

Figure 4: Trends in NAEP Grade 4 Reading Achievement Among MLEs in California, Texas, and Indiana, 1998–2024



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1998–2024 Reading Assessments.

Implications for California

The research summarized here does not point toward a single policy lever. It points toward a system that has made genuine progress at scale but has not yet implemented policies that facilitate equivalent progress for its most complex student populations.

Reclassification systems may need structural revision

The current evidence shows that California’s academic reclassification criterion is not systematically helping students succeed after reclassification. The findings suggest the value of clearer statewide parameters for the academic criterion, or of revisiting whether a locally determined academic threshold serves its intended purpose. The widening reclassification gap for dually identified students warrants particular attention: current systems may not adequately account for how disability affects language development and assessment, and that gap is not a minor technical problem.

Teacher preparation and distribution require geographic specificity

The 2021 reforms are a positive development, but the more pressing near-term problem is geographic: bilingual preparation programs are not located where bilingual teachers are most needed. The evidence suggests that expanding capacity in high-need regions, whether through institution-based programs, district-led pathways, or well-designed hybrid options, may be more targeted than further system-wide credential reform alone. A useful next step would be to examine how existing incentive structures align preparation program locations and authorization support with actual demand. That review should also account for the structural disconnect between the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, which governs preservice preparation, and the California Department of Education, which governs ongoing professional development, as that fragmentation limits coherent MLE-specialist development across the career pipeline (Grossman and Kaul, 2026).

Dually identified students require a coherent response

Students identified as both MLEs and students with disabilities sit at the intersection of two systems that do not consistently coordinate. The increasing concentration of dually identified students in kindergarten and first grade suggests that early diagnostic systems may not be adequately distinguishing language development differences from disability. High-enrollment counties that achieve better outcomes for this population suggest purposeful organizational investment can matter. The evidence suggests the value of examining how the infrastructure high-enrollment counties have developed might be extended through professional learning networks, technical assistance, or accountability expectations that explicitly address this population. Assembly Bill 1119, passed in February 2025, has already directed the Commission on Teacher Credentialing to examine streamlined dual certification in special education and general education, which represents a concrete entry point for building the needs of dually identified students into credentialing reform (Grossman and Kaul, 2026).

Specialist expertise deserves a more central role in the system

California's current model embeds MLE competencies within general credentialing without formal verification. Texas and Indiana illustrate what it looks like to treat specialist expertise as a distinct professional domain at the system level. The evidence suggests the value of exploring what statewide verification of MLE instructional competencies might look like within California's existing credential structure, and whether clearer role differentiation between general classroom teachers and MLE specialists would improve service consistency, particularly for students in the LTEL category. Specialist expertise matters partly because students who remain classified as MLEs into later grades can face reduced access to the coursework that prepares them for college. Other research drawing on course-taking data shows that MLEs are among the groups least likely to complete A-G requirements,

and that A-G completion is associated with college enrollment rates above 80 percent compared to 67 percent for students overall (Reed et al., 2026).

Funding structures could be redesigned to reflect actual student need

The evidence points to three structural gaps in California’s funding approach. First, replacing unduplicated pupil counts with dual funding would allow the approximately 85 percent of English learners who also qualify as low-income to generate resources under both categories, consistent with 37 of 42 comparable states. Second, differentiating the supplemental grant weight by English proficiency level would better reflect the fact that students at different stages of acquisition have meaningfully different resource needs. Third, replacing one-time competitive grants with formula-based incentives for dual language programs would create more sustained structural support for evidence-based program expansion rather than relying on exhaustible grant cycles. Redesigning funding structures is also urgent in light of broader findings showing that historically high per-pupil revenues have been substantially absorbed by rising special education and health and pension benefit costs, leaving limited new room for MLE-specific investments (Bruno, 2026).

Better data and clearer program infrastructure are prerequisites for targeted MLE policy

California lacks a statewide requirement and sustained policy infrastructure for ensuring access to bilingual or dual language programming. The reports reviewed here do not provide evidence on the adequacy of state-adopted dual language curricula, the effectiveness of dual language programs, or which students are enrolled in those programs, in part because these data are not systematically collected. This absence is itself important: without clearer program data and infrastructure, California cannot assess whether students have access to bilingual or dual language options, whether those programs are well supported, or how they relate to student outcomes.

Conclusion

California has articulated an ambitious vision for MLE education through initiatives such as the English Learner Roadmap and Global California 2030. The research summarized here suggests that this vision has been accompanied by real progress, but that the state has not consistently matched its goals with the sustained funding, technical assistance, data systems, and capacity building needed for full implementation.

The path forward is not a departure from what California has built. It is a more deliberate extension of it, one that centers the students for whom the current system has not yet worked as well as it should. That means attending to reclassification processes that produce inequitable variation across districts,

geographic mismatches in the bilingual teacher pipeline, the compounding disadvantages of students navigating both MLE and special education classification, and the absence of the specialist role differentiation and proficiency-sensitive funding that other states have shown can make a difference.

California already has evidence of what works. Positive outlier districts demonstrate that better outcomes for MLE students are achievable within the existing system. High-enrollment counties are achieving better outcomes for dually identified students. The 2021 credential reforms point toward a more specialized preparation model. The task now is to learn deliberately from these examples and build the data, teacher preparation, funding, and reclassification infrastructure needed to make stronger outcomes available to more students, in more schools, across California.

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