EdSource

BILINGUAL EDUCATION

Why Texas is ahead of California on bilingual education



Wendell Norris Marquez teaches pre-AP Spanish to seventh graders at Lively Middle School in Austin, Texas.

Credit: Zaidee Stavely/EdSource



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5 COMMENTS

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On a recent Monday morning in Wendell Norris Marquez's classroom in Austin, Texas, students were getting ready to read a story in Spanish by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. But first, they discussed the differences between a story and a novel, and between a story and a legend.

"Los cuentos son ficción (Stories are fiction)," said one student. "But are legends real?" asked Norris Marquez.

No, the students decided. They may have started based on something real, but then they changed over time as they were told and retold.

This is a sophisticated literature class. But these students aren't in high school. They're in seventh grade. And they'll be taking the AP Spanish exam before they graduate from middle school.

"When I describe this class, I tell people it's not really what you think in the back of your head as a language course, because in elementary, the kids already learned Spanish, so by the time they get to us, they're already fully bilingual," Norris Marquez said. "So it is about taking them to the next level. We learn literary genres, we talk about metaphors, we analyze poems, and we write essays."

PODCAST

What California can learn from Texas about bilingual education

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EdSource – What California can learn from Texas about bilingual education SOUNDCLOUD

This kind of advanced Spanish class is only possible at the middle school level because most of Norris Marquez's students have been attending dual-language programs with instruction in both Spanish and English since preschool or kindergarten.

It turns out that bilingual education is much more common in Texas than in California.

"Anybody who studies bilingual education, English learners, dual-language students, eventually stumbles across this reality that Texas has this long and linguistically rich, multilingual, multicultural K-12 history, and California doesn't," said Conor P. Williams, senior fellow at The Century Foundation and author of a report called "Making California Public Schools Better for English Learners: Lessons from Texas."

According to the report, Texas enrolls 38% of English learners in bilingual education programs — more than double the 18% California enrolls.

Williams also found that Texas' English learners have consistently done better than California's on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in both reading and math.

"On every single administration of the test, Texas is better, over and over and over," he said.

It's not clear whether Texas' English learners are doing better because of bilingual education. Multiple other factors could influence scores. Still, Williams points out that the findings are consistent with research that shows that bilingual education helps students achieve fluency in English and do better on academic tests over time.

"The research suggests that English learners in bilingual schools will score a little lower in English acquisition and in academics for a couple of years, but by roughly fourth grade, they should be outperforming English learners in English-only," Williams said. "So you would expect to see that by about fourth grade, Texas, with its large number of bilingual programs, would start to really outperform California. You would expect that to be especially true by eighth grade. And that's sort of what we see."

Money and a mandate

Texas requires school districts to offer bilingual education if at least 20 children in the same grade speak the same language other than English at home, a mandate that dates back to 1973.

By contrast, California voters passed a law in 1998, Proposition 227, that required English learners to be taught in English-only classrooms unless their parents signed a waiver. That law remained in place for 18 years, until voters overturned it in 2016. The almost two decades of English-only instruction set the state back, officials say.

"The passage of Proposition 227 deeply impacted bilingual teacher education programs, resulting in fewer teachers earning bilingual certification over the past two and a half decades. Bilingual teacher education programs are still recovering," wrote Alesha Moreno-Ramirez, director of multilingual support at the California Department of Education, in an email.

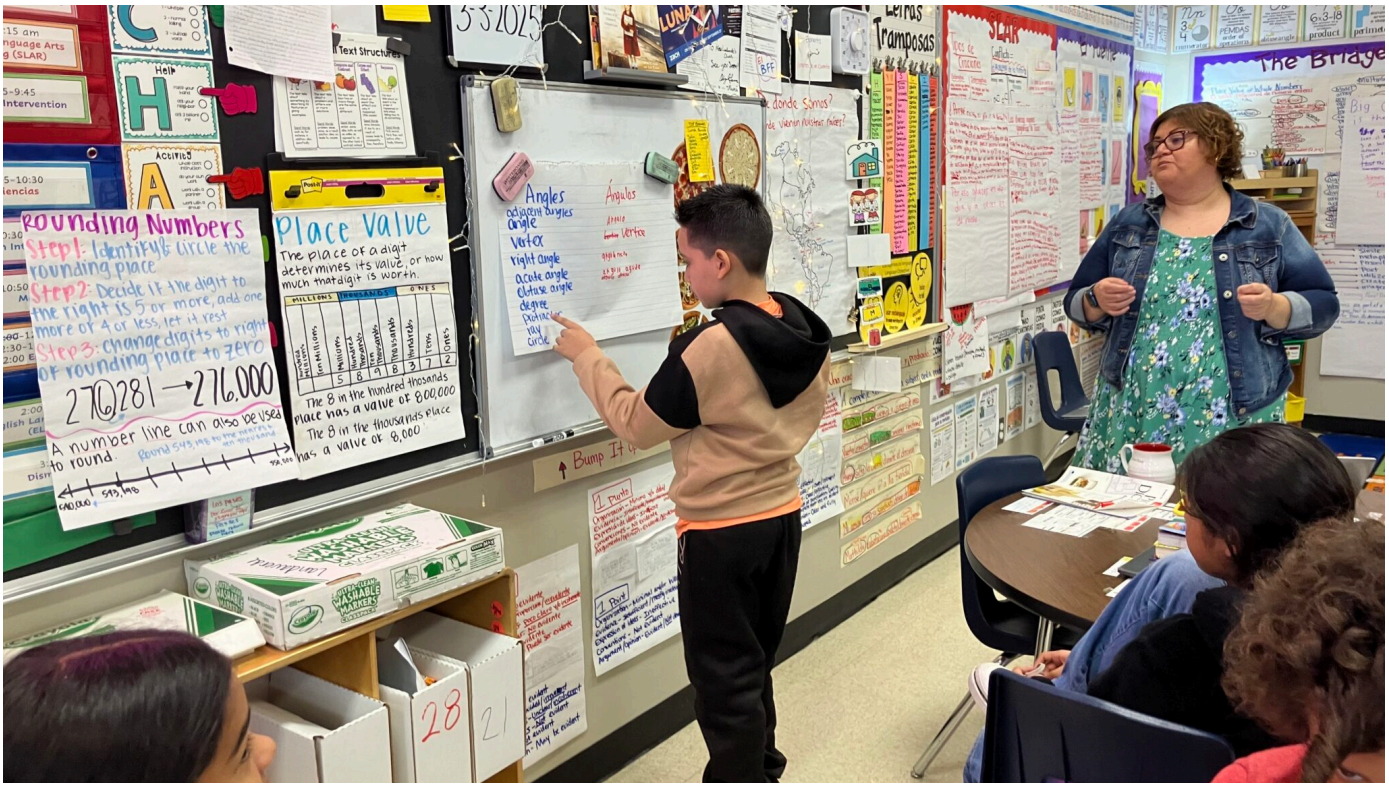
After Proposition 227 was overturned, California published two documents that set out a vision and goals for expanding bilingual education, the English Learner Roadmap and Global California 2030. But Williams says these documents have no teeth.

“There hasn’t been commensurate investment, accountability and oversight to make sure that these goals and vision documents matter,” Williams said. “Neither can make any school district do anything. It’s all voluntary.”

Texas passed a law in 2019 that sends additional funds to schools for all students enrolled in dual language immersion, and even more for English learners enrolled. By one calculation, Texas schools receive $924 more per year for every English learner in dual-language immersion. The state also has a long history of bipartisan support for bilingual education, and the top education official reportedly sends his own children to a bilingual school.

In Austin alone, there are 57 elementary schools offering dual-language programs, in Spanish, Mandarin and Vietnamese. More than half of the district’s English learners, referred to as “emergent bilingual” students, attend these programs.

At Perez Elementary, Spanish and English can be heard in classrooms, hallways, and out on the playground. One corner of the school library is dedicated entirely to books the students wrote themselves in both languages. Alongside a book that one child wrote about Roblox, a game creation platform, is a poignant story about a family’s journey to the U.S. from Honduras.



Yadi Landaverde teaches fourth grade at Perez Elementary School in Austin.

Credit: Zaidee Stavely/EdSource

In a fourth grade classroom, as students prepared for a math lesson in English, teacher Yadi Landaverde walked them through how to say some terms in English and Spanish — right angle, obtuse angle and protractor, for example.

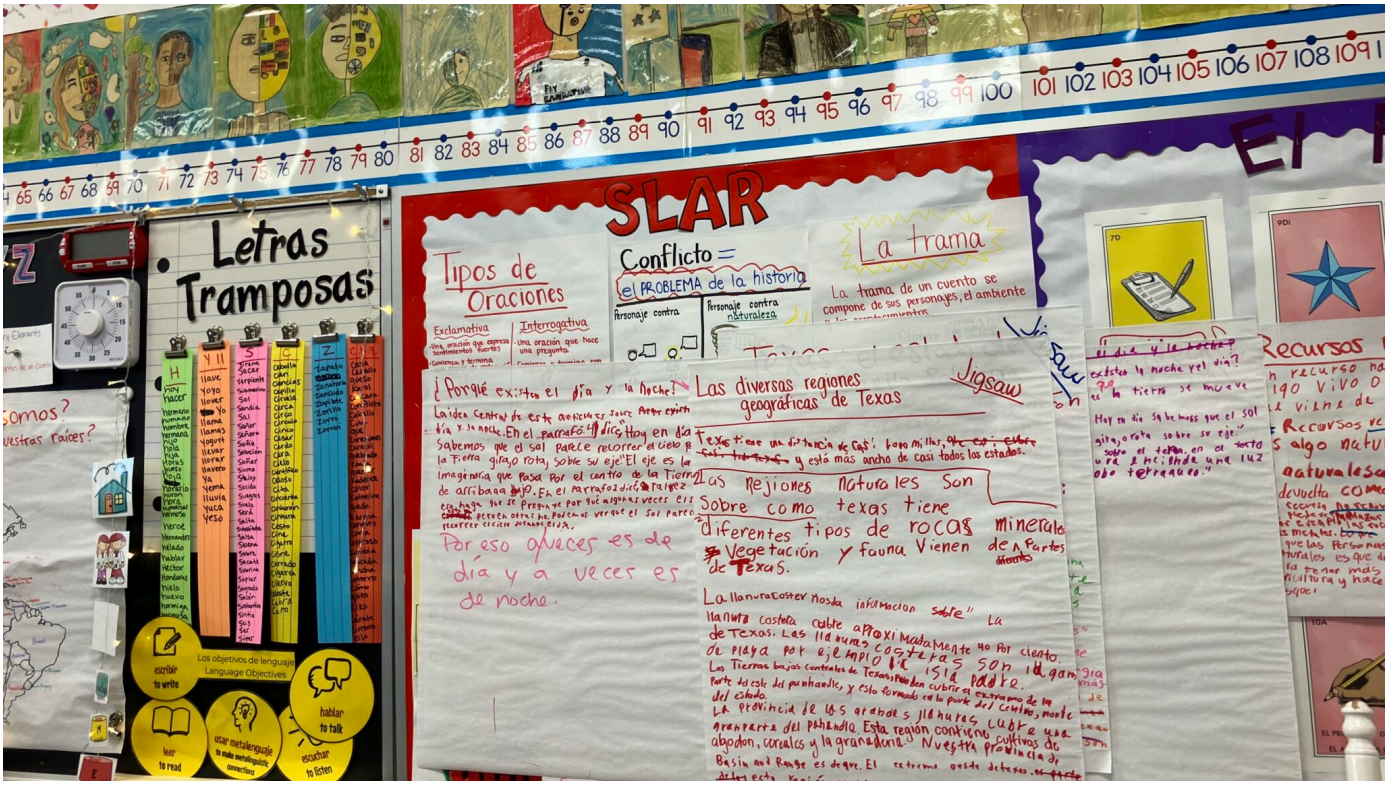
Landaverde, who has been teaching for 10 years, said that explicitly teaching the differences and similarities between languages is especially important for students who recently immigrated to the U.S. and are not as familiar with English. This year, she said, she has eight recent immigrants in her class. Landaverde was born in Mexico and grew up in South Texas. Growing up, she only had English instruction in school. But she's seen the benefits of dual-language immersion with her students.

"As long as the first language is strong, students do tend to score higher on state tests," Landaverde said. "I've seen that."

Her students were eager to share why they love bilingual education.

“Being in a dual-language program is just the best thing you could do in school because you are learning two languages, and that feels like a superpower for everybody,” said Emil, 10. Austin Independent School District officials asked EdSource not to publish students’ last names to protect their privacy.

His classmate Luis, also 10, emigrated from Venezuela two years ago, but first attended an English-only school in New York, where he didn’t feel like he could communicate with anyone.



A fourth grade dual-language classroom at Perez Elementary in Austin, Texas.

Credit: Zaidee Stavely/EdSource

“I couldn’t understand nobody and I couldn’t talk to nobody. One time I got home, and I was crying because nobody talked to me,” he said. When he moved to Texas and began attending Perez, he said, he was immediately welcomed.

“Now in class, I can speak Spanish normally without nobody saying that they don’t understand me,” he said. “And when I don’t know … something in English, I can just ask my friend that speaks more English than me and say,

‘What does this word mean?’”

Mathilda, who has been in the dual-language program at Perez since pre-kindergarten and speaks Spanish at home, said it has helped her keep both languages strong.

“My cousins in California cannot speak Spanish, so I need to teach them to learn Spanish ’cause they don’t go to a program for bilingual,” she said.

Middle and high school classes

In Austin, 13 middle schools and five high schools have bilingual programs in which students take at least two classes a semester in Spanish. One is a language or literature course, and the other is a content class, like science or math. Many schools also have electives available in Spanish, like film history or web design.

Down the hall from Norris Marquez’ class at Lively Middle School, Antonia Vincent teaches AP Spanish to eighth graders.

“At the beginning, they don’t even believe that they can do an AP class, and they don’t understand, most of them, what is an AP class,” Vincent said. “But at the end, we have good results, and they are very proud of themselves.”



Antonia Vincent teaches AP Spanish to eighth graders at Lively Middle School in Austin.

Credit: Zaidee Stavely/EdSource

The majority of students in the dual-language classes in middle and high school in Austin are students who have been enrolled in bilingual education since elementary school. But some are also recent immigrants.

Advanced classes in Spanish can be empowering for recent immigrant students, Vincent said.

“Some of them, in the beginning, they are very shy,” Vincent said. “And this class empowers them because they feel that we listen to them, so they are building their confidence.”

One immigrant student wrote Vincent a letter saying, “Thanks to your class, I know that I can express myself, and that is empowering me to continue and to take this opportunity in my other classes.”

The classes also have benefits for students who are not English learners.

Caroline Sweet, the dual-language instructional coach at Perez Elementary School, sent both her children to dual immersion programs. Her oldest son, now in 10th grade, attended Perez and then continued in dual immersion at Lively Middle School and Travis High School.

“His advanced Spanish courses in high school are so hard that when I look at those texts, I’m like, I do not know what that medieval poem means,” Sweet said. “But I think it’s just kept him pretty astute and paying attention to language and then just kind of really flexible in his brain.”

Patchy progress in California

Dual-language immersion programs like the ones at Perez Elementary and Lively Middle School do exist in California. Los Angeles Unified, for example, has more than 230 dual-language programs that span transitional kindergarten through 12th grade. But advocates for English learners say the investment of resources by the state has been piecemeal.

“Access to bilingual programs varies wildly depending on the district, the community, and available resources,” said Martha Hernandez, executive director of Californians Together, a nonprofit organization that advocates for English learners statewide.

Advocates and state officials agree that the biggest challenge is a lack of teachers with bilingual credentials.

Moreno-Ramirez, from the California Department of Education, pointed to recent investments to show that the state is supporting school districts to expand bilingual education.

In 2021, California invested $10 million for grants to expand dual-language

immersion programs. In 2022, the state put another $10 million toward grants for helping train teachers in “effective language acquisition programs” for English learners, including bilingual proficiency. Most recently, the state invested $20 million in a program to help more teachers get bilingual credentials.

These investments have been helpful, but insufficient, said Anya Hurwitz, executive director of SEAL (Sobrato Early Academic Language), a nonprofit organization that promotes bilingual education.

“If we want to see multilingual education scaled in California, it’s got to be invested in,” Hurwitz said. “Money alone is not the answer ever to almost anything in life, yet we can’t pretend that it’s not an important ingredient.”

Williams agreed.

“227 is a real thing, no question. But 227 ended almost a decade ago,” said Williams. “At some level, if you’re going to be a progressive leader on this, it’s been a decade, it’s time, you can’t blame that anymore.”

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