

HB 2256 Will Equip our Schools to Support English Learners with Disabilities and Delays

Testimony to the Texas House Public Education Committee in Support of HB 2256

HB 2256 by Rep. Guerra/SB 1101 by Sen. Creighton will provide English Learners eligible for Special Education the opportunity for a quality education.

Texas has the highest percentage of English Learners (ELs) in the nation, but Texas schools lack the personnel to address EL student disabilities and delays in effective ways. Unfortunately, the lack of certified Bilingual Special Education teachers creates several problems:

- Students are misdiagnosed – in both directions.
 - ELs **with** disabilities and delays are **not identified for Special Education** when untrained school personnel incorrectly assume that their challenges are based solely on language.
 - ELs who do **not** have disabilities and delays are **incorrectly identified for Special Education** when untrained teachers and administrators mistake a language barrier for other challenges.
- There are delays – often for years – in identifying ELs who need Special Education, meaning ELs are missing effective support during the years where they would benefit the most.
- When ELs are correctly identified for Special Education, their families are often forced to choose between either A) a program and teacher equipped to address students' language needs but not student disabilities or delays, or B) a program and teacher equipped to address disabilities and delays but not students' language needs.

HB 2256 would create a teacher certification in Bilingual Special Education, which will build a pipeline of school leaders who are equipped to effectively serve the educational needs of English Learner children with disabilities

and developmental delays in pre-k through 12th grade. Diagnoses will be more accurate. They will happen soon enough to start services when they are most effective. And they will be followed by services that can meet the student's language needs and address the student's disabilities and delays.



COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted English Learners and students in special education, creating greater urgency to pass this legislation.

English Learners and children with disabilities and delays have been **hugely impacted by moving to distance learning** during the COVID-19 pandemic due to a lack of:

- effective devices and instructional materials for their learning needs;
- reliable internet access; and
- sufficient support at home to engage with remote instruction.

The lack of structured learning is particularly detrimental to these learners because **online learning does not effectively cultivate language development** nor provide the individual teacher-child interactions critical for these students to succeed in school.

With more educators equipped to serve these children's needs, districts will be better suited to serve these children's unique needs and respond more effectively in similar circumstances moving forward.

HB 2256 is a top recommendation of the Texas Early Childhood English Learner Initiative based on a year of statewide research.

To ensure more Texas children are successful both inside and outside the classroom and to maximize the impact of the historic education investments in House Bill 3 from the 2019 Texas legislative session, Texans Care for Children, along with a variety of partners and stakeholders, launched [the Texas Early Childhood English Learner Initiative](#) in early 2020.

Our goals are to ensure more English Learner (EL) students become **strong readers by third grade**, become **fluent and literate in both English and their home language**, and are learning in settings where **educators, principals, child care directors, and parents have the tools they need** to support them during this precious period of childhood. Early childhood experiences – in the home, child care, pre-k, and other early grades – provide the foundation for success in later grades and later in life.

From January through October 2020, we developed the recommendations through a statewide survey of 185 experts in bilingual and early childhood education, three virtual workgroup convenings with community leaders from around the state, and numerous conversations with education program leaders and stakeholders.

Through these conversations, one of the top challenges and needs identified was supporting English Learners with disabilities and developmental delays. Of the 185 stakeholders surveyed, when given a choice of significant, moderate, low, or no impact,

- **76 percent** said schools employing personnel dually certified in bilingual and special education certifications would have a significant impact.
- **79 percent** said utilizing culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate screening procedures for students who may require special education services and who are ELs would have a significant impact.

Here is some of what we heard from experts:

- “We are in **desperate need** for more teachers that are certified in bilingual and special education.” - Dr. Illana Alanis, UTSA
- “There is a huge need to have a certification in Bilingual Special Education. This is why the **schools do not have the expertise** and have to rely on 2 people/cross-collaboration. Cross collaboration sounds good, but is not doable/possible for many reasons.” - Dr. Elena Izquierdo, UT El Paso.
- “Leadership should have demonstrated educational and/or practical experience in areas of bilingual education and **servicing children who are dually identified as English learners and children with disabilities.**” - Rodolfo Rodriguez, Dallas ISD

Conclusion

HB 2256 will help districts respond to missed learning opportunities from COVID-19 and better support these children moving forward. We appreciate the House Committee on Public Education’s favorable consideration of this critical bill for some of our state’s most vulnerable children.