



# Policy Brief

## English Learner Programming Needs

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**Date:** October 17, 2024

New Mexico prides itself on its cultural and linguistic diversity, and its schools reflect that diversity in the many backgrounds students bring from home. Those cultural and linguistic assets enrich school communities while also providing unique challenges to a system judged largely on English language proficiency that often lacks the resources students from linguistically diverse backgrounds need.

When students speak languages other than English at home, they are identified as English learners (ELs). As such, they are entitled to and need additional supports in the form of fiscal and human resources. While serving ELs can prove challenging to any school system, an increasing percentage of ELs in New Mexico has made the task more difficult.

Students identified as ELs typically have unique linguistic and academic needs that are supported through a variety of programs and services. However, the successful implementation of these programs is often hindered by limited resources, a shortage of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL)-certified teachers, and the unique needs of small school districts, charter schools, and tribal communities.

In its decision in the *Martinez-Yazzie* consolidated education sufficiency lawsuit, the court found New Mexico had failed to adequately meet the needs of its English learners. Six years after the court's 2018 decision, ELs continue to lag behind their peers in academic measures, though there are promising signs of improvement. Simultaneously, the court also emphasized the need to provide a culturally and linguistically responsive education. For ELs, that means valuing and sustaining home languages while providing support toward English language proficiency.

This brief examines the state of supports for ELs, including federal and state funding sources, the need to improve the pipeline of educators equipped to serve ELs, programs that have shown success in serving ELs, and the ways the Legislature can provide support and clarity to school districts in their efforts to both sustain our state's cultural and linguistic diversity while ensuring ELs are on a path toward college and career readiness.

### English Learners: An Overview

ELs are students whose primary language is not English and who require additional support to develop English proficiency. These students come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and face unique challenges in accessing and fully participating in academic instruction. ELs are typically identified through language assessments and are provided with tailored instructional services to help them acquire the language skills necessary for success in both school and broader community environments.

### Key Takeaways

- The WIDA assessment plays a significant role in shaping the educational strategies and supports provided to EL students (*Page 2*)
- There is a shortage of qualified teachers who understand both English language acquisition and Indigenous cultural contexts (*Page 4*)
- School districts report a notably low number of students exiting EL programs (*Page 6*)
- There is mandatory monitoring of exited EL students for at least two years after reclassification (*Page 7*)
- An inclusive approach to ELs can promote bilingualism as an asset rather than a barrier (*Page 8*)

## Identifying English Learners

Under Title VI of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 and subsequent federal and state mandates, New Mexico schools are obligated to screen, identify, and provide appropriate services to ELs. To identify ELs, both students and their families are assessed.

Districts gather information from parents or guardians upon students' initial enrollment in public school through the [New Mexico Language Usage Survey](#) (LUS) to identify potential ELs. This initial survey is completed only one time in a student's public education career and is attached to their cumulative file. Once a language other than English has been identified using this survey, potential EL students are then assessed using the state-approved [English Language Proficiency](#) (ELP) WIDA screener to determine EL status. Families are then appropriately notified by their schools that their student has been identified as an EL student and qualifies for an EL program or language support services.

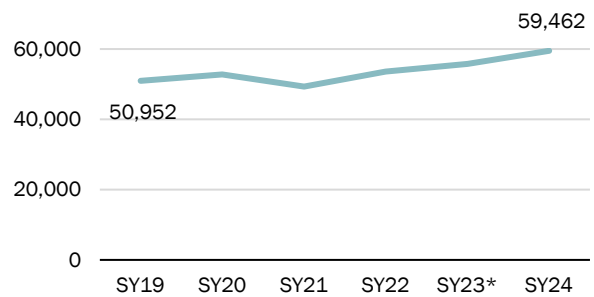
As shown in Figures 1 and 2 to the right, a growing number of New Mexico students have been identified as ELs each year, both in terms of the number of students identified as EL as well as the percent of the total student population. In the 2023-2024 school year (SY24), the percent of students identified as ELs rose to nearly 19 percent of the total student population statewide. In addition, New Mexico's share of EL students is significantly higher than national averages. In 2021, the National Center for Education Statistics reported ELs made up 10.6 percent of all students across the country. At the time, only California and Texas served a larger percentage of ELs, at 18.9 and 20.2 percent, respectively.

## Testing for English Language Proficiency

Once identified, ELs are monitored regularly for progress toward English language proficiency. The WIDA assessment is widely used to evaluate kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (K-12) ELs in U.S. schools. Its primary purpose is to measure students' progress in acquiring English and determine when they are ready to exit EL programs. The test is crucial in assessing language development and is used alongside other academic data, such as performance in math, science, and English language arts, to monitor how EL students are performing overall.

The WIDA assessment consists of several components, including a speaking portion where students are required to speak into a microphone. One school official noted this portion of the test can present challenges for some students, especially those who may be shy or have other inhibitions that impact their ability to demonstrate their true proficiency levels. This aspect of the test is critical since the results help determine the level of support a student continues to receive and influence the decision regarding their exit from EL programs.

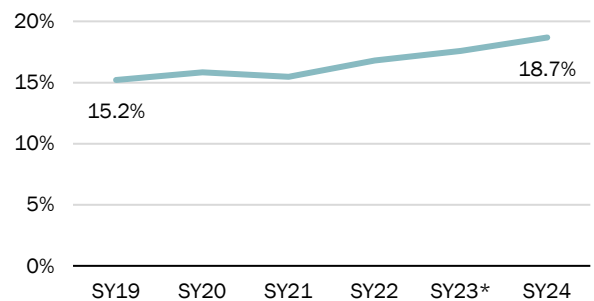
**Figure 1: Number of English Learners in New Mexico**  
SY19-SY24



\*Note: Data available to LESC staff for SY23 is inconsistent with prior years. LESC staff estimated EL totals for SY23 using analysis of prior year trends.

Source: LESC Analysis of PED Data

**Figure 2: New Mexico EL Student Rate**  
SY19-SY24



\*Note: Data available to LESC staff for SY23 is inconsistent with prior years. LESC staff estimated EL totals for SY23 using analysis of prior year trends.

Source: LESC Analysis of PED Data

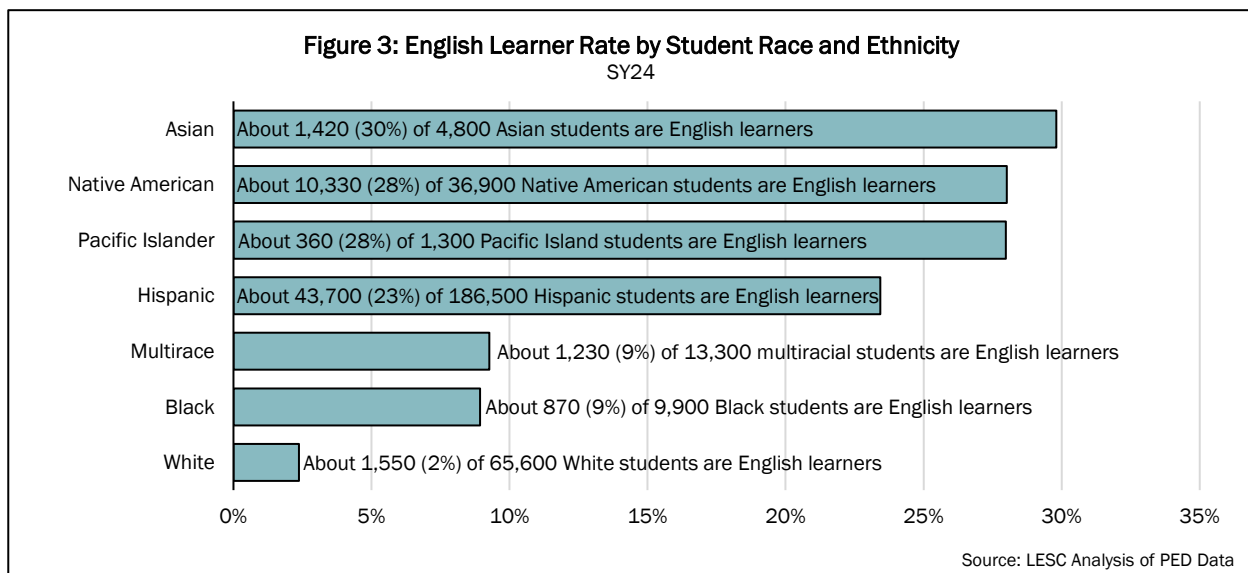
Teachers and educational assistants undergo WIDA training to better support EL students. While this training provides educators with essential tools to guide their students' language development, it is often delivered online and is generally considered less comprehensive than complete TESOL endorsement programs that offer more rigorous preparation for teaching ELs.

## Programs and Services for Students Identified as English Learners

**The support of ELs in schools requires a multifaceted approach that addresses language development and academic success.** English learner and dual language educators use various strategies to support EL students, including integrated English language instruction, bilingual and dual language programs, teacher certifications, and individualized support based on proficiency levels. Additionally, schools emphasize cultural responsiveness, family engagement, and the use of data-driven approaches to track student progress.

Like any subgroup of students, ELs vary in their backgrounds and abilities, as well as in the types of programming and resources they need. Below is a breakdown of four subgroups of ELs, all with distinct needs.

- Students with limited or interrupted formal education may function below grade level, and may be illiterate in their native language due to inconsistent education. They need intensive language development, equitable academic programs, and collaborative teacher support.
- Newcomers are foreign-born students who have arrived in the U.S. within the last three years. Unlike students with limited or interrupted formal education, newcomers do not necessarily have interrupted education but still need welcoming environments, social and emotional support, and high-quality language development programs to succeed academically.
- Long-term ELs are students who have been in school for six or more years without achieving English proficiency. Long-term ELs often face challenges due to inadequate language instruction and exclusionary tracking practices, leading to lower academic performance and lower graduation rates compared to their peers.
- Dually identified ELs are students who are EL and have a learning disability. This subgroup is often underserved due to limited guidance for educators. Addressing the needs of these subgroups requires targeted support and teacher development. Because of their limited English proficiency, ELs are more likely to be incorrectly classified with learning disabilities, placing them at higher risk for poor academic outcomes.



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***The Public Education Department has adopted policies governing standards and practices for English learners.*** NMAC 6.29.5, English Language Development, outlines content standards for English learners in grades prekindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (PreK-12.) They include listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the four core content areas, as well as for communicating in the general school setting. The rule requires implementation of integrated English language development across all content areas, along with explicit blocks for English language development instruction.

While Hispanic students make up the majority of ELs in New Mexico, it is important to note ELs come from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. As such, policymakers should not conflate support for ELs with supports for bilingual multicultural education programs (BMEPs), though bilingual education can be an effective way to both sustain home language and increase English language proficiency. As illustrated in the graph on the previous page, the diversity of New Mexico's population of EL students underscores the need for strong support and culturally responsive programs tailored to these students.

***School districts struggle to find or train qualified personnel to serve ELs.*** There is a significant need for better training and support for teachers, particularly through increasing the number of TESOL-certified educators, as many districts struggle to encourage teachers to pursue this endorsement. EL educators suggest embedding TESOL certification in educator preparation programs in New Mexico to better prepare future educators. Doing so could improve educators' capacity to support ELs across various contexts. Additionally, school districts have praised the Public Education Department's (PED's) for their work on the New Mexico Instructional Scope for Spanish Language Arts, however some educators are still concerned there is not enough support and training provided to school districts and teachers in effectively serving EL students. While some districts have well-developed TESOL programs, there is a significant gap in awareness and training across the state. This inconsistency presents challenges for ensuring that all educators are equipped to meet the needs of ELs.

Schools recognize the need for individualized support based on students' varying English proficiency levels. As a result, they offer tailored programs ranging from newcomer initiatives to specialized interventions for long-term ELs. Long-term ELs, especially those who remain in EL programs from early grades through middle and high school, require more robust and intentional support to help them exit EL status. This challenge is compounded

### TESOL Certification

TESOL certification qualifies educators to teach English to speakers of other languages, focusing on skills needed to effectively support ELs in various settings like K-12 schools and adult education programs. It covers areas such as language acquisition, teaching methodologies, cultural sensitivity, curriculum development, and assessment of language proficiency.

- Beginning teachers, those without a completed teacher preparation program, and those holding an alternative license must pass the PRAXIS ESOL 5362 exam or a department-approved TESOL licensure test. Additionally, they must complete 24 hours of TESOL coursework, with 12 hours being upper-division or post-baccalaureate, in alignment with TESOL NMAC 6.64.11 competencies.
- Existing teachers, who have completed a teacher preparation program, have two options to add a TESOL endorsement. Option 1 requires passing the PRAXIS ESOL 5362 exam and earning 12 hours of TESOL coursework, with six hours in a language other than English or related fields, and six upper-division credits. Option 2 requires 24 hours of TESOL coursework, with the same language and upper-division requirements.
- Additional pathways include teachers with national board TESOL certification must pass the PRAXIS ESOL 5362 exam. Teachers with reciprocal licenses from outside the U.S. must pass the PRAXIS exam, complete 24 hours of TESOL coursework, and pass an English proficiency test. Waivers for language coursework are available for those with relevant certifications or degrees in another language.

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by the need for enhanced data systems that track EL progress, monitor students after they exit the program, and enable timely interventions if needed.

***Schools rely on assessment results, including English language proficiency assessments such as WIDA, to track student progress and make data-driven decisions to adjust their support strategies as needed.*** Some school districts, such as Las Cruces Public Schools, use data to monitor the progress of English learners and identify trends in exiting EL status. This helps in developing targeted interventions, such as the *Bridges* curriculum for middle school students who are struggling to exit EL status. Equally important is family engagement, where schools actively involve families by providing information in their home languages and establishing parent advisory committees to foster a sense of community and collaboration. Improved communication and collaboration between schools and the families of ELs, particularly for mixed-status families, is also crucial to helping these students navigate the education system effectively.

### Standalone English Learner Programs

The limited availability of language programs excludes many students from bilingual education, placing them in stand-alone EL programs like English Language Development (ELD) or English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. These students often face content-area teachers who lack sufficient training to address their language needs while teaching grade-level material. Although all school districts and charter school can offer and receive funding for Bilingual Multicultural Education Programs (BMEPs), a lack of qualified staff limits their ability to support the diverse home languages of ELs.

## Funding Supporting English Learners

School districts and charter schools in New Mexico can support ELs using a variety of funding sources, including federal grants. There is no explicit state funding, however, tied solely to the number or percentage of ELs in a school.

***Federal funding comes in many forms but is often limited to specific uses, making it difficult for school districts to adequately support ELs.*** PED expects to award \$5 million in federal Title III funding for the 2024-2025 school year, not including carryover awards ranging from \$1.3 million for Albuquerque Public Schools to only hundreds of dollars for the smallest school districts and charter schools. Title III funding, however, is primarily allocated for teacher training and not for direct student support. Moreover, Title III guidelines prohibit the creation of classrooms or programs solely for ELs, which limits flexibility and makes it harder to provide targeted support.

***ELs generate funding in the school funding formula, but it is not discrete and school district and charter school officials cannot point to an amount generated by ELs.*** Instead, the percentage of ELs in a school district is one of three factors used to calculate a school district's at-risk index. The other two are the percentage of low-income students and mobile students. This lack of clarity results in less intentional support for EL programs, as districts struggle to identify and prioritize resources for EL students. Without a distinct funding stream, EL needs may be overshadowed by other at-risk groups, reducing the focus on targeted interventions. A clearer, more identifiable allocation for ELs would help districts direct resources more effectively and ensure better outcomes for these students.

## Exiting English Learner Status

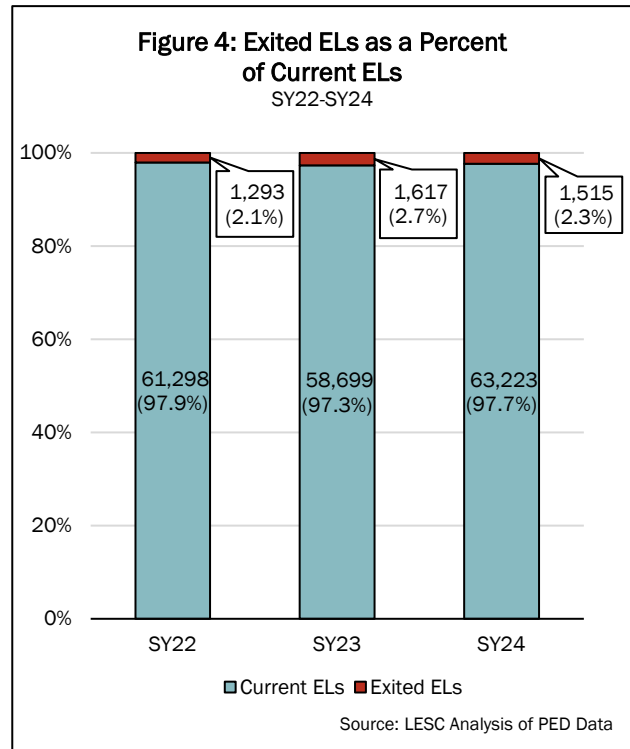
***The federal government established a five-year timeline for ELs exiting EL status with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) under the Every Student Succeeds Act.*** However, the actual duration for students to achieve sufficient English proficiency and exit EL status can vary significantly. While some students may meet proficiency criteria earlier, particularly in elementary school, others may struggle to exit, even as they progress into middle and high school.

The process of exiting EL status is determined by students demonstrating adequate English proficiency through the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State (ACCESS) assessment. ACCESS is a standardized English language proficiency test designed to measure the progress of ELs in acquiring academic English. The test measures students' abilities in four language domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

It is typically administered annually in U.S. schools and serves as a tool to track students' proficiency levels and determine when they are ready to exit EL programs.

As shown in **Figure 3: Exited ELs as a Percent of Current ELs**, while roughly 60,000 students each year are considered ELs, only 1,200 to 1,500 EL students score high enough on the ACCESS assessment to exit EL status. This equates to roughly 2 to 3 percent of ELs exiting EL status annually.

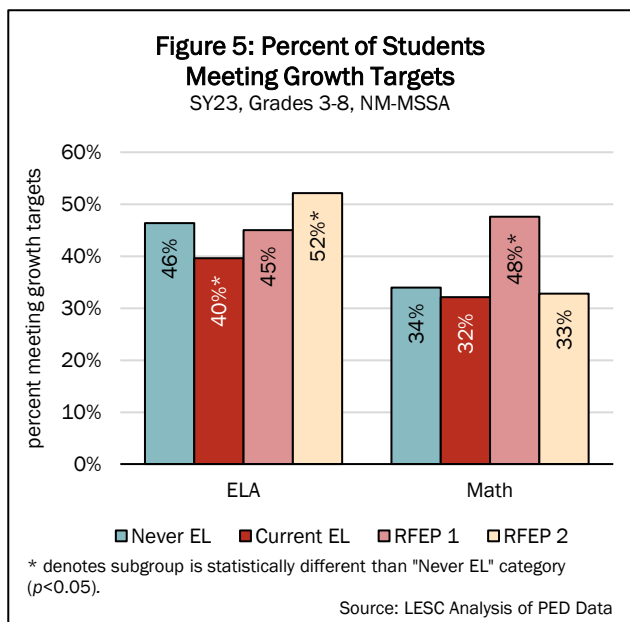
The test is aligned with the WIDA English language development standards, which formed the basis for New Mexico's standards and focus on academic language development across core content areas. Students' performance on the ACCESS assessment helps educators understand their current level of English proficiency and informs decisions regarding instructional strategies, the need for continued language support, and, ultimately, whether a student is ready to exit the EL program. Schools are required to track the progress of students who have exited EL status for two years to ensure their continued academic success without language support services.



**Despite the five-year goal, the priority remains on providing appropriate, individualized support to help students develop English proficiency at their own pace.** For example, in one school district, students either do not exit the program in elementary or are identified as ELs in middle or high school. Students who retain EL status into middle and high school frequently face difficulties meeting the reclassification criteria. To address this, the district has implemented a new curriculum called *Bridges*, designed to support middle school students who are close to proficiency but have not yet achieved it. Despite these efforts, reclassification remains a significant hurdle for older students.

Other school districts report a notably low number of students exiting EL programs because of reluctance to speak during the ACCESS assessment. This hesitation can prevent students from demonstrating their true language abilities, prolonging their EL status. Educators noted a similar pattern in a predominantly Indigenous-serving school district, where low exit rates from EL status are partially attributed to students' reluctance to speak during the ACCESS assessment.

LESC analysis of student growth found students who exit EL status set themselves on a growth trajectory to outpace their non-EL peers over time. As shown in **Figure 4: Percent of Students Meeting Growth Targets**, students who exit EL status and enter their first year in reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP 1) status are about as likely to meet ELA growth targets as students who were never classified as EL. In the second year (RFEP 2), students are significantly





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more likely than students who were never ELs to meet their growth targets. In math, RFEF 1 students see significantly higher rates of math growth than students who are ELs and students who were never ELs. While still a preliminary analysis, early findings highlight the need to both support students in exiting EL status and to better understand the factors contributing to stronger academic performance upon exit.

## Services and Support for Students who Exit English Learner Status

***Schools are required to monitor the academic progress of students who exit EL status for two years after reclassification.*** While there is no standard method of monitoring progress, PED reported schools use various academic measures, including short-cycle and summative assessments, to ensure exited EL students are not falling behind.

Although no longer classified as ELs, these students may benefit from integrated language development strategies embedded in regular content instruction. These strategies, essential during their time as ELs, continue to help reinforce language skills and support overall academic achievement.

In some cases, exited EL students may continue participating in bilingual programs, which provide further opportunities to improve their language skills. Although the specific supports available may vary by district and school, the overarching goal remains to provide exited EL students with the necessary assistance to succeed academically and continue their progress beyond EL status.

***Because of the federal and state requirement to monitor students for two years after reclassification, it is important school districts and charter schools have adequate support and resources.*** Without explicit funding for monitoring exited EL students, districts are left to absorb costs through general funds or reallocate resources from other areas. This can result in inconsistent or inadequate monitoring, as schools may lack the necessary staffing or tools to track students' academic progress and intervene when needed. Moreover, this oversight in funding can undermine the goal of ensuring long-term academic success for former EL students, as there is no formal mechanism to sustain support once they exit EL programs.

### Indigenous Students Identified as English Learners

Bilingual and multicultural education is seen as essential for Indigenous students, emphasizing the need to preserve Indigenous languages while also building English proficiency. A dual-language approach is crucial for maintaining cultural identity and ensuring academic success. Standard English Learning methods may not fully address Indigenous students' needs, highlighting the importance of culturally responsive teaching.

A key challenge is the shortage of qualified teachers who understand both English language acquisition and Indigenous cultural contexts. Addressing this gap is vital for providing the specialized support Indigenous students need to succeed academically while preserving their linguistic heritage.

A school district with a high Indigenous population implemented a "heritage model" for language instruction. It offers Indigenous language courses to all prekindergarten through eighth-grade students, with the option to take these courses for credit at the high school level. This model aims to promote the learning of Indigenous languages among the younger generation, integrating them into the standard curriculum. School district officials noted a recent trend of a decrease in kindergarten identified as English learners. Historically, most incoming kindergarteners were classified as English learners. Officials suggested the shift means more families are speaking English at home, leading to fewer students needing English language development services. This change indicates a gradual language shift within the community, where English is increasingly spoken over the Indigenous language.

Despite these shifts, most English learners within the district are still Indigenous students, with smaller populations of Filipino and other tribal students also classified as English learners. This highlights the district's diverse linguistic needs and the ongoing efforts to support both Indigenous language revitalization and English proficiency.

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## The Role of Dual-Language Programs in Serving English learners

Strategies that preserve and sustain home languages, while simultaneously improving English language proficiency can be an effective way to support ELs. While traditional supports for ELs focus on helping students achieve proficiency in English, strategies such as dual language programs aim to develop proficiency in English and another language. As noted previously, it is important that the state's strategies distinguish between ELs and students participating in BMEPs, such as dual language. Not all ELs participate in BMEPs, and not all students who participate in BMEPs are ELs.

Dual language programs serve both EL and native English-speaking students, offering instruction in two languages with the goal of students becoming bilingual and biliterate, thereby promoting cultural and linguistic relevancy. This model is often viewed as an enrichment approach that maintains and strengthens students' home languages while developing their English skills. Another important distinction is the cultural component; dual language programs generally emphasize cultural learning and exchange, allowing students to engage with both languages' cultural contexts. Some [research](#) has found dual language programs improve literacy outcomes for students.

New Mexico funds BMEPs through the school funding formula, with students participating in a PED-approved BMEP generating additional funds for school districts and charter schools. That additional funding is often used to pay stipends to teachers with bilingual endorsements or for supplemental materials needed for bilingual programming. Dual language programs, with their focus on language immersion, often require all or a subset of educators to be certified to teach in a bilingual program. Schools may incur additional costs to offer dual language programs, with [research](#) indicating a range of 2 percent to 12 percent more funding per pupil compared to monolingual programming. Despite the potential of bilingual programming to improve outcomes for ELs, a recent Legislative Finance Committee [evaluation](#) of the state's bilingual programming found most ELs do not participate in BMEPs.

## Policy and Budget Recommendations

As New Mexico continues to grapple with the need to ensure ELs attain English language proficiency while balancing linguistic and cultural sustainability, the Legislature can take steps to provide more clarity about the resources school districts and charters have to support English learners. It can also work to ensure more educators have the training they need to adequately serve ELs. The Legislature should consider:

- Creating a standalone English learner factor in the school funding formula. This would allow districts to track EL-specific resources more easily and direct them toward critical interventions such as bilingual education, individualized support, and professional development for teachers. Additionally, clearer funding streams would help districts measure the impact of these funds on EL outcomes, ensuring students receive the specialized services necessary for academic success.
- Extending the EL factor to reclassified students during the federally mandated two-year monitoring period.
- Funding below-the-line appropriations to support more educators becoming TESOL or bilingual certified.
- Studying the need to embed TESOL-certification or other EL-specific strategies in all educator preparation programs.