



Quick Facts: How Early Learning and Care Programs Identify Dual Language Learners

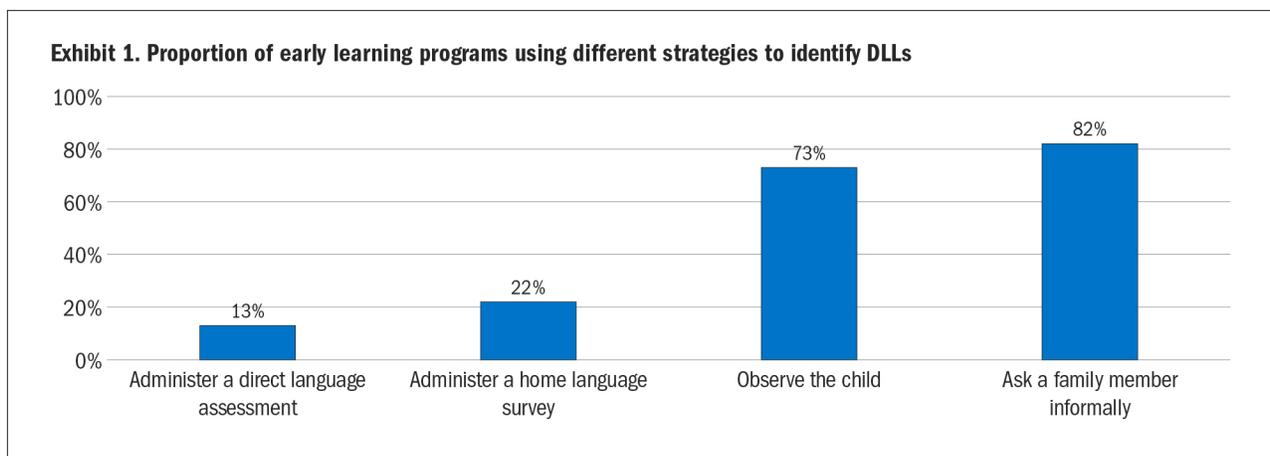
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Although an estimated 60% of children birth to age 5 live in households in which a language other than English is spoken,¹ there is no consistent definition of dual language learners (DLLs) or systematic manner of identifying them in California's early learning system. Recent data from the California State Preschool Program shows that only 44% of children enrolled in that program are DLLs,² suggesting that DLLs may be undercounted.

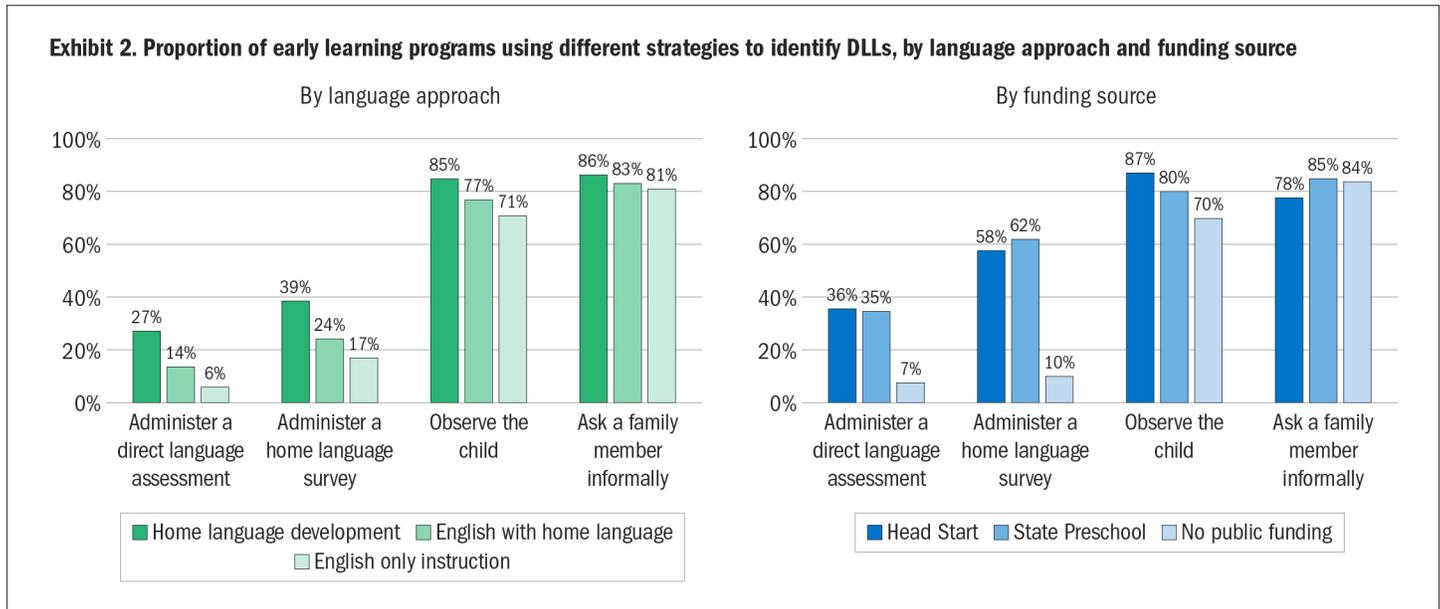
The absence of accurate information about the number of DLLs in early learning programs in the state restricts policymakers' ability to make informed decisions about resources for these programs, such as supports for critical staff training³ and bilingual materials. The recent knowledge brief on DLLs written to support the Master Plan for Early Learning and Care⁴ advocates for a systematic longitudinal data system to house information on the numbers, needs, and outcomes for DLLs, to support this type of resource decision making. Having data that allows for equitable and sufficient provision of resources to programs serving DLLs will help programs nurture and develop DLLs' linguistic assets for the benefit of the state.

In 2018 and early 2019, AIR surveyed a representative sample of 744 directors of early learning and care programs across California about their instructional and family engagement practices to support dual language learners, as part of the First 5 California Dual Language Learner Pilot Study. Through this survey, directors were asked how their program identifies students as DLLs, and whether their program formally collects information on how many children in the program are DLLs.

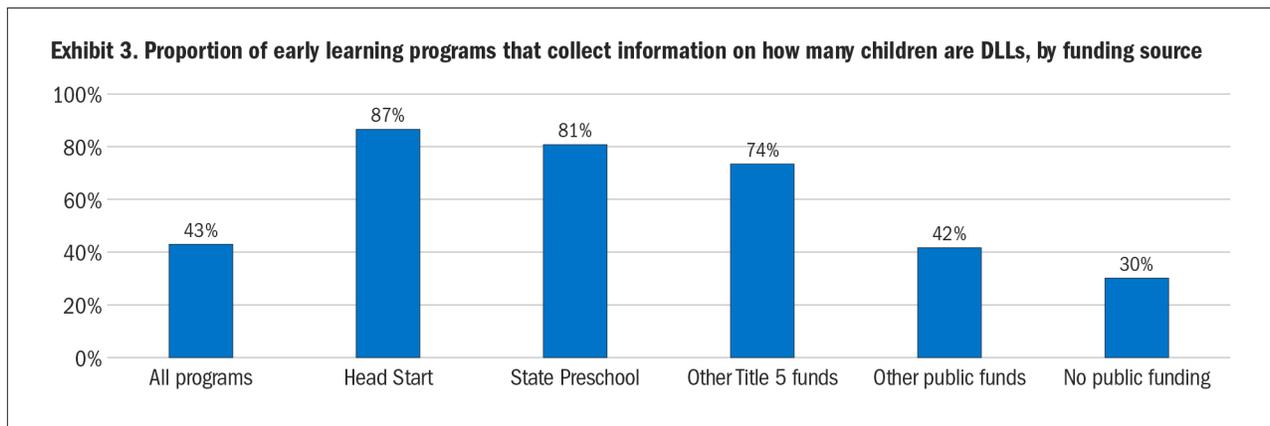
Directors were most likely to report using informal strategies to identify DLLs in their programs; fewer programs used formal identification strategies. Directors were more likely to report that they ask the parent or caregiver about the child's language informally (82%), or that they observe the child during program activities or during interactions with their family members (73%) to determine if the child is a DLL. Fewer programs reported using formal strategies such as administering a home language survey⁵ or using direct language assessments (Exhibit 1).



Strategies for identifying DLLs varied, with some types of programs—including centers, those receiving Head Start or State Preschool funds, and those serving a high proportion of DLLs—using formal strategies more than others. Center directors were more likely to report using a home language survey than family child care home (FCCH) directors, and programs specifically implementing intentional dual language models in their classrooms were more likely than other programs to report doing so. Programs that serve higher proportions of DLLs were more likely to use home language surveys or direct language assessments of children than programs with fewer DLLs. Programs receiving Head Start or State Preschool funds were also more likely to use these formal tools; this was especially true for FCCHs receiving these funds compared to other FCCHs. Exhibit 2 shows these results by language approach and by funding source.



Although many programs ask about children’s language background to determine if they are DLLs, fewer than half of program directors (43%) reported that they collect information on the number of DLL children in their program. This proportion was approximately the same in centers (44%) and FCCHs (42%) and was also similar regardless of the ages of children served. Programs receiving Head Start (87%) or State Preschool (81%) funding were much more likely to report that they collect this information than programs receiving other (non-Title 5) public funding (42%) or no public funding at all (30%) (Exhibit 3).



TEACHER PERSPECTIVES: SPECIFIC DATA COLLECTED ON DLLS

In the 2020 guide for the California Department of Education, *Improving Education for Multilingual and English Learners: Research to Practice*, Espinosa and Crandell recommend that one strong practice to identify DLLs is to implement “intake procedures that include a comprehensive family survey or interview about a child’s language background that goes beyond a simple question about which languages are spoken in the home.” As part of the DLL Pilot Study, teachers working in a subset of DLL-serving programs were surveyed about the information collected by their programs. Though this sample is not representative of the state, responses illustrate some of the specific types of information program staff collect about their DLLs, through *formal* or *informal* processes.

In almost all programs surveyed* (98% of centers and 81% of FCCHs), teachers reported that information was collected on what languages were spoken at home. Other information collected by programs included:

- The child’s dominant language (90% in centers; 75% in FCCHs)
- The family’s cultural background (70% in centers; 44% in FCCHs)
- The amount of home language spoken at home (67% in centers; 59% in FCCHs)
- The amount of English spoken at home (66% in centers; 28% in FCCHs)
- The age at which the child was first exposed to English (33% in centers; 22% in FCCHs)

*Programs were counted if at least half of their teachers said this information was collected. A total of 138 centers and 33 FCCHs participated.

Summary and Implications

In order for state policymakers to make well-informed decisions about resource distribution to early learning programs to support DLLs, they need consistent data about the DLLs served in those programs. For example, data on the number of DLLs served, languages families speak at home, and children’s level of exposure to and use of both English and their home language are needed to guide policy and practice. As noted in both the federal Head Start Performance Standards and in a joint policy statement from the federal Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, identifying DLLs is the first step in ensuring that the learning needs of these children are met.^{6,7} County early education leaders in California have stressed that not having formal guidance and solely relying on the teacher’s opinion to identify DLLs results in an underreporting of DLLs.⁸

This brief highlights the variation in approaches to collecting data about DLLs across programs and the frequent reliance on informal methods of identifying DLLs. Demonstrating a desire to identify DLLs and better support them, many program directors reported using strategies to learn about their students’ language backgrounds. For example, many programs use informal conversations with family members or observations of children to determine their language needs. But other programs use more formal strategies (such as home language surveys or language assessments); these formal strategies are more commonly used by programs that receive public funding, programs that are implementing intentional dual language models in their classrooms, and programs that serve more DLLs. Overall, however, fewer than half of programs report collecting information about the overall number of DLLs they serve, which could be useful for informing policy.

State policy requiring all early learning programs to collect information on the number of DLLs they serve is needed to provide better data to inform resource allocation decisions. Such a policy should clearly define which children should be considered DLLs and how that determination should be made. It will be critical to establish a process that identifies DLLs accurately, generates detailed information for programs so that they can provide instructional supports to students, and informs parents in a transparent way about how the information will be used. Programs will also need resources to plan for and implement these processes.

¹ Holtby, S., Lordi, N., Park, R., & Ponce, N. (2017). *Families with young children in California: Findings from the California Health Interview Survey, 2011–2014, by geography and home language* [Health Policy Brief]. UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. https://www.cfc.ca.gov/pdf/whatwedo/whatweknow/Child_PB_FINAL_5-31-17.pdf

² Zepeda, M., & Wiese, A. (2020). *Knowledge brief: Promoting equitable early learning and care for dual language learners*. California Health and Human Services Agency. <https://californiaforallkids.chhs.ca.gov/assets/pdfs/CA%20For%20All%20Kids%20-%20Master%20Plan%20Knowledge%20Brief%20-%20DLL.pdf>

³ Brodziak de los Reyes, I., Anthony, J., Carbuca-Abbott, M., Quick, H., Manship, K., & Handjojo, C. (2020). *Professional development to support teachers of young dual language learners in California*. American Institutes for Research. <https://californiadllstudy.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/First%205%20DLL%20Pilot%20Study%20-%20PD%20Full%20Brief.pdf>

⁴ Zepeda, M., & Wiese, A. (2020). *Knowledge brief: Promoting equitable early learning and care for dual language learners*. California Health and Human Services Agency. <https://californiaforallkids.chhs.ca.gov/assets/pdfs/CA%20For%20All%20Kids%20-%20Master%20Plan%20Knowledge%20Brief%20-%20DLL.pdf>

⁵ Home language surveys are sometimes referred to as family language instruments in early childhood settings.

⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start. (2016). *Head Start Program performance standards*. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/hspps-appendix.pdf>

⁷ Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education. (2017). *Policy statement on supporting the development of children who are dual language learners in early childhood programs*. <https://sites.ed.gov/underservedyouth/files/2017/01/Policy-Statement-on-Supporting-the-Development-of-Children-who-are-Dual-Language-Learners-in-Early-Childhood-Programs.pdf>

⁸ Bergey, R., Quick, H., Anthony, J., Manship, K., White, L., Handjojo, C., Hauser, A., & Keuter, S. (2019). *The early learning and care context for dual language learners in California*. American Institutes for Research. <https://californiadllstudy.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/F5CA-DLL%20-1st%20Brief%20-The%20Early%20Learning%20and%20Care%20Context%20for%20DLL%20in%20CA.pdf>

About the First 5 California DLL Pilot Study

In 2015, First 5 California committed \$20 million for the DLL Pilot Study to support effective and scalable strategies in early learning and care programs to promote learning and development for DLLs and their families. A key component of this overall initiative seeks to describe and evaluate the range of strategies to support DLLs, including three strategies of particular interest: instructional practices, PD for early educators, and family engagement. The study is examining the range of practices, by age, setting type, and diverse language groups. It also examines how various practices support child and family outcomes. The study includes 16 counties selected to be broadly representative of the state's DLL population: Butte, Calaveras, Contra Costa, Fresno, Los Angeles, Monterey, Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, Sonoma, Stanislaus, and Yolo. The study is being conducted by AIR and its partners at Juárez & Associates; CRI; School Readiness Consulting; Allen, Shea & Associates; and Stanfield Systems, Inc.; with guidance from the DLL Input Group, which comprises stakeholders, advocates, and state and national experts on DLLs.

For more information about the study and to read other study briefs and reports:

<https://californiadllstudy.org/>

www.cafc.ca.gov/

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