

A photograph showing a male teacher with long hair and a watch, wearing a dark button-down shirt, leaning over a wooden table. He is pointing at a book with a yellow pencil. Several young students, including a girl in the foreground with her hair in a bun, are looking at the book. There are other books and papers on the table, including one titled 'HUBERTA the Hiking...'. The background shows a classroom setting with shelves and other students.

# Building the Supply of Bilingual Teachers in California

Evidence From State Investment Shows Districts Should Look Closer to Home for Bilingual Teacher Candidates

By Martha I Martinez and Corina Sapien, SEAL

## Summary

Policymakers should be helping school districts develop and retain bilingual teacher candidates in their local school systems. Experts say these strategies can help address critical teacher shortages and train educators to staff the state's new embrace of bilingual education.

This brief examines the work of a consortium of California's local education agencies (LEAs) in partnership with Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL), funded by a California Department of Education grant to support LEAs to grow their own bilingual teachers. The Oak Grove/SEAL Bilingual Teacher grant project provided professional development, mentoring, and financial support to existing staff to obtain bilingual teaching authorizations and to be placed in bilingual classrooms. This brief examines the project approach and the broader policy implications for the state.



# Introduction

In 2016, a vast majority of California voters approved Proposition 58, ushering in a new era for the state that embraced bilingualism and biculturalism as the path forward for California’s children and education system. However, a major roadblock remains: the shortage of teachers authorized to teach in bilingual classrooms.

Research shows that California has an imbalance between the linguistic diversity of K-12 students and the number of teachers who have bilingual authorizations to teach in these students’ home languages. For example, Spanish and Vietnamese are the top two home languages of K-12 students from multilingual households, and the student-to-bilingually authorized teacher ratio is 258 students to one teacher for Spanish and 2,121 students to one teacher for Vietnamese.<sup>1</sup> Demand for bilingual teachers in California is only increasing.<sup>2</sup> Sixty percent of children age 5 and under in California are Dual Language Learners.<sup>3</sup> A high-quality bilingual education program—particularly a long-term dual language immersion program—provides the best opportunity for these students to achieve academically as well as reach high levels of biliteracy.<sup>4</sup> The growth in dual language immersion programs in California and elsewhere is also fueled by increasing demand among English-dominant families, many of whom recognize the benefits of bilingualism and seek these programs for their children.<sup>5</sup> State policymakers are further increasing the demand for these programs and bilingual teachers: The Global California 2030 plan calls for a significant increase in dual language immersion programs by 2030 so that most of the students in the state can become proficient in at least two languages.<sup>6</sup> But the state does not have enough bilingual teachers or teacher candidates in the pipeline for these new programs.<sup>7</sup>

In 2017, the California Department of Education awarded eight state grants, including the Oak Grove/SEAL Bilingual Teacher project, to pilot a new Grow Your Own approach. The approach aims to support existing bilingual educators who do not have a bilingual teaching credential to get one and those with a bilingual credential who are not teaching in a bilingual classroom to return to this setting. The results of this investment show that focusing on educators who are already in the system is a key strategy for helping to address the critical bilingual teacher shortage.



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# Background

Nearly 2.6 million California K-12 public school students bring a linguistic asset to school every day, living in homes where a language other than English is spoken.<sup>8</sup> This population is growing.<sup>9</sup>

But the state has only recently embraced an approach to educating its children in a way that celebrates bilingualism. Prior to 2016, a state ballot initiative had placed major restrictions on bilingual education, banning bilingual teaching in most cases. This 1998 state ballot initiative, Proposition 227 (or Prop 227, for short), enacted major restrictions on bilingual education and required English Learners (ELs) to be taught only in English unless their parents signed a waiver.

After the passage of Prop 227, the state saw a massive decline in teachers with a bilingual authorization. Most teacher preparation programs in California that had offered bilingual authorization programs stopped offering them, and today, according to EdSource, just 42 of 80 teacher preparation programs in the state provide teacher candidates the option to become bilingually certified.<sup>10</sup>

Today, the state’s teaching workforce reflects this old system in many ways. As a result of Prop 227, bilingual teacher preparation programs struggled for many years to enroll bilingual teacher candidates for positions that no longer existed.<sup>11</sup> Thus, these programs have not been able to keep up with the state’s policy reversal and newfound support for bilingual teaching. Experts say the state has not made the full investments needed to meet the ambitious biliteracy goals outlined in the Global California 2030 initiative. Launched in 2018, this initiative identified a clear need for 1,000-2,000 new bilingual teachers every year in order to provide more opportunities for students to learn a second or third language at school.<sup>12</sup> But credentialing this many new bilingual teachers requires additional funding. Analysts say the state would need to double the current number of teachers in our bilingual preparation programs to meet these goals.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, experts say school principals are desperate for bilingual teachers. “Every day, my phone rings off the hook,” Cristina Alfaro, the chair of San Diego State University’s Department of Dual Language and English Learner Education, told Education Next. “Principals say, ‘I need a bilingual teacher. I need six teachers. I need someone right now.’”<sup>14</sup>



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California has experienced a decline in the supply of qualified K-12 teachers that began during the recession of 2008.<sup>15</sup> The decline is caused by low salaries—compared with other college-educated professions—as well as challenging working conditions. The pandemic has only exacerbated the decline.<sup>16</sup> The state is now also struggling to retain its existing teacher workforce. Teachers are burned out after teaching through a very difficult few years; there has been an increase in teacher retirements; and many others are considering leaving the profession.<sup>17</sup> A 2021 study by the Learning Policy Institute found that this school year, increases in teacher retirements and resignations as well as a limited supply of candidates—led to unusually high levels of vacancies in some districts in the state.<sup>18</sup> Teacher shortages in California got so severe this year that some districts were forced to shut down classrooms and school buildings because they did not have enough adults to ensure children’s safety.<sup>19</sup>

Amid these severe shortages, bilingual teachers are a key area of need. Research finds that bilingual teaching shortages are becoming more pronounced in the state.<sup>20</sup> Principals report having challenges hiring and retaining bilingual teachers. Research also shows that bilingual teaching shortages disproportionately impact schools serving historically disadvantaged students: ELs, students of color, and students from families with low income.<sup>21</sup> This is especially concerning given that these populations of students were more likely to have lost instruction during the pandemic and need teachers who are well qualified to help them make up for those losses.


A teacher preparation strategy that focuses on developing and retaining teachers within local communities and school districts is an important model.<sup>22</sup> Such Grow Your Own programs can help address teacher shortages and begin to build the pipeline of bilingual teachers that the state desperately needs.

In 2017, the California Legislature established the Bilingual Teacher Professional Development Program (BTPDP), a competitive grant program designed to increase the number of teachers who

obtain bilingual authorizations and to increase the number of teachers with a bilingual authorization who return to teaching in a bilingual setting.<sup>24</sup> The California Department of Education subsequently awarded a BTPDP state grant to eight LEAs to address the bilingual teacher shortage in California, including to Oak Grove School District.

Oak Grove served as the lead funding agency for the Oak Grove/SEAL Bilingual Teacher project, which included a consortium of 12 school districts and one county office of education in partnership with SEAL. In addition to Oak Grove, the other LEAs were: Coalinga-Huron Unified School District, Earlimart School District, Evergreen School District, Golden Plains Unified School District,

Mountain View School District, Newark Unified School District, Redwood City School District, San Lorenzo Unified School District, San Rafael City Schools, Santa Clara County Office of Education, Santa Clara Unified School District, and Williams Unified School District. SEAL provided professional development for grant participants and played a key role in assisting Oak Grove with the overall

 *We are looking for teachers in the wrong places. We're not going to find the number of teachers that we need at universities. We need to find these folks in our communities.*<sup>23</sup>

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project design and management. Although project activities were primarily directed at teachers, other groups were targeted too, including paraprofessionals, students, and administrators. As such, the Oak Grove/SEAL Bilingual Teacher project had several goals related to teachers: (1) to increase the number of fully authorized bilingual teachers in the consortium districts; (2) to increase the number of authorized bilingual teachers who are placed in bilingual settings; and (3) to improve the quality of bilingual instruction, particularly for ELs, through professional development and support for participating teachers. Additional project goals were related to the other groups and the overall project, such as engaging highly qualified paraprofessionals and Seal of Biliteracy students in bilingual teaching career pathways, enlisting the active support of district and school administrators, and moving toward a sustainable and replicable BTPDP.

The Oak Grove/SEAL Bilingual Teacher project targeted two groups of existing Spanish-speaking teachers: those who were already working in the consortium schools and did not have a bilingual authorization and those who had a bilingual authorization and were not yet teaching in a bilingual classroom. For the first group, the project offered teachers multiple ways and resources to meet the specific testing and coursework requirements to obtain a bilingual authorization, including financial assistance to pay for (a) test fees for California’s subject exams for bilingual teachers, (b) university coursework in lieu of one or more required exams, or (c) a combination of these two options. The project also offered coaching to help educators navigate the authorization process and encourage them to complete the various steps. In addition, both groups of teachers were provided professional development to increase their bilingual pedagogical knowledge and skills, particularly around teaching ELs and centering their needs within bilingual programs. District and school administrators, too, were offered professional development related to bilingual program pedagogy and development. They were also provided administrative support to recruit teachers and paraprofessionals to participate in the grant program and, when needed, to support their teachers in navigating the bilingual authorization process. Lastly, paraprofessionals and high school students were offered limited supports to encourage them to enter bilingual teaching career pathways.



# Key Findings

KEY FINDING

#1

**Money and time are key barriers to multilingual teachers and staff getting their bilingual teaching credentials.**

Pathways into bilingual teaching are expensive and time consuming. For educators who are already juggling working in a school system as well as family and other responsibilities—some also working second jobs—finding the time and money to navigate the necessary coursework, fees, exams, and bureaucracy is often too daunting a barrier to overcome.

For paraprofessionals, the process can be lengthy, costly, and can involve getting a bachelor’s degree before receiving a teaching credential and bilingual authorization. The costs associated with these steps are prohibitive for many candidates who already earn much less than K-12 teachers. Almost 70% of paraprofessionals selected for this project withdrew, citing financial reasons.

KEY FINDING

#2

**With support, school districts can help multilingual teachers and staff get credentialed to teach in a bilingual classroom. Financial assistance is key.**

Fifty-three percent of the teachers enrolled in this program received their bilingual authorization as a result. Participants cited the following key components as contributors to their success: professional development for teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators, as well as reimbursements for testing and coursework required for bilingual authorization.

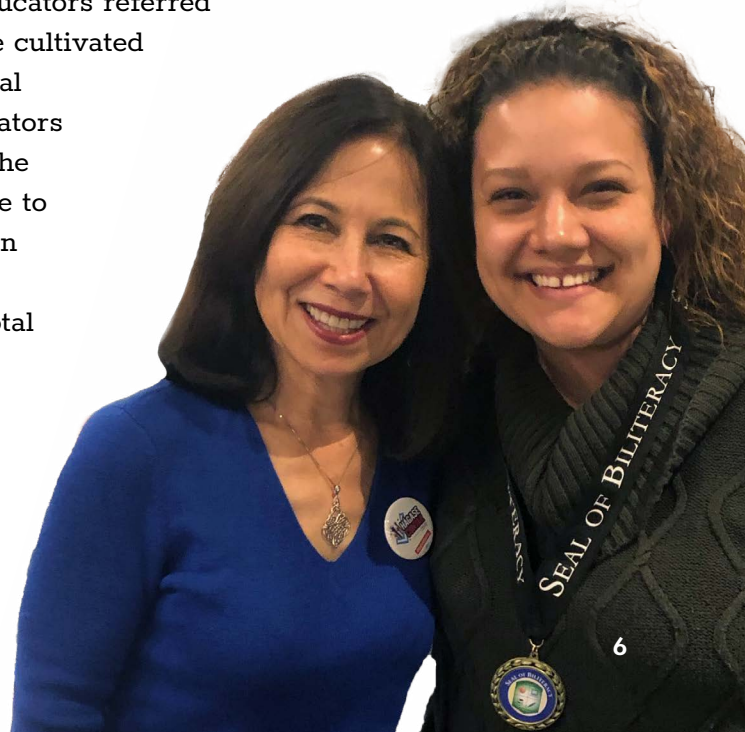
KEY FINDING

#3

**The role of the coach was instrumental in supporting staff through the authorization process. The coach helped educators identify their options and navigate the course or test-taking process. Coaches provided resources and played an important cheerleading role.**

A coach was hired to help support teachers without bilingual authorization to navigate the authorization process about a year after the project started. This coach, Carla Santa Cruz, served all school districts and partners in this project. Educators referred to her as “Tía Carla,” signaling the strong relationship she cultivated with them. In addition to her knowledge about the bilingual authorization process, the trust she established with educators allowed her to be more effective in coaching teachers to the certification finish line. Though large districts may be able to afford to staff this position internally, this would have been cost prohibitive for small- and medium-sized districts without the support of the grant; yet, the role proved pivotal to the project's success.

**Oak Grove/SEAL BTPDP Coach, Carla Santa Cruz or “Tía Carla” as teachers called her, and Cindy Ponce, a Cambrian School District teacher with the SCCOE BTPDP Cohort** >



**KEY FINDING****#4**

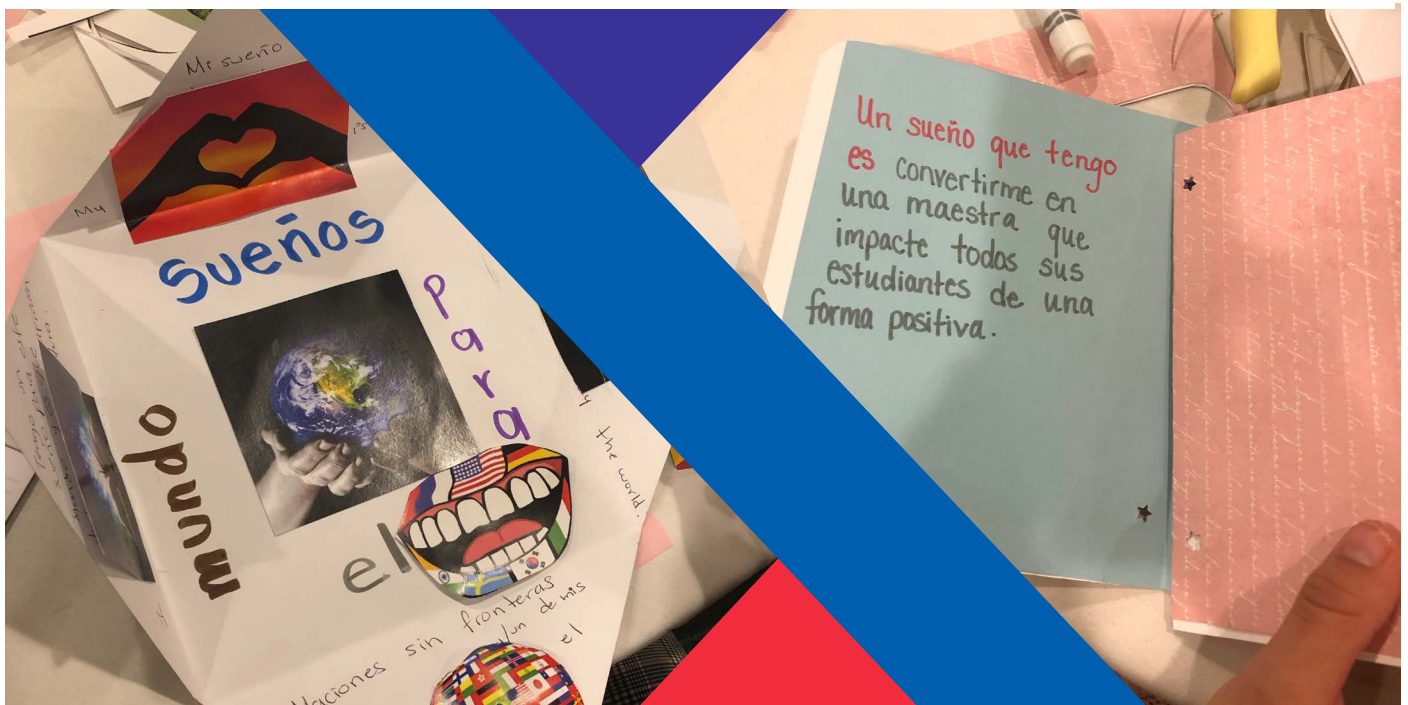
**Professional development (to strengthen bilingual teaching skills and academic Spanish), along with mentoring and coaching, can strengthen the supply and expertise of bilingual teachers.**

SEAL, the Center for Equity for English Learners at Loyola Marymount, the California Association of Bilingual Education, and Dr. Allison Briceño from San Jose State University all offered training on best practices in bilingual education in serving ELs within these settings and in fostering students' biliteracy development. This work likely contributed to the increase in bilingual teaching knowledge and skills that participants demonstrated at the culmination of the Oak Grove/SEAL Bilingual Teacher project. It also likely contributed to teachers' ability to meet their bilingual authorization requirements, their confidence in teaching within bilingual programs, and their willingness to seek bilingual teaching placements.

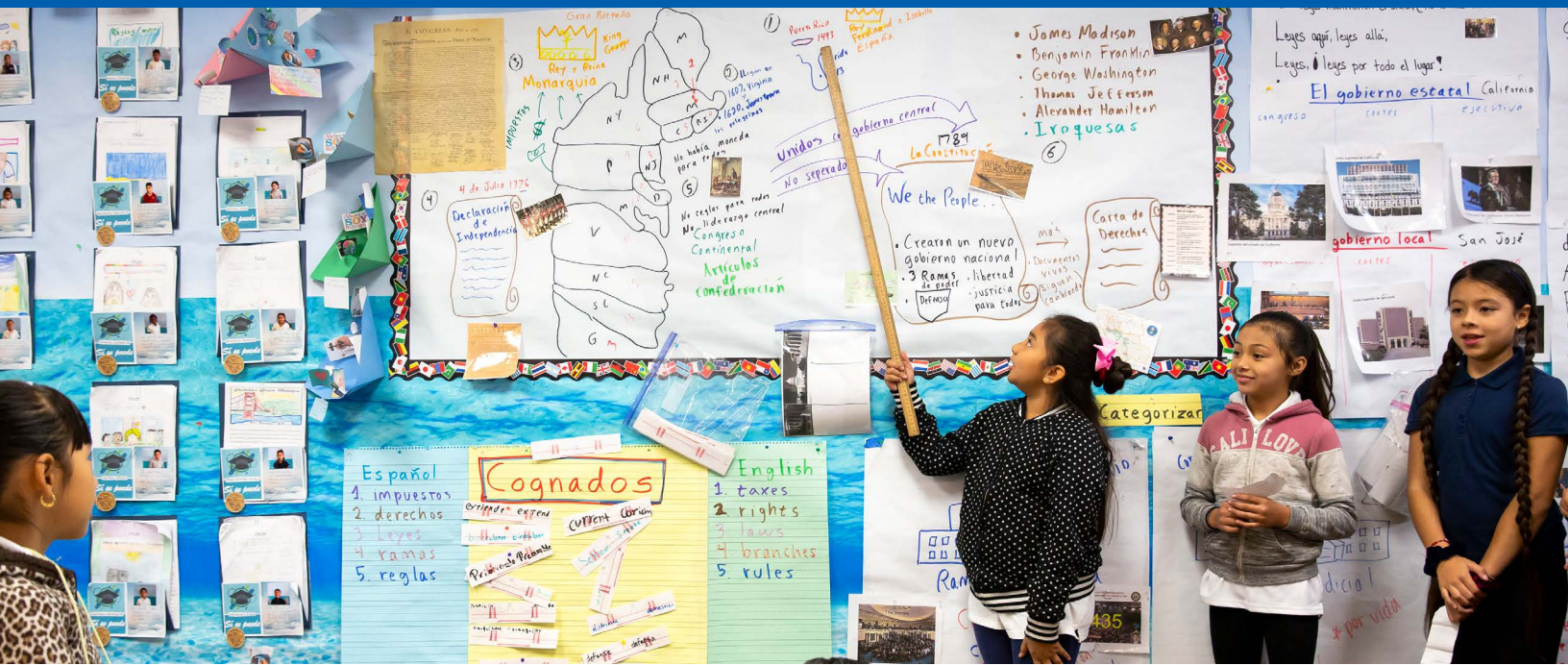
**KEY FINDING****#5**

**Support for administrators and instructional coaches can help existing teachers and staff increase their knowledge and skills in teaching bilingual students.**

Some administrators attended conferences, workshops, training sessions, bilingual convenings, and, when possible, instructional rounds. These opportunities helped contribute to administrators' knowledge and understanding of effective bilingual education and an asset-based framework for working with multilingual students.<sup>25</sup>



^ In one of the professional development activities, teachers shared their hopes and dreams for their students.



## Discussion and Policy Implications

California has always been multilingual. The resources exist in the state to build an education system that is biliterate and bilingual—where children are guided by multilingual educators who are skilled at creating language-rich environments and who celebrate the rich diversity that students and their families bring to the classroom.

Yet, to build a truly multilingual and multicultural workforce, the state needs to do more to address the critical shortage of bilingual teachers, including developing the bilingual workforce that is already in schools.

**California has an extensive supply of multilingual teachers and staff.** These educators need extra support to become authorized to teach in a bilingual classroom. One in five paraprofessional educators in the United States speaks a language other than English at home, the same as the proportion of students.<sup>26</sup> According to a 2017 survey from Californians Together, a substantial number of K-12 teachers are already fluent in another language and could, if given support, be able to teach in bilingual settings.<sup>27</sup> The survey found 6,000 teachers with bilingual authorizations currently teaching in English-only programs and another 900 teachers fluent in another language but not bilingually certified. Moreover, the survey only included a fraction of California districts, so the actual number of existing multilingual teachers who are not teaching in bilingual programs is likely much higher. **These teachers represent a huge untapped resource.**

Grow Your Own programs are one important way of developing this potential workforce. This teacher preparation strategy focuses on developing and retaining teachers from the local community. This is a meaningful way to address teacher shortages and increase the diversity of the teacher workforce.



California Assembly Bill (AB) 1701 provides another way. AB 1701, introduced this year, would establish the California State University Jump Start Grant Program to increase the number of bilingual faculty for bilingual authorization programs in accredited schools of education. The bill would require the office of the Chancellor of the California State University and schools of education to hire new faculty to increase the number of students enrolled in bilingual authorization programs. AB 1701 is a welcome development, but we should not lose sight of an equally important approach to addressing California’s bilingual teacher shortage: investing in Grow Your Own programs.

Additionally, bilingual teacher pathways that take advantage of the state’s large cadre of paraprofessionals and high school students need to be explored. This grant spurred one district, Coalinga-Huron, to create a bilingual teacher pathway program for their high school students in



collaboration with the local community college. However, educators noted that students were not particularly interested in or enthusiastic about becoming bilingual teachers—even if they were already bilingual. A public relations campaign and incentives for becoming a bilingual teacher could help California’s bilingual high school students see the benefits of a teaching career, overcome negative public perceptions about the profession, see their bilingualism as an asset, and be encouraged to pursue this pathway.

Like the Oak Grove/SEAL Bilingual Teacher project, the programs funded through the BTPDP grant show that, with proper support, school districts can “grow their own” teachers to help fill the critical bilingual teacher shortage in the state.<sup>28</sup> Districts can fill bilingual teaching slots for their existing and expanding bilingual/dual language programs with their own teachers, helping them become bilingually certified and ensuring that those who already have a bilingual authorization are placed in a bilingual teaching classroom.

**Like the Oak Grove/SEAL Bilingual Teacher project, the programs funded through the BTPDP grant show that, with proper support, school districts can “grow their own” teachers to help fill the critical bilingual teacher shortage in the state.**

Districts can also provide support to improve teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and skills to serve all students, especially ELs, more effectively in bilingual/dual language programs. Drawing on existing teachers’ skills and strengthening their bilingual teaching expertise can help build the teaching workforce the state needs as well as realize the goals of Global California 2030.

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