



What Will Happen to Bilingual Education After the Elections?



Between now and November 5th, we are running a series of 10 Q&As with NEPC Fellows about education issues relevant to the 2024 federal election. The goal of the series is to inform readers about the education-related stances of the nation's two major political parties, drawing upon the Republican and Democratic parties' national platforms and on Project 2025. Q&A participants were selected on the basis of their research expertise on the topics they have been asked to address. In addition to describing the parties' positions, each expert is providing background information, with a focus on summarizing research findings.

Today's Q&A is with Patricia Núñez, a doctoral student working with NEPC Fellow [Angela Valenzuela](#) in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Texas at Austin, addresses bilingual education. Núñez has worked as a bilingual educator in Texas for more than 28 years. She has also worked at the national level in U.S. public schools, supporting the development and implementation of dual language programs. Her research highlights bilingual communities and students and the revitalization of community and heritage learning practices. She holds a master's degree in Bilingual/Bicultural Education from the University of Texas at Austin.

1. *From a historical perspective, why has the federal government been engaged in this issue?*

The [history of bilingual education dates back to the 1800s](#). In 1839, the state of Ohio

began offering German-English instruction at parents' request. Between the 1840s and 1870s, Louisiana passed a law allowing French-English instruction in schools, and the first German-only kindergarten was established in St. Louis schools. But even before then, in 1838, the Cherokee community established an educational system in which their students exceeded a 90% literacy rate using bilingual materials. Despite these successes, in 1864, [Congress prohibited](#) the teaching of Indigenous languages within communities and Indigenous schools. Accordingly, federal involvement in this area began as an effort to undermine bilingual policies.

The segregation of Mexican American children in California ended in 1946. Twenty-two years later, President Johnson signed the Bilingual Act designating funding for developing bilingual programs for students' acquisition and strengthening of English while maintaining their home language. Over the years, federal funding has been instrumental in shaping bilingual education through the underwriting of programming, resulting in a variety of program approaches. Immersion and transitional programs are taught primarily in English. Maintenance bilingual programs, called dual language programs, seek to develop bilingualism (speaking and listening) and biliteracy (reading and writing) in both program languages. These programs rely on both federal and state funding.

Yet the federal government's involvement in bilingual education became controversial due to a complex interplay of sociopolitical and cultural factors. [English-only movements took hold in the 1980s and 1990s](#), spurring districts nationwide to adopt English as the sole language for school instruction. The 2002 reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was known as No Child Left Behind, made it [challenging](#) to implement robust and faithful bilingual programs. In 2015, ESEA's most recent reauthorization, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act, provided additional flexibility in how states and districts supported emergent bilinguals. However, the lack of federal guidance has resulted in programming varying considerably by state and local district.

2. *From a research perspective, how has federal government involvement been helpful or harmful in preparing multilingual learners to succeed in college, career, and life?*

The federal government's role in preparing emergent bilinguals for college, careers, and life has been evolving, with positive and negative impacts.

Positive Impacts

- Federal initiatives lifted the importance of multilingualism and spurred a national conversation on language education.
- Federal funding and support through Title III funding provided resources and essential services for multilingual learners that states might not have funded absent federal mandates.
- The federal government facilitated the research and research dissemination on language instruction. Overall, this research body suggests that bilingual education improves academic outcomes, leading to higher levels of English proficiency.

- Federal assistance helped tie bilingual education to research on culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, which make school an inclusive and supportive space.
- Federal programs provided resources for educational institutions, communities, and families, and these programs have highlighted multilingualism as an asset as opposed to a problem.

Negative Impacts

- Federal laws' focus on English proficiency marginalizes students' home languages and cultures.
 - Rigid and inflexible policies can hinder the local response to the specific needs of the diverse populations of emergent bilinguals.
 - Federal laws and rules overemphasize accountability tied to English language proficiency without considering the actual trajectory of language acquisition.
 - The current assessments have limitations due to their monolingual nature. Literacy skills in bilingual students are often misjudged due to assessment design.
 - Data collection is misaligned with bilingual programs, since federal and district accountability measures do not set goals for multilingualism.
 - Insufficient funding leads to a lack of coherence and continuity, making it difficult for districts at the local level to implement effective practices.
3. *Based on your own research expertise, how (if at all) should the federal role on this issue shift? What is the justification for those recommendations?*

Research-based recommendations for improving policy related to multilingual learners include:

- Develop a definition of an English language learner that is stable across federal and state lines. The federal government should require stable and accurate data reporting and classification.
- Use federal funding and influence to encourage states to start bilingual educational support early—through meaningful bilingual early childhood programs that continue into the middle school.
- Support and expand educational programs that have demonstrated success in providing a challenging, high-quality education and that build on the strengths children and youth bring to school, including their home languages and cultures.
- Use federal funding and influence to encourage states to require that all school leaders, teachers, and other school personnel be well versed in issues of bilingualism and understand the importance of the home language and culture.
- Reinstate Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provided federal funding for bilingual teacher preparation programs and bilingual program development.

4. *Please briefly explain how Project 2025, the RNC national platform, and the DNC national platform address this issue.*

Project 2025 does not directly address bilingual education. However, it does state that federal education policy should be limited. The plan calls for the elimination of the federal Department of Education and the “[reduction of] the number of programs managed by OESE”, the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. This would include Title 1 funding for low-income school districts, which would be shifted to the Department of Health and Human Services, specifically the Administration for Children and Families. This department has little experience with educational programming for multilingual learners. Eventually, all ESEA funding responsibilities would move to the states. While some states might choose to fund bilingual educations, others might not. Like Project 2025, the Republican National Committee (RNC) platform does not directly address bilingual education programming.

The Democratic National platform states that its goal is to “provide every student with a pathway to multilingual education while ensuring equitable access to a high-quality education for English learners, who’ve historically been underserved.”

5. *What is your response to how this issue is addressed by Project 2025, the RNC national platform, and the DNC national platform, based on your knowledge of the research in this area?*

The elimination of the Department of Education proposed by Project 2025 would be detrimental to the implementation of various programs in schools. The Department of Education serves as a resource to policymakers and school leaders. Local districts and states look to the Department of Education for guidance based on recent, evidence-based research when it comes to effective instructional strategies. An elimination of federal mandates for bilingual programming would lead to inequities and possibly (depending on the state) the elimination of effective bilingual programming and its academic benefits. It is possible that, in some areas, transferring control to the state and local level could support bilingual programming by allowing states to respond to local contexts. However, without federal guidance or accountability, states could also adopt approaches that impede bilingual education.

The DNC platform’s statement of support for bilingual programming suggests that the federal government would continue to provide guidance and professional development to states and districts, which helps create a common vocabulary and improve school officials’ understanding of bilingual education programming.

Prior newsletters in this series:

[*What Role Should the Federal Government Play in Education Policy?*](#)

[*Help or Harmful? The Federal Role in Supporting Students with Disabilities in Schools*](#)

[*Protections Against Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination in Schools:*](#)

[The Federal Role](#)

[Federally Funded School Vouchers: Contrasting Party Views](#)

[Testing and Accountability: The Federal Role](#)

[Early Childhood Education and the 2024 Elections](#)

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