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Supporting Dual Language Learners in State-Funded Preschool

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ABOUT NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, conducts and disseminates independent research and analysis to inform early childhood education policy.

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Nationally, one-third of children under the age of 5 are Dual Language Learners (DLL), meaning that they are learning English in addition to another home language. Both the number of DLLs in the U.S. and the number of all children attending state-funded preschool are growing. Research shows that high quality preschool benefits DLLs, and benefits can be increased by specific supports for DLLs' home language development and through engagement with their families.

This report summarizes information from NIEER's *2024 State of Preschool Yearbook* on states' policies regarding supports for DLLs and their families in state-funded preschool programs. We find that states vary widely in their supports for DLLs, and that state policies often do not match research-recommended best practice for DLLs. We highlight exemplar states and look closely at the ten states with the highest percentages of DLLs. We offer recommendations to strengthen state-funded preschool programs' supports for DLLs and their families.



Nationwide, young Dual Language Learners (DLLs) comprise about 33% of the preschool-aged population and represent the fastest growing population of children aged 0-5 (Habben & Kim, 2025). DLLs are children who are learning English in addition to being exposed to at least one other language by their family at home. They may also be referred to as English Language Learners, English Learners, Emergent Multilingual Learners, Multilingual Learners, and/or Emergent Bilinguals. In this brief we will use Dual Language Learners and DLLs. Research has found that DLLs benefit from participation in high-quality preschool programs, often showing larger learning gains compared to their peers (Ansari & Winsler, 2016; Bloom & Weiland, 2015; Johnson et al., 2025; Yazejian et al., 2015). Research also offers insights into policies and practices that support preschool program participation and outcomes specifically for DLLs (Garcia, 2023). This brief explores how states do (and do not) provide supports for young DLLs and their families in state-funded preschool programs.

We use data from the National Institute for Early Education Research's (NIEER) 2024 [State of Preschool](#) survey (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2025) about policies to support DLLs. During the 2023-2024 school year, there were 65¹ state-funded preschool programs in 45 states and Washington, D.C. (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2025). State-funded preschool is defined as programs funded and administered by states that serve primarily 3- and/or 4-year-olds in educationally-focused group learning settings.

The 2024 *State of Preschool* survey included a set of questions about supports for DLLs. These questions focused on key areas including: how many DLLs were enrolled in state-funded pre-K, identifying children as DLLs, state definitions of a DLL, models of bilingual instruction, supporting families, pre-K quality specific to DLL, and teacher qualifications.

¹ Indiana's On My Way Pre-K is similar to a state-funded preschool program but does not meet NIEER's definition of a state-funded pre-K program because of a parent employment/school requirements. However, Indiana is included in the data presented in this report.

Identifying Dual Language Learners in Preschool

A clear, precise definition of a DLL helps to identify and support children who are learning more than one language. The U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued a [policy statement](#) in 2016 that defines DLLs as children “who are learning two (or more) languages at the same time, or learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language. Children who are DLLs come from homes where a language other than English is spoken.” This is the definition used by the national Head Start program. Nationally, Title 20 of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 2015, § 3120 also provides a comprehensive definition of an English learner, see Box 1.

Box 1. Title 20 ESSA Federal Definition of a Dual Language Learner

USC 7801(20): “THE TERM “ENGLISH LEARNER”, WHEN USED WITH RESPECT TO AN INDIVIDUAL, MEANS AN INDIVIDUAL WHO IS AGED 3 THROUGH 21; (B) WHO IS ENROLLED OR PREPARING TO ENROLL IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL OR SECONDARY SCHOOL; (C)(i) WHO WAS NOT BORN IN THE UNITED STATES OR WHOSE NATIVE LANGUAGE IS A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH; (ii)(I) WHO IS A NATIVE AMERICAN OR ALASKA NATIVE, OR A NATIVE RESIDENT OF THE OUTLYING AREAS; AND (II) WHO COMES FROM AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH HAS HAD A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON THE INDIVIDUAL’S LEVEL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY; OR (iii) WHO IS MIGRATORY, WHOSE NATIVE LANGUAGE IS A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH, AND WHO COMES FROM AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH IS DOMINANT; AND (D) WHOSE DIFFICULTIES IN SPEAKING, READING, WRITING, OR UNDERSTANDING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE MAY BE SUFFICIENT TO DENY THE INDIVIDUAL- (i) THE ABILITY TO MEET THE CHALLENGING STATE ACADEMIC STANDARDS; (ii) THE ABILITY TO SUCCESSFULLY ACHIEVE IN CLASSROOMS WHERE THE LANGUAGE WHERE THE LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION IS ENGLISH; OR (iii) THE OPPORTUNITY TO PARTICIPATE FULLY IN SOCIETY.

Despite having two national definitions of a DLL, states vary widely in how they define a DLL in their state-funded preschool programs. Only five programs rely on the federal definition from ESSA and two others used the Head Start definition. Twenty-two programs had no definition at all (See Table 1). In the remaining programs, definitions of a DLL varied, with most including exposure to a language other than English in some capacity. Two programs—Illinois Preschool for All and Massachusetts Chapter 70—stand out because their definitions include both that children are exposed to another language and that children demonstrate lack of English proficiency on

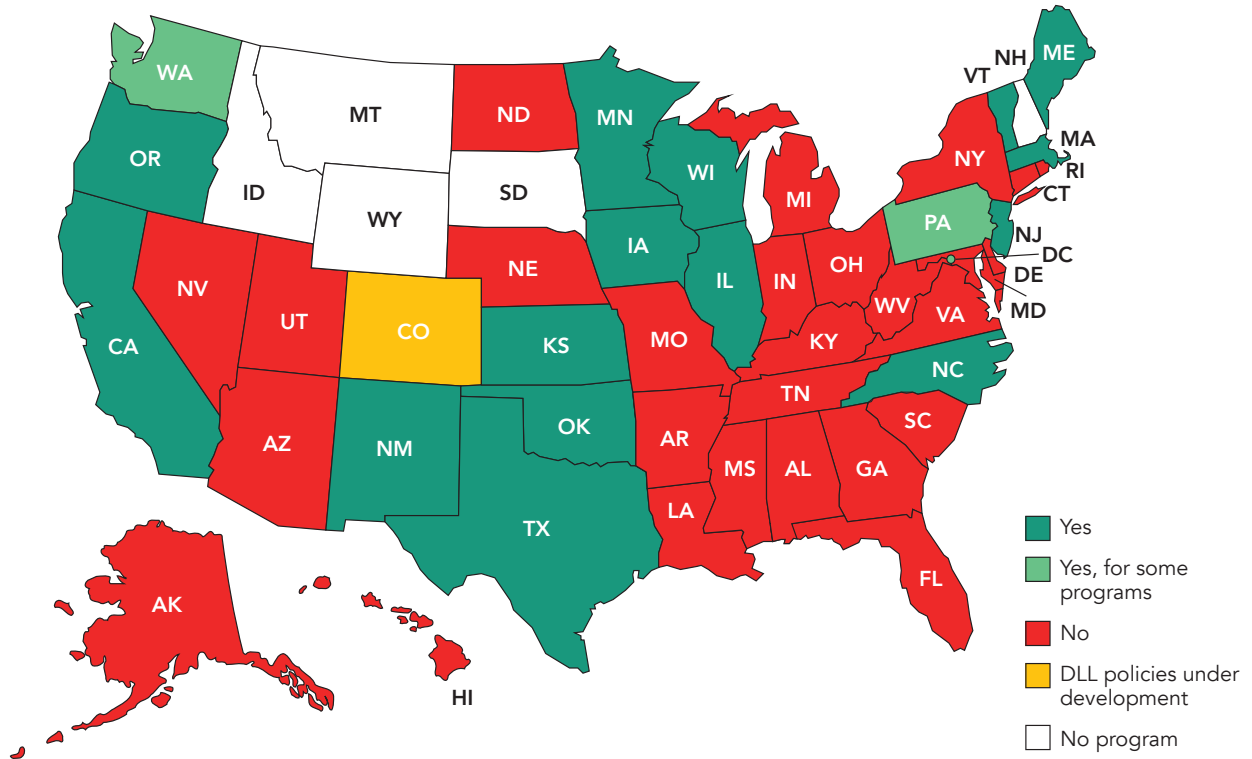
Table 1. State Pre-K Program DLL Definitions

Definitions of DLL	Number of state-funded preschool programs
Uses Head Start definition	2
Uses federal definition	5
Limited English proficient	2
Have a home language other than English	8
Learning more than one language at the same time	16
Has a home language other than English AND does not demonstrate proficiency on a screening	2
No definition	22
Definition in development	1
Determined by locally selected assessments	2
Not reported	5

a screening. Limiting specialized DLL supports to children who are not proficient in English on a screener would leave out many children and families who speak a language other than English, and who might benefit from additional supports in the home language.

Tightly related to defining DLLs in preschool is how state-funded preschool programs identify children as a DLL. Only about one-third of state-funded preschool programs reported that they have a policy for identifying DLLs (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. State has a Policy on Identification of Preschool Dual Language Learners (DLLs)



Enrollment of DLLs in State-Funded Preschool

Although DLL children live in every state, only 36 state-funded preschool programs in 27 states were able to report the number of DLLs in their state-funded preschool program. States that could not report the number of DLLs enrolled in state-funded preschool include states with many DLLs such as Texas, New Jersey, and Nevada. Knowing how many DLL children are enrolled in pre-K and which children are DLLs is critical for designing and funding programs to support DLLs, as well as to ascertain how well such children are accessing state pre-K.

Figure 2 and Table 2 show the percentage of children enrolled in state-funded preschool who are DLLs, as well as the overall percentage of 3- & 4-year-olds who are DLLs by state. In the 27 states that reported enrollment of DLLs in pre-K, on average 23% of children enrolled in pre-K were DLLs, compared to 35% of children in those states, suggesting that DLLs are under-enrolled in preschool. However, this percentage varies greatly across states. Some states with a high percentage of DLLs serve a high percentage of DLLs in their pre-K programs, including California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Oregon, and Washington. Other states with high percentages of DLLs do not enroll a high percentage of DLLs in state pre-K: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, New Mexico, and New York. Texas, New Jersey, and Nevada are states with large DLL populations that could not report the number of DLLs in state-funded pre-K.

Turning to policies that might facilitate enrollment of DLLs in pre-K, 26 state-funded preschool programs include having a non-English home language as an eligibility criteria for pre-K. (Note that nearly two-thirds of the programs that do not include this as an eligibility criteria do not have any eligibility criteria beyond age.) Additionally, 36 pre-K programs have an income criterion for eligibility, which could improve access for DLLs. Fifteen programs that include a Non-English home language as an eligibility criterion also reported the number of DLLs in state pre-K.

Figure 2. Percentage of State Pre-K Enrollment who are DLLs

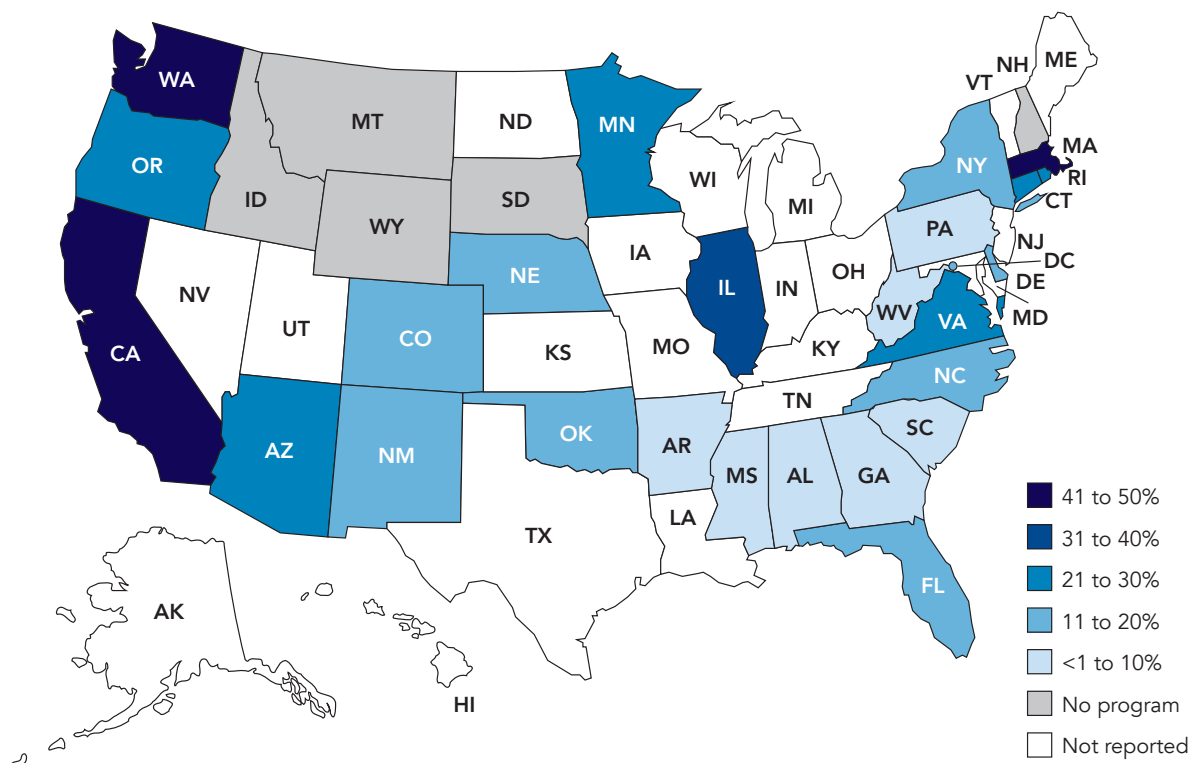


Table 2. DLLs in the State and in State-Funded Preschool

State	Number of DLLs enrolled in state-funded pre-K	% of state pre-K enrollment who are DLLs	% of 3- and 4-year-olds in state who are DLLs	Non-English home language eligibility criteria for pre-K
Alabama	1,089	4%	11%	No criteria beyond age
Alaska	Not reported	Not reported	22%	No criteria beyond age
Arizona	1,463	23%	41%	No
Arkansas	1,446	7%	14%	Yes
California	105,373	42%	59%	No (CSPP); No criteria beyond age (TK)
Colorado	5,388	12%	26%	Yes (for 3 year-olds only)
Connecticut	3,621	29%	36%	Yes (for Smart Start only)
Delaware	251	20%	26%	Yes
District of Columbia	1,573	12%	29%	No criteria beyond age
Florida	25,710	17%	42%	No criteria beyond age
Georgia	5,143	7%	24%	No criteria beyond age
Hawaii	Not reported	Not reported	36%	Yes (for EOEL only)
Idaho	No program	No program	20%	No program
Illinois	26,279	32%	34%	Yes
Indiana	561	7%	16%	No
Iowa	Not reported	Not reported	15%	Yes (for Shared Visions only)
Kansas	Not reported	Not reported	19%	Yes
Kentucky	Not reported	Not reported	12%	No
Louisiana	Not reported	Not reported	12%	Yes (for 8(g) only)
Maine	Not reported	Not reported	8%	No criteria beyond age
Maryland	Not reported	Not reported	33%	Yes
Massachusetts	1,290	44%	41%	No criteria beyond age
Michigan	Not reported	Not reported	15%	Yes
Minnesota	1,903	27%	23%	Yes (for Head Start and SRP)
Mississippi	190	3%	7%	Yes
Missouri	Not reported	Not reported	11%	No
Montana	No program	No program	8%	No program
Nebraska	1,889	14%	19%	No
Nevada	Not reported	Not reported	45%	Yes
New Hampshire	No program	No program	15%	No program
New Jersey	Not reported	Not reported	48%	No criteria beyond age
New Mexico	2,542	16%	40%	No criteria beyond age
New York	28,403	18%	45%	No criteria beyond age
North Carolina	3,800	14%	23%	Yes
North Dakota	Not reported	Not reported	11%	No
Ohio	Not reported	Not reported	14%	No
Oklahoma	6,849	18%	19%	No criteria beyond age
Oregon	3,207	25%	28%	Yes (for OPK only)
Pennsylvania	4,105	9%	21%	Yes (for HSSAP and PKC)
Rhode Island	710	30%	43%	No criteria beyond age
South Carolina	205	6%	13%	Yes
South Dakota	No program	No program	8%	No program
Tennessee	Not reported	Not reported	15%	No
Texas	Not reported	Not reported	48%	Yes
Utah	Not reported	Not reported	23%	Yes
Vermont	Not reported	Not reported	6%	No criteria beyond age
Virginia	5,207	21%	27%	Yes (VPI only)
Washington	8,884	41%	35%	Yes
West Virginia	55	0.4%	6%	No criteria beyond age
Wisconsin	Not reported	Not reported	16%	No criteria beyond age
Wyoming	No program	No program	10%	No program
U.S. TOTAL	247,136	23%	33%	

Policies to Support DLLs in State-Funded Preschool



Fifty-eight programs (85%) reported having at least one policy in place to support DLLs (see Table 3). However, 19 programs required only one, including states like Arizona and Florida which also have some of the largest numbers of DLLs. Six programs (Illinois, Minnesota Head Start, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon OPK, and Texas) had seven or more of the ten policies. This list includes three states where at least 40% of children in the state are DLLs: New Jersey, New Mexico, and Texas.

Ten preschool programs require monitoring focused on the quality of instruction provided to DLLs at the state and/or program level. These monitoring practices ensure quality education is provided to DLLs and help to identify areas of needed budgetary support and staff professional development. Twelve preschool programs require approved written plans for supporting DLLs, including California TK, New Jersey, and New Mexico. State-level requirements for approved written plans at the local level signal expectations for programs to deliver specialized supports and can also inform policymakers about opportunities to improve DLL policies. Twenty-seven programs reported having specific policies to regulate services for DLLs, which provide structure and guidance for local school districts, where decision makers may not have the background or pedagogical knowledge to develop and implement strong policies to support DLLs. Only five programs (Illinois, Minnesota Head Start and VPK/SRP, New Jersey, and New Mexico) required a systematic approach to ensuring DLLs are placed in classrooms with other children with the same home language, which can reduce isolation for children and families.

Twenty programs require *screening* preschoolers in their home language if there is a valid and reliable screening method available in their home language. Separately, twenty-one programs require *assessing* children in their home language if there is a valid and reliable assessment in their home language. Most preschools programs that required assessments or screenings in a child's home language required both.

Table 3. Policies to Support Dual Language Learners in State-Funded Preschool

State/Program	Has a policy for identifying DLLs	Specific policies to regulate services for DLLs	Approved written plan for supporting DLLs is required	Extra/additional funding allocated for serving DLLs	Bilingual instruction is permitted	Monitoring focused on the quality of instruction for DLLs	DLLs screened in their home language	DLLs assessed in their home language	DLLs placed in classes with other children with same home language	Bilingual staff required when a specified number/% of DLLs are in a class	Total policy supports for preschool DLLs
Alabama	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	2
Alaska Pre-Elementary	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	1
Alaska Early Ed Program Grants	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	4
Alaska ADM Pre-K	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	4
Arizona	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	1
Arkansas	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	2
California CSPP	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	5
California TK	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	5
Colorado	Policies related to DLLs are forthcoming				Yes	Yes (program level)	Yes	Yes	No	No	4
Connecticut CDCC	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	1
Connecticut SR	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	1
Connecticut Smart Start	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	1
Delaware	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	2
District of Columbia	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes (program level)	No	No	No	No	4
Florida	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	1
Georgia	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	1
Hawaii EOEL	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	1
Hawaii SPCSP	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	1
Illinois	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes (state level)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9
Indiana	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	1
Iowa Shared Visions	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	2
Iowa SWVPP	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	2
Kansas	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (program level)	No	No	No	No	6
Kentucky	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
Louisiana 8(g)	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
Louisiana LA 4	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
Louisiana NSECD	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
Maine	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes (state level)	No	No	No	No	4
Maryland	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	0
Massachusetts CPPI	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	4
Massachusetts Chapter 70	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes (program level)	No	No	No	No	5
Michigan	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	0
Minnesota HdSt	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes (program level)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	8
Minnesota VPK/SRP	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	5

Table 3. Policies to Support Dual Language Learners in State-Funded Preschool (continued)

State/Program	Has a policy for identifying DLLs	Specific policies to regulate services for DLLs	Approved written plan for supporting DLLs is required	Extra/additional funding allocated for serving DLLs	Bilingual instruction is permitted	Monitoring focused on the quality of instruction for DLLs	DLLs screened in their home language	DLLs assessed in their home language	DLLs placed in classes with other children with same home language	Bilingual staff required when a specified number/% of DLLs are in a class	Total policy supports for preschool DLLs
Mississippi ELC	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	0
Mississippi SIP	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	0
Missouri FF	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	0
Missouri QPK	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	0
Nebraska	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	3
Nevada	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	2
New Jersey	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes (program & state level)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	8
New Mexico	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	7
New York	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	2
North Carolina	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	3
North Dakota	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	0
Ohio	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes (program & state level)	No	No	No	No	3
Oklahoma	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	5
Oregon OPK	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes (program level)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	8
Oregon Preschool Promise	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	4
Pennsylvania RTL	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	6
Pennsylvania HSSAP	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	1
Pennsylvania K4 & SBPK	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	6
Pennsylvania PKC	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	1
Rhode Island	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	2
South Carolina	No	No	Yes (public); No (First Steps)	No	Yes (public); No (First Steps)	No	No	No	No	No	2
Tennessee	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	1
Texas	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	7
Utah	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	1
Vermont	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	4
Virginia VPI	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	2
Virginia Mixed Delivery	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	2
Washington ECEAP	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	5
Washington TK	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	5
West Virginia	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	1
Wisconsin	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	4
U.S. TOTAL	24	27	12	16	47	10	20	21	5	4	
Guam	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	0

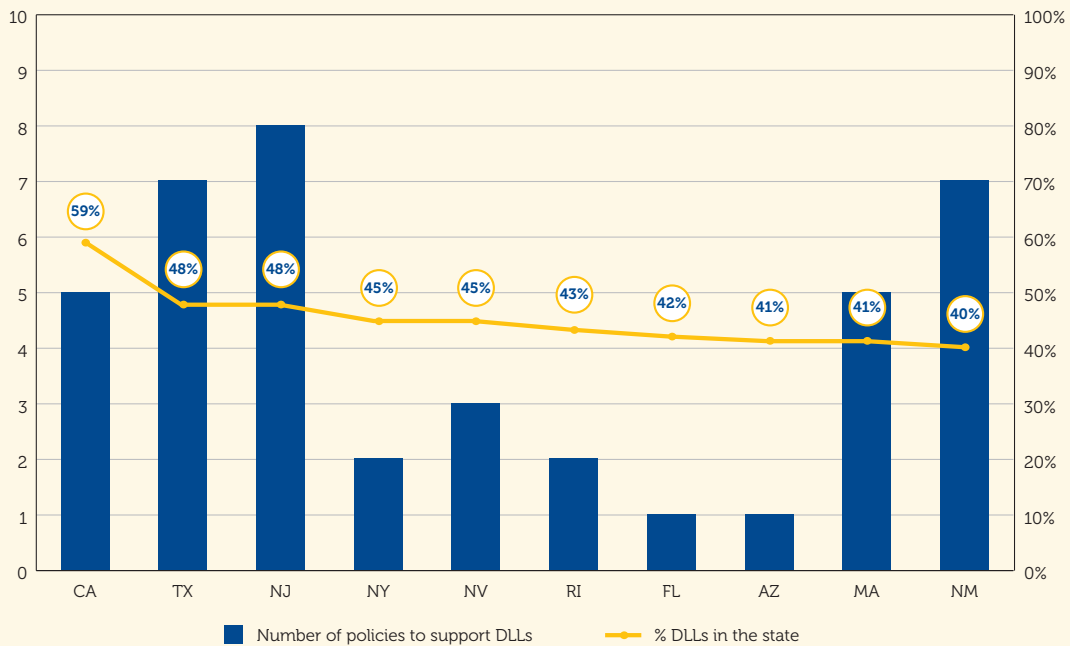
Box 2. States with a High Percentage of DLLs

THERE ARE TEN STATES IN WHICH DLLS COMPRISE 40% OR MORE OF CHILDREN AGES 0 TO 5 YEARS IN THE STATE. THESE STATES VARY WIDELY IN HOW THEY SUPPORT PRESCHOOL DLLS: SOME REPORT HAVING ONLY ONE OF TEN SUPPORTS FOR DLLS (FLORIDA AND ARIZONA) WHILE OTHERS REPORT SEVEN (TEXAS AND NEW MEXICO) OR EIGHT (NEW JERSEY). FIGURE 3 SHOWS THE NUMBER OF POLICIES EACH OF THESE STATES HAS IN PLACE AND THE PERCENTAGE OF YOUNG CHILDREN WHO ARE DLLS.

TEXAS ENROLLS ALMOST A QUARTER OF A MILLION CHILDREN IN STATE PRESCHOOL, MANY OF WHOM ARE LIKELY DLLS (SINCE NEARLY HALF OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN TEXAS SPEAK A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH). THE STATE PROVIDES IMPORTANT SUPPORTS FOR THEIR DLLS INCLUDING EXTRA FUNDING FOR PROGRAMS THAT SERVE DLLS, ASSESSMENTS AND SCREENINGS IN THE HOME LANGUAGE, AND REQUIRING BILINGUAL STAFF WHEN THERE IS A DESIGNATED THRESHOLD OF DLLS IN THE CLASS. CALIFORNIA'S TK PROGRAM, IS ONE OF THE LARGEST PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS IN THE COUNTRY (AND GROWING), AND REQUIRES WRITTEN PROGRAM PLANS FOR SERVING DLLS, PROVIDES EXTRA FUNDING FOR SERVING DLLS, MONITORS QUALITY OF DLL SUPPORTS, AND MANDATES SPECIALIZED TRAINING FOR TEACHERS WORKING WITH DLLS.

SEVERAL OF THE STATES WITH A HIGH PERCENTAGE OF DLLS EITHER HAVE OR ARE WORKING TOWARDS UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL WHICH, WHEN FULLY IMPLEMENTED, WOULD PROVIDE PRESCHOOL TO ALL AGE-ELIGIBLE DLLS IN THE STATE. CA HAS UNIVERSAL TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN FOR ALL 4-YEAR-OLDS AND FLORIDA'S VOLUNTARY PREKINDERGARTEN PROGRAM IS AVAILABLE TO ALL 4-YEAR-OLDS. IN NEW JERSEY, PRESCHOOL IS AVAILABLE TO ALL 3- AND 4-YEAR-OLDS IN CERTAIN HIGH-POVERTY DISTRICTS, MANY OF WHICH ALSO HAVE HIGH CONCENTRATIONS OF DLLS. NEW YORK HAS A UNIVERSAL PROGRAM BUT ONLY HAS FUNDING TO REACH ABOUT HALF OF 4-YEAR-OLDS WITH PLANS TO CONTINUE TO EXPAND. NEW MEXICO IS RAPIDLY WORKING TOWARDS UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL FOR 3- AND 4-YEAR-OLDS.

Figure 3. Ten High Percentage DLL States: Number of DLL Policies & Percentage of DLLs



Models of Bilingual Instruction in State-Funded Preschool

Forty-eight preschool programs permit bilingual instruction. Though many of the programs that do not permit bilingual instruction are in states with lower percentages of DLLs, a few programs in states where more than one-quarter of children are DLLs also do not allow bilingual instruction.

Table 4 shows permitted models of bilingual instruction in each preschool program. Notably, only two programs reported that any model of bilingual instruction was *required*. Alabama requires that children are pulled out for English Language Instruction (ESL) and Texas requires a summer language program to support DLLs. Dual language immersion classes were the most common model of bilingual instruction, permitted by 38 programs, followed by transitional bilingual programs reported by 34 state-funded preschool programs. Twenty-seven programs reported permitting monolingual non-English classes, 27 programs reported summer language programs to support DLLs, and 22 reported that children were pulled out for ESL. Most programs that allowed bilingual models reported allowing more than one type of bilingual model.



Policies to Support Families of Preschool DLLs

Family engagement in their young child's learning and education has long been an expectation for effective preschool programs (Castro et al., 2015). It is an integral part of many early childhood programs. However, family engagement can be particularly challenging when family members do not speak English, like for families of DLLs. Table 5 shows preschool policies related to family engagement for families of DLLs. Eleven state preschool programs require all six of the family support policies: Kansas, Maine, Minnesota Head Start, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon Prenatal to Kindergarten (OPK), Oregon Preschool Promise, Pennsylvania HSSAP, and South Carolina. This list includes some states like Nevada, New Jersey, and New Mexico with large percentages of DLLs in the state.

Forty-seven preschool programs had at least one requirement to support families of DLLs. Most commonly, 39 state preschool programs required that programs were required to collect information about language inputs in the home and 27 programs reported that programs were required to use that information. This could include, for example, use of a home language survey about languages spoken at home and sources of and exposure to English at home. Other family engagement supports are related to providing parents with information in their home language, including recruitment and outreach, enrollment information, children's progress, and regular communications. Only one-fifth to one-quarter of preschool programs required each of these, yet these policies are critical to ensuring access and participation among DLLs.

Table 4. Models of Bilingual Instruction in State-Funded Preschool

State/Program	Monolingual non-English classes	Transitional bilingual programs	Dual language immersion classes	Summer language programs to support DLLs	Children are pulled out for English language instruction (ESL)	Other bilingual models of instruction
Alabama		✓			✓	✓
Alaska Pre-Elementary						✓
Alaska Early Ed Program Grants						✓
Alaska ADM Pre-K						✓
Arizona	✓	✓	✓			
California CSPP	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
California TK	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Colorado	✓	✓	✓			
Connecticut CDCC	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Connecticut SR	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Connecticut Smart Start	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
District of Columbia			✓	✓		
Florida	✓	✓	✓			
Georgia				✓		
Hawaii EOEL	✓		✓			✓
Hawaii SPCSP	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Illinois		✓	✓		✓	
Indiana	✓	✓	✓			
Iowa Shared Visions		✓	✓	✓		
Iowa SWVPP		✓	✓	✓		
Kansas	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Maine	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Massachusetts CPPI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Massachusetts Chapter 70		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Minnesota HdSt	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Minnesota VPK/SRP	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Nebraska						✓
Nevada		✓	✓	✓		
New Jersey	✓	✓	✓	✓		
New Mexico	✓	✓	✓		✓	
New York	✓	✓	✓			
North Carolina						✓
Ohio		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Oklahoma		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Oregon OPK	✓		✓	✓		✓
Oregon Preschool Promise	✓	✓	✓			✓
Pennsylvania RTL	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Pennsylvania HSSAP						✓
Pennsylvania K4 & SBPK	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Pennsylvania PKC						✓
South Carolina				✓ (Public only)	✓ (Public only)	✓ (Public only)
Texas		✓	✓	✓		✓
Utah	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Virginia VPI	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Virginia Mixed Delivery	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Washington ECEAP	✓		✓			✓
Washington TK		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Wisconsin						✓
U.S. TOTAL	27	34	38	27	22	25

Table 5. Policies to Support of Families of DLL in State-Funded Preschool

State/Program	Required to collect information on language inputs in the home	Required to use information on language inputs in the home	Required to provide recruitment & outreach information to families in their home language	Required to provide enrollment information to families in their home language	Required to provide information about their child's progress to families in their home language	Required to provide other regular communications to families in their home language	Other policies
Alabama	✓	✓					✓
Alaska Early Ed Program Grants	✓						
Alaska ADM Pre-K	✓						
Arizona				✓			
Arkansas	✓						
California CSPP	✓	✓					✓
California TK	✓	✓					✓
Colorado	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Delaware	✓	✓					
District of Columbia							✓
Georgia	✓						
Hawaii EOEL	✓						✓
Hawaii SPCSP	✓	✓					
Illinois	✓	✓					
Iowa Shared Visions	✓	✓					
Iowa SWVPP	✓	✓					
Kansas	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Louisiana 8(g)				✓			
Louisiana LA 4				✓			
Louisiana NSECD				✓			
Maine	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Maryland	✓						
Massachusetts CPPI							✓
Massachusetts Chapter 70	✓	✓					
Minnesota HdSt	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Minnesota VPK/SRP	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Nevada	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
New Jersey	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
New Mexico	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
New York	✓						
North Carolina							✓
Ohio	✓	✓	✓				✓
Oklahoma	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Oregon OPK	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Oregon Preschool Promise	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pennsylvania RTL	✓						
Pennsylvania HSSAP	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Pennsylvania K4 & SBPK	✓						
Rhode Island	✓	✓	✓	✓			
South Carolina	✓	✓ (public only)	✓ (public only)	✓ (public only)	✓ (public only)	✓ (public only)	
Tennessee							✓
Texas	✓	✓			✓		✓
Virginia VPI	✓						
Virginia Mixed Delivery	✓						
Washington ECEAP	✓				✓		
Washington TK	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
West Virginia	✓	✓		✓		✓	
U.S. TOTAL	39	27	16	20	13	15	14

Qualifications of Staff Working with Preschool DLLs

Qualified teachers are key to providing the high-quality early learning experiences that help prepare young children for kindergarten and beyond (Barnett, 2003; Bogard et al., 2008; Campbell et al., 2002; Gormley, 2008; Gormley et al., 2005; Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015; Reynolds, 1997; Whitebook, 2014). Preschool effectiveness for DLLs can be higher when teaching staff have specific knowledge and skills to support the unique learning and development needs of DLLs (Figueras-Daniel & Li, 2021, Pollard-Durodola et al., 2012; Rojas et al., 2020; Sawyer et al., 2016). Additionally, DLLs benefit more from pre-K when they have at least one teaching staff in the classroom that speaks the same home language (Downer et al., 2016, Markowitz, et al., 2020; Partika, 2023).

Most state-funded preschool programs have few policies around staffing requirements and qualifications related to DLLs. Four preschool programs (Illinois, Nebraska, Oregon OPK, and Texas) require a bilingual staff member in the classroom when there is a minimum number or percentage of DLLs that speak the same non-English language in the classroom (See Table 6). Fourteen preschool programs require lead teachers working with DLLs to have specific qualifications or training. Eight of these programs specifically require a bilingual certification, license, or endorsement for lead teachers, including programs in four states with large DLL populations: California TK, Massachusetts, New York, and Texas.

Only five programs (Kansas, Minnesota Head Start, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Oregon Preschool Promise) require assistant teachers to have training or qualifications related to DLLs and only three programs require this for administrators (Massachusetts Chapter 70, Minnesota Head Start, and New Jersey).

Eight state-funded preschool programs were able to report the percentage of lead and assistant teachers who spoke a language other than English (See Table 6). Percentages ranged from less than five percent in states with small DLL populations to more than 50% in California CSPP and Oregon OPK.



Table 6. Preschool Staff Qualifications Related to Teaching DLLs

State/Program	Bilingual staff required when a specified number/ % of DLLs are in a class	Specific qualifications or training required for working with DLLs and families			Bilingual certification, license, or endorsement required	Percentage of teachers fluent in a language other than English	
		Lead teachers	Assistant teachers	Program administrators		Lead teachers	Assistant teachers
Alabama	No					1%	3%
Alaska Pre-Elementary	No					NA	NA
Alaska Early Ed Program Grants	No					NA	NA
Alaska ADM Pre-K	No					NA	NA
Arizona	No					NA	NA
Arkansas	No					NA	NA
California CSPP	No					52%	66%
California TK	No	Yes			Yes	NA	NA
Colorado	No				Determined locally	NA	NA
Connecticut CDCC	No					29%	38%
Connecticut SR	No					31%	34%
Connecticut Smart Start	No					10%	22%
Delaware	No					NA	NA
District of Columbia	No	Yes (DCPS)			Yes (DCPS)	NA	NA
Florida	No					NA	NA
Georgia	No					NA	NA
Hawaii EOEL	No	Yes			No	NA	NA
Hawaii SPCSP	No					NA	NA
Illinois	Yes	Yes			Yes	NA	NA
Indiana	No					NA	NA
Iowa Shared Visions	No					NA	NA
Iowa SWVPP	No					NA	NA
Kansas	No	Yes	Yes		No	NA	NA
Kentucky	No					NA	NA
Louisiana 8(g)	No					NA	NA
Louisiana LA 4	No					NA	NA
Louisiana NSECD	No					NA	NA
Maine	No					NA	NA
Maryland	No					NA	NA
Massachusetts CPPI	No	Yes (public)			Yes (public)	NA	NA
Massachusetts Chapter 70	No	Yes		Yes	Yes	NA	NA
Michigan	No					NA	NA
Minnesota HdSt	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	NA	NA
Minnesota VPK/SRP	No					NA	NA
Mississippi ELC	No					NA	NA
Mississippi SIP	No					NA	NA
Missouri FF	No					NA	NA

Table 6. Preschool Staff Qualifications Related to Teaching DLLs (continued)

State/Program	Bilingual staff required when a specified number/ % of DLLs are in a class	Specific qualifications or training required for working with DLLs and families			Bilingual certification, license, or endorsement required	Percentage of teachers fluent in a language other than English	
		Lead teachers	Assistant teachers	Program administrators		Lead teachers	Assistant teachers
Missouri QPK	No					NA	NA
Nebraska	Yes					NA	NA
Nevada	No					NA	NA
New Jersey	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	NA	NA
New Mexico	No					NA	NA
New York	No	Yes			Yes	NA	NA
North Carolina	No					NA	NA
North Dakota	No					NA	NA
Ohio	No					NA	NA
Oklahoma	No	Yes	Yes		No	NA	NA
Oregon OPK	Yes					64% (all teaching staff)	
Oregon Preschool Promise	No	Yes	Yes		No	42% (all teaching staff)	
Pennsylvania RTL	No					NA	NA
Pennsylvania HSSAP	No					NA	NA
Pennsylvania K4 & SBPK	No					NA	NA
Pennsylvania PKC	No					NA	NA
Rhode Island	No					NA	NA
South Carolina	No				No	2% (First Steps); Unknown (Public)	
Tennessee	No					NA	NA
Texas	Yes	Yes			Yes	NA	NA
Utah	No					NA	NA
Vermont	No					NA	NA
Virginia VPI	No					NA	NA
Virginia Mixed Delivery	No					8%	7%
Washington ECEAP	No					30%	36%
Washington TK	No					NA	NA
West Virginia	No					NA	NA
Wisconsin	No	Yes			Yes	NA	NA
U.S. TOTAL	4	14	5	3	8		
Guam	No					50%	25%

Pre-K Quality for DLLs

NIEER has a set of ten, research-based, quality standards benchmarks (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2025) against which to assess states' preschool policies. These are policies considered to be the minimum standards needed to implement a quality preschool program (though they do not guarantee quality and must be implemented and funded well). Nationally, only 16% of children are in state-funded preschool programs that met nine or ten benchmarks, while 44% of children were in programs that met five or fewer.

Focusing on only the ten states with the highest percentage of DLLs in the state, four meet five or fewer benchmarks (Arizona, California, Florida, and Texas) and three (New Jersey, New Mexico, and Rhode Island) meet nine or ten benchmarks. There are more than 12 times as many children in the four states meeting five or fewer benchmarks compared to the three states meeting 9 or 10 benchmarks.

Without better data on enrollment of DLLs in state preschool, it is difficult to understand differences in the number of DLLs attending programs meeting 9 or 10 vs. 5 or fewer benchmarks. Using the available (albeit incomplete) data, there are nearly ten times as many DLLs enrolled in programs meeting five or fewer benchmarks compared to those enrolled in programs meeting nine or ten. These data raise concerns about access to and quality of preschool programs attended by DLLs.

Future Policy Directions

This report highlights the state of preschool policies to support DLLs. In most states there is much work to do to improve experiences for DLLs and their families. However, there are also examples of states and programs with strong policies related to supporting DLLs. As states expand preschool access and the DLL population continues to grow, we offer several research-backed policy recommendations:

- Establish a clear definition of a DLL that applies to all preschool programs in the state and is aligned with definitions used in K–12.
- Collect information on children's home language use and exposure. This information should be readily available to state preschool administrators and teachers so they can plan and deliver supports for DLL children.
- Use valid and reliable screenings and assessments in children's home languages. This should include when screening children for a disability. Assessing and screening DLLs in English only may not provide a clear and full picture of their strengths and needs. By understanding children's skills in English and their home language, teachers can better support their development of early language and literacy skills that are linked to stronger reading skills in elementary school.
- DLLs may be underrepresented in state preschool programs. Providing outreach to parents in their home language about the importance of preschool and how to enroll could be crucial to reducing enrollment and attendance barriers for DLLs. Successful outreach may include utilizing networks within DLLs' communities to build awareness and trust of the programs.
- Require administrators overseeing preschool programs with DLLs, in addition to teachers working in the classroom, to have training specific to the needs of DLLs. This could include requiring a bilingual certification or professional development or coaching. Hiring bilingual teaching staff will also support children's development in the classroom and help foster relationships with families. States can also establish pathways and programs for bilingual teachers to obtain credentials and expertise related to English language acquisition in ECE who can then ascend to positions of leadership
- Select instructional materials that include supports for DLLs (e.g., curriculum) and provide support for using those materials, such as professional development or coaching around how to use the curriculum specifically to support DLLs.

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