



Where are Multilingual Learners With Disabilities Most Likely to Thrive?



Multilingual learners with disabilities experience better educational outcomes in districts that enroll plenty of other multilingual learners.

That's one of the main conclusions of a [new analysis](#) of California's multilingual learners with disabilities. Written by NEPC Fellow [Alfredo Artiles](#) and [João M. Souto-Maior](#), both of Stanford University, the report uses data to describe the current status of California's 177,000 multilingual learners with disabilities. These students comprise 3% of the state's total public school population, 17.5% of its multilingual learner population, and 21% of its special education students.

Along with Texas, California enrolls the nation's largest population of multilingual learners. Although the report focuses on a single state, its findings should apply nationally.

The study identifies several key differences between multilingual learners with and without disabilities and between students with disabilities who are and are not multilingual learners. These populations also differ

in important ways from California students who fall into neither category. Consider in particular the following six differences:

- Relative to students with disabilities who are not multilingual learners, multilingual learners with disabilities are less likely to be separated into classrooms and schools that are restricted to students with disabilities.
- Compared to multilingual learners without disabilities, multilingual learners with disabilities are more likely to be suspended. However, they are less likely to be suspended than students with disabilities who are not in the process of learning English.
- Relative to multilingual learners without disabilities, multilingual learners with disabilities are less likely to be reclassified as fluent in English by Grade 10 (84% vs. 69%).
- Multilingual learners with disabilities graduate high school with regular diplomas at roughly the same rate (75%) as students with disabilities who are not multilingual learners (76%). Multilingual learners without disabilities are slightly more likely than their peers with disabilities to graduate with a regular diploma (82%). All three groups lag behind students who fall into neither category (91%).
- Males are overrepresented among students with disabilities who are multilingual learners and among those who are not. By contrast, males and females are represented at roughly equal rates among multilingual learners without disabilities.
- Multilingual learners with disabilities enroll in college right out of high school at roughly the same rate (44%) as multilingual learners without disabilities (43%) and students with disabilities who are not also multilingual learners (46%). All three groups are much less likely to enroll in college than students who fall into neither category (66%).

In addition to describing the population of multilingual learners with disabilities, Artiles and Souto-Maior explore whether county-level characteristics such as student demographics and teacher experience levels are associated with higher or lower rates of high school graduation and

college enrollment for dually identified students. They find that both rates are higher in communities that enroll higher rates of multilingual learners with disabilities than in those that enroll a smaller share of students that fit this description. Specifically, each additional percentage point of enrollment of dual-classified students is associated with a roughly four percentage point likelihood in the odds of completing high school.

“The magnitude of this compositional effect is substantial,” the researchers write, adding:

While the mechanisms behind the compositional relationship remain unclear and cannot be determined from these data, the pattern is consistent with several possibilities: counties with higher concentrations of dually identified students may develop more appropriate infrastructure, specialized personnel, and targeted supports; students may benefit from peer networks that provide academic and social resources, reducing the isolation that can accompany dual identification in settings where few students share similar needs; or other unmeasured county characteristics may drive both higher dual identification rates and better outcomes.

Artiles’s and Souto-Maior’s report was released in May as part of a large project, [*Getting Down to Facts III*](#), which produced 55 technical reports and 22 research briefs reviewing California’s public education system. The influential project is the subject of May’s [NEPC Talks Education podcast interview](#) of Stanford Professor Susanna Loeb, who led the initiative. Multiple NEPC Fellows contributed to this effort. [Other studies have been highlighted](#) in past newsletters, and additional work will be described in future installments.

NEPC Resources on Multilingual and/or Multicultural Education

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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