Supporting Multilingual Learners in Early Childhood Settings in Illinois:

Where are We Now and Where are We Headed?

Image: Reported languages spoken by children in childcare centers surveyed for this project.

IWERC

Illinois Workforce & Education Research Collaborative

Raisa Blazquez, PhD, Meg Bates, PhD, & Sebastián Kiguel, PhD

June 2026

Suggested Citation

Blazquez, R., Bates, M., & Kiguel, S. (2026). *Supporting multilingual learners in early childhood settings in Illinois: Where are we now and where are we headed?* Chicago, IL: Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC), University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Acknowledgements

This report was written as part of a broader collaboration between IWERC, Latino Policy Forum, and thirteen community-based childcare organizations across Illinois. IWERC's research component was funded by CME Group Foundation and Steans Family Foundation. Latino Policy Forum's development work was funded by Crown Family Philanthropies, Hunter Family Foundation, Irving Harris Foundation, Robert R. McCormick Foundation, Schreiber Philanthropy, W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation, and Vivo Foundation. However, all funders understood and supported the entire project, and we are deeply grateful for their support.

We thank the Latino Policy Forum, the thirteen community-based childcare organizations, the 22 Illinois stakeholders who were interviewed for this study, our project advisory committee, and all the center staff and families who provided their wisdom and insights for this report. We appreciate our colleagues who were reviewers of this report, including Rosario Hernandez, Dr. Gudelia López, Erika Méndez, Dr. Lindsay Meeker, and Dr. Rebecca Vonderlack-Navarro.

IWERC is supported by a group of foundations including The Brinson Foundation, CME Group Foundation, Crown Family Philanthropies, Joyce Foundation, Pritzker Traubert Foundation, Robert R. McCormick Foundation, Spencer Foundation, Square One Foundation, Steans Family Foundation, W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation, and two anonymous donors. We thank them for allowing IWERC to pursue important research questions of interest to the state of Illinois.

About IWERC

The Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC) is an education research-practice partnership with the state of Illinois. IWERC works with community partners across the state to research and co-construct solutions to the most pressing issues in the cradle-to-career, education-to-workforce pipeline. IWERC's research spans four sectors: early childhood, K-12, postsecondary, and workforce. Designed to be an independent, objective source of information for the state's education and policy leaders, IWERC is housed within the College of Education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Supporting Multilingual Learners in Early Childhood Settings in Illinois: Where are We Now and Where are We Headed?

Executive Summary

Improving supports for young multilingual children is critical, as access to high-quality early childhood experiences and, specifically, preschool bilingual programs are related to better performance in later schooling (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; de la Torre et al., 2021; Goldenberg et al., 2013). This report summarizes findings from a statewide project designed to improve services for multilingual children in community-based childcare settings. The Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC) partnered with Latino Policy Forum and thirteen Illinois childcare organizations to understand the landscape of current and ideal practices for multilingual children in early childhood, as well as to study how new tools and professional learning around multilingual learners was received in childcare settings. This report summarizes the research aspects of this project, shedding light on the opportunities and challenges for serving multilingual children in early childhood at scale.

Background

Illinois is experiencing a dramatic shift in the linguistic landscape of its student population. In the last five years, the number of English Learners has risen from 12.5% to 17.5% of all Pre-K-12 students (ISBE, 2025b). The multilingual population is also strong in early childhood education, wherein at least 193,727 Illinois children from birth to age 5 lived in households speaking a language other than English in 2023 (IECAM, 2023). Serving multilingual children well is vital, as not developing English proficiency can lead to issues with school readiness, educational attainment, and workforce outcomes, while developing proficiency in multiple languages confers many cognitive and economic advantages (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Castro et al., 2011). Accordingly, the new Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC) has made multilingual learners a priority area as they transition early childhood services under their umbrella in July 2026. To move from good intentions to true support for multilingual learners, however, requires infusion of guidance, resources, and support throughout the early childhood system (Castro & Pryshker, 2019).

As a foundation, **educating multilingual children well requires specific knowledge, beliefs, and practices on the part of educators and the organizations in which they work.** In early childhood, research highlights several important facets of educating multilingual learners, including:

- Having a strong **knowledge base** about the acquisition of first and second language, the distinction between social and academic English, the intersection of language and culture, and the use of home language to build English proficiency (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Goldenberg et al., 2013; Lake & Pappamihiel, 2003; Zepeda et al., 2011; Zheng, 2025).

Clarifying the Terms Used in this Report

The terms used to identify children who speak and/or are exposed to non-English languages in the home can be confusing and, in some cases, contentious (Kanno et al., 2024; Najarro, 2023). Preferred terms differ by educational setting (e.g., early childhood, K-12, college) and have historically evolved as attitudes about immigrants and multilingualism have shifted both nationally and at the state level (Kanno et al., 2024). In general, some advocates prefer terms such as multilingual, bilingual, or dual language learner, which they perceive as more asset-oriented regarding the social and cognitive benefits of multilingualism and linguistic/cultural diversity. However, other advocates caution that the term English Learner is used in federal (and many states') laws, thus rendering that identifier necessary to protect services and civil rights for specific children (Kanno et al., 2024; Najarro, 2023).

Following Kanno et al. (2024), we adopt the stance that the proper terminology is contextual; our obligation is to use terms that most accurately identify the students we are studying. As such, in this report, we use:

> **Multilingual learners** to refer to children in families that speak multiple languages and/or that speak a language other than English in the home. This group is broad, comprising about a third of Illinois children ages 0-5 (Habben & Kim, 2025).
>
> **English Learners** to refer to multilingual learners who have not yet achieved the proficiency in English required for U.S. school success. English Learners are a substantial subset of multilingual learners, based on Illinois K-12 data (see Vonderlack-Navarro & Garibay-Mulattieri, 2020). English Learner is the term used in federal and state law to designate students in Pre-K through Grade 12 public schools who must receive specific programming towards developing English proficiency. When such students attain English proficiency, they "exit" English Learner status, but they would still be multilingual learners per the definition in this paper.

We acknowledge that the discussion over proper terminology is even more complicated in early childhood than in K-12. In early childhood, all children are striving towards English proficiency, as well as proficiency in any other languages spoken at home, so in an informal sense all young children are English learners. Recognizing this, the field of early childhood often refers to children from multilingual homes as multilingual or dual language learners, as it is unknown which children will later become designated English Learners. In Illinois, students begin being identified formally as English Learners in Pre-K (ages 3-4). Part of the goal of this project is to explore when and how it makes sense to identify young children as English Learners (or potential English Learners) so that they can receive protected and aligned services that will lead them to school readiness and success (see ISBE, 2025; Kanno et al., 2024; Najarro, 2023), as English Learners do in K-12. While all young children are indeed learning English, children whose home language is not English need and deserve specialized instruction and resources, which requires some sort of identification of specialized status (Kanno et al., 2024; Najarro, 2023).

In general, the terms we use are important but secondary to the actions we collectively take to improve the educational experiences of multilingual and English Learners. As Kanno et al. (2024) write: "The task, then, is not simply about replacing labels but about changing the way we treat students and how we structurally position them to succeed. Without critical reflection, clarification, anticipation, and interaction with multiple systems, renaming alone will be ineffective for—and at times even counterproductive to—the collective efforts needed for truly just and equitable education for all students." (p. 10).

- Holding **beliefs** that affirm the value of home language and multilingualism, as well as the fact that multilingual learners need not just high-quality instruction, but additional focused language instruction and family engagement (Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2011; Zheng, 2025).
- Using specific **instructional practices that create a language-rich, culturally-sustaining environment** that develops academic English and encourages maintenance of home language (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Calderón et al., 2011; Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Coulombe & Lafferty Márquez, 2020; Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013; Lake & Pappamihiel, 2003; Shin, 2010; Wagner, 2021). These practices include:
    - Explicit English vocabulary instruction tied to children's developmental trajectories as multilingual learners.
    - Interactive, play-based activities that build language and comprehension.
    - Provision of classroom materials, such as books, toys, labels/signs, and dramatic play materials, in multiple languages and with diverse cultural contexts.
    - Intentional use and inclusion of children's home language, through practices such as translanguaging and use of songs, poetry, and books that are in non-English languages.
    - Use of small groups and peer discussions that allow multilingual children to speak with same-language peers and share their home language with different-language peers.
    - Support for children's socioemotional development.
- Frequently **assessing children's language development and knowledge** in English and home language, adjusting instruction accordingly (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Calderón et al., 2011; Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2011)
- Engaging **families** in multiple ways (Zepeda et al., 2011). This includes discussion of family goals and child linguistic background to inform instruction, as well as educating families about how home language can support English language development and how to engage children in reading and speaking to build home language at home (Calderón et al., 2011; Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Goldenberg et al., 2013; Shin, 2010). It also includes using parents and community members as volunteers to share language and cultural assets with all children (Calderón et al., 2011).
- Building a **workforce** that understands and supports multilingual learners. The literature calls for teachers with specific bilingual credentials, as well as teachers who speak children's home language (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019). However, sharing a child's home language does not automatically confer the evidence-based competencies needed to support these children, nor is sharing a child's home language required to support multilingual learners effectively (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Zheng, 2025). Specific training on multilingualism can benefit all early childhood teachers (Calderón et al., 2011; Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019), with bilingual-credentialed teachers providing more intensive supports.

In K-12, similar competencies have been the subject of much research and documentation (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Calderón et al., 2011; Vonderlack-Navarro & Garibay-Mulattieri, 2020).

However, the commitment to best practices with multilingual learners looks very different depending on a child's age. In K-12, service to English Learners is mandated via firm policy levers (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; ISBE, 2025a; Vonderlack-Navarro & Garibay-Mulattieri, 2020). Per

federal requirements, Illinois schools must *identify* English Learners by first asking families about the languages spoken in the home and then assessing the English proficiency of students from multilingual and/or non-English speaking families. Schools must then provide *services* to English Learners to help them attain English proficiency, with service options ranging from English immersion programs to bilingual programs that encourage development of both home and English language skills. Illinois has particularly strong requirements for English Learner services, with the Illinois Administrative Code[1] mandating a bilingual education program in schools with 20 or more English Learners who have the same home language, including smaller class sizes for students in this program. Finally, once students attain English proficiency, schools must *monitor* "former English Learners" for two years to ensure their continued growth.

In Illinois, teachers who work with English Learners must be certified as bilingual teachers or English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, depending on the specific program being provided to students. Teachers must be bilingual themselves to earn the bilingual endorsement, but they do not need to be bilingual to earn the ESL endorsement. Professional development for staff who are assessing or working with English Learners within programs is also mandated (ISBE, 2025a; Vonderlack-Navarro & Garibay-Mulattieri, 2020). While these requirements for identifying, serving, and monitoring K-12 English Learners are not without debate, they are clear and binding—providing a level of protection to English Learners, an important subset of multilingual learners writ large.

In contrast, **service to multilingual children in early childhood is idiosyncratic, unclear, and largely unregulated**. In Illinois, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) requires that all preschool programs (for children ages 3 to 5) identify, serve, and monitor English Learners if those programs are "administered by a public school district" (ISBE, 2026). However, there are no such requirements for children ages 0-2 and for the many preschool and childcare programs (serving ages 0-5) that fall outside of this district-administered umbrella. These include childcare centers, home-based care, and other informal and community-based organizations. As such, the services multilingual children receive will be greatly uneven based on family access to and/or selection of early childhood setting (see also ISBE, 2025a). Many, if not most, childcare settings will **not** screen or identify children as English Learners, provide trained bilingual/ESL teachers, receive protected funding to serve multilingual children, or provided guaranteed services to such children.

Additionally, **the early childhood community faces many challenges, debates, and even misconceptions related to serving multilingual children**. First, there is disagreement about whether the goal of multilingual education in early childhood should be bilingualism or acquisition of English language (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Calderón et al., 2011; Goldenberg et al., 2013), especially in a context where families opt into early childhood education and thus their goals for their children's care must be considered alongside best practices and state/federal standards. This debate extends to the role of home language use within early childhood settings, including the feasibility of such use, even for the aim of promoting English language development (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Calderón et al., 2011; Goldenberg et al., 2013).

Second and relatedly, there is concern about the ability to provide multilingual staff that speak children's home languages and to train and/or certify staff in working with multilingual children.

[1] Illinois Administrative Code, Section 228: https://www.isbe.net/documents/228ark.pdf

Although speaking children's home language is not required to provide high-quality education to multilingual children (nor does it automatically confer the ability to do so), it does help with implementing best practices like translanguaging (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Wagner, 2021). As such, many providers have a misconception that staff *must* be multilingual to work with multilingual children, or conversely that having multilingual staff is all that *is* needed.

Third, many educators have concerns about assessing or identifying young children as "English Learners" (Castellana, 2024; Garcia, 2025), especially as very young children (ages 0-2) are *all* developing language skills, regardless of the languages spoken at home (Garcia, 2025; Goldenberg et al., 2013). There are also few to no valid and developmentally appropriate assessments for identifying English Learners aged 0-3 (Garcia, 2025). However, understanding children's language exposure and experiences—even at very young ages—can help identify instruction and resources that emerging multilingual learners may need (on top of "good instruction") and ensure that qualified staff are working with emerging multilingual children (Castro et al., 2011; Garcia, 2025; Head Start, 2020). The field may need to strike a balance that allows educators to assess children's linguistic backgrounds and skills, permits providers and policymakers to provide additional resources to multilingual children, and maintains a developmentally appropriate approach to children's language learning.

A final challenge is that multilingual families are less likely to be enrolled in early childhood programming at all (Habben & Kim, 2025; Park et al., 2022). This is a shame, as high-quality early childhood leads to positive outcomes, overall and specifically for multilingual learners (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Goldenberg et al., 2013; Habben & Kim, 2025; Vonderlack-Navarro & Garibay-Mulattieri, 2020). As such, improving services and outreach to multilingual children and families may encourage more enrollment by this priority population.

Findings

This study involved surveys, focus groups, and interviews of families, educators, providers, and policymakers, as well as action research during an intensive collaboration between the Latino Policy Forum and 13 childcare providers, wherein educators and providers tested professional development and tools related to multilingual assessment and instruction. From this work, we extracted the following key takeaways:

- **Engagement with multilingual families is foundational.** Providers seek to communicate with families in their home languages, to inform families about the benefits of multilingualism and about how they are supporting children's home and English language development, and to involve parents in childcare activities, particularly opportunities to share their linguistic and cultural wealth. However, providers report challenges in doing this work well, including worries over a lack of multilingual staff to communicate with families, particularly when families speak lower-incidence languages (i.e., not English or Spanish). While having multilingual staff is not required to provide high-quality family engagement, more training, resources, and support for conducting high-quality family engagement in diverse linguistic contexts may be needed.
- **Providers seek to base services on firm, shared goals for multilingual children's development, with these goals touching on identification, language assessment, and teaching practices.** Families expressed a desire for culturally and linguistically affirming

childcare settings that developed both home and English language skills in their children, and centers sought to provide such settings. Providers understood the importance of having materials in different languages, using play-based instruction, and affirming the different cultural and linguistic aspects of children's identity. However, providers seemed to use relatively informal methods for identifying languages spoken at home and for assessing language development. Providers also were much more equipped to develop English language abilities than home language abilities, despite enthusiasm for doing the latter. Again, providers felt hampered by a lack of multilingual staff and materials, especially for low-incidence languages. More training and support around multilingual education for all staff may help educators become more confident, effective, and structured in assessing and interacting with multilingual children. In particular, educators may need reassurance and examples of how high-quality programming for multilingual/English Learners is conducted when the educator does not share the child's home language.

- **The capacity and training of the early childhood workforce was the greatest single challenge identified for serving multilingual learners.** Providers and educators expressed genuine enthusiasm for asset-oriented approaches to multilingualism and linguistically responsive practices. However, providers lacked the time and funding to support professional learning in this area, as well as worried about placing more burdens on underpaid, overworked staff. Educators shared positive experiences working in linguistically diverse teacher teams, which may provide a path towards connecting to children's home languages in the classroom; however, this will not solve the issue of a lack of overall training in serving multilingual learners, which promotes specific knowledge, beliefs, and instructional approaches, but requires time and funding to acquire.
- **Providers generally responded favorably to professional learning around multilingualism and tools for assessing children's language use, but centers had different levels of capacity to implement these new approaches.** Feedback on the professional learning and tools provided by Latino Policy Forum to the thirteen participating childcare organizations was largely positive. Centers found the information and tools to be useful and usable. However, there was great variety in centers' access of these supports and in the implementation of these supports after use. Some centers clearly had more capacity for this kind of continuous improvement effort than others.

In general, the Illinois policymakers, providers, educators, and families with whom we engaged were supportive of more intensive practices related to multilingualism in young children. However, efforts to systemically improve these practices must contend with the same problems that plague early childhood as a whole—limited funding, an overburdened and undercompensated workforce, and variation in capacity for continuous improvement. There were also unique challenges reported around providing support to children from families who speak low-incidence languages, while support for Spanish-speaking children was seen as more doable. This may reflect a misconception about quality service to multilingual children *requiring* bilingual teachers, or it may reflect a desire to provide the more idealistic approach to bilingual education that builds both home and English language skills simultaneously. In general, the Illinois early childhood landscape could clearly benefit from more training, guidance, structure, and resources (such as funding, community connections, and/or floating bilingual specialists and/or multilingual staff) related to multilingual children.

Supporting Multilingual Learners in Early Childhood Settings in Illinois: Where are We Now and Where are We Headed?

Introduction

Over the last few years, Illinois has experienced a dramatic shift in the linguistic landscape of its student population. In K-12 schools, the number of English Learners has risen from 245,502 (or 12.5% of Illinois students) in 2020 to 323,442 (or 17.5% of Illinois students) in 2025 (ISBE, 2025b). This rise can be attributed, at least in part, to a substantial influx of international immigrants, with over 51,000 new arrivals in Chicago alone since 2022 (City of Chicago, 2024). The multilingual population is also strong in early childhood education, wherein at least 193,727 Illinois children from birth to age 5 lived in households speaking a language other than English in 2023 (IECAM, 2023). Among these young multilingual learners and their families, Spanish is by far the most spoken language outside of English, followed by Arabic, Polish, Urdu, Chinese, and many others (IECAM, 2023).

While Illinois has strong policy related to English Learners in public schools, Illinois policy related to multilingual children under the age of 5 is at best incomplete. In K-12, service to English Learners is mandated via firm policy levers (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; ISBE, 2025a; Vonderlack-Navarro & Garibay-Mulattieri, 2020). Per federal requirements, Illinois schools must *identify* "English Learners" by first asking families about the languages spoken in the home and then assessing the English proficiency of students from multilingual and/or non-English speaking families. Schools must then provide *services* to English Learners to help them attain English proficiency, with service options ranging from English immersion programs to bilingual programs that encourage development of both home and English language skills. Illinois has particularly strong requirements for English Learner services, with the Illinois Administrative Code[2] mandating a bilingual education program in schools with 20 or more English Learners who have the same home language, including smaller class sizes for students in this program. Finally, once students attain English proficiency, schools must *monitor* "former English Learners" for two years to ensure their continued growth.

In Illinois, teachers who work with bilingual learners must be certified as bilingual teachers or English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, depending on the specific program being provided to students. Teachers must be bilingual themselves to earn the bilingual endorsement, but they do not need to be bilingual to earn the ESL endorsement. Professional development for staff who are assessing or working with English Learners within programs is also mandated (ISBE, 2025a; Vonderlack-Navarro & Garibay-Mulattieri, 2020). While these requirements for identifying, serving, and monitoring K-12 English Learners are not without debate, they are clear and binding—providing a level of protection to English Learners, an important subset of multilingual learners writ large.

[2] Illinois Administrative Code, Section 228: https://www.isbe.net/documents/228ark.pdf

In contrast, service to multilingual children in early childhood is idiosyncratic, unclear, and largely unregulated. In Illinois, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) requires that all preschool programs (serving children ages 3 to 5) identify, serve, and monitor English Learners if those programs are "administered by a public school district" (ISBE, 2026). However, there are no such requirements for children ages 0-2 and for the many preschool and childcare programs (serving ages 0-5) that fall outside of this district-administered umbrella. These include childcare centers, home-based care, and other informal and community-based organizations. As such, the services multilingual children receive will be greatly uneven based on family access to and/or selection of early childhood setting. In 2025, ISBE identified this as a major issue for consideration, writing:

> *There are estimates that between one-fourth to one-third of pre-K students in Illinois come from homes where a language other than English is spoken. These 3- and 4-year-olds are served through a variety of early childhood and early care (ECEC) programs. Some are funded by ISBE (e.g., Preschool for All/Preschool for All Expansion); others, such as Head Start, via federal funding; and still others through state agencies, such as the Illinois Department of Human Services. ISBE-funded pre-K programs are covered by the same bilingual/ESL rules and regulations that cover K-12 programs. This is not the case for programs financed through other funding streams (including from the state).*
>
> *As the state moves to align all ECEC programs under one agency, it is important to ensure that the pre-K bilingual/ESL services covered by ISBE also apply to all ECEC programs in Illinois to the extent possible. Otherwise, there will be instances where pre-K ELs will be placed in English-only programming and then, once they reach kindergarten, be placed in bilingual/ESL programs. This area needs further regulatory language to ensure better alignment across programs for students at this most critical age.* (ISBE, 2025a, p. 57)

Improving supports for young multilingual children is critical, as access to high-quality early childhood experiences and, specifically, preschool bilingual programs are related to better performance in later schooling (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; de la Torre et al., 2021; Goldenberg et al., 2013). More broadly, not developing English proficiency can lead to issues with school readiness, educational attainment, and workforce outcomes, while developing proficiency in multiple languages confers many cognitive and economic advantages (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Castro et al., 2011).

Following calls to strengthen multilingual supports and services in early childhood (e.g., Park et al., 2022), Illinois has been working to improve policy and practice to ensure its multilingual population (non-English speaking, particularly) is adequately served. This population has been a major interest of the new Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC), aligning with recent efforts by the state to establish systems by which children from multilingual families are accurately identified in preschool (King et al., 2024) so that equitable practices and procedures can be applied. To move from good intentions to true support for multilingual learners, however, requires infusion of guidance, resources, and support throughout the early childhood system (Castro & Pryshker, 2019).

Recognizing this crucial policy moment, IWERC and Latino Policy Forum combined forces **to better understand how multilingual learners and their families can be supported in diverse early childhood settings**. This project had two components. The first was a "landscape study" to understand viewpoints and practices related to multilingual learners in early childhood, including family, educator, policymaker, and provider needs; barriers to identifying and supporting multilingual learners in diverse early childhood settings; and best practices. This portion was led by IWERC, with support from the Forum. The second was an action research project with 13 community-based childcare organizations, in which the Forum provided new tools and professional development related to multilingual learners in early childhood. IWERC supported this work by analyzing feedback from providers on these tools and professional development offerings, so that they could be revised and tested in a larger number of centers.

In general, the following questions guided this study: **(1) How are multilingual learners currently being identified and served across diverse early childhood settings, (2) How can identification and service practices be improved to better support multilingual learners in early childhood, and (3) How should state policies around multilingual identification and service provision in early childhood be altered to best support multilingual children?** This report presents findings from both the landscape and action research studies that have potential to increase and improve multilingual education opportunities in the early childhood landscape.

This report is organized in two parts. In "Landscape Study," we describe the research that helped us answer the forementioned questions, anchored in insights from relevant stakeholders. In "Action Research," we describe the iterative process that led to the development of tools and professional development (PD) for consistent multilingual identification and service in CBOs across the state, as well as lessons learned.

Supporting Multilingual Learners in Early Childhood Education and Care: A Review

In this section, we review what we know about best practices for multilingual learners in early childhood, as well as challenges to instituting those best practices at scale. As a foundation, it is important to state that **educating multilingual children well requires specific knowledge, beliefs, and practices on the part of educators and the organizations in which they work.** It is not simply "good instruction," although good instruction is a necessary but insufficient baseline (Castro et al., 2011; Lake & Pappamihiel, 2003). Research highlights several important facets of educating multilingual learners from ages 0-5.

Best Practices for Educating Multilingual Learners in Early Childhood

First, educators and providers must have a strong **knowledge base** about the acquisition of first and second language. The language acquisition process may appear differently in multilingual learners than in English monolingual learners, and instruction should be responsive to the stage in which multilingual children are developmentally. As described by Castro et al. (2011), multilingual learners will start by using home language, then observe and be less verbal for some time, then use language formulaically (such as labeling objects), and finally engage in productive English language use. This may include a silent period during which multilingual children are processing the new language nonverbally but can still be engaged in meaningful learning if educators are attuned to the children's developmental stage (Goldenberg et al., 2013).

This knowledge base should also include a distinction between social English and academic English. Children develop oral or social English sooner than the academic English required for school success; indeed, it may appear that multilingual children are fluent English speakers well before they have proficiency in academic English (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Lake & Pappamihiel, 2003). Educators may also have a misconception that young children are "sponges," making it easy to acquire new language (Zheng, 2025); this may contribute to them overestimating children's proficiency in English or underestimating their needs.

Importantly, educators also need to be knowledgeable about bridging home and school language and culture, including the deep intersection of language and culture (Nnoli, 2024; Zepeda et al., 2011) and the importance of home language use for building English proficiency (Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019). Many educators and families believe that maintaining or developing home language interferes with English language development, when in fact home language proficiency can support academic content learning and English language acquisition (Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Goldenberg et al., 2013; Zheng, 2025). This knowledge is necessary for sharing accurate information about home language with families and for incorporating home language into instruction appropriately.

Second, educators should hold **beliefs** that affirm the value of home language and multilingualism, as well as the fact that multilingual learners need not just high-quality instruction, but additional focused language instruction and family engagement (Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2011; Zheng, 2025). Unfortunately, many educators have deficit-oriented beliefs that contradict tenets of high-quality multilingual education (Zheng, 2025).

Third, educators should use specific **instructional practices that create a language-rich, culturally-sustaining environment** that develops academic English and encourages maintenance of home language (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Calderón et al., 2011; Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Coulombe & Lafferty Márquez, 2020; Fernando-Smith, 2024; Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013; Lake & Pappamihiel, 2003; Nemeth, 2025; Shin, 2010; Wagner, 2021; Zero to Three, 2024). These practices are too numerous to detail here, but they have such facets (drawn from the citations above) as:

- Explicit English vocabulary instruction tied to children's developmental trajectories as multilingual learners. This may include visual guides, vocabulary pre-teaching, word walls, teaching words in thematic sets, repeated exposure to new words, and a focus on academic language development (such as words used in math or science);
- Interactive, play-based activities that build language and comprehension, including intentional questioning for children at different stages of language development;
- Provision of classroom materials, such as books, toys, labels/signs, and dramatic play materials, in multiple languages and with diverse cultural contexts;
- Intentional use and inclusion of children's home language, through practices such as translanguaging and use of songs, poetry, and books that are in non-English languages;
- Use of small groups and peer discussions that allow multilingual children to speak with same-language peers and share their home language with different-language peers;
- Support for children's socioemotional development.

Fourth, educators must frequently **assess children's language development and knowledge** in English and home language, in order to adjust instruction (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Calderón et al., 2011; Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2011). Castro et al. (2011) note that these assessments should be multifaceted and developmentally appropriate, including observations, family reports, and more direct assessments with children. Head Start provides an example of using family reports to understand children's language abilities, as they offer questions to ask families and detailed explanations about how to use the information provided by families (Head Start, 2020).

Although more controversial, identification of young multilingual learners and/or English Learners—so that they can receive appropriate services and instruction—is also a key component of assessment. As Castro & Pryshker (2019) recommended for policy: "Create assessment systems for the early and accurate identification of bilingual children. To ensure appropriate instruction for young bilinguals, it is important to identify their first and second language abilities and the prior knowledge they bring to early childhood education settings, and in later years, to school." In brief, frequent assessment can help educators respond appropriately to children as well as marshal additional resources for children who need them.

Fifth, educators must engage **families** of multilingual learners in multiple ways (Zepeda et al., 2011). This includes discussion of family goals and child linguistic background to inform instruction, as well as educating families about how home language can support English language development and how to engage children in reading and speaking to build home language at home (Calderón et al., 2011; Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Goldenberg et al., 2013; Shin, 2010). It also includes using parents and community members as volunteers to share language and culture with all children

(Calderón et al., 2011). This outreach should be conducted in the family's home language as possible (Calderón et al., 2011).

Finally, to implement all of this work, early childhood systems must build a **workforce** that understands and supports multilingual learners. The literature calls for teachers with specific bilingual credentials, as well as teachers who speak children's home language (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019). This recommendation often seems infeasible, but the literature underscores its importance. As Castro et al. (2011) write, "...to implement classroom activities in the children's primary language, to conduct valid and reliable assessments in children's primary language and English, and to plan activities that are responsive to young [multilingual learners]' individual developmental and learning needs, programs will need to increase the number of bilingual and qualified staff, as well as offer ongoing professional development…Also, the implementation of outreach and communication strategies that take into account families' diverse cultures and languages will be facilitated by the availability of bilingual, bicultural, qualified staff." (p. 268).

This being said, it's important to bear in mind that staff being multilingual—while valuable in its own right—is not the same as staff being trained or credentialed in the support of multilingual learners. Sharing a child's home language does not automatically confer the evidence-based competencies needed to support these children, nor is sharing a child's home language required to support multilingual learners effectively (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Zheng, 2025). Indeed, specific training on multilingualism can benefit all early childhood teachers (Calderón et al., 2011; Castro et al., 2011; Castro & Pryshker, 2019), with bilingual credentialed teachers providing more intensive supports.

Barrow and Markman-Pithers (2016) describe this issue elegantly, writing: "Research has shown that participating in high-quality preschool programs has large benefits for all children, and the limited research that focuses on preschool quality and English learner children indicates that they may benefit at least as much from high-quality preschool programs as other children do, if not more so. Of course, preschool-aged English learners likely need teachers who are trained to work with such students, so a high-quality preschool designed for non–English learner students probably isn't enough. High-quality preschool teachers for English learners may need to understand language theory and pedagogy related to first and second language acquisition, be sensitive to the role that culture plays in language and overall development, and be able to foster positive peer relationships and parental engagement" (p. 175).

Challenges and Debates in Early Childhood Multilingual Education

Despite this rich literature base on best practices, **the early childhood community faces many challenges, debates, and even misconceptions related to serving multilingual children**. First, there is disagreement about whether the goal of multilingual education in early childhood should be bilingualism or acquisition of English language (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Calderón et al., 2011; Goldenberg et al., 2013), especially in a context where families opt into early childhood education and thus their goals for their children's care must be considered alongside best practices and state/federal standards (which are less robust in early childhood than in K-12 bilingual education). This debate extends to the role of home language use within early childhood settings,

including the feasibility of such use, even for the aim of promoting English language development (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Calderón et al., 2011; Goldenberg et al., 2013).

Second and relatedly, there is concern about the ability to recruit and retain multilingual staff that speak children's home languages and to train and/or certify staff in working with multilingual children. As noted previously, speaking children's home language is not required to provide high-quality multilingual education (nor does it automatically confer the ability to do so). However, it does help with implementing best practices like translanguaging (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Castro & Pryshker, 2019; Wagner, 2021). As such, many providers may have a misconception that staff must be multilingual to work with multilingual children, or conversely that having multilingual staff is all that is needed to implement bilingual education.

Third, many educators have concerns about assessing or identifying young children as "English Learners" (Castellana, 2024; Garcia, 2025), especially as very young children (ages 0-2) are *all* developing language skills, regardless of languages spoken at home (Garcia, 2025; Goldenberg et al., 2013). Castellana (2024) recently conducted a national scan looking at each state's policies and guidelines for English Learner identification in preschool programs. Their results showed variation in identification procedures across states, with 22 states (plus Washington, D.C.) engaging in English Learner identification practices for preschool children. Fifteen of those states have a policy-enforced requirement for screening, while the other eight offered recommendations or guidance instead. Of the remaining states, 19 did not screen for English Learner status, and nine did it just before Kindergarten entry as a forward-looking screener. A reason given for these decisions was concern about the developmental appropriateness of existing assessments for young children.

Indeed, there are few to no valid and developmentally appropriate assessments for identifying English Learners aged 0-3 (Garcia, 2025). States with mandates or recommendations for English Learner status screening in preschool (ages 3-5) use various methods, though most seem to administer a home language survey prior to the screening process. Children whose families speak a non-English language are then assessed for English proficiency or, as is the case in nine states, are directly classified as English Learners. For those who proceed to administer an English proficiency assessment, there are five existing tools specifically designed for preschool children (ages 3-5): Pre-IPT, preLAS, preLAS Observational Assessment, Oklahoma Pre-Kindergarten Screening Tool (PKST), and Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey. Requirements for which screener to use also vary by state, with 14 states requiring one, and nine providing flexibility to districts among multiple approved screeners. Additionally, two states allow the WIDA screener which is designed for Kindergarten (Castellana, 2024; Garcia, 2025).

Understanding children's language exposure and experiences—even at very young ages 0-2—can help identify additional instruction and resources emerging multilingual learners may need (on top of "good instruction") and ensure qualified staff are working with emerging multilingual children (Castro et al., 2011; Garcia, 2025; Head Start, 2020). As a follow-up to their 2024 national scan, New America (Garcia, 2025) released additional findings about the implementation of English Learner screenings across six states—including Illinois—with different screening requirements or guidance. Their key findings highlight the important role of state funding and mandates in determining how each state approaches preschool English Learner screening. In states like Illinois, bilingual mandates require English Learner identification procedures to ensure access to language supports. In addition, English

Learner screenings are often tied to funding streams that base money allocations on the number of English Learners served. Given the flexibility given to states, there is also variation in screening tools and processes used across and within states. However, states seemed to agree on the need for more guidance, as well as for the development of screening tools appropriate for preschool children.

The field may need to strike a balance that allows educators to assess children's linguistic backgrounds and skills, permits providers and policymakers to provide additional resources to multilingual children, and maintains a developmentally appropriate approach to children's language learning.

A final challenge is that multilingual families are less likely to be enrolled in early childhood programming at all (Habben & Kim, 2025; Park et al., 2022). This is a shame, as high-quality early childhood leads to positive outcomes, overall and specifically for multilingual learners (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Goldenberg et al., 2013; Habben & Kim, 2025; Vonderlack-Navarro & Garibay-Mulattieri, 2020). As such, improving services and outreach to multilingual children and families may encourage more enrollment by this priority population.

Landscape Study

The landscape study utilized data from direct communication with families of young multilingual children, as well as early childhood providers, educators, and policymakers. IWERC used surveys, focus groups, and interviews with these stakeholders to understand current and ideal practices around multilingual learners, as well barriers to and needed supports for improved practices. We briefly describe the method of this study, then share key findings.

Method: Data Collection

Landscape Surveys

We created two surveys—one for families of young children, one for center staff—to collect data throughout the state that would help us better understand current practices and family experiences with early childhood education and care in Illinois. To protect participant privacy in a difficult political climate for multilingual families/providers, these surveys were anonymous, voluntary, and unpaid. For both surveys, we used a method of distributing information about participating through trusted intermediaries such as early childhood networks and providers, relevant state agencies, community-based organizations, and state bilingual advisory boards/conferences.

Family survey. The data collected from December 2024 to June 2025 totaled 124 responses from parents of young children (ages 0-5) in Illinois—centered in the Chicago area, but including other areas throughout the state. Respondents indicated the languages they spoke, which allowed us to define our sample by their linguistic characteristics: 60% were multilinguals (i.e., spoke more than one language at home and/or did not speak English at home[3]), and 40% were English monolinguals (i.e., spoke English only). Since we are particularly interested in the experiences of multilingual families and children, we generally refer to the multilingual sample alone in the findings section of this report.

Within our full sample, there was a high concentration of English (84%) and Spanish (50%) language use, followed by Russian (2%), Polish (2%), and Pilipino-Tagalog (2%). The remaining 8% included Bangla, French, German, Gujarati, Italian, Korean, Ukrainian, and Yoruba. As these numbers show, Spanish was the most represented non-English language in our sample, as is generally the case in the state of Illinois (IECAM, 2023).

In terms of race/ethnicity, almost half the full sample (49%) identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 29% as Black or African American, 22% as White, and 5% as Asian. Within our multilingual sample only, 76% identified as Hispanic, with a little bit of representation in the White (14%), Asian (8%), and Black (5%) groups. As for the non-English speakers (a subgroup of our multilinguals), 85% are Hispanic, 10% White, and 5% Asian. As such, this sample is not representative of the state as whole, but greatly (and intentionally) represents our target population of multilingual families. We thus use survey findings to

[3] For the survey, the multilingual group includes both (a) those who speak multiple languages and (b) those who primarily speak another language that is not English. While this may include some respondents who are technically not multilingual (e.g., someone who speaks Polish only), our expansive use of the term multilingual allows us to characterize the experiences of those with non-dominant linguistic backgrounds (e.g., non-English monolingual), which is the target population we intend to serve with this project.

supplement and extend findings from interviews/focus groups, treating them as another piece of data with which to triangulate our findings.

Center survey. From November 2024 to June 2025, we gathered 68 responses from early childhood center staff in a variety of roles (site/assistant directors, teachers and others who work directly with children, family liaisons, etc.). There was participation from many areas throughout the state, but most responses came from the Chicago area. From the respondents' perspectives, the concentration of multilingual families served in their centers was evenly distributed across our sample. A little less than half (48%) worked in contexts where they reported that 51-100% of the parents of children in their care were multilingual, and the other 52% worked in centers where they reported that between 0-50% of the parents of children in their care were multilingual families. To try and understand those multilingual contexts a little better, we also asked center respondents to report on the languages children/families speak at their centers, as well as on the languages spoken by their child-facing staff. In both cases, English (100% of centers had some children speaking English) and Spanish (94% of centers had some children speaking Spanish) topped the list as the most spoken languages by at least some children in the centers.

Again, this sample is not representative of the state as whole, but instead (and intentionally) represents centers with multilingual populations/interest. We thus use survey findings to supplement and extend findings from interviews/focus groups, treating them as another piece of data with which to triangulate our findings.

Interviews and Focus Groups

For a more in-depth exploration of the current and ideal-state early childhood services for multilingual families and children, we designed four sets of interviews with groups that could provide important insights and perspectives for the study: key state stakeholders, center directors, teachers, and multilingual families. First, between November 2024 and January 2025, we interviewed 22 key stakeholders with roles in research, practice, administration, and policy (see Table 1 below). Following that, between January 2025 and August 2025, we conducted interviews with 11 center directors who were participating in the broader project. Within the same timeframe, we conducted focus groups with teachers/staff in 8 of the participating centers, with active participation from 46 staff members, including lead and assistant teachers, home visiting coordinators, program advisors, education disabilities coordinators, and paraprofessionals. Last but not least, we interviewed 7 multilingual families between September 2025 and March 2026.

Table 1. Key stakeholder participants.

Name	Title
Dagmara Avelar	State Representative for Illinois' 85th District
Olimpia Bahena	Director of Instructional Framework and Instructional Support, Proviso Township High School District #209 (current) Deputy Chief of the Office of Multilingual-Multicultural Education, Chicago Public Schools (at time of interview)
Joanne Clyde	Director of the Multilingual/Language Development Department, Illinois State Board of Education
Kate Connor	Professor, Truman College, City Colleges of Chicago
Gloria Delany Barmann	Professor of Bilingual and Bicultural Education, Western Illinois University

Cicely Fleming	Director, Birth to Five Illinois
Amy Freitag	Director of Multilingual Learners and Grants, Monmouth-Roseville C.U.S.D. #238 School District
Ireta Gasner	Vice President, Illinois Policy, Start Early
Tara Keener	Principal, Champaign Early Childhood Center
Tammy King	Program Manager for Multilingual Initiatives, Early Childhood Professional Learning
Keely Krueger	Assistant Superintendent for Early Childhood & Elementary Education, Woodstock Community Unit School District 200
Catherine Main	Senior Lecturer & Director of Early Childhood Education, Educational Psychology, University of Illinois Chicago
Luisiana Meléndez	Clinical Professor, Erikson Institute
Marcy Mendenhall	President and CEO, SAL Community Services
Bela Mote	President and CEO, Carole Robertson Center for Learning
David Nieto	Associate Professor in Bilingual Education, Northern Illinois University
Cristina Pacione-Zayas	Chief of Staff, City of Chicago
Carla Paciotto	Professor of Bilingual and Bicultural Education, Western Illinois University
Leslie Perkins	Coordinator of English Learners, Moline-Coal Valley School District
Maya Portillo	Project Director, Funding Design, Illinois Department of Early Childhood (current) Senior Early Childhood Policy Advisor, Advance Illinois (at time of interview)
Teresa Ramos	Secretary, Illinois Department of Early Childhood (current) First Assistant Deputy Governor for Education, Office of Governor JB Pritzker (at time of interview)
Rosario Wortman	Director, Office of Migrant & Seasonal Head Start, Illinois Department of Human Services

Tailored to each participant group, all the interview protocols covered similar topics in early childhood, aiming to capture different perspectives on areas of interest and growth in Illinois:

- Recruitment of multilingual families
- Home language identification
- Communication with multilingual families
- Assessment of English and home language development
- Teaching multilingual young children
- Teaching all children about multilingualism/multiculturalism
- Policy or other supports needed
- Goals for multilingual students
- Perspectives on multilingualism

Method: Data Analysis

We applied a multi-phase analysis process where family and center landscape surveys were analyzed first, along with the interviews with key stakeholders. This allowed early findings to guide decisions in subsequent data collection and analysis approaches, such as interviews with center directors and teachers, and with multilingual families. In addition, we utilized this process for data triangulation, cross-checking potential claims with the different groups of stakeholders who participated in the study. Through this iterative process, data collection was always informed by ongoing analyses; the

key stakeholders' voices helped write the narrative for what the state should aim for, and later voices and experiences from centers and multilingual families supported or challenged those claims. See more in the Findings section below.

Survey Data Analysis

For the survey data analysis, we conducted a descriptive quantitative analysis of survey responses. For each item, we calculated the frequency and percentage of respondents selecting each response. Because many questions allowed respondents to select multiple answers, response categories were treated as non-mutually exclusive. Thus, percentages reflect the proportion of respondents selecting a given option rather than summing to 100 percent across categories. To explore heterogeneity by our populations of interest, we analyzed survey responses for all respondents (overall), multilinguals (including non-English speakers), and non-English speakers only. This approach provided a straightforward descriptive overview of response distributions while allowing for visual assessment of differences across groups.

Interview Data Analysis

For the analysis of our qualitative interview data sets, we used a thematic coding approach, combining the use of both deductive codes (guided by the research goals and our initial findings from key stakeholders' interview analysis), and inductive codes. Following our multi-phase analysis, we ran multiple rounds of coding in Dedoose to ensure emerging concepts were applied throughout our data, informed and represented by the different groups and experiences included in our study. Analytic memoing was used as an ongoing strategy to identify areas of interest and unveil key concepts during each stage of the analysis, from data collection to code categorization and sensemaking. In the findings section, quotes from interviews are presented as exemplars of themes that emerged from data analysis; all quotes are anonymized except those of the key stakeholders, who agreed to be named. As a courtesy, and to ensure we captured their true intent with their comments, key stakeholders who are quoted below were given the opportunity to review and edit their quotes for clarity. These edits did not change the meaning or the applied themes.

Findings

Our qualitative findings present research-based descriptions of current practices identifying and serving multilingual children in 11 CBOs, highlighting successful linguistically[4] responsive experiences as well as the challenges that prevail in some areas, with perceptions on what is needed to move forward. Throughout this section, our qualitative themes weave together the voices of key stakeholders, multilingual families, center leaders, teachers, and other staff who participated in our interviews/focus groups. Where relevant and appropriate, we complement these findings with quantitative information from the center/family surveys.

Guided by the most salient themes in our findings, in this section we discuss three key areas for consideration when thinking about how multilingual learners and their families can be best supported in diverse early childhood settings: **1) family engagement; 2) instructional practices for serving multilingual learners, and 3) workforce adequacy**. Our findings discuss what experts in the Illinois

[4] We understand the concepts of language and culture to be tightly related and inseparable in some contexts. As such, we may refer to "linguistically and culturally" or only "linguistically" responsive practices (for brevity), understanding that people's cultural and linguistic identities go hand in hand.

early childhood context consider necessary for serving multilingual students well, examples of what is currently working well in multilingual programs, what gets in the way, and what additional supports are needed.

Family Engagement: Communication and Relationship Building with Multilingual Families

When it comes to supporting multilingual learners in early childhood, meaningful communication and engagement between the centers and the families was a key strategy mentioned by our participants, many of whom emphasized the importance of building a relationship of trust, respect, and support through family engagement. From the first interactions at recruitment, to involving parents in their children's development, our qualitative interview findings suggested different ways to engage in meaningful communication and partnership with multilingual families, highlighting the importance of asset-based framings to support and honor the families' cultural and linguistic identities, and to move away from a culture of assimilation.

Linguistically responsive communication. Our qualitative findings mainly emphasize the importance of learning about the children and their families and strategically adapting communication strategies and materials (and other general practices) to their language and culture. This type of linguistic and cultural responsiveness was described with strategies that might or might not be a heavy lift for centers, depending on the resources available to them, like taking the time to understand the linguistic and cultural practices of the families or communicating using language that families understand.

> *Obviously, you'd want to have everything that you're sending home in English [to also be] accessible and available in the home language of the family. It's a no-brainer. But more than that, there hopefully and ideally should be a trusted messenger who speaks the same language as the family.*
>
> -Maya Portillo, Senior Early Childhood Policy Advisor, Advance Illinois

In our family survey, 56% of multilingual and/or non-English-speaking respondents said that center staff spoke to them in their home language. This survey information ties in with other communication strategies mentioned in our qualitative data, like having better representation of the multilingual and multicultural population among the staff. Speaking the families' home languages—or having resources for cross-language communication—is essential to engage with families and to provide linguistically inclusive environments for multilingual families.

In an example from our family interviews, a Spanish-speaking mother was very pleased by the fact that staff at her child's center were able to communicate in her home language and especially appreciated that "everything that was happening in the child's environment was always communicated to [her]." However, the number of languages represented at each center might determine how responsive providers can be to families from diverse linguistic contexts.

Involving and informing families. Also essential for family engagement was involving and informing families at different points in the program. Many participants spoke about the importance of establishing a line of trust and communication with families, taking the time to understand the families, their needs and perspectives, and their goals for their children. The literature suggests that to support multilingual families, particularly those unfamiliar with the early childhood system, providers should strive to inform parents about multilingual education practices, expected benefits for children, the specific program components, their options and choices, the linguistic practices, etc. Some participants spoke about existing mechanisms in K-12 that could be used as a model, like "bilingual parent advisory councils where you are educating parents and empowering them and helping them understand the school system more" (Tammy King, Program Manager for Multilingual Initiatives, Early Childhood Professional Learning). However, this information may not always be shared with families. In our family survey data, 26% of multilingual/non-English-speaking families reported that the programs they explored had information about teaching multiple languages, and 30% said the programs described specific practices they use for children from multilingual families.

The literature suggests that centers should also involve parents in different processes, like language screenings and teaching/classroom participation. More generally, our participants talked about the importance of involving the families in discussions about multilingualism, especially transmitting why multilingualism is valued in early childhood, but also in getting their input on different aspects of their children's care and honoring their communication preferences. Some specific ideas for parent involvement included parents as mentors, or as linguistic help in the classroom, which can be ways to bridge communication with multilingual families but also to address multilingual staff shortages. On that point, some warned that they can engage parents to help, but parents should not be a replacement for staffing. But the overall sense when talking about parents and community as partners and resources was one of opportunity for connection and intentionality around linguistic responsiveness.

As Ireta Gasner, Vice President of Illinois Policy at Start Early, shared, "Having parents in classrooms and engaging and bringing that language richness could be one of the things that you ask parents to do." And we heard from parents in our interviews that they appreciated opportunities to be in the classroom or to be involved in activities related to their children's development. In one case, for example, a Spanish-English bilingual mom shared that their child's center has monthly parent meetings where "they'll let you know any updates and things that the teachers suggest parents to work [on] at home. And they'll do a little 30-minute after-the-meeting parent activity, so I feel like they have that parent involvement...it's really clear that they want parents to be involved one way or the other."

The recruitment process, wherein families seek information about a center while exploring their options for early childhood providers for their children, also offers a great opportunity to establish communication with the families and to identify where multilingual support is needed. Our interview findings emphasized a few important aspects to consider, like recruit where the community goes, go to places where the families can be reached, and be intentional about the language used at recruitment.

You (agencies/providers) have to first identify the families before you can inform them about the services that even exist. Then you can work to recruit them by explaining the benefits, cost, hours, etc. Recruitment needs to be intentional and family-centered, going past trying to fill a seat and working to understand what, exactly, the family needs. Recruiting families and education can go hand in hand, but the recruitment is best done in a family's native language, ideally by a native speaker. Cultural awareness in recruitment is also key because the (white dominant) American educational system, particularly formalized education, is not necessarily the norm for other cultures. Many non-white Americans and individuals from other cultures may prioritize what we call Family, Friend, and Neighbor care over a "Gold Star" rated center.

-Cicely Fleming, Director, Birth to Five Illinois

In our family survey, 50% of the multilingual/non-English-speaking families said recruitment information was available in their home language, and 48% said they were asked about the languages they spoke at home. About one-quarter (26%) of these families said that the childcare programs they explored had information on their websites, pamphlets, or advertisements about teaching children who are not from English-speaking homes.

Challenges and supports. Our findings also revealed challenges and needs that may be preventing higher success at communicating and engaging with multilingual families. Mainly, there is concern about the lack of multilingual supports in various forms: multilingual staff, translation tools, interpretation services, etc. This is especially relevant for centers serving multilingual families who speak languages other than English at home, where strategies for communication must overcome linguistic barriers to bring equitable access and opportunities to multilingual families and children. While centers with a small number of high-incidence languages (such as Spanish) can more ably provide multilingual supports, centers with children speaking a larger number of often low-incidence languages have more difficulty finding staff who speak those languages or alternative resources to facilitate multilingual communication.

The same is true for accessing materials like curricula, books, language assessments, etc.; in particular, early childhood educators emphasized that educational resources are always more available in English and hardly or not at all available in other languages (with the exception of Spanish, which is more accessible than other non-English languages, but still less available than English). At one of the centers, for example, a teacher shared that they were “struggling with Kurdish. We are starting to get a few kids, and there are no children’s books available. I’m struggling to find Kurdish books.”

Multilingual staff were a frequently mentioned need to communicate genuinely with multilingual families, but some centers shared creative and adaptive ways to address communication challenges with families who do not speak English. For example, translation applications that deliver messages in the recipient’s language of choice—no matter what language it was sent in—were mentioned: “If somebody needs a translation, we have a phone line that we can use for assistance. And then, also, we

have the opportunity to print things in different languages, resources, and we have an app called Learning Genie and we use that app with our families to communicate with them and to keep them involved."

Resources like this could help remove language barriers in all centers, accounting for support for financial or technological limitations. Additionally, some centers explained how they rely on the partnership they have built with parents as another strategy to increase linguistic representation and mitigate the lack of resources. Centers leverage existing resources to establish respectful relationships with multilingual families and provide a welcoming learning environment to multilingual children, though the resources available at different centers can vary tremendously. Some of these findings may require centers to access or restructure resources and funding that will allow them to take certain actions. While not an easy lift, if done intentionally and systematically, the suggestions included in this section can help remove existing barriers, foster inclusion and belonging, and support multilingual families in early childhood settings.

Instructional Practices for Serving Multilingual Learners: Teaching and Assessment

Central to this study was to explore how early childhood practices can better support multilingual learners in early childhood. In this section, we start by discussing goals for multilingual children and early childhood settings, then dive into several aspects of practice that were discussed: home language identification, language assessments, and teaching practices in 0-5 multilingual classrooms. We also discuss existing challenges and the role of state policy and guidance to help guide appropriate linguistically responsive practices for early childhood settings.

Goals for multilingual children & early childhood. Our interview findings highlight the importance of setting goals to foster/support multilingualism in early childhood programs and using those goals to determine practices that support multilingual learners. In theory, goals for multilingual instruction would be intentionally designed into curricula, materials, and policy at the centers, yet not all centers are equally equipped or have the same training. In our qualitative findings, commonly cited goals for multilingual young learners included (in order of prevalence):

- Maintaining/strengthening the home language (or avoiding assimilation). "Don't lose your language just because you joined the American school system," emphasized Tammy King, Program Manager for Multilingual Initiatives, Early Childhood Professional Learning.
- Achieving biliteracy/bilingualism.
- Being in inclusive/safe spaces.
- Being kindergarten/school ready.
- Gaining socioemotional/socialization skills.
- Bridging gaps by having the same goals and opportunities for all the children.

While talking about goals for multilingual children, our participants also spoke about goals centers/staff should pursue to support multilingual children, like making sure that the home languages and cultures of the children are honored, increasing teacher cultural awareness, determining goals with families/local communities, and cultivating spaces where multilingualism is amplified and normalized.

Our family survey and interview findings provide some information about the goals that families had for their children's early childhood programs. Aligning with our qualitative findings, multilingual/non-English-speaking families identified the following top goals for early childhood settings:

- To develop my child's social and interpersonal skills (74%)
- To be a safe space for the child during the workday (56%)
- To prepare my child for kindergarten (53%)
- To have joy and feel happy and cared for (50%)

All other goals received less than 50% support. Focusing on goals for multilingual teaching and learning specifically, 65% of multilingual families wanted their child's program to help develop both the child's home language and English, 22% wanted the program to help develop English only, and 14% wanted the program to help develop their child's home language only.

When asked about the goals they had for their children's early childhood experiences, all interviewed families shared their hopes that their children become bilingual and speak the (non-English) home language. Reflecting on their own experiences growing up bilingual in this country, some of the parents were very intentional about the language use at home, trying to preserve the home language and encouraging their children to not only speak it but feel a connection with the home language and culture. In those cases, multilingual families wanted their children to "reinforce what [they] do at home."

> *We were very keen on having our kids go to dual language. So, our youngest was exposed to dual language versus our oldest child who was not exposed to dual language until we moved to a different district, and so then he was receiving classes in dual language. But I wish we would have had that sooner, because I can tell you my daughter and my youngest son take more to Spanish than they do English, versus my oldest son. You can speak to him in Spanish, and he'll understand you, but he won't speak back to you in Spanish. Like, he'll respond to you in English, which is his…technically his primary language.*
>
> -Family interview participant

Unfortunately, despite centers in our survey expressing interest in helping children develop both home language and English, 27% of center respondents said they do not have the capacity or staff to develop children's home language skills (alone or alongside English).

Home language identification. Beyond establishing and embedding goals through program design, our findings focus on the design and implementation of practices that support the specific multilingual population at each center, starting with efforts for home language identification. The findings about recruitment described above offer reminders of the importance of accurate home language identification so that centers can determine goals for their children and programs based on the population (and languages) they serve. Without accurate home language identification, centers cannot truly approach instruction, assessment, and other routines with linguistically responsive practices.

Our survey findings shed light on how common home language identification is and how it is enacted by centers. Among multilingual/non-English-speaking families in our survey, 46% said that staff asked about languages spoken at home, while only 31% said that the center formally assessed which languages the child spoke. Center survey respondents also provided information on the tools that are used at their centers to identify what languages children speak (if they do so). Among the options available, 76% of centers reported they rely on informal observations of the children, 69% obtained information through discussions or interviews with families, 55% used ISBE's home language survey, 24% used self-created tools, and 21% relied on language surveys provided with their curriculum.

Our qualitative findings also speak to the centers' current practices. Most of the centers who reportedly implemented home language identification processes relied on some sort of home language survey, and some described home visit protocols to learn information about the families' languages, which might involve pairing the home visit with the home language survey. Other centers described ways of learning about the children's languages that did not rely on specific documentation. For example, they relied on staff observations/perceptions of the families to determine whether they were a multilingual family or English was not the main/only language spoken at home.

Our family interview participants who could speak to home language identification practices when enrolling their children in early childhood programs had mixed experiences. Some were happy about the way the information was collected and seeing the center staff adapt communication practices (both with the parents and the children) to the family's preference on language. A couple of parents, however, shared that they felt the center had made some incorrect assumptions, even pre-filling some of the home language form.

Given these bespoke methods for identifying home language, our findings reveal the need for more systematic ways to identify multilingual families and document their home languages, including a plan for what to do with that information.

> *I can do that [language identification] assessment, but if I don't necessarily have my own skills or training, or the support and the professional learning to then help me know what to do with that knowledge... I now have this kid who speaks two languages, how do I really foster that?*
>
> -Ireta Gasner, Vice President of Illinois Policy at Start Early

Our participants offered some important considerations about home language identification, emphasizing the need to involve families and to use comprehensive tools that are both designed and implemented following asset-based approaches. Respondents emphasized that these processes should also be conducted by staff who are knowledgeable about the tools being used and speak the child's home language.

Language assessments. Our study intended to capture current practices around both English and home language development assessments. Among surveyed families who were multilingual/non-

English-speaking, 31% responded that the program assessed their child's English proficiency and only 15% reported the program assessing home language proficiency. Center survey findings provided more details on which English assessments were being implemented, with Teaching Strategies Gold materials at the top (51%), followed by DRDP (43%), informal observations (43%), Ballard and Tighe Pre-IPT (26%) and self-created tools (17%). We also saw variety in our qualitative findings, which included information about the various ways assessments were implemented (e.g., play-based, observational, one-on-one, etc.). Most centers seemed to rely on assessment tools included within the curriculum packages they used, or on commercial assessments, and very little information was shared on how teachers used assessment data to inform their practice.

As we learned from some of our interviewees, no specific guidelines for English assessments in childcare settings are officially stipulated in Illinois, though centers may follow ISBE's requirements and recommendations outlined for preschool programs, which include commercial assessments.

> *I don't think there's any sort of assessment that I would endorse fully for children birth through five in terms of English development. I know that WIDA was working on some standards and some things but they have abandoned their early childhood work. Because, you know, many logistical and very legitimate reasons. But I don't think there's a lot, not that I know. The assessments that exist are, in my opinion, not very adequate. They usually are in English only, so they can only tap on what the children know in one language and totally ignore the home language.*
>
> -Luisiana Meléndez, Clinical Professor, Erikson Institute

Even less guidance is found for assessing *home* language proficiency (in early childhood or beyond). Our center interview participants revealed that home language proficiency assessments are not commonly implemented, partly due to not having the sufficient resources/staff to do so adequately. These findings suggest that more specific guidance and support for implementing home language assessments, especially in places where no staff speak the children's language, would be helpful.

With the understanding that language assessment is an area for improvement in early childhood, our interview findings include considerations for best practices for both English and home language assessments. First and foremost, many of our participants pointed out that language assessments of multilingual children should be done by staff who are not only familiar with the tools, but who also speak the child's home language. Other design and implementation suggestions included that these assessments should be research-based, age-appropriate, continuous (measuring progress, not mastery), systematic, involving multiple people/methods, and made part of the regular day with a play-based/observation-based approach. The time and staff demands of these procedures were also discussed, pointing to higher needs at centers with many languages in their student body and/or limited multilingual staff. Several of our key stakeholder interviewees also emphasized the need to involve families in language assessment processes, suggesting the use and design of assessment tools that include family participation. Doing so could be a way of involving multiple people, having someone who speaks the child's home language, which would mitigate multilingual staff limitations and increase capacity to adequately assess children's language development.

Multilingual teaching practices. We end this section with our findings more directly related to multilingual teaching practices. With a mix of survey and interview data, we describe what strategies centers are using to teach multilingual young children (ages 0-5) and how multilingual instruction is generally approached. Combined with insights on what best practices look like, these findings may be helpful in determining how multilingual learners and their families can be best supported in diverse early childhood settings.

We start with the bilingual programs in our study (including roughly half of the interviewed centers and experienced by most of the interviewed families), which were designed to provide instruction in both English and the home language. Bilingual programs in our interview samples were in centers that typically serve children from households where English and/or Spanish are spoken. When those were the only two languages served, centers typically had staff matching the linguistic backgrounds of the children and felt equipped to adequately serve their children and families. This was important to the multilingual parents we interviewed, some of whom also seemed to be happy about the teacher-student ratio and small classrooms at the centers where they took their children.

> *My two kids that went to [a bilingual center] were still learning English, so it was really helpful to have that bilingual assistant teacher there, and my daughter and my son would go up to that Spanish assistant teacher and request their needs in Spanish, but then, she would translate in English, so then that way my son and my daughter will be able to communicate it in English, so they do have that support there.*
>
> -Family interview participant

A couple of the bilingual centers we interviewed reported having one to a few children who spoke a different language, like Arabic, and explained how they made sure they had inclusive linguistic representation, by Arabic-speaking teachers (when possible) or involving the parents in the classroom. Based on some of the teachers' accounts, the bilingual environments of these programs seemed to help the children thrive and even pick up a third language—just like they help monolingual children (in English or Spanish) learn both languages simultaneously. However, as we heard from both bilingual and non-bilingual programs, it gets trickier as more home languages come into play. In fact, serving a multilingual child population composed of many home languages constituted one of the biggest challenges expressed by our participants.

Our findings here focus on teaching approaches used with multilingual learners particularly, as well as practices that foster multilingualism among all children—often simultaneously, as many of our interview participants agreed that implementing practices that support multilingual children also benefits monolingual children. Having multiple languages in a classroom allowed children to engage with one another and make multilingual environments a familiar context they could safely navigate. Relatedly, many commented on young children's capacity to learn new languages as an obvious indicator that early childhood is the best time to develop multilingualism. As one key stakeholder pointed out:

> *Children are born to be multilingual. That is, in terms of neurology and brain and everything, that's how humans are born. Depending on whether we have the opportunity of hearing another language or not, then that perceptual narrowing happens and we lose our capacity to learn languages as easily.*
>
> -Luisiana Meléndez, Clinical Professor, Erikson Institute

With expected positive outcomes for all children—as expressed in the goals we described in the previous section—interview participants talked about different ways in which early childhood centers should foster multilingual inclusive environments. When talking specifically about multilingual practices with all children, a central point was the importance of promoting asset-based views of multilingualism with anti-bias approaches and activities that encourage learning other languages and cultures. The exemplar role of bilingual programs was mentioned by some, but not without expressing the need to expand bilingual opportunities beyond Spanish-English programs to cater to children coming from different countries and multilingual backgrounds.

> *Language and culture are connected, in my mind. American society [the educational system] does an inadequate job teaching children about other cultures, be it inaccurate history or using deficit-based narratives. Including multi-cultural education and language beginning in early education would not only allow us to have a citizenship of global thinkers, but children would also be more inclusive and respectful of non-native language learners and cultures. Recognizing cultural achievements during the designated month, such as Women's History Month, Black History Month, or a Polish American holiday, does not communicate the true importance of diversity to children. Instead, it only communicates tolerance and difference [from mainstream white culture].*
>
> -Cicely Fleming, Director, Birth to Five Illinois

Moving on to describe practices that center multilingual learners in particular, our interviewees provided insights on what practices should be or are being considered when teaching multilingual young children, ages 0-5. These insights aligned with the goals for multilingual children described earlier, pointing to the importance of carefully considering goals when designing early childhood practices. Predominantly, our findings emphasize the importance of strategic language exposure and program design to maximize opportunities to learn and engage.

Some participants also noted that age-specific approaches for children that are 0-3 or 3-5 years old should both foster multilingualism, accounting for their developmental skills while carefully curating a rich linguistic environment for the children. Luisiana Meléndez, Clinical Professor, Erikson Institute, emphasized how important it is to have language representation among the staff and that they should be "very intentional in how they use those languages when changing diapers, when reading a book, when engaging in play with different children, all those things that are typical of a birth to 3

classroom." And while doing this may feel natural or intuitive to bilingual early childhood teachers—as we learned in our teacher focus groups—others also highlighted the need for bilingual training and state guidance.

> *I think we know that play is important, and multilingual play is important, so I think we should encourage things […] that meet the children's needs. So, if they have encouraged linguistic diversity, encourage linguistic instruction in play. […] I think we can do more to prepare tools that are linguistically diverse, that providers are using those play-based learnings in multiple languages makes sense. I think we have to make sure that we communicate it as a value. I think we probably should be teaching everybody play and real-world, hands-on based learning across the continuum, and we need to push up play, I think it might be more structured play in 3 to 5. […] It's the best instruction that we have in the early years, anyway, which is like fostering curiosity and interest.*
>
> -Teresa Ramos, First Assistant Deputy Governor for Education, Office of Governor JB Pritzker

As highlighted by another key stakeholder:

> *The best practices of any classroom, I believe, whether the teachers in the classroom can speak all of the languages represented or one or some of the languages, is that it really starts with sort of the recognition that, this is in 0 – 3, […] that representation of that child's home culture and representation of that child's spoken language at home—if it in fact is something that the families want to grow and foster in their child—has to be actually in the materials in the classroom. So, I think just we have to think about the things that subtly reinforce culture and language. And sometimes it isn't just about the individual that's speaking the language or teaching in that language. It's actually looking in the environment and seeing if you can see yourself in that environment, right? [...] In 0 – 3, you have to constantly keep talking to them, right? That is how they acquire language. That's how they become expressive and receptive in their language abilities. And so, what do you do in a classroom with multilingual kiddos, right? […] It's much easier to do that when you know that you have books in English, you have books in Spanish or Polish, and you can speak and learn some of those things, right?*
>
> Bela Mote, President and CEO, Carole Robertson Center for Learning

And as shared by an early childhood educator:

> *For our infant teachers, a lot of it is just kind of intermingled. Diapering is done in their home language. Feeding is done in English and their home language. As much as we can, it's just kind of peppered in. We have Spanglish and mixtures of Arabic and English, and…whatever they need, the teachers figure it out and talk to the children that way. Whenever they need that comfort.*
>
> -Center teacher

Also highly discussed was the need to honor and affirm the different home languages and cultures through practice, involving community members and parents, bringing storytellers, and finding different ways of representing language and culture in the classroom. Some even mentioned that the curriculum should be delivered in languages spoken by children and families and encompassed the sentiment that "all students' identity should be at the center of work, regardless of the program," as Olimpia Bahena, Deputy Chief of the Office of Multilingual-Multicultural Education, Chicago Public Schools, pointed out. The involvement of families was particularly mentioned in conversations about language development, with examples like co-teaching partnerships with parents, or informing them of how they can foster a multilingual environment at home so the children are having that exposure both in and out of school. As Carla Paciotto, Professor of Bilingual and Bicultural Education, Western Illinois University, put it, it's about "empowering the parents to support the work of ECE teachers."

Reminding us of the section on goals for multilingual children above, discussions around multilingual education practices also focused heavily on the implementation of practices that develop both English and the home language. From centers who described bilingual or dual education practices, most multilingual opportunities seemed to be in Spanish, which for some centers seemed to adequately serve their population. However, the availability of multilingual resources and practices decreased when centers needed to go beyond Spanish. On some occasions, teachers and parents searched for materials in specific languages that were hard to access. In general, our participants spoke about multilingualism and multilingual education practices positively and as a goal for children and future generations to achieve. In some centers, multilingual education may not be the biggest priority, or while the idea sounds appealing, it may not seem attainable. However, our participants largely emphasize how urgent it is for Illinois centers to become equipped to provide multilingual education. As one key stakeholder emphasized:

> *Home language instruction is really critical. We know that it supports second language acquisition, developing a firm foundation in your home languages. And we do have a lot of simultaneous learners. So addressing them, being able to use translanguaging practices in the classroom, being open to children using their home language [is critical].*
>
> -Carla Paciotto, Professor of Bilingual and Bicultural Education, Western Illinois University

As participants described the current and ideal teaching practices in multilingual early childhood contexts, they told us what strategies are currently working or could be improved. Widely discussed was the delivery of instruction in multiple languages, which rarely implied that centers provided lessons on learning specific languages, but rather focused on utilizing the multilingual staff skills to provide individualized attention and repeat things for children based on their linguistic preferences, making them feel safe and comfortable.

> *I [use the children's home languages] throughout the day. I like to kind of greet them when they come in, 'Buenos días' or 'Marhaba,' and I like to greet them in their language. And then I just, I do it throughout the day, or as I see that they need it, you know. Sometimes they miss home, so I kind of try to speak a few words of their home language to kind of comfort them, remind them that their parents are coming back.*
>
> -Center teacher
>
> *We have children that speak Spanish only, and some kids only speak Arabic. And you know English, you know, we have more teachers that speak English, too, but I try to, if the child doesn't understand the English, I'll start to do his language. Those 2 languages, either in Spanish or Arabic. And the kids, they will be more comfortable. They feel more safe. In the beginning they reject, but then, when they see that you are, you know, speaking their language, and you are close to them, and you want to give them as much as you can, the care and the love, they will be open, and they will be more comfortable.*
>
> -Center teacher
>
> *[Home language support is most needed] during small groups or when arriving, because some kids they don't want to separate from their parents, and you try to be comfortable with their language, you know, talking to them, to understand, you know, and be ready to leave the parents.*
>
> -Center teacher

Our survey samples answered a related question, where 13% of the multilingual/non-English-speaking family participants said their child's program had lessons about speaking other languages. What constitutes 'lessons about speaking other languages' could have been up for interpretation. For example, in the case of the interviews, participants varied in their interpretations, with some more strictly thinking about language classes focused on structure, grammar, etc., and some implying that by using multiple languages during instruction and translating back and forth, 'lessons on speaking other languages' were being provided.

One powerful finding that emerged in our conversations with teachers was the importance behind creating intentional teacher teams to ensure multilingual representation and support for multilingual

young learners. This seemed to be a particularly helpful practice when centers have enough teachers to create pairs of staff representing different languages. According to some experiences shared by teachers, children quickly begin to associate each teacher with their language and felt encouraged to speak to them in that language only. The impact of having a bilingual teacher in each classroom was beneficial to multilingual children (i.e., making them feel safe and comfortable, supporting learning processes, removing potential barriers, etc.), particularly non-English speakers, but also for the linguistic enrichment of the teachers teaming up together, as exemplified in the following:

> *When I was working in my old classroom, I had a coworker that spoke only English, and I would tell her what Spanish things meant. And then she started learning how I would say stuff! And she would ask me, 'What does this mean in Spanish? And what is this like? How can I say this word?' So then she started using like an app, started like learning Spanish. Having the Spanish-speaking kids motivated her to learn Spanish, so then she would be able to communicate with…the Spanish speaking kids on her own. She learned her words, and she learned how to communicate with the parents for the most part, and if she needed help, she would always come to me.*
>
> -Center teacher

Also worth noting, as this example illustrates, is the commitment that many teachers expressed to learn new strategies—and even new languages—as well as to pursuing additional education so they can support their multilingual children in the best way possible. We will discuss how centers could play an important role in supporting these initiatives in the next section about workforce preparation.

In our discussions about teaching practices, we also talked to centers about their access to and use of multilingual and multicultural materials. Most centers seemed to rely on their curriculum of choice for instruction and, sometimes, other procedures like language assessment (depending on what the curriculum provides). In general, the curriculum and main materials were in English, though centers usually had supporting materials and books/toys representing various languages and cultures—the most helpful ones seem to be bilingual books, which are more easily accessible in English-Spanish. According to our survey results, 25% of multilingual/non-English-speaking families reported that their programs had instructional materials/toys in non-English languages, with 29% saying the same for books.

In our family survey, 15 multilingual participants answered an open-ended question about their experiences with early childhood programs and the development of their children's language abilities. In general, parents left comments expressing gratitude or satisfaction with the services received, including specific mentions of children's opportunities to learn both English and their home language, of bilingual teachers available at the center, and of programs that were inclusive of multiple languages and cultures. A handful of people expressed the need for more options of languages/cultures in certain programs, and for more multilingual programs in general.

At the time there were almost no programs like this in Chicago, now there are several, but they are the exception and quite expensive. These should be the norm. We are so lucky to have found a place that not only normalizes but also celebrates multilingualism and multiculturalism especially in times like these.

-Parent from an English-and-Spanish-speaking household

Challenges, supports, and policy implications. As we learned about the different language assessment and multilingual teaching strategies center staff implemented or deemed essential, we also learned about challenges they experience. Teacher shortages were the most prevalent concern, followed by challenges accessing multilingual resources and materials, and extending certain practices outside of English, particularly for centers serving children from a wide variety of linguistic backgrounds. These challenges were also brought up by our key stakeholders, who also agreed with centers on the complications faced throughout the state due to the current political climate. Relatedly, deficit views on multilingualism continue to challenge procedural and systematic aspects of the early childhood context. Home language identification challenges were also discussed, with some highlighting inaccurate identification, inadequate resources, families' misconceptions about the process and/or its implications, and the lack of accountability in policy implementation.

What participants shared about policy or supports needed was very much in alignment with the challenges described. Key stakeholders, as well as providers/teachers, generally agreed that better resources and systems would help move the state forward tremendously. Looking at what others are doing in this area was suggested by some, both in terms of looking at policy and assessment in other states and encouraging centers to learn from each other in order to promote linguistically responsive early childhood structures. Respondents indicated that early childhood settings need to be intentional about multilingual instruction:

We need to go beyond the 'little kids are sponges,' you need to use ESL approaches with translanguaging, even at that level. I think that's still very rooted in the fact that you just exposed a little child to a language and here it is, voilà, magic. [...] I think that it is super important to go beyond traditional EC approaches and include all these other ESL-based.

-Carla Paciotto, Professor of Bilingual and Bicultural Education, Western Illinois University

And still within systems, there were mentions of funding—discontinuity, inconsistency, and/or unavailability—as one of the main detractors from progress in this area.

Workforce Adequacy: Required Knowledge and Skills for the Early Childhood Workforce

In this last section of findings, we expand on issues regarding multilingual workforce adequacy, which were often described as a challenge for our state. As our findings above showed, the extent to which centers felt they could implement linguistically responsive practices depended heavily on the number of languages centers served, but also on how well represented those languages were among the staff. Specifically talking about adequately equipping early childhood programs to promote multilingualism and support multilingual learners, topics like capacity or teacher qualifications and training had a strong presence in our data.

Capacity. Much of what our data said about how centers serve their multilingual population focused on their teachers' capacity to implement linguistically responsive practices. Most of our participants highlighted the staffing shortages in early childhood centers (in general, but especially multilingual staff). These capacity shortages came up when participants were talking about multilingual teaching approaches, as well as procedures for the identification of home languages and language assessments, and the ability to communicate with and serve multilingual families.

The need for different types of multilingual support was broadly cited among our participants, with emphasis on the need to increase the multilingual teacher workforce. Some participants strongly advocated for additional compensation for teachers with multilingual skills (while others were opposed to this idea, citing other important skills that are not currently subject to additional compensation). And many brought up the need to increase access to adequate (i.e., research-based) resources and guidance to implement multilingual-inclusive practices specific to 0-5 years.

> *Our CBOs are way overworked and understaffed, that came through loud and clear during the PDG project. Losing staff members on a regular basis to go work at Aldi and Walmart because they get better pay and better benefits. And there's no extra pay for if you're bilingual or if you have ESL credentials, generally speaking, in the field. I mean, it's just tough. And if you do, then you end up getting recruited by public school districts.*
>
> -Tammy King, Program Manager for Multilingual Initiatives, Early Childhood Professional Learning

Our participants shared their experiences with different levels of multilingual representation among the staff and how they adapt to the changing linguistic makeup of the population they serve. Intentional teaching teams where multilingual and monolingual teachers work together in the classroom, as described in the previous section, seemed to be a tremendous opportunity for knowledge exchange and support, increasing capacity to adequately serve multilingual classrooms. The collegiality among the teachers was evident in our teacher focus groups, and we repeatedly heard examples of multilingual teachers stepping up to help when needed. "I feel like, it's a really good thing that I know both languages so that if [my colleagues] need help, I'm able to help them," said a bilingual teacher.

We also heard the complementary perspective, where English monolingual teachers described the benefits of sharing a teaching space with a bilingual teacher, particularly in how it helped them to better support multilingual children. Understanding that centers cannot always rely exclusively on their multilingual teachers, some monolingual teachers also explained their own efforts to be able to address multilingual situations "just in case those coworkers are not around at that moment." We note that these teaching arrangements may help solve the issue of supporting children in their home language, but they do not solve the issue of teachers having specific bilingual education training or credentials, which is discussed more in the next section.

Teacher training and requirements. Given the lack of multilingual teachers many centers experienced, the conversation turned to how centers can prepare their workforce through continuous training and what qualifications should be required for teachers working in multilingual environments. Knowing the families' home languages is one important step towards providing linguistically responsive early childhood services, one that can be especially helpful in removing communication barriers. However, even with the ability to speak the languages, specific training about teaching in multilingual early childhood contexts is also needed. Being bilingual is neither the solution nor a requirement to work with multilingual children, and there seemed to be some misconceptions about who and how people can get trained for such jobs, like the "assumption that you must be bilingual in the kid's language to even learn best practices," as Tammy King, Program Manager for Multilingual Initiatives, Early Childhood Professional Learning, pointed out.

Some of the centers we spoke with described a culture of learning where teachers felt encouraged (and in some cases supported, financially or otherwise) to pursue additional preparation that will prepare them to work in multilingual settings, whether it was learning a new language, obtaining a certification, or obtaining a degree. One inevitable concern when talking about training opportunities was funding. Our center participants showed variability in the types of training and support they were able to provide to their teachers. Many offered supports at the center, but only some had access to scholarships or other ways to fund higher education for teachers. For some teachers, these opportunities, while encouraged, had to be self-funded.

Thus, remaining concerns were not only what training centers need to provide for their teachers, but also how they were going to pay for it. In addition, some expressed that clear degree requirements and other credentials are needed for certain positions. And it seemed to get more confusing when different funding sources and program requirements came into play. In light of that, some saw the role of policy intervention as an opportunity to "help us to educate and train our staff a little bit better, giving more opportunity to get the right licensing for the teachers, the teacher assistant, and setting a path for them to go and take a certification," said Rosario Wortman, Director, Office of Migrant & Seasonal Head Start, Illinois Department of Human Services.

To promote the use of research-based approaches in multilingual early childhood contexts, ongoing professional development and training can help prepare staff to meet their ever-changing child population. But what exactly should teachers learn? How do we bridge preparation gaps and build intentional teams to maximize everyone's strengths and create a culture of ongoing learning supported at the centers? Our findings include issues of elevated importance by our participants that may provide some ideas or considerations moving forward.

Home language identification, described in the previous section, was highlighted as an essential procedure to understand the population served that should involve specific training. Participants also mentioned the need for deeper knowledge about linguistically responsive practices and evidence-based goals for multilingual children (specifically for the 0-5 context). Higher awareness about the importance of multilingualism and multilingual education practices was also brought up, referring to teachers but also leadership (especially those with the power of making decisions). Other actionable ideas shared by our participants focused on ensuring alignment of priorities and approaches through every aspect of the early childhood workforce pipeline, with the involvement of policy and higher education emphasized.

> *An attainable idea is that every educator needs to be trained or educated about multilingual development, assessment, ... everything that entails multilingual education. And we are far from there. And so we've been really struggling within our [higher education] institution to make that a priority. The state of Illinois has incrementally added more requirements for teacher education, but we're still not getting there. I feel like one of the big obstacles is mandates. Basically, there are always kind of minimal requirements. And every educator should have knowledge of multilingual development and should have knowledge of assessment practices that, even though they themselves are not multilingual and they cannot access information in the first language, they have to find ways to at least be aware that that's an area of assessment, systematic assessment.*
>
> -Carla Paciotto, Professor of Bilingual and Bicultural Education, Western Illinois University

Asset-based views of multilingualism. Our findings stress the importance of drawing from asset-based framings to enhance and promote the benefits of multilingualism throughout the early childhood system, involving teachers and other staff working with children at the centers, directors/leaders, higher education teacher preparation programs, education mandates, etc. Our participants particularly emphasized that to increase awareness about the benefits and opportunities of multilingualism, preconceived biases and misconceptions need to be understood and challenged.

> *I think there's probably still a lot of need for educating our own field about the valuing of first languages. And I know there's probably still work to do with parents who are eager to have their children learn English because they see it to succeed. I think, there's probably still a ton of education in multiple cases, including our own, to help people understand that being fluent in English is not necessarily the most important goal.*
>
> -Ireta Gasner, Vice President of Illinois Policy at Start Early

In fact, the challenges perceived in deficit-oriented views on multilingualism were seen as "obstacles to considering multilingualism as an additive element," as Carla Paciotto, Professor of Bilingual and Bicultural Education, Western Illinois University, put it.

A key way to address this issue recommended by our participants was to center asset-based framings in early childhood trainings and policy. Professional development for center staff could include antibias training and information on the benefits of multilingualism and the specific aspects needed to integrate these concepts into practice. If accompanied by asset-oriented mandates that ensure protections and supports for multilingual education, linguistically and culturally responsive education state guidelines and policy enforcement requirements, the state's capacity to foster multilingual early childhood education and equitably serve multilingual families and children could see a significant growth. As part of these conversations, the current political climate and the federal administration's threats against multilingual education were brought up as a significant challenge, but Illinois was also praised for its continued commitment to protecting multilingual children and families. Some emphasized the tremendously negative impact that deficit-oriented policy and funding streams could have, often referring to how they have historically slowed down federal and state progress in providing equitable education opportunities for multilingual learners (Dontamsetti et al., 2026).

Against the problematic aspects of deficit views, our participants emphasized the need to move towards a more positive view of multilingualism, seeing it as a strength and not a weakness. Our data includes the participants' perceptions on what multilingualism means to them and why they think it is important, particularly in early childhood contexts. Across our interview samples, participants emphasized the benefits of multilingualism and praised asset-based educational (e.g., translanguaging) approaches and ideologies. Particularly referenced were the cognitive benefits of multilingualism, the ways it brings people closer by encouraging connection and understanding, and the future opportunities that multilingual skills will bring to children. There were also many mentions of the tight relation of language with culture and identity, and the enriching opportunities of being in linguistically and culturally diverse learning environments.

Our center survey participants expressed similar views, defining multilingualism as a practice that could improve communication, as well as to support children and families in early childhood. Other common responses highlighted the importance of honoring and maintaining the families' home language, the need to adapt to ways to communicate with everyone, and the opportunities that multilingualism brings to individuals and communities. Seeing multilingualism as an imperative in our increasingly diverse world, some emphasized the need to develop awareness and understanding of other languages and cultures. Other comments spoke of the benefits of multilingualism, such as the brain and socio-emotional development that goes with learning multiple languages, or its importance in fostering connection and inclusion.

Summary

This section has provided a detailed overview of stakeholder viewpoints on supporting young multilingual children and their families. Stakeholders were not monolithic in their views, and we sought to capture that nuance in the previous sections. However, stakeholders were largely aligned with extant literature in the issues they highlighted as important and worthwhile, as well as the challenges they faced. Here we summarize three lessons learned from stakeholder input.

- **Engagement with multilingual families is foundational.** Providers seek to communicate with families in their home languages, to inform families about the benefits of multilingualism and about how they are supporting children's home and English language development, and to involve parents in childcare activities, particularly opportunities to share their linguistic and cultural wealth. However, providers report challenges in doing this work well, including worries over a lack of multilingual staff to communicate with families, particularly when families speak lower-incidence languages (i.e., not English or Spanish). While having multilingual staff is not required to provide high-quality family engagement, more training, resources, and support for conducting high-quality family engagement in diverse linguistic contexts may be needed.
- **Providers seek to base services on firm, shared goals for multilingual children's development, with these goals touching on identification, language assessment, and teaching practices.** Families expressed a desire for culturally and linguistically affirming childcare settings that developed both home and English language skills in their children, and centers sought to provide such settings. Providers understood the importance of having materials in different languages, using play-based instruction, and affirming the different cultural and linguistic aspects of children's identity. However, providers seemed to use relatively informal methods for identifying languages spoken at home and for assessing language development. Providers also were much more equipped to develop English language abilities than home language abilities, despite enthusiasm for doing the latter. Again, providers felt hampered by a lack of multilingual staff and materials, especially for low-incidence languages. More training and support around multilingual education for all staff may help educators become more confident, effective, and structured in assessing and interacting with multilingual children. In particular, educators may need reassurance and examples of how high-quality programming for multilingual/English Learners is conducted when the educator does not share the child's home language.
- **The capacity and training of the early childhood workforce was the greatest single challenge identified for serving multilingual learners.** Providers and educators expressed genuine enthusiasm for asset-oriented approaches to multilingualism and linguistically responsive practices. However, providers lacked the time and funding to support professional learning in this area, as well as worried about placing more burdens on underpaid, overworked staff. Educators shared positive experiences working in linguistically diverse teacher teams, which may provide a path towards connecting to children's home languages in the classroom; however, this will not solve the issue of a lack of overall training in serving multilingual learners, which promotes specific knowledge, beliefs, and instructional approaches, but requires time and funding to acquire.

We now turn to lessons learned from the action research study with thirteen community-based childcare organizations.

Action Research Study

In parallel with the landscape study, the Latino Policy Forum led professional development, coaching, and multilingual learner identification activities with center directors and staff. From December 2024 to February 2026, the Forum worked with centers and IWERC collected feedback from participants on these activities, which was used to redesign the professional development and identification tools, as well as to consider challenges and barriers centers face in doing this work that could be further addressed by policy. In this section, we briefly describe the professional development and tools in which centers engaged, as well as the findings from the project about each. The Latino Policy Forum has separately developed statewide policy recommendations from this work, which will be available on their website in the fall.

Participants

As mentioned previously, 13 community-based childcare centers participated in this work, summarized in Table 2. We intentionally recruited childcare centers across the state of Illinois, to ensure that our learnings would be generalizable across the diverse geographic and political contexts of the state.

Table 2. Participating community-based childcare centers.

Participating Center	Illinois County
PACT - Beardstown Center	Cass
Carole Robertson Center for Learning- Albany Park	Cook
Chicago Commons- Guadalupano Family Center	Cook
Family Focus- Confirming site	Cook
Gads Hill Center- Confirming site	Cook
The Children's Center- Red Feather Site	Cook
Educare West DuPage	DuPage
Metropolitan Family Services- DuPage Center	DuPage
Metropolitan Family Services- Early Learning programs within D200	DuPage
One Hope United- Busy Bee Early Learning Child Development Center	Lake
Project NOW Head Start- Esperanza	Rock Island
Skip-A-Long Childhood Centers- RIC	Rock Island
WIU Spanish Bilingual Early Learning Center	Rock Island

Professional Development

Professional development was provided in several forms. First, in December 2024 and January 2025, the Forum offered a “train the trainers” session on basic principles of multilingual support, identification strategies, and teaching approaches for young multilingual learners. This session was available synchronously, via a webinar or in-person event. Second, center directors and staff were asked to take sets of grouped modules. One set focused on linguistically sustaining practices, family partnerships, and supporting environments. Another set focused on instruction and assessment. These modules were available via a synchronous webinar, a self-paced asynchronous online platform, or in-person sessions.

Participants were encouraged to give feedback on these professional development opportunities via an online feedback form. In total, there were 210 usable responses from center staff. Table 3 below summarizes the respondents' centers and roles.

Table 3. Professional development respondent roles.

Respondent Roles	N
Teacher	84
Other Center Staff	56
Teacher's Assistant	45
Center Director	25

186 responses were for the online PD modules, while 24 responses were for the "train the trainers" PD given at the outset of the project. We provide the findings for the online PD modules here, as these are most pertinent to the design of PD on multilingual learners for the early childhood workforce at large. We note that an analysis of initial findings was given to the Latino Policy Forum team in April 2025, allowing them to make changes to the modules based on feedback as part of the iterative action research. These results represent the full corpus of responses, pre- and post-changes.

Training format. Most respondents took the training "on their own and used the audio provided" (N = 123; 66%). 16 respondents took it as a webinar option with Dr. Meeker (the Forum's consultant on this work to provide the PD), 30 did it with a staff lead or partner at their center, and 17 took it in another format or did not indicate.

Impact on understanding assets and needs of multilingual children. A majority of respondents felt the PD changed their understanding of the assets and needs of multilingual children, with just over half saying it changed their understanding "a lot" (N= 105; 56%) and 60 saying it changed their understanding "somewhat" (32%). A much smaller group said it changed their understanding only "a little" (N = 16; 9%) or "not at all" (N = 4; 2%).

Impact on understanding best practices for working with multilingual children. Again, a majority of respondents felt the PD changed their understanding, by "a lot" (N= 105; 56%) or "somewhat" (N = 64; 34%). A much smaller group said it changed their understanding only "a little" (N = 15; 8%), with a sole respondent saying it did not change their understanding at all (0.5%).

More on the "a little/not at all" respondents. We examined the responses of those who answered "a little" or "not at all" to either of the first two questions (about how the PD increased their understanding of the assets/needs or best practices for multilingual children).

- First, there was great overlap in these groups. Of the 20 respondents who answered the first question as "a little/not at all," 14 answered "a little/not at all" to the second question. Of the 16 respondents who answered "a little" to the second question, 14 had answered "a little/not at all" to the first question. In other words, **only 22 total respondents (12%)** were really in this "negative" respondent group.
- Second, a review of their comments on the PD revealed specific issues on which to consider improvement. These include the following:
    - Some wanted more specific, grounded examples and practices. Quotes:

        - "More sample videos of teachers implementing specific practices, strategies and activities."
        - "More strategies and examples in the classroom"
        - "How to work in groups with children and one on one with ELL if you do not speak the child's home language"
        - "More example of how to implement the scaffold to instruction in support for English Language learners."
        - "What about non Spanish, non English infants?" [in short, this respondent appeared to want more training on working with infants, whose language capabilities are not yet externalized]
    - Some wanted changes to the structure or technical pieces of the PD.
        - Two noted the links within the PD did not work. Based on their comments, it seems these two were taking the screening PD.
        - One wanted the PD in Spanish.
        - One said: "More organization, it threw me off the way it was shared and laid out."
        - One shared issues with navigating the modules.
    - Some indicated that they were simply experienced in the area already.

Practices respondents will use in the classroom. 177 respondents (95%) shared how they will use the PD in their classrooms as they work with multilingual children, which seems to be a positive signal of their engagement in and learning from the PD. Some themes in the respondents' answers included:

- Encouraging home language use
- Teaching in multiple languages
- Encouraging and improving family involvement
- Using specific modeling, communication, and visual scaffolding strategies
- Using Spanish-language (or other non-English-language) books, materials, toys, labels, or songs
- Engaging in more outdoor activities, dramatic play, and use of concrete materials
- Using, planning for, and encouraging play
- Using equitable, play-based, and new assessment and screening practices
- Using WIDA standards
- Being aware of languages in the center
- Creating a language-rich environment
- Creating a culturally-sustaining environment

PD aspects respondents found most compelling. 180 respondents (97%) shared what they found most compelling about the PD. Some themes in the respondents' answers included:

- Content of the PD (Specific strategies to use with English Learners, use of home language, play plans, engagement with families, activity lists by age group, cognitive development information, etc.)
- Structure of the PD itself (embedded videos, use of literature/articles, use of statistics, use of Illinois tip sheet, self-paced, use of family stories)
- The fit with the need in the center
- The external resources provided
- Affirmation of pre-existing feelings and beliefs about the strengths of multilingual learners

Recommended changes to the PD. Respondents indicated the components of the PD they found least compelling or wanted to change. These responses were largely those given by the "negative" respondents (see above) or echoed those responses. However, some additional comments included that a module was "freezing up," additional issues with broken links, issues with mobile accessibility, and a concern about whether one formative assessment question was a trick question.

More substantively, several respondents thought the modules were heavy on explaining theoretical approaches and could have had more practical examples. A few respondents thought the content was useful for ages 4+, but not as much for younger children. Still others wanted specific ideas for modifying curriculum and assessment materials for multilingual learners. As one respondent who learned "a lot" from the training noted, "I would have appreciated more concrete examples of how to adapt curriculum materials to be more accessible to multilingual learners, especially for small-group instruction. It would also have been helpful to see more video demonstrations of effective language support strategies being used in real classrooms with children ages 3–5. Additionally, more guidance on how to collaborate with interpreters or bilingual staff during assessments and family conferences would be valuable."

Needed support/materials. Respondents suggested some materials and support that would help them implement the practices they learned about. These included:

- Flip charts, sentence strips, markers and materials to implement strategies
- Books in different languages
- Multicultural toys/materials/props
- Multicultural music, art and photos of people
- Posters/visuals in different languages
- Play plans
- Further training and instructional coaching
- More knowledge of children's backgrounds and favorite words at home
- Translation devices/apps
- More family presence and involvement
- Additional assessments/screeners

Tool Development

The Forum worked closely with centers throughout the project to implement existing tools for multilingual learners in early childhood and to test new tools developed to fill particular needs. Table 4 summarizes the tools centers implemented. Tools in gray are pre-existing tools that were not developed for this project but were simply encouraged to be implemented to systematically identify multilingual and English learners. The tools in white are new tools developed through this project and tested in an iterative design process.

Table 4. Tools implemented by centers for this project.

Tool	Description
ISBE Home Language Survey (0 to 5 years old)	A two question survey that determines if a child speaks a language other than English or if another language other than English is spoken in their home. It lets us know if a child is multilingual and needs to participate in an additional language screening and identification process.

Family Language Interview Tool (0 to 3 years old)	The Family Language Interview Tool is a guided interview to be used with parents/guardians of a child younger than 3 years old who speaks a language other than English or is exposed to a language other than English in their home according to the Home Language Survey. It helps early care and education providers determine how the family and the child use English and their home language within home and community contexts. It is developmentally informed and aligns to the early care and education pillar that families are a child's first teacher.
Home Language Observation Tool (2 tools for infants/toddlers and preschoolers)	This is an observation tool that helps ECEC staff identify how, with whom, and during what activities the child tends to use their home language so that staff can continue to build upon those language assets. It is helpful if the staff members know the child's home language but is not required.
DRDP English Language Development measures (3 to 5 years old)	The DRDP (Desired Results Developmental Profile) English Language Development (ELD) measures assess the progress of dual language learners/multilingual learners in communicating and acquiring English language skills. These measures focus on how children understand and use English, building upon their initial language development in their home language. It will determine if the multilingual child also qualifies as an English Learner and would need additional funding, supports, and bilingual education programming.
Pre-IPT screener (3 to 5 years old)	The Pre-IPT (Preschool Language Proficiency Screener) is a standardized test designed to assess the language abilities of preschool-aged children (typically 3-5 years old).The Pre-IPT is used for initial identification and placement in appropriate language instruction programs and to determine if a child qualifies as an English Learner and would need additional funding, supports, and bilingual education programming.
English Language Development Tool for Young Children (18 months to under 3 years old)	This tool will determine where children ages 18 months to less than three years old are in their English use and development. Children below a specific benchmark will be identified as Young English Learners. However, they will all be assessed with an English screener when they turn 3 years old to actually determine English Learner status. This tool is aligned to WIDA Early Years Can Do Descriptors.

Source: Latino Policy Forum

As with the PD, center staff were encouraged to give feedback on the tools. In total, there were 71 usable responses from center staff across all the tools. We collected feedback on both the pre-existing and new tools in order to put the feedback we received on the new tools in context. By understanding the use and implementation of pre-existing tools, we could understand how well the new tools were performing at ease-of-use and usefulness. Below, we provide summaries of the feedback only for the newly developed tools.

English Language Development Tool (5)

- **Time**: Estimates ranged from 1-15 minutes (4 respondents) to 31-45 minutes (1). Overall, time did not seem to be an issue.

- **Ease-of-use**: All respondents rated it extremely (1) or somewhat (4) easy to use, citing easy questions to understand. Only one respondent suggested changes, which were to add more detailed instructions.
- **How it can be used by the center**: Respondents thought it would help guide instructional planning and help them better understand specific languages children speak.
- **Accuracy at capturing children's English language skills**: All respondents thought it captured the skills somewhat (3), very (1), or a little (1) well. Only one respondent gave follow-up notes on their rating (of "somewhat well"), saying that they have learned about different ways/dialects of speaking Spanish (and presumably weren't sure if the tool captures those nuances).

Family Interview Protocol (8)

- **Time:** All respondents said it took 1-15 minutes.
- **Ease-of-use**: All respondents rated it extremely easy to use, noting clear questions and parental understanding of the questions.
- **How it can be used by the center**: Respondents said it would be useful for understanding and developing children's home language, as well as furthering family engagement.
- **Proposed changes**: Respondents asked for more English language examples, built-in translation, and a question about the children's first words and responsiveness to different languages.

Infant/Toddler Home Language Observation Tool (8)

- **Time**: Respondents had mixed views. Some thought the tool took 1-15 minutes (5 respondents), while others thought 16-30 minutes (1) or 1+ hours (2).
- **Ease-of-use**: Most respondents rated it extremely (4) or somewhat (3) easy to use. One respondent said it was somewhat difficult to use; however, they noted that they are not the regular teacher of the child they observed, making it difficult to implement. Some respondents wanted a change to the graphic design to make it easier to check off or enter answers.
- **How it can be used by the center**: Respondents thought the tool provided information on the child's dominant language (English or home language) and activities in which they preferred one or the other language. They thought the information would inform instruction.
- **Accuracy at capturing children's English language skills**: Respondents were split on the tool's accuracy in capturing children's skills, with 2 selecting *somewhat* well, 2 selecting *very* well, and 4 selecting *a little* well. Respondents noted that they'd like to have more time to observe children and/or to observe children over time, for it to reflect their full language abilities.

Preschool Home Language Observation Tool (7)

- **Time**: Respondents had mixed views. Some thought the tool took 1-15 minutes (4 respondents), while others thought 16-30 minutes (2) or 31-45 minutes (1).
- **Ease-of-use**: Respondents rated it extremely (5) or somewhat (2) easy to use.
- **How it can be used by the center**: Respondents thought the tool would help them self-assess the child's comfort in the center, as well as help them identify needed resources and encourage peer relationships that can support home language development.

- **Accuracy at capturing children's English language skills**: Respondents were split on the tool's accuracy in capturing children's skills, with 3 selecting *somewhat* well, 3 selecting *very* well, and 1 selecting *a little* well. Respondents noted that they'd like to have more questions and time to truly capture the child's full language ability.

Reflections on Supporting Providers

We asked Dr. Lindsay Meeker, content specialist, and Dr. Gudelia López, project manager, to reflect on (1) How feedback data on the PD and tools was used during revisions, (2) What sorts of capacity/readiness were needed for the CBOs to engage fully in this work and what challenges should be addressed to scale this work, and (3) Lessons learned from this work about the promise and barriers to adequately identifying and serving multilingual learners in early childhood.

(1) How feedback data on the PD and tools was used during revisions

Feedback was helpful to think about how much learning PD participants can take on in one session, leading to changes in how information was presented at subsequent sessions.

> *We started out with lots of resources, and while some people liked that, we realized we really needed an audio input with, like, here's the have-to-haves, here's the nice-to-haves, right? So, here's the key information, and then the next slide would be, like, additional information for those who can handle it.*
>
> -Dr. Meeker

Bringing different perspectives to this work helped them be intentional about revisions, so when Dr. Meeker created something, they met and reviewed the tools and the PD together, making revisions based on their unique lenses. Dr. López's research experience in survey development also helped inform decisions about the length and language used in PD prompts. As Dr. Meeker ran PD sessions, Dr. López paid attention to participants' reactions and engagement, which was also helpful to decide where changes needed to be made. For example, they reorganized content and modules in areas of the PD where participants seem to struggle. Their collaboration was key, as Dr. Meeker shared "if we didn't have that back and forth, it would have been really hard for me as the developer to be able to respond only to the feedback provided by the teachers taking it."

(2) What sorts of capacity/readiness were needed for the CBOs to engage fully in this work and what challenges should be addressed to scale this work

A center's capacity to be involved in multilingual education PD and practice depended on existing staffing and resources. As Dr. Meeker shared, "The programs that had complete support across their buildings and across their staff, that's where you saw change happening." On the other hand, some centers "really wanted to do well, but they are very under-resourced and very understaffed and they're barely making it in every day. So, it's important to understand that the resources these centers had across the continuum are wildly different." Additionally, allocating compensated time for PD participation was key to successful engagement, as Dr. Meeker pointed out that compensation alone was not enough when teachers were not given time to participate in PD and had to do it, for example,

during nap time or on their own time. On that note, centers with a built-in PD structure where teachers regularly engaged in PD seemed to more easily integrate this work in their schedules and operations.

Another important aspect about engagement and capacity brought up by Drs. Meeker and López was leadership participation in the trainings, as well as other center staff (not just the teachers). They noticed a positive difference in engagement and outcomes in centers where the leadership committed to the training, and in how teacher engagement played out at each center when leaders understood the type of work needed from teachers to engage in the PD. As Dr. Meeker explained, "in one particular program, their director did not participate in trainings, and when they had their teachers take the trainings like a webinar, they had them sitting all in one room where they couldn't even use a device. They were just sitting as passive listeners."

Based on the different levels of participation in the different PD modalities offered, Drs. Meeker and López reported having to spend "a lot of time tracking people down to make sure they took the trainings" and even increase their offerings to ensure everyone participated. Thus, for scaling this work, Dr. Meeker emphasized the compliance piece needed to be part of the requirements for programming. Reflecting further on the issues discussed here, Dr. López expressed the importance to emphasize to centers why this work is so important, and that they perceived a higher engagement from centers who seemed to have developed—whether previously or at their PD—an understanding of the importance of multilingual education. Assessing the level of understanding at each center and group of educators attending each PD was one idea to ensure the right information is provided to each session, as well as protecting time for that at the beginning.

An accountability system for centers to allocate the necessary time and money for this type of training was described as a potential helpful strategy for capacity building. A system will also ensure consistency, having a process by which centers receive the appropriate guidelines, monitoring, and support.

> *There was some miscommunication in some centers that I think, maybe we should have made sure was happening. And that's why this needs to be a systems thing, right? I mean, the way that we were trying to work with the centers, we had no authority over what they should do, or how they should do it. We were simply trying to run a research practice partnership with them to both support and learn from them as they were engaging in the learning.*
>
> -Dr. López

Clarity on why this work is important cannot be taken for granted, added Dr. Meeker, emphasizing that this communication piece needs to start with CBO directors and quality managers.

(3) Lessons learned from this work about the promise and barriers to adequately identifying and serving multilingual learners in early childhood

Dr. López, who comes from a background in K-12, shared a note on the importance of the terminology used to center this work and to ensure the needs of children are adequately addressed:

> *The words that we use to describe children who come from a home where English is not the only language spoken, or may not even be spoken at all, where there's another language other than English, I think can get confusing and can sort of mask the need that we have in these young children. So multilingual is a term that we ended up using for the project, but really, we need to talk about children who are multilingual, and children who are English Learners. Those children who do not yet have age-appropriate facility with the English language who need additional supports, and we must provide those initial supports so they can develop English in their ECE programs.*
>
> -Dr. López

After working with the 13 CBOs, which had been intentionally chosen in attempts to reach centers that had some capacity but did not already know everything, it was clear that "we have a lot of capacity to build, and it is because we haven't, as a system, attended to developing that capacity," shared Dr. López. Agreeing, Dr. Meeker added that "There's a large gap between what evidence-based practices should look like for early childhood multilingual learners and what it does look like." While the level of capacity or commitment to this work may have varied from center to center, every participating program had "a wish to do better." Thinking about what participants shared, another takeaway from this work was to remember that centers don't know what they don't know, and that sometimes they will need these types of training in order to know what is missing in the classroom. This was clear in an example about a leader who shared that no one had taught them what they should be looking for, and that, thanks to participating in this project, they now had a clearer vision for where to go from here. Misconceptions and unawareness around multilingualism and multilingual education that prevail in today's early childhood environments need to be addressed and can, as was the case for some of the participating centers, empower and equip educators to support multilingual children.

Despite the challenges described, Dr. López sees this project and moment in time as an opportunity for progress.

> *We already know how to identify children who are multilingual learners and children who are English Learners. We have these systems already in place in our preschools in school districts. We can utilize these practices where possible in early childhood education, doing the same in preschool and continuing to figure out how to do it in birth to 3 programs. And we should, even if it's not done perfectly, right away, it's okay. We'll get better, everyone will get better, but it gives us a chance to really understand what the need is.*

-Dr. López

However, to build on current momentum, some challenges must be addressed. One of the biggest barriers relates to teacher preparation and ensuring that early childhood teachers can access the necessary training to support multilingual children. A specific roadblock for this is the limited funding in early childhood and low salaries for teachers. Policy and guidelines that open pathways and opportunities would be tremendously helpful. An example shared was to approve bachelor's degrees for early childhood in community colleges, a proposal that was not approved by the state of Illinois but that is seen as a potential for change. Integrating bilingual teaching credentials within early childhood programs was another suggestion, which seems to be the case for three universities in the state but not a common opportunity. There is hope in the new IDEC agency opening these types of opportunities and ensuring that funding streams and guidelines are distributed widely, building capacity for early education staff to serve priority populations.

Summary

From this action research process, we learned that providers generally responded favorably to professional learning around multilingualism and tools for assessing children's language use, but centers had different levels of capacity to implement these new approaches. Feedback on the professional learning and tools provided by Latino Policy Forum to the thirteen participating childcare organizations was largely positive. Centers found the information and tools to be useful and usable. However, there was great variety in centers' access of these supports and in the implementation of these supports after use. Some centers clearly had more capacity for this kind of continuous improvement effort than others. Any statewide effort to improve multilingual services must plan for these different levels of capacity and provide additional introductions and support for continuous improvement efforts more broadly.

Conclusion

In general, the Illinois policymakers, providers, educators, and families with whom we engaged were supportive of more intensive practices related to multilingualism in young children. However, efforts to systemically improve these practices must contend with the same problems that plague early childhood as a whole—limited funding, an overburdened and undercompensated workforce, and variation in capacity for continuous improvement. There were also unique challenges reported around providing support to children from families who speak low-incidence languages, while support for Spanish-speaking children was seen as more doable. This may reflect a misconception about quality service to multilingual children *requiring* bilingual teachers, or it may reflect a desire to provide the more idealistic approach to bilingual education that builds both home and English language skills simultaneously. In general, the Illinois early childhood landscape could clearly benefit from more training, guidance, structure, and resources (such as funding, community connections, and/or floating bilingual specialists and/or multilingual staff) related to multilingual children. The Latino Policy Forum has created policy recommendations stemming from this work, which can be used to guide a path forward for policymakers, providers, and educators.

References

Barrow, L., & Markman-Pithers, L. (2016). Supporting young English Learners in the United States. *The Future of Children, 26*(2), 159-183.

Calderón, M., Slavin, R., & Sánchez, M. (2011). Effective instruction for English learners. *The Future of Children*, *21*(1), 103–127.

Castellana, M. (2024). *National scan of screening policies and practices for identifying English Learners in Pre-K.* New America. https://www.newamerica.org/insights/national-scan-of-screening-policies-and-practices-for-identifying-english-learners-in-pre-k/

Castro, D. C., Espinosa, L., & Páez, M. M. (2011). Defining and measuring quality in early childhood practices that promote Dual Language Learners' development and learning. In M. Zaslow, I. Martinez-Beck, K. Tout, & T. Halle (Ed.), *Quality measurement in early childhood settings* (pp. 257–280). Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Castro, D. C., & Pryshker, N. (2019). Early childhood education for bilingual children and the road to multilingualism. In C. Brown & M. B. McMullen (Eds.). *Handbook of Early Childhood Care and Education* (pp. 173-195). Wiley Blackwell Publishing.

City of Chicago. (2024). *New arrivals situational awareness dashboard.* https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/texas-new-arrivals/home/Dashboard.html

Coulombe, M., & Lafferty Márquez, K. (2020). Supporting multilingual students in the early grades. *Edutopia*. https://www.edutopia.org/article/supporting-multilingual-students-early-grades/

de la Torre, M., Freire, S., & Blanchard, A. (2021). *English Learners in Chicago Public Schools: An exploration of the influence of Pre-K and early grade years*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

Dontamsetti, S., Castillo-Lavergne, C. M., & Campbell, V. A. (2026). Bilingual education in the U.S. *Encyclopedia, 6*(1), 4. https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia6010004

Fernando-Smith, L. (2024). Honoring home languages: Strategies to encourage preschoolers' translanguaging practices. *Teaching Young Children, 17*(4). https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/summer2024/honoring-home-languages

Garcia, A. (2025). *Identifying English Learners in Pre-K: State policies, rationale, and practices.* New America. https://www.newamerica.org/insights/identifying-english-learners-in-pre-k-state-policies-rationale-and-practices/

Goldenberg, C., Hicks, J., & Lit, I. (2013). Dual language learners: Effective instruction in early childhood. *American Educator*, *37*(2), 26-29.

Habben, K., & Kim, V. (2025). *A data profile of young dual language learners in Illinois and implications for early childhood programs*. Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-nciip-dll-fact-sheet-il-2025_final.pdf

Head Start. (2020). *Gathering and using language information that families share.* https://headstart.gov/publication/gathering-using-language-information-families-share

Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map. [IECAM]. (2023). *Language: Languages spoken at home*. https://iecam.illinois.edu/browse/data/language-languages-spoken-at-home

Illinois State Board of Education. [ISBE]. (2025a). *English learners in Illinois: SY2023-24 statistical report.* https://www.isbe.net/Documents/English-Learner-Stat-Report-2023-24.pdf

Illinois State Board of Education. [ISBE]. (2025b). *Illinois Report Card*. https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/

Illinois State Board of Education. [ISBE]. (2026). *Serving English Learners in Preschool Programs in Illinois Public School Districts 23 Ill. Adm. Code Part 228. Multilingual/Language Development Department: Frequently Asked Questions*. https://www.isbe.net/documents/preschool_faq.pdf

Kanno, Y., Rios-Aguilar, C. & Bunch, G. C. (2024). English learners? Emergent bilinguals? Multilingual learners?: Goals, contexts, and consequences in labeling students. *TESOL Journal, 15,* e797. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.797

King, T., Meeker, L., Taylor, A., & Oziemkowski, J. (2024). *English Learner identification project report*. Springfield: Illinois State Board of Education and The Center: Resources for Teaching and Learning's Early Childhood Professional Learning project.

Lake, V. E., & Pappamihiel, N. E. (2003). Effective practices and principles to support English language learners in the early childhood classroom. *Childhood Education*, *79*(4), 200-203.

Najarro, I. (2023, March 30). The debate over English Learner terminology, explained. *Education Week*, 1,12,13.

Nemeth, K. (2025). What works for multilingual learners: 7 high-quality preschool practices. *Colorín Colorado*. https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/what-works-multilingual-learners-7-high-quality-preschool-practices

Nnoli, K. (2024). Embracing linguistic diversity to support multilingual learners. *Teaching Young Children, 17*(4). https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/summer2024/embracing-linguistic-diversity

Park, M., Hofstetter, J., & Giang, I. T. N. (2022). *Overlooked but essential: Language access in early childhood programs*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/language-access-early-childhood

Shin, S. J. (2010). Teaching English Language Learners: Recommendations for early childhood educators. *Dimensions of Early Childhood, 38*(2), 13-20.

Vonderlack-Navarro, R., & Garibay-Mulattieri, K. (2020). *Illinois English Learner Handbook*. Latino Policy Forum. https://englishlearnersinil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/illinois-english-learner-handbook.pdf

Wagner, C. J. (2021). Teacher language practices that support multilingual learners: Classroom-based approaches from multilingual early childhood teachers. *TESOL Journal*, *12*(3), e583.

Zepeda, M., Castro, D. C., & Cronin, S. (2011). Preparing early childhood teachers to work with young dual language learners: Preparing early childhood teachers. *Child Development Perspectives*, *5*(1), 10–14.

Zero to Three (2024). *5 ways to support dual language learning in early childhood education programs*. https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/5-ways-to-support-dual-language-learning-in-early-childhood-education-programs/

Zheng, Z. (2025). Teachers' beliefs about multilingualism in early childhood education settings: A scoping review. *Education Sciences*, *15*(7), 849.