

Embracing Every Student: The Importance of Supporting Multilingual Learners

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Written by: Liliana Bolaños



Multilingual students are a vibrant and enriching part of our school communities. In Utah, **59,147 students** in the K-12 system are Multilingual Learners (ML), also known as English Language Learners or English Learners. They bring diverse backgrounds and perspectives that enhance the educational experience for all students.

This summer, Voices for Utah Children and the Center for Economic Opportunity and Belonging have been raising awareness of ML students and the richness their backgrounds bring. On June 18th, we co-organized a Lunch and Learn event, *Promising Practices and Resources to Welcome Newcomers to Schools*.

We welcomed Dr. Christelle Estrada, Ph.D (right photo), who presented data, promising practices, and resources for Multilingual Learners. Dr. Estrada is the Education Specialist with the Title III, Refugee & Immigration Program at the Utah State Board of Education. Additionally, Wendy Cervantes (center photo) from the [Center for Law and Social Policy](#) joined virtually giving information regarding the federal context on K-12 multilingual and undocumented students, highlighting concerns about the potential resurgence of issues related to Plyler v. Doe in the coming year.

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We know much has been debated about immigrant students, and questions have been raised about how resource allocation affects non-ML students. **As an organization, we stand by ensuring all children have the opportunity to obtain an education in our state regardless of where they were born or their immigration status.** Our state leaders now have a critical opportunity to provide additional support to help our school districts meet the diverse needs of these students.

History of Education for Immigrant Students

Under the 1982 Plyler v. Doe ruling, all foreign-born children, including undocumented ones, have the right to a public K-12 education. Schools are legally obligated to identify multilingual learners and provide necessary language assistance services. This ruling also ensures that parents are informed about enrollment into ML programs and that school policies are in a language they understand. Unfortunately, there are continued efforts to [challenge or undermine this ruling](#), which would be detrimental to immigrant students and their families living in our state.

Impact and Importance of Multilingual Learners

Educating all children, including newcomers, has proven to be beneficial to the United States as a whole. Historically, multilingual learners are newcomers/immigrants. Research indicates that newcomer students positively impact native-born students, improving their educational outcomes.

The long-term benefits of educating Multilingual Learners are evident in the achievements of previous generations who have accessed public education and subsequently joined the workforce, such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients. [2] A June 2024 [report by The Center for American Progress](#) highlights some of the significant benefits the DACA program has had in our country. The report reveals that nearly 23% of DACA recipients have pursued higher education, and approximately 343,000 served as essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Immigrants, including those undocumented, make substantial contributions to the U.S. economy, paying \$524.7 billion in total taxes in 2021.

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According to a [report by The Century Foundation](#), the presence of immigrant students fosters diverse learning environments, which benefit all students by enhancing skills such as creative problem-solving and critical thinking. Denying education to any child, regardless of immigration status, could have long-term detrimental effects on society, emphasizing the importance of inclusive educational policies.

Why Are We Talking About ML Students Now?

In Utah, the ML student population has seen consistent growth. According to the Utah State Board of Education, the number of refugee students increased from 3,866 in the 2022-23 school year to 4,473 in the 2023-24 school year. Similarly, refugee students learning English rose from 3,157 to 3,555 during the same period. The immigrant student group saw an increase from 17,668 to 18,210, with those learning English growing from 13,491 to 14,233. Overall, the total number of students learning English slightly adjusted from 59,176 to 59,147 between the two school years?. This data shows that ML students continue to be a small percentage of the overall student population.

Student Group	Student Count School Year 22-23 (Final)	Student Count School Year 23-24 (Dec 2023)
Refugee Student Group	3,866	4,473
Refugee Student who is Learning English (English Learner) Student Group	3,157	3,555
Immigrant Student Group	17,668	18,210
Immigrant Student who is Learning English (English Learner) Student Group	13,491	14,233
Total Students Learning English Student Group	59,176 *	59,147 *

* Official October 1 Headcount

Who Are Utah’s ML Students?

The ML population in Utah is diverse, including refugees, immigrants, US-born

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citizens, and other students learning English. These students come to the U.S. for various reasons and hold different immigration statuses. [1] The following definitions come from the Utah State Board of Education and play a role in ML funding opportunities.

- I-94 Arrival-Departure Record Form holders
- I-551 Permanent Resident Record holders
- Immigration Court Letter recipients, also identified as refugee or asylum seekers

ML students are typically aged between 3 and 21, born outside the U.S., and have not attended one or more schools in any state for more than three full academic years. These students are categorized based on their engagement with English Learner services at their school as:

- Y: Receiving English Learner services
- 0: Qualified for services, but family refused
- Fluent: Achieved English fluency and no longer need services

Funding for ML Students

Funding for multilingual (ML) students' education is multifaceted. Schools receive each student's Weighted Pupil Unit (WPU) and Supplemental Federal Title III Funds. Additionally, some school districts have utilized alternative funding sources to address the needs of students beyond the classroom, particularly in response to significant increases in newcomer students. *This funding is designated specifically for English learners and does not detract from the resources available to non-English learner students.*

Addressing Misconceptions

During the most recent [Education Interim Committee meeting](#), concerns were raised about resource allocation and its impact on non-ML students. However, based on available funding data, these concerns appear unfounded. Some elected officials claimed that ML students were diverting resources from non-ML students and that Utah schools were overwhelmed by the influx of ML students, leading to insufficient resources and funding. Some suggested that revoking children's right to a public

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education could resolve these issues. However, it is imperative to uphold access to a public K-12 education as a constitutional right (*Plyler v. Doe*). While we acknowledge that certain districts have been more affected than others, establishing collaborative groups to discuss and implement promising practices will offer school districts the opportunity to ensure they receive the necessary support.

It is essential for committee officials to engage in discussions with school district leaders to better understand the funding structure for EL programs and raise more awareness. Additionally, it's important to allocate time and resources to constructive conversations on how to ensure that every student has access to a quality education.

Long-term Recommendations for Supporting ML Students

Changes in demographics bring both opportunities and challenges. Utah has the potential to lead by supporting innovative solutions and promising practices led by districts like Canyons, Granite, and Wasatch. Key recommendations include:

- Strengthening learning cohorts and investing in promising models.
- Developing structural changes to expand teacher and school personnel knowledge.
- Investing in professional development for teachers, including curriculum planning, training, and ML endorsement funding
- Increasing classroom support with additional teacher aides.
- Facilitating regular meetings for district officials to share promising practices with those district officials.

Success Stories and Partnerships

Several success stories from schools in Utah were highlighted during the Education Interim Committee, displaying the positive impact of community and educational partnerships:

- Herriman High School: Partnered with Herriman City, Salt Lake Community College, and Deloitte Accounting to support ML students. These collaborations help students integrate, succeed, and feel proud to be part of the U.S. educational system.
- Granite School District: Implemented the Grant Tuminari Process, which

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supports newcomers and refugees with immediate school immersion, family support, and home visits with interpreters.

Call to Action

Utah's commitment to supporting ML students is critical in fostering an inclusive and enriching educational environment for all children in the state. By investing in these students, we invest in the future of our entire community. These solutions will require continued collaboration, trust, and determination to support all students in our schools, regardless of their birthplace. Upholding access to public K-12 education as a constitutional right is crucial.

When done right, we know Utah schools can be where all immigrant, refugee, and ML students feel supported in their educational journey. We encourage community members to stay engaged with Voices for Utah Children as the interim discussions progress in Utah.

We also invite you to listen in on the [Education Interim Committee meetings](#) and help hold them accountable for the educational rights of all of our children. At the end of the interim period, the committee will propose legislation that could either support or harm our ML students, making it crucial for all of us to remain engaged.

For questions, please email Liliana@utahchildren.org.

Footnotes

1. It is important to recognize that while refugees are immigrants, not all immigrants are refugees. The term Immigrant includes refugees, asylum seekers, international students, and more.
2. Historically, many DACA recipients have been beneficiaries of the ML programs at their schools.