



# Emergent bilinguals are the future

## How do we support educators to ensure their success?

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past 15 years, the US population has changed dramatically. The number of emergent bilinguals, also known as English language learners (ELLs) or English learners (ELs), has nearly doubled—to about 5 million, roughly 10% of all students in our public schools. This number will only increase (NEA, 2019; Quintero & Hansen, 2017).

Emergent bilinguals are an extremely diverse group of students—representing many ages, languages, cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities—enrolled in school districts throughout the country (USDOE, 2015). Despite an overemphasis on newcomers, the majority of emergent bilinguals were born in the US (Zong & Batalova, 2015).

By 2025, emergent bilinguals are projected to account for 25% of the total K–12 enrollment in the US (NEA, 2019). Combined, these numbers tell a story: emergent bilinguals are our future.

The question must be asked, then: How prepared are our schools and educators for this future? Today's teachers, who may or may not be trained to support bilingualism, face numerous challenges, from lack of training and support to limited state and government policies (Quintero & Hansen, 2017).

According to one survey, while more than 55% of teachers have at least one emergent bilingual student, less than 33% have had even a “modest level” of training to support them. And a 2014 study revealed that only 24% of teaching programs train elementary teacher candidates to support emergent bilinguals (Quintero & Hansen, 2017).

While training programs vary, so too do state policies. Many states don't require English learning teachers or general classroom teachers to have structured English immersion certification or endorsement. And while the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires schools to report emergent bilingual progress, no new federal policies have prioritized teacher training (Quintero & Hansen, 2017).

In this white paper, we explore the growing need for better training, policies, and resources dedicated to emergent bilingual education; the emergent bilingual achievement gap and its societal consequences; and, last, we discuss the types of tools and additional support needed to help educators and administrators more effectively teach and engage this important student population.

### Emergent bilinguals born in the US

85% grades pre-K–5

62% grades 6–12

### Why we use the term “emergent bilinguals”

The language we use matters, shaping our thinking and behaviors. Terms like “long-term English learners” or “newcomers” emphasize what students don't know, as opposed to what they do. This is often referred to as the deficit model.

The phrase emergent bilinguals, on the other hand, celebrates the asset of bilingualism that these students bring to our schools and our society—reflecting, instead, the asset model (USDOE, 2015). Bilingual students have demonstrated advantages in awareness of language, communication skills, memory, decision-making, and analytical skills. In addition to being bilingual, they are bicultural, which involves developing empathy through an awareness of and respect for other cultures. To honor these benefits and transform our educational approaches, the right terminology is essential (Lexia, 2020).

## GROWING NEED, EMERGING CHALLENGES

Emergent bilinguals are one of the fastest-growing segments among school-age children in the US, projected to account for 25% of the total K–12 enrollment by 2025 (NEA, 2019).

Despite these growing numbers, as a group, emergent bilinguals statistically underperform non-emergent-bilinguals. During the 2015–16 academic year, only 67% of emergent bilinguals, versus 85% of non-emergent bilinguals, graduated from high school on time (USDOE, 2015). Emergent bilinguals also represent less than 3% of students in gifted and talented education nationwide and are underrepresented in gifted programs in almost every state (Sparks & Harwin, 2017).

This gap is concerning, with a number of individual, district-wide, and society-wide consequences. For starters, the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) is used by all states as part of their school accountability systems under ESSA (Sugarman, 2019). This means that schools with lower ACGRs may be labeled in need of improvement, negatively affecting their reputation, funding, and more.

At the individual level, those without a high school diploma experience lower earnings and higher unemployment rates than those with a diploma. As a result, this gap can have lasting impacts on minority and immigrant-background communities, from reduced family earnings to poorer health and increased incarceration rates (Sparks & Harwin, 2017; Sugarman, 2019; Haneda & Wells, 2012).

Finally, lower graduation rates for emergent bilinguals represent a loss to society as a whole, because these students “are unable to make the contribution of which they are potentially capable to the nation’s competitiveness in the global economy” (Haneda & Wells, 2012).



**1 out of 4** public school students will be an emergent bilingual by 2025



## WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO THE EMERGENT BILINGUAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP?

Many factors contribute to the gap in graduation rates between emergent bilinguals and non-emergent-bilinguals, from larger, complex societal issues to personal family concerns. All of these factors play a role. For the purposes of this white paper, below is a brief overview of some of the contributing factors exclusive to districts and schools.

### **Different profiles aren't accounted for**

Emergent bilinguals have diverse academic and linguistic needs as well as different levels of proficiency that a one-size-fits-all pedagogic approach to English language learning may not effectively address (Ferlazzo, 2015; Haneda & Wells, 2012; Sparks & Harwin, 2017).

Beyond educational backgrounds, emergent bilinguals also differ in language and cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and how they or their family came to be in the US (even US-born students may experience stress related to their parents' immigration history or issues of cultural adjustment) (Sugarman, 2019).

### **Classrooms aren't culturally responsive**

Cultural responsiveness, or the ability to learn from and relate respectfully with people of your own culture and others, is an essential component of today's classroom. As part of a culturally responsive education, teachers recognize emergent bilinguals' valuable cultural experiences and find ways to incorporate them in classroom activities.

Connecting the curriculum to students' interests, knowledge, and aspirations encourages them to contribute to classroom discussion on the basis of their own experiences. In fact, research shows that connecting lessons to emergent bilinguals' home lives and other experiences can lead to meaningful and engaging literate activity. When a classroom isn't culturally responsive, emergent bilinguals can feel marginalized, leading to disengagement and lack of motivation (Haneda & Wells, 2012; Manyak, 2007; Ferlazzo, 2017).

### **Academic language isn't focused on or fully developed**

When it comes to English language learning, it's important for teachers to recognize the difference between conversational/social English and academic English. Academic English is curriculum-based, aligned with educational standards, and covers the areas of social studies, math, language arts, and science (Colorin Colorado, 2020).

While emergent bilinguals' conversational English may start developing within a few months, it may take much longer for them to fully develop academic English skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This means that while many emergent bilinguals will be able to speak social English, they may lack the academic language needed for school success (Colorin Colorado, 2020).

### **Not enough bilingual educators**

Another contributing factor to the gap in emergent bilingual graduate rates is the shortage of bilingual educators in schools across the country.

Most states struggle to recruit and retain bilingual educators, and the numbers are striking. During the 2015–16 academic year, there were only 78,000 teachers dedicated to addressing the needs of 4.6 million emergent bilinguals (NCES, 2017).

### **K–12 teachers lack adequate support**

Last but certainly not least, teachers may lack the tools, funding, and/or support needed to most effectively address the needs of their emergent bilingual students (Sugarman, 2019).

In 2000, a national survey reported that 41% of public school teachers taught emergent bilinguals. Yet less than a third of those teachers had even a modest level of training to support these students. A more recent survey, in 2012, revealed that 55% of teachers have at least one emergent bilingual student in their classrooms, but there is no evidence that shows teacher training is improving (Quintero & Hansen, 2017).

## WHAT DO EDUCATORS NEED TO HELP CLOSE THE GAP?

Below is an overview of the types of support, systems, and tools that educators and administrators need to help them more effectively teach and engage emergent bilinguals.

### Teachers

- **Resources for adopting an asset-model approach.** An asset-based approach counters more popular deficit-oriented teaching methods and helps ensure students see themselves and their communities reflected and valued in the content they're taught in school (New America, 2019).
- **Tools for creating a more culturally responsive learning environment.** To create a more culturally responsive classroom, teachers must consider instructional techniques, materials, their relationships with students, the classroom climate, and their own self-awareness. Providing opportunities for students to think critically about inequities in their own or their classmates' experience is key, too. Teachers can also consider the more recent introduction of culturally sustaining pedagogy, an approach that helps students develop a positive cultural identity while learning academic subjects like math, reading, problem-solving, and civics (Paris & Alim Samy, 2014).
- **A better way to gauge each student's abilities and skills.** Measuring emergent bilinguals' progress can be challenging, because each assessment represents just a moment in time. Additionally, students' abilities show up differently on assessments—whether they are measuring English language proficiency or content knowledge—as their English language skills develop (Williams, 2015).
- **An easier way to update parents and administrators on progress.** Frequent progress updates can help teachers build strong relationships with the parents of emergent bilinguals, which can have pedagogical benefits for students (Ferlazzo, 2016). But without a way to measure ongoing progress, this can prove challenging. Similarly, teachers are tasked with providing ongoing progress reports to administrators—again, often without a consistent, ongoing method of measurement with which to work.

### A Checklist for Culturally Responsive Teaching

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reflect on one's cultural lens                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Communicate in linguistically and culturally responsive ways |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Recognize and redress bias in the system                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Collaborate with families and the local community            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Draw on students' culture to shape curriculum and instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> Promote respect for student differences                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bring real-world issues into the classroom                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Model high expectations for all students                     |

Source: New America.

## Principals/Superintendents

- **A consistent, effective approach to language learning for better student outcomes.** Administrators need reliable ways to provide their teachers with ongoing support and resources to better serve their emergent bilingual students.
- **An easier way to track student progress and teacher success.** Administrators must find ways to ensure teacher success and student progress for better learning outcomes. Not only will this support emergent bilingual students, but it will also help to improve school and district ratings.
- **A better way to enhance ESSA ratings.** Administrators who invest in their emergent bilingual students not only improve learning outcomes, but also raise their ACGRs under ESSA. This can mean more funding, which can in turn be used to further support specific student needs.

### Assessing a language learning program

Adaptive blended learning technology has proven to be an effective way to support emergent bilinguals by combining English language and academic learning. The following questions can help guide educators and administrators as they assess programs.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Does it support educational equity?   | <input type="checkbox"/> Does it provide ongoing actionable data and reports?                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Is it culturally responsive for better student engagement?  | <input type="checkbox"/> Does it come from a trusted name in education and language learning? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Does it blend English language learning with academic content areas, like science, math, history, etc.? | <input type="checkbox"/> Is it easy to implement and use?                                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Does it offer continuing progress monitoring or assessment?   | <input type="checkbox"/> Does it combine online and offline instruction?                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can it be individualized or personalized for each student?  | <input type="checkbox"/> Does it offer corrective feedback?                                   |

## CONCLUSION

In the US, emergent bilinguals are changing the educational landscape for the better, bringing different talents, skills, perspectives, and cultures to our classrooms. Yet, despite the growing numbers of these students educators may not have the training, tools, and/or resources they need to ensure emergent bilinguals' academic success.

Educational technology has been shown to offer numerous benefits to emergent bilinguals. Finding the right technology—a program that combines English language and academic learning in a way that's culturally responsive and targeted to individual students—is imperative. However, while technology is essential, ultimately it is our educators who are our greatest asset. As our future, emergent bilinguals must be set up for success. But so too must our teachers.

Learn more about language learning programs and solutions from Rosetta Stone at [rosettastone.com/k12](https://rosettastone.com/k12)

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