



Dual Language Learners

A National Demographic and Policy Profile

By Maki Park, Anna O'Toole, and Caitlin Katsiaficas

Since 2000, the young Dual Language Learner (DLL) population in the United States has grown by 24 percent. DLLs, defined as children ages 8 and under with at least one parent who speaks a language other than English at home, now make up nearly one-third of all young children in the United States and more than 20 percent of the young child population in 24 states and the District of Columbia. Across the United States, DLLs are less likely than their peers to enroll in high-quality early childhood programs, even though they stand to benefit disproportionately from such services. Ensuring these young learners have an equal opportunity to get their academic careers off to a good start requires strategic policies that support access to high-quality programs for DLLs and their families.

This fact sheet outlines the key sociodemographic characteristics of the DLL population in the United States and explores the range of state-level policies that shape their access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs. The data it presents are based on Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) data pooled over the 2011–15 period and on surveys of state ECEC agencies conducted by MPI researchers in April 2017. The fact sheet also provides information on English Learner (EL)¹ and non-EL academic outcomes nationwide at the fourth-grade level as a means of understanding lags in achievement DLLs experience later in their academic trajectories that may be due in part to inadequate or ineffective ECEC services as well as other risk factors described in this sociodemographic analysis. The final section provides an overview of major state ECEC policies and initiatives that support DLLs.

This national profile of the DLL population is part of a series that also includes 30 state-level fact sheets, which examine these sociodemographic characteristics and policy indicators in the states with the most DLLs.² Together, these national and state profiles aim to provide stakeholders with a basic understanding of the characteristics of the substantial DLL population across the United States and the level of responsiveness states have shown in meeting their needs.

I. Demographic Overview of DLLs in the United States

DLLs in the United States, who number more than 11 million children, now make up 32 percent of the nation's child young population (ages 0 to 8). The tables in this section provide information about the size of this growing population, their share of all young children in the United States, and key demographic characteristics for both DLLs and their non-DLL peers. Home-language skills and experience with different cultures represent important assets for DLLs' development, and a wealth of research has confirmed the benefits of bilingualism.³ However, DLLs and their families also exhibit characteristics that may impede their access to

Table 1. Key Characteristics of DLLs, Non-DLLs, and their Parents in United States, 2011–15

	Dual Language Learners in the United States		Non-DLL Population in the United States	
	Number	Share (%)	Number	Share (%)
Total young child population (ages 0-8)	11,496,000	100.0	24,766,000	100.0
Age				
0-2	3,732,000	32.5	7,858,000	31.7
3-4	2,665,000	23.2	5,604,000	22.6
5-8	5,098,000	44.4	11,304,000	45.6
Race/Ethnicity				
Hispanic	7,122,000	62.0	2,078,000	8.4
White/other	1,864,000	16.2	16,597,000	67.0
Asian	1,726,000	15.0	592,000	2.4
Black	692,000	6.0	5,136,000	20.7
American Indian	92,000	0.8	364,000	1.5
Income and Poverty				
Below 100% of FPL	3,503,000	30.5	5,549,000	22.4
100-199% of FPL	3,160,000	27.5	5,091,000	20.6
At or above 200% of FPL	4,832,000	42.0	14,127,000	57.0
Parental English Proficiency				
Total parent population	12,755,000	100.0	26,588,000	100.0
LEP	5,230,000	41.0	N/A	N/A
Parental Educational Attainment				
Total parent population (ages 25 and older)	11,812,000	100.0	24,342,000	100.0
Less than high school	3,043,000	25.8	1,445,000	5.9
High school diploma or equivalent	2,663,000	22.5	5,333,000	21.9
Some college	2,674,000	22.6	8,434,000	34.6
Bachelor's degree or higher	3,433,000	29.1	9,130,000	37.5

FPL = Federal poverty level; LEP = Limited English Proficient.

Notes: Poverty level refers to the poverty thresholds used by the Census Bureau to measure the share of the population living in poverty. English proficiency is self-reported. LEP refers to American Community Survey (ACS) respondents who indicated that they speak English less than “very well.”

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2011–15 ACS data.

high-quality ECEC programming. Data in Table 1 show the extent to which several significant risk factors affect DLLs and non-DLLs nationwide. For example, 58 percent of DLLs live in low-income families,⁴ as compared with 43 percent of non-DLLs. And while 26 percent of parents of DLL children have less than a high school education, this rate is considerably lower (6 percent) among the parents of non-DLLs.

Table 2 lists the top five home languages spoken by parents of DLLs in the United States. These data hint at the linguistic diversity within this population, but the full range of languages spoken in DLLs’ homes is even more apparent at state and local levels. Families with speakers of lower-incidence minority languages may face particular difficulties in gaining access to early childhood and other social services, often as a result of capacity challenges that government agencies and local

Table 2. Top Five Home Languages Spoken by Parents of DLLs in the United States, 2011–15

	Spanish	Chinese	Tagalog	Vietnamese	Arabic
Number of DLL parents	7,520,000	418,000	246,000	238,000	238,000
Share of DLL parents (%)	59.0	3.3	1.9	1.9	1.9

Notes: The table excludes parents of DLLs who speak English only. Chinese includes Cantonese, Mandarin, and other Chinese languages.

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2011–15 ACS data.

service providers encounter as linguistic diversity increases.

Extensive research has demonstrated the importance of high-quality early learning opportunities in building a foundation for future success and healthy development. DLLs especially stand to benefit from participation in high-quality pre-K. However, DLLs across the United States are enrolling in pre-K programs at lower rates than their non-DLL peers (see Table 3), which may contribute to lags in kindergarten readiness for this population.

II. Looking Beyond Early Childhood: Achievement Gaps Between ELs and Non-ELs in the United States

As young DLLs enter the K-12 system, their level of school readiness compared to that of their non-DLL peers can contribute to the well-documented discrepancies between the academic outcomes of ELs and non-ELs later in elementary school. Because children are expected to be relatively competent in written language by

the time they reach third grade, academic success beyond this point is highly dependent on foundational language skills developed prior to this period, underscoring the critical importance of the early years to future academic success. Fourth grade reading and math scores, taken from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), provide the earliest available indication of cross-state student performance and are widely used as a national report card to demonstrate how students are performing academically across the United States. Nationwide, ELs have substantially lower scores in both reading and math compared with their native peers in fourth grade (see Figure 1). This disparity in outcomes points to the importance of early childhood interventions that seek to place all young children on equal footing academically.

III. Early Childhood Education and Care Policies Affecting DLLs in the United States

Although DLLs now comprise a substantial proportion of the young child population in most states, policy responsiveness to this population remains uneven. This section highlights trends

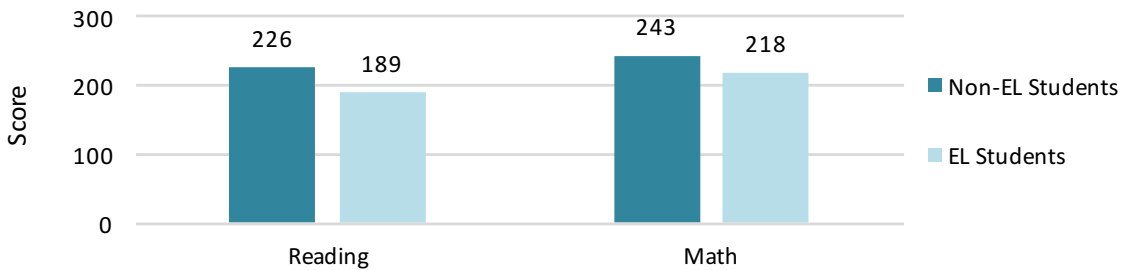
Table 3. Pre-K Enrollment of Children (ages 3 to 4) in the United States, by DLL Status, 2011–15

	DLL Number	DLL Share (%)	Non-DLL Number	Non-DLL Share (%)
Total population	2,552,000	100.0	5,496,000	100.0
Enrolled in pre-K	1,060,000	41.5	2,630,000	47.9

Note: These numbers exclude children ages 3 to 4 who were enrolled in kindergarten.

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2011–15 ACS data.

Figure 1. Fourth Grade Reading and Math NAEP Scores, by EL Status, 2015



NAEP = National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, “NAEP Data Explorer—Math and Reading Assessments, 2015,” accessed March 8, 2017, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>.

in the presence or absence of key system- and program-level policies among the 30 states studied as part of this fact sheet series.

A. System-Level Policies

The scope and maturity of ECEC systems vary considerably across the United States. While many state systems consist of several disparate programs working in relative isolation from one another, a few system-level policies have the potential to broadly promote more equitable ECEC services and outcomes for DLLs and their families.

1. Bilingual Education Policies

The growth of the DLL population has led to the adoption of mandatory bilingual education laws in several states, including Alaska, California, Connecticut, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington State, and Wisconsin.⁵ Statutes in most of these states instruct schools or districts that enroll a minimum number of DLLs to design and implement a bilingual education program. These programs provide home-language instruction and development, which has been proven to support English language acquisition and improve future academic outcomes.⁶ Notably, while K-12 is the primary focus of such laws in

most states, Illinois⁷ and Texas⁸ explicitly extend this mandate to include state-funded pre-K programs.

In contrast, Arizona, Massachusetts, and Tennessee have all enacted laws prohibiting bilingual education in all public schools, though policy-makers in Massachusetts are debating the reversal of its law. Similarly, South Carolina requires that state pre-K classes, specifically, be conducted in English.⁹ California, once among the ranks of English-only states, overturned a law prohibiting bilingual instruction in 2016, giving public schools more flexibility in the design and implementation of such programs. Between these two camps sits a third group of states that neither explicitly require nor prohibit bilingual instruction.

2. Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) represent another important means by which some states recognize DLLs’ unique learning strengths and needs and ensure ECEC systems adequately tend to them. Increasingly, states are using QRIS to create a shared definition of what quality programming should entail and to support program improvement. The indicators included in state QRIS, and the evaluation and improvement systems built up around them, can influence whether ECEC systems value program

elements that address linguistic and cultural diversity.¹⁰

Among the states that have designed their QRIS to support DLLs, the Illinois QRIS (ExceleRate Illinois) requires all ECEC centers to meet linguistic and cultural competency standards in all three rating levels. Centers can also apply for the Award of Excellence in Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Practice, which requires programs to explicitly promote both English and home-language development, hire culturally and linguistically diverse staff, and hold family conferences in parents' home languages.¹¹ Similarly, the Massachusetts QRIS encourages early learning programs to engage culturally and linguistically diverse families, including by offering opportunities to volunteer and share their cultural traditions and by connecting families with training and support programs (e.g., family literacy or English language courses). And in Oregon, the state Early Learning Council has established a set of goals and recommendations for involving racially and culturally diverse communities, including Limited English Proficient (LEP) and immigrant stakeholders, in both QRIS design and implementation.¹²

While states such as Illinois, Massachusetts, and Oregon have strategically adopted QRIS criteria and processes that are responsive to DLL needs, most states have few if any provisions that do so. "Quality" is often defined based on research into what serves the U.S. child population well overall, rather than what could best benefit different subgroups. And among states that do have diversity-related QRIS standards, some only apply these once a program has attained a high rating, thus characterizing such program elements as secondary rather than core practices.¹³

3. Kindergarten Entry or Readiness Assessments

Accurate assessment of child development is critical both to improving instruction for individual learners as well as for understanding and raising ECEC program quality overall. Several states now require schools to complete

a Kindergarten Entry or Readiness Assessment (KEA/KRA) for each child upon entry into kindergarten to determine their level of development and to identify supports needed. As with assessments in K-12, administration guidelines often accompany KEAs/KRAs and occasionally outline strategies for observing and assessing DLLs in order to increase the validity of assessment outcomes. DLLs benefit from assessment guidelines that take their varied levels of home-language and English proficiency into account, and that seek to gauge their development rather than their ability to demonstrate it in English. In the absence of guidelines that are mindful of these and other factors that shape the developmental trajectories of DLLs, KEAs and KRAs are likely to rely on measures that insufficiently or inaccurately measure DLLs' development. When this happens, it may prevent administrators from identifying and making needed program improvements and could lead schools to make misguided recommendations for DLLs regarding potential developmental delays.

Some states—such as New Jersey, Oregon, and Texas—have developed assessments entirely in Spanish. In others, including Illinois and Washington State, KEAs/KRAs include areas in which students' development in other languages can be assessed and require that the assessor speak the home language of the student. Similarly, assessment administration procedures in Ohio and South Carolina aim to mitigate the impact of low levels of English proficiency on assessment outcomes through "Level-the-Field Supports" for DLLs.¹⁴ Among these optional supports, assessors are encouraged to accept responses to questions in multiple forms, such as allowing a child to gesture in response instead of requiring a verbal answer; adjusted assessment rubrics can thus provide a way to more accurately measure DLLs' developmental levels despite limited English language proficiency.

In many other states, KEA/KRA guidelines for DLLs are less developed and often exempt children with limited English proficiency from language-related indicators, which could lead to inaccurate results for these children.

B. Child Care and Development Fund Usage

The federal government allocates Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) resources to states to improve access to high-quality child-care services among low-income families by offering child-care subsidies. Overall, only 13 percent of federally eligible children receive child-care assistance through CCDF nationwide.¹⁵ Participation among most racial and ethnic minority groups is disproportionately low. For example, 8 percent of eligible Hispanic children are served by these funds—a disparity that points to the importance of program strategies that explicitly aim to expand access for culturally and linguistically diverse families.¹⁶ CCDF requires states to develop and submit plans outlining their intended use of grant resources, and each state’s plan is required to include information on supports for LEP families and child-care providers. In their plans, the majority of states have committed to offering basic services for LEP families in other languages (e.g., applications and informational materials). Several states also utilize a language-line service, which allows for immediate translation via a third-party, contracted provider.

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Beyond seeking to reach LEP families, states can also use CCDF funds to offer linguistic and cultural support and targeted technical assistance for LEP child-care providers. By doing so, states can increase their supply of culturally and linguistically responsive care and bolster diversity in the child-care workforce. Many states encourage LEP providers to participate in education, training, and professional development activities. In California, for example, the Department of Education contracts with community colleges to offer English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to ECEC workers. And Oklahoma’s Child Care

Resource and Referral Association organizes an annual Hispanic Childcare Conference, conducted entirely in Spanish, to promote the professional development of the state’s LEP workforce. Other states, such as Minnesota, have developed strategies for using their CCDF resources to recruit and support culturally and linguistically diverse professionals, including by providing relevant and accessible professional development and training opportunities to LEP providers and workers.

In addition, some states have opted to provide targeted support to migrant and/or agricultural workers, many of whom are LEP, due to the significant barriers these families face in accessing high-quality care for their children. For example, Michigan offers specialized assistance for migrant-worker families and has eliminated income eligibility requirements for these families, removing a key barrier that once hindered access. Similarly, the Florida Office of Early Learning partners with a local nonprofit to provide services to DLLs whose parents work in the agriculture industry.¹⁷

C. Home Visiting

The federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program supports grants to all 50 states and the District of Columbia, offering crucial assistance to low-income families with young children through regular home visits and access to health, social service, and child development professionals free of cost. These supports can be particularly effective for immigrant and LEP parents of young children who are relatively isolated and are not accessing other public services. Collecting state-level data regarding the participation of different subgroups in the MIECHV program is critical to understanding potential gaps in services and barriers to access for minority populations, including young DLLs and their families. Data collection at the state level makes it possible to identify disparities in participation and to improve programs in order to promote equitable access.

Most states collect data on participants' race/ethnicity and home language, but Hawaii is among the only states to collect information on the LEP status of parents. The collection of these data can allow state home visiting programs to identify underserved populations and improve program design for DLLs' families through a better understanding of program reach and effectiveness. At the national level, however, neither race and ethnicity nor home language or parental LEP status are currently considered priority areas when deciding how to target home visiting services.¹⁸

Even without complete data, some states utilize strategies to serve DLLs and the children of immigrants through their home visiting programs. Most provide translation and interpretation services when necessary, as in Maryland, where state law requires the Department of Health to offer translation, interpretation, and visual communication services in 25 languages. And some states have adopted a wide range of additional measures to ensure immigrant and LEP populations are equitably served. North Carolina, for example, requires its programs to report demographic and cultural characteristics of participants, identify staff training needs when it comes to serving unique populations, analyze ways to make the service delivery system culturally sensitive, and facilitate orientation for staff on the role of culture in parenting.

D. Pre-K and Early Learning

Forty-three states and the District of Columbia have publicly funded preschool programs. Research has consistently shown that DLLs stand to benefit disproportionately from attending high-quality preschool. As such, it is important to understand how state policies might support or impede DLLs' access to high-quality pre-K. The policies highlighted in Table 4 can help states reach this objective, yet relatively few states have implemented them. Notably, because the majority of states do not track the enrollment of DLLs in their state pre-K program, this population is rendered invisible in most program improvement efforts and policy conversations.

In addition to, or sometimes in the absence of, the policy approaches listed in Table 4, some states have found other ways to support DLLs in their pre-K programs. For example, Massachusetts conducted a focus group discussions as part of its Supporting Young Dual Language Learners' School Readiness initiative to communicate with families the important role they can play in language development and school readiness.¹⁹ In partnership with WIDA Early Years, Massachusetts also adopted the Early English Language Development (E-ELD) Standards to provide a system-wide framework for supporting, instructing, and assessing young DLLs (ages 2.5 to 5.5).²⁰ Similarly, the 2017 re-

Table 4. State Early Learning Policies that Support DLLs, 2015

The state:	Number of States* that follow this policy
Uses home language as eligibility criteria for publicly funded pre-K	12 out of 51
Tracks enrollment of DLLs in state pre-K program	22 out of 51
Can report DLL enrollment by home language	14 out of 51
Provides recruitment and enrollment materials in non-English languages	17 out of 51
Requires DLLs in state pre-K program to be assessed in their home language	6 out of 51
Requires pre-K teachers to have qualifications related to DLLs	5 out of 51
Allocates extra state pre-K program resources to serve DLLs	9 out of 51

* Data in this column include the District of Columbia.

Source: W. Steven Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2015: State Preschool Yearbook* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2016), http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Yearbook_2015_rev1.pdf.

vision of the South Carolina early learning standards includes a section on DLLs, consisting of a tailored developmental continuum and strategies for teachers working with DLLs and their families. South Carolina is also in the process of revising its State Core Competencies for early childhood teachers, caregivers, and program administrators to include specific competencies for those teaching young DLLs. And in Illinois, all teachers, including pre-K teachers, are now required to hold an ESL endorsement if instructing between one and 19 DLLs or a bilingual endorsement if serving 20 or more DLLs. Since the adoption of this law in 2015, many teacher preparation programs in the state have made obtaining the endorsements a requirement to graduate.

By taking a strength-based rather than deficit-based approach to serving DLLs, reforms such as this one have the potential to positively impact DLL outcomes in a range of ways.

The scope and reach of the policies states have introduced to support DLLs vary considerably, from targeted adjustments to specific program aspects to more systemic changes statewide. The Minnesota *Learning English for Academic Proficiency and Success Act* (LEAPS Act), passed in 2014, revised a number of state education statutes and frames multilingualism as an asset

for Minnesota students.²¹ The law mandates a variety of supports, such as the administration of reading assessments in DLLs' native languages, and requires districts to report DLLs' progress in their native languages as part of school performance and accountability reports. The LEAPS Act also instructs districts to provide teachers with professional development opportunities related to teaching DLLs and requires teachers to demonstrate the knowledge and skills needed to instruct DLLs to obtain licensure.²² By taking a strength-based rather than deficit-based approach to serving DLLs, reforms such as this one have the potential to positively impact DLL outcomes in a range of ways at a system-wide and societal level.

IV. Conclusion

Dual Language Learners now comprise a substantial proportion of the young child population, both nationwide and in most states. While a number of states have implemented initiatives designed to promote equitable access to high-quality early learning opportunities for DLLs, such policies are far from widespread and often do not have a system-wide impact. As the DLL population grows, early childhood policies that recognize and address DLLs' learning strengths and needs are crucial to ensuring that all young children are able to build a strong foundation for future success.

Endnotes

- 1 English Learners (ELs) are defined as elementary and secondary students whose first language is not English and who have not yet attained English proficiency.
- 2 For the complete series, see Maki Park, Anna O’Toole, and Caitlin Katsiaficas, *Dual Language Learners: A National Demographic and Policy Profile* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2017), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/dual-language-learners-national-demographic-and-policy-profile.
- 3 See, for example, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.17226/24677>.
- 4 Families with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level are considered low-income.
- 5 New America, “Bilingual Mandates,” accessed July 27, 2017, www.newamerica.org/education-policy/policy-explainers/early-ed-prek-12/dual-language-learners/legislation/state-legislation/bilingual-mandates/.
- 6 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Promoting Educational Success*.
- 7 State of Illinois, “Transitional Bilingual Education,” *Illinois Administrative Code* 23(A)(I)(f)(228), July 23, 2015, www.isbe.net/Documents/228ARK.pdf.
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- 10 Julie Sugarman and Maki Park, *Quality for Whom? Supporting Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Children and Workers in Early Childhood Quality Rating and Improvement Systems* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2017), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/supporting-culturally-and-linguistically-diverse-children-and-workers.
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- 13 Sugarman and Park, *Quality for Whom?*
- 14 Ohio Department of Education, *Ohio Ready for Kindergarten Assessments: Guidelines on Allowable Supports for the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment* (Columbus, OH: Ohio Department of Education, 2015), http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Early-Learning/Guidance-About-Kindergarten/Ohios-Kindergarten-Readiness-Assessment/Kindergarten-Readiness-Assessment-for-Teachers/OH_KRA-Guideline-final.pdf.aspx.
- 15 Stephanie Schmit and Christina Walker, *Disparate Access: Head Start and CCDBG Data by Race and Ethnicity* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2016), www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/Disparate-Access.pdf.
- 16 Ibid.

- 17 Redlands Christian Migrant Association, “Our Programs,” accessed July 27, 2017, www.rcma.org/programs.html.
- 18 James Bell Associates and the Urban Institute, *2017 Home Visiting Yearbook* (Arlington, VA: National Home Visiting Resources Center, 2017), www.nhvrc.org/wp-content/uploads/NHVRC_Yearbook_2017_Final.pdf.
- 19 WIDA, “EEC Key Initiative: Supporting Young Dual Language Learners’ School Readiness—Institute Series about the WIDA Early Language Development Standards Framework,” accessed August 14, 2017, www.wida.us/membership/states/MA/Mass%20Fall%202015%20PD_new4.pdf.
- 20 WIDA, “Early Language Development Standards,” accessed August 14, 2017, www.wida.us/standards/EarlyYears.aspx.
- 21 Minnesota Department of Education, “LEAPs Act,” accessed July 22, 2017, <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/el/leap/>.
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Acknowledgments

The authors thank the Alliance for Early Success for its support of this work. They also acknowledge the contributions of their MPI colleagues, including Lauren Shaw, Michelle Mittelstadt, Jeanne Batalova, Jie Zong, and Margie McHugh.

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Design: April Siruno, MPI
Layout: Liz Heimann

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Suggested citation: Park, Maki, Anna O'Toole, and Caitlin Katsiaficas. 2017. *Dual Language Learners: A National Demographic and Policy Profile*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

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