

Multilingual learners in Minnesota: A survey of statewide support

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After a decade of growth in Minnesota's English Learner population, a collaborative research team administered a survey to gauge levels of support for multilingual learners across the state. This paper presents data on key areas of policy implementation, professional learning, and English learner support as reported by survey participants and offers suggestions for continued improvement across the state.

Keywords: elementary, middle school, secondary, SLIFE (students with limited or interrupted formal education), policy, LEAPS Act

Introduction and purpose of the study

Over the last decade, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) has reported a 22% increase in students receiving English learner (EL) services across the state of Minnesota (MDE, 2024a). Despite this growth, the effectiveness of educational services for multilingual learners remains inadequate. In the 2023 school year, less than 30% of English learners met their language growth targets (Minnesota Report Card, 2023). To address the widening academic gap between multilingual learners and their monolingual peers, this research project aimed to assess the statewide support for these students, their families, and educators. The study involved diverse stakeholders and seeks to inform policy discussions and guide actionable improvements in support systems.

What does the literature say about support for multilingual learners in Minnesota?

Minnesota has a notable legislative commitment to supporting multilingual learners (Andersen, 2020). The state's increasing linguistic diversity – evidenced by approximately 12% of Minnesotans speaking a language other than English at home (Minnesota Education Equity Partnership, 2024) – highlights the urgent need for investment in EL students and their families. ELs are the fastest-growing student demographic, comprising approximately nine percent of all public school students in the 2023-2024 school year (MDE, 2024a).

Alongside the rapid growth of the multilingual learner population, the academic opportunity gap between multilingual learners and their monolingual peers is also expanding (King & Bigelow, 2019). Multilingual learners tend to achieve lower outcomes in math, reading, science, and high school graduation rates than their native English-speaking peers (Anderson, 2020; MDE, 2023).

The Learning English for Academic Proficiency and Success (LEAPS) Act of 2014 aimed to address these inequities. The LEAPS Act encompasses critical provisions aimed at recognizing the benefits of multilingualism, enhancing the skills and knowledge of teachers and administrators in supporting multilingual learners, and academic language development in both home languages and English (Anderson, 2020). Specifically, the LEAPS Act lays out several

provisions to ensure that all teachers, not just those explicitly working with English learners, are prepared to work with multilingual learners (MDE, 2018). The Act also promotes family engagement, bilingual programs, and tailored support for students categorized as students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) and long-term English learners (LTELs).

Despite being progressive and research-based, the law has encountered implementation challenges due to the state's sociopolitical, demographic, and cultural context (King & Bigelow, 2019). While the Act supports the use of students' native languages for learning academic English, it lacks specific guidance on implementing an additive multilingual education policy, such as through bilingual education (Anderson, 2020).

In addition to state law, federal law also aims to ensure equitable access for multilingual learners. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) grants states the authority to establish systems and policies that prioritize equity and continuous improvement for all students and guarantees that students receive the resources necessary for their success while ensuring that teachers and administrators have the required support to fulfill this commitment. For multilingual learners, ESSA mandates standardized processes for eligibility, annual assessment and reclassification, and incorporation of English proficiency into statewide accountability systems.

Understanding current support for multilingual learners in Minnesota schools will enable teachers, school leaders and policymakers to share informed recommendations at the local and state level. This paper presents survey data on statewide perceptions of knowledge and implementation related to state and federal policy along with recommendations for strengthening statewide support through professional learning.

Our research process

The survey questions used in this research were adapted from research instruments funded by the U.S. Department of Education, developed through a partnership of seven states (Arkansas, Arizona, Ohio, Michigan, Mississippi, Washington, and Wisconsin), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and researchers at California State University Northridge (CSUN) and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

The adapted survey included a total of 52 prompts, addressing topics such as school environments, staff knowledge, professional learning, and family engagement. Additionally, the survey included demographic questions related to organizational affiliation, role, and language background. The questions included Likert-scale prompts, and multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The Wilder Research Institutional Review Board (IRB) classified the research as exempt from full review, indicating that the study posed minimal risk to participants based on the survey content and target audience. Survey information and consent documentation were shared with survey participants at the beginning of the survey, and survey participation was incentivized through a stipend opportunity.

For the purposes of this paper we identified a subset of survey prompts that directly addressed the following research questions:

1. How do educators perceive the implementation of specific state policy related to multilingual learners?

2. What types of professional learning opportunities contribute to a statewide system of support for multilingual learners and families?
3. What systems and structures may be needed to strengthen statewide support for multilingual learners?

A wide range of dissemination strategies was used to ensure representation from both urban and rural school districts as well as various roles in those schools. The survey was disseminated through the MinneTESOL email distribution list, the MDE English Learner Coordinator's Newsletter, several non-profit newsletters and a university affiliated Facebook group. The survey link was also disseminated through publicly available MDE contact lists, including Bilingual Family Engagement Liaisons, Program Coordinators for Bilingual Seals, District English Learner Coordinators, Migrant Liaisons and WIDA eLearning Coordinators.

Who responded to the survey?

Approximately half (n=151) of the survey respondents disclosed their district affiliation. Thirty-five counties were represented, as seen in Figure 1: County Representation by Survey Participants in Minnesota. There were 76 public school districts represented as well as 15 charter, tribal, or private schools and cooperatives.

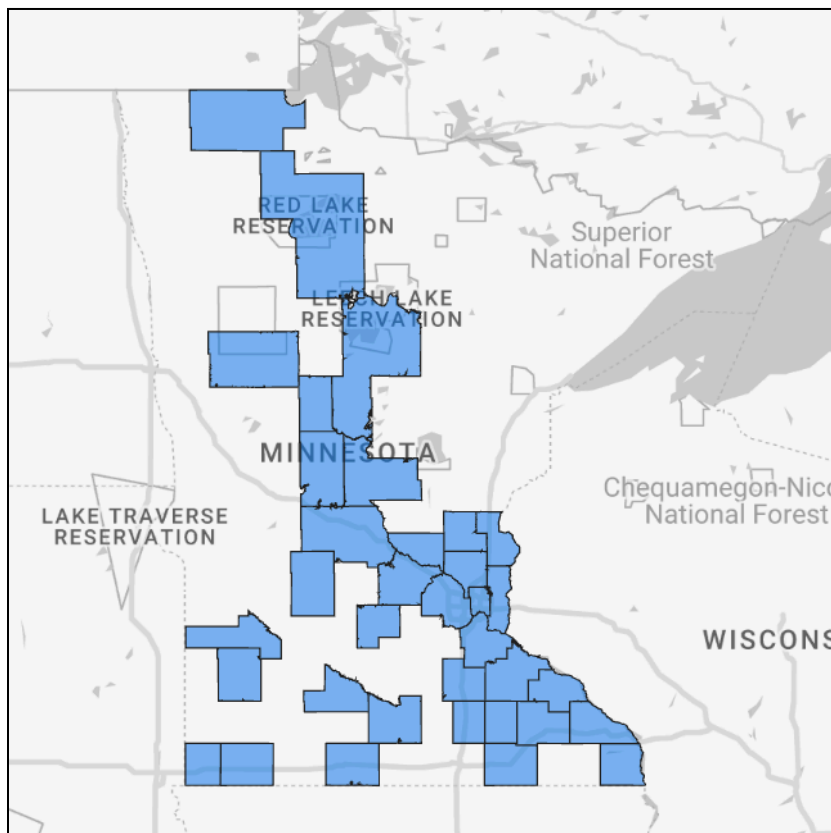


Table 1 shows the respondent demographics by role. Approximately half of the respondents identified as either classroom teachers or English Language Development (ELD) teachers. In addition, seventy-three respondents reported that they are fluent or conversational in languages in addition to English. More than 50 respondents reported fluency in Spanish. Additional languages included French, German, Swedish, Finnish, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Russian, Hindi, Ojibwe, and American Sign Language, each reported by between one to five respondents.

Figure 1. County Representation by Survey Participants in Minnesota

Table 1. Respondent Roles

Role	Percentage <i>n=223</i>
Classroom teacher	27%
ELD / English Learner teacher	22%
Title III / English Learner coordinator	8%
Education support professional	6%
School administrator	7%
Other (<i>e.g., instructional coach, school counselor, special education teacher, speech language pathologist, parent engagement coordinator, Q Comp coordinator, liaison</i>)	30%

How do educators perceive the implementation of specific state policy related to multilingual learners?

The survey asked participants to rate their knowledge on various topics related to instructing students receiving EL services. Participants reported their knowledge on a four-point scale (not at all, a little bit, moderately, and highly) as depicted in Table 2: Participant Knowledge.

Table 2: Participant Knowledge

How knowledgeable are you about the following topics related to instruction of English learners?	N	Not at all	A little bit	Moderately	Highly
Identification procedures for English learners (e.g., language usage survey, ELP screener)	276	15%	27%	23%	37%
The statewide annual ELP assessment (WIDA ACCESS)	273	18%	22%	20%	40%
State expectations concerning annual English learner progress	278	19%	35%	28%	18%
Monitoring procedures for former (exited/reclassified) English learners	280	28%	34%	22%	15%
Minnesota Learning English for Academic Proficiency and Success (LEAPS) Act	280	40%	30%	21%	9%

A significant number of survey respondents indicated little to no knowledge of state and federal policy for ELs across key survey prompts. Two-fifths of respondents reported little to no knowledge of identification procedures and assessment requirements for multilingual learners. More than half of survey respondents indicated little to no knowledge of state expectations for annual EL progress or monitoring procedures for reclassified ELs. Additionally, 70% of respondents reported minimal knowledge of the LEAPS Act. Effective implementation requires strong practitioner knowledge, so these results demonstrate an opportunity for building capacity through additional professional learning.

What types of professional learning opportunities contribute to a statewide system of support for multilingual learners and families?

In addition to exploring perceptions of policy implementation, the survey asked participants to reflect on their experience with professional learning related to supporting multilingual learners. Participants were asked about their participation in different types of professional learning over the past year, and to assess how effectively that professional development offered high-quality professional learning opportunities to improve instruction for multilingual learners. Evaluation options ranged from "not at all" to "a great deal," with an "unsure" option included. (See Table 3: Participation and Evaluation of Professional Learning.)

Table 3: Participation and Evaluation of Professional Learning

	Percentage of educators who participated in the past 12 months (n=207)	Of those who participated, percentage who reported "somewhat" or "to a great deal" (n=10-159*)
Minnesota English Learner Education (MELEd) Conference	31%	100%
WIDA eLearning Courses	33%	82%
Project MOMENTUM Courses	5%	100%
School/District Provided CEUs	82%	74%
College/University Courses	27%	90%

**Note: This number represents the range of responses. Respondents only answered this question if they reported that they had participated in professional learning. The high end of the range (n=159) represents the number of respondents who participated in School/District provided CEUs and the low end (n=10) represents the number who had participated in Project MOMENTUM courses.*

Overall, 82% of respondents reported school/district-level professional development as their most common experience. However, this type of professional learning was also perceived as having the least impact on improving instruction for multilingual learners.

Only 5% of respondents had participated in Project MOMENTUM courses. Project MOMENTUM is a federally-funded grant program from the Office of English Language Acquisition (Award #T365Z220119) that provides professional learning to teachers in Minnesota. These courses were launched in Fall 2023, and the survey was conducted in Spring 2024. Although participation in Project MOMENTUM's courses was low at the time of survey completion, all participants gave the learning experience high evaluation marks.

What systems and structures may be needed to strengthen statewide support for multilingual learners?

Survey respondents were asked to evaluate support for multilingual learners and educators in Minnesota on a scale from 1 (no support) to 10 (very high support) and to provide additional comments about improving instruction for multilingual learners in Minnesota. Results included an average rating of 6.4 (n=226) for support for multilingual learners, and an average rating of 5.9 (n=225) for support for teachers working with multilingual learners. In addition, there were 82 open-ended comments about improving support for multilingual learners and 64 open-ended comments about support for teachers working with multilingual learners.

Based on a thematic analysis of survey responses conducted by Wilder Research, the most commonly requested support was additional education and training for teachers, especially for general education teachers (Gozali-Lee & Washington, 2024). There were explicit statements about the need for additional training, for adapting curriculum to meet the needs of multilingual learners, and for implementing state standards. The following comments highlight some of the areas identified for continuous improvement efforts:

“More consistency in resources available statewide.”

“More legislation is to be provided. Currently, the guidelines from MDE can be used so loosely and it's easy for districts to under-fund ELD programs because it isn't as legally bound as other programs such as SPED.”

“More professional development for content area and classroom teachers so they know how to differentiate for MLLs [Multilingual Learners].”

“More staff members with an expertise in supporting multilingual learners available to collaborate and support teachers.”

Implications

The purpose of this collaborative research project was to gather key insights regarding statewide support for multilingual learners across Minnesota. The results of this survey have underscored the need to strengthen knowledge around state and federal policy and to expand opportunities for professional development specific to the strengths and needs of multilingual learners.

All teachers in Minnesota should have foundational knowledge of student eligibility for language services and statewide expectations for language proficiency and growth. ESSA establishes a framework for standardized state procedures related to the civil rights of multilingual learners and the LEAPS Act sets forth a vision for linguistically sustaining schools. However, without strong knowledge and implementation of state and federal policy, Minnesota schools will continue to fall short in closing opportunity gaps for multilingual learners.

Of the survey participants, 49% represent teachers who regularly support multilingual learners. Their responses consistently expressed the desire for additional professional development that is specifically tailored to support multilingual learners. Minnesota has taken a significant step in updating the Standards of Effective Practice for aspiring educators to focus more explicitly on language development. These efforts, however, contrast greatly with current relicensure requirements from the Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing Board, which require only one hour of professional learning related to multilingual students during each three to five-year license period, which is insufficient to meet the ongoing needs of educators working with multilingual learners.

Limitations

This survey had a modest sample size ($n=314$) and was limited by being available only in English, which may have excluded some multilingual participants. Future surveys should broaden dissemination and language accessibility. Additionally, exploring various professional development methods beyond traditional formats, such as professional learning communities or instructional coaching, could provide further insights.

Conclusion and recommendations for further action

Strengthening statewide systems of support for multilingual learners must be a collaborative effort involving local school districts, MDE, regional service cooperatives, colleges and universities, and community partners. One current effort to enhance statewide support related to state and federal policy is MDE's Collaborative Minnesota Partnerships to Advance Student Success (COMPASS) initiative. COMPASS is designed with partnership in mind and aims to guide and support education systems to improve instruction within the Minnesota Multi-tiered System of Supports (MnMTSS) framework (MDE, 2024b).

As part of the COMPASS support system, two equity specialists have been designated to support multilingual education across the state. While this is a clear step in the right direction to expand statewide support and ensure effective implementation of the LEAPS Act, the scale of the need across Minnesota is grounds for a more substantial investment in state leadership capacity. The COMPASS initiative creates an opportunity to intentionally incorporate the strengths and needs of multilingual learners into the MnMTSS framework and ensure compliance with state and federal policy. Additional statewide initiatives, such as the Southeast Service Cooperative's Project MOMENTUM, offer promising resources to improve instruction for multilingual learners through online, self-paced professional development courses accessible to all educators in the state.

Multilingual learners, their families, and the educators who support them deserve strong statewide support. This research project highlights the need for further investment in enhancing knowledge and implementation of state and federal policies. It is essential to provide all teachers with professional learning opportunities that effectively improve instruction for multilingual learners. A follow-up statewide survey is planned for Spring 2027 for comparative analysis.

Disclaimer

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Dr. Kendra Katnik is an Instructional Specialist at the Southeast Service Cooperative, specializing in multilingual learner education. Her diverse experience includes roles as an elementary and middle school teacher, English Language Development teacher, consultant and program coordinator, and in both teacher professional development and higher education. Dr. Katnik is committed to advocating for equitable educational opportunities for culturally and linguistically diverse students. She holds an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from the University of Michigan and has professional licenses in teaching and central office administration, highlighting her dedication to advancing educational equity and instructional quality at both classroom and systems levels.

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Feature image



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