

# An English-Only Mandate for Head Start Will Harm Children

By Alexandra Figueras-Daniel and Christina Stephens

## Introduction

On August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2026, the Trump administration introduced [proposed rule changes](#) for Head Start that include a new requirement to deliver all instruction in English only. This would shift the program away from current regulations that have required supports for bilingualism since 2016. Yet, the current [Program Performance Standards](#) are the most evidence-based, comprehensive standards for education of young dual language learners (DLLs) in the United States (US).

## Why does this matter?

Nationally, [one-third of children under the age of 5 are DLLs](#), and DLLs account for an even higher percentage of Head Start (36%) and Early Head Start (40%) [enrollment](#). Among DLLs, the largest share speak Spanish at home (56%), with others speaking dozens of other non-English languages at home. Additionally, DLLs have home language experiences that vary substantially in terms of use and exposure to English and non-English languages. For example, many DLLs have at least one parent/caregiver with [limited English proficiency](#), and children's first exposure to English may be upon entry into formal schooling. Programs such as Head Start play a critical role in providing education experiences that facilitate English language acquisition, and they do so most effectively through opportunities that also support home language development.

### Dual Language Learners in Head Start

Defined as [§1305.2]: “a child who is acquiring two or more languages at the same time, or a child who is learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language. The term “DLL” may encompass or overlap substantially with other terms frequently used, such as bilingual, English language learner (ELL), Limited English Proficient (LEP), English learner, and children who speak a Language Other Than English (LOTE).”

Head Start standards for DLLs are based on [evidence](#) that emergent bilingual children learning English have better long-term academic and life outcomes when instruction includes the home language, and when teachers receive targeted training in how to support English acquisition. Although teaching in a child's home language for English acquisition may seem counterintuitive, it can help children grasp concepts they might otherwise miss while still developing English proficiency. This principle parallels the civil rights protections established for multilingual learners in K–12 education, beginning with [Lau v. Nichols](#) (1974). This case established that providing DLL and monolingual children with identical instruction does not constitute equal educational opportunity, when language barriers prevent DLLs from meaningfully accessing that instruction. The use of children's home languages to support instruction ensures children do not lose access to educational content while they are still developing proficiency in English. From this perspective, incorporating non-English instruction for DLL children is not an alternative to teaching English; it is a means of ensuring that children continue to learn while they are acquiring English. Indeed, an increasing number of states are introducing legislation that incorporates [Science of Reading](#) principles which also emphasize the need for home language supports for DLLs.

In addition, dual-language or bilingual instruction does not reduce and can enhance English language acquisition. [Research](#) examining the efficacy of preschool dual-language immersion models finds that these programs do not hinder DLLs' English language acquisition. These models also offer children additional developmental advantages, including maintaining and strengthening the home language and enhancing executive function skills. The process of learning multiple languages strengthens cognitive flexibility, communication skills, and long-term brain health – and these benefits position bilingual individuals to thrive in school and have access to wider career opportunities, which contribute to higher earning potential and economic benefits. Interestingly, the sole study of dual language instruction in the primary grades meeting the US government's What Works Clearinghouse standards provided

strong evidence of [positive effects on English language literacy](#). Not surprisingly, given global markets and international norms of bilingualism and multilingualism, dual language bilingual education (DLBE) programs have also [grown in popularity](#) because they provide all children with opportunities to become bilingual and biliterate.

## What Else is at Risk?

Requiring English-only instruction is not the only proposed rule change with potentially negative consequences for Head Start effectiveness for DLLs. The administration’s proposal would also eliminate other program standards that promote important language and literacy skills for DLLs (See Appendix Table A.1). These include:

1. Identifying community needs, and procedures for recruitment and enrollment that help ensure children have access to the program.
2. Policies for assessment and screening to determine not only what language children are proficient in, but also what they know, and when there are additional special needs to address.
3. Requirements for staffing, teacher qualifications and training to ensure there are adequately prepared staff with knowledge of how to teach children to speak and use a new language.
4. Policies that require programs to translate materials for recruitment and enrollment, and engagement of families by providing important resources for parents/caregivers.
5. [Removal of standards for ratios](#), while problematic for all children, are most detrimental to DLLs as [smaller group sizes are a key support](#) for high-quality practices promoting English acquisition.

Eliminating standards in each of these areas poses risks to participation in Head Start or Head Start effectiveness for DLL children. Effective recruitment, enrollment, family engagement, assessment and screenings, and accessibility to instructional content are essential for the success of Head Start. Ultimately, these challenges threaten not only short-term outcomes for DLLs, but also the nation’s long-term educational and economic well-being, given the growing share of children learning English.

## Conclusion

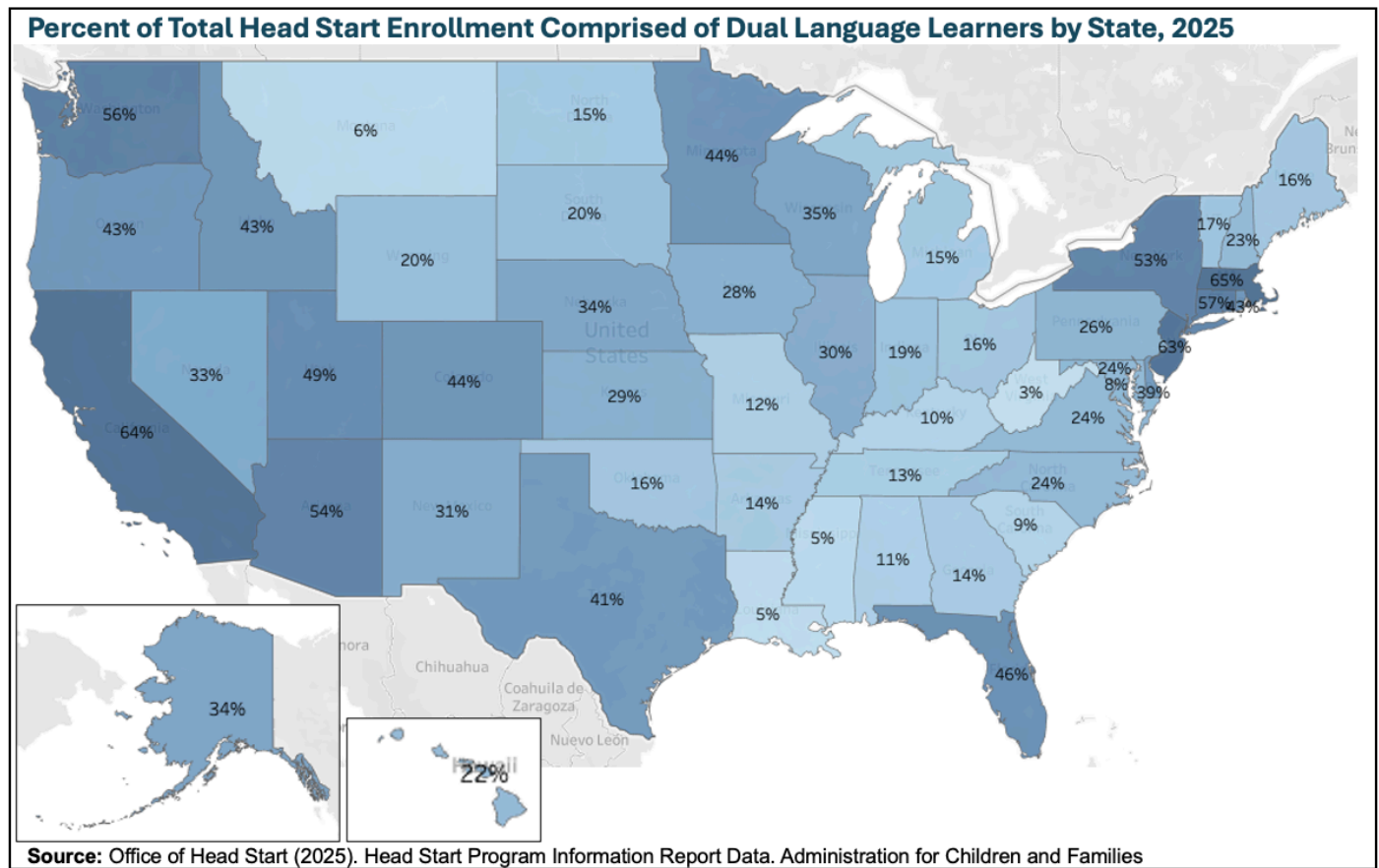
If Head Start mandates English-only instruction and removes other supports for bilingual learners, Head Start will become less effective with a population for which it has produced especially strong results in the past. As shown by research from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), [state-funded preschool](#) programs vary greatly with often weak or few policies in place to ensure DLLs are served with [research-based](#) best practices. Emergent bilingual children served in programs that use the home language for instruction grow in their academic skills and learning outcomes faster and better than those that are served in English-only settings. Further, [research](#) suggests that 4-year-old children with stronger proficiency in their home language are more quickly able to learn English language skills. [The faster](#) children acquire English, the better their outcomes for later academic achievement.

## Appendix

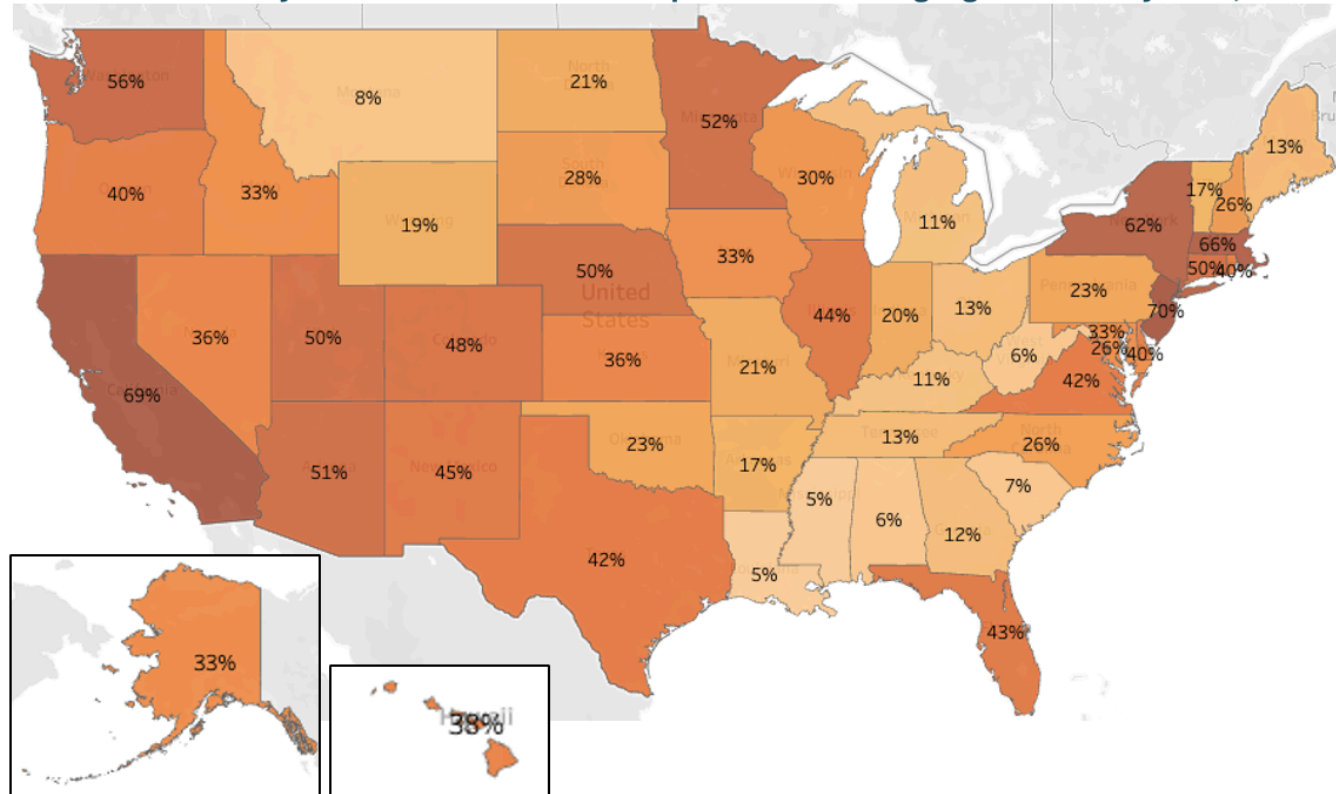
| Table A.1 Program Elements Involving Home Language Supports for DLLs in Head Start Performance Standards |                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Program Element                                                                                          | Section                            | Standard                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Eligibility, Recruitment & Enrollment                                                                    | §1302.11.2                         | A program must consider community needs, including the languages families speak in conducting a community assessment.                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Teaching & the Learning Environment                                                                      | §1302.30,<br>§1302.31,<br>§1302.35 | A program must deliver developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate learning experiences. For DLLs a program must recognize bilingualism and biliteracy as strengths and implement research-based teaching practices that support their development.                                                       |
| Child Screenings & Assessments                                                                           | §1302.33                           | Screenings and assessments must be valid and reliable for the population and purpose for which they will be used, including by being conducted by qualified and trained personnel, and being age, developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate, and appropriate for children with disabilities, as needed. |
| Family Engagement                                                                                        | §1302.50                           | Conduct family engagement services in the family’s preferred language, or through an interpreter, to the extent possible, and ensure families have the opportunity to share personal information in an environment in which they feel safe.                                                                               |
| Parent Activities to Promote Child Learning & Development                                                | §1302.51                           | Offer activities that support parent-child relationships and child development including language, dual language, literacy, and bi-literacy development as appropriate. And for DLLs, provide information, and resources for parents about the benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy.                                   |

|                                                |           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Personnel Policies                             | §1302.90  | Ensure staff and program consultants or contractors are familiar with the ethnic backgrounds and heritages of families in the program and are able to serve and effectively communicate, either directly or through interpretation and translation, with children who are DLLs and to the extent feasible, with families with limited English proficiency. If a majority of children in a class or home-based program speak the same language, at least one class staff member or home visitor must speak such language. |
| Staff Qualifications & Competency Requirements | §1302.91  | Ensure teachers and staff demonstrate competency to provide effective and nurturing teacher-child interactions, plan and implement learning experiences that ensure effective curriculum implementation and use of assessment and promote children's progress, including for DLL children as appropriate.                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Training & Professional Development            | §1302.92  | Research-based approaches to professional development for education staff, that include supports focusing on DLLs as appropriate.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Management System                              | §1302.101 | A program must design and implement program-wide coordinated approaches that ensure:<br>The full and effective participation of children who are DLLs and their families.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Continuous Improvement, & Reporting            | §1302.102 | Ensure child-level assessment data is aggregated and analyzed, including for sub-groups, such as DLLs and children with disabilities.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Definitions                                    | §1305.2   | Dual language learner means a child who is acquiring two or more languages at the same time, or a child who is learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language. The term "dual language learner" may encompass or overlap substantially with other terms frequently used, such as bilingual, English language learner (ELL), Limited English Proficient (LEP), English learner, and children who speak a Language Other Than English (LOTE).                                                 |

**Source:** Office of Head Start. *Head Start Program Performance Standards*. Administration for Children and Families. <https://headstart.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>



## Percent of Total Early Head Start Enrollment Comprised of Dual Language Learners by State, 2025



Source: Office of Head Start (2025). Early Head Start Program Information Report Data. Administration for Children and Families

### 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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