Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Washington State Multilingual Learners: Policies and Practice Guide

2023

CHAPTER 6: MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS & SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Access, Equity, and Inclusion

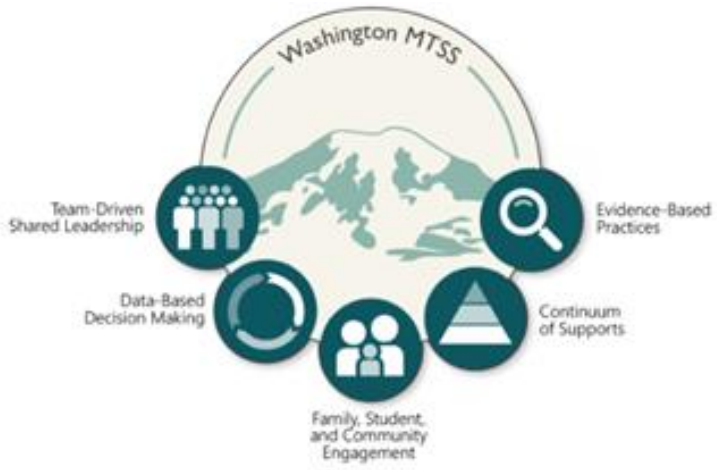
All students benefit from opportunities for an accessible, equitable, and inclusive education. To better understand how these terms will be used within this chapter, please review the table below:

Term	Definition
Access	Equal opportunities are provided to participate in general education by reducing or removing barriers.
Equity	Each student receives the support and resources needed to benefit from equal opportunities to learn and participate in all aspects of school.
Inclusion	All students feel a sense of belonging and experience meaningful participation in learning and the community because the environment, curriculum, and assessments are accessible and equitable.

Using a Multi-Tiered System of Supports for MLs

Washington's MTSS Framework

Districts and schools can increase opportunities for access, equity, and inclusion by leveraging a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). MTSS is a framework that uses evidence-based practices to achieve important outcomes for every student.



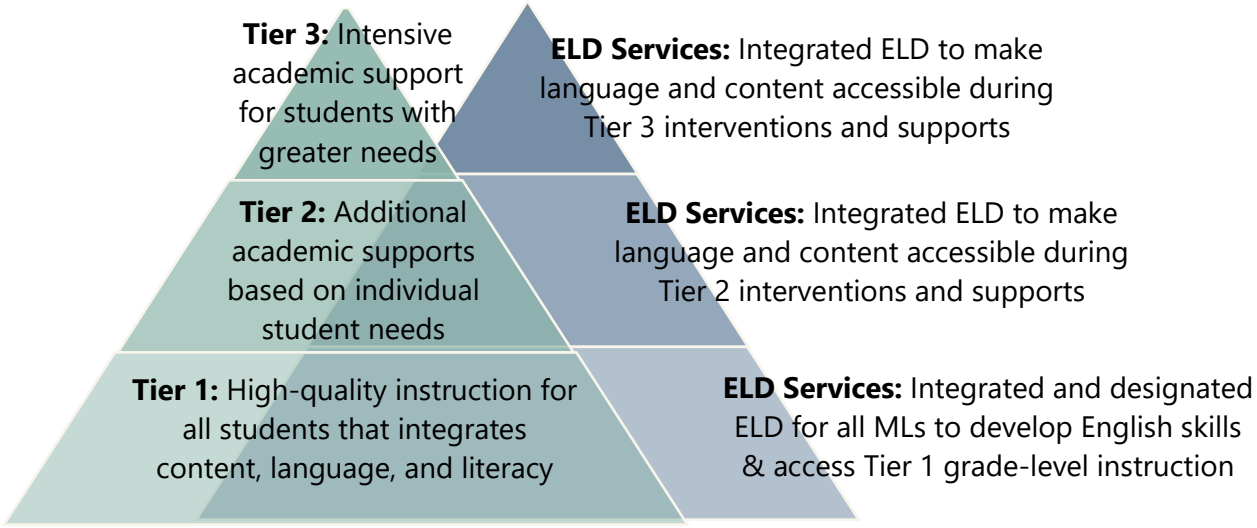
Washington's MTSS Framework focuses on organizing the efforts of adults to ensure students benefit from culturally and linguistically

nurturing environments and equitable access to instruction and supports that are differentiated to meet their unique needs including supporting Multilingual Learners (MLs) through:

- **Team-driven shared leadership.** A team-based approach including classroom teachers, bilingual educators, EL specialists, reading specialists, and/or special education specialists may be helpful to determine what multilingual learners can do, what skills are still developing, and how to best support the student's academic, language, and literacy development.
- **Data-based decision making.** Reviewing data not only from English language proficiency and academic assessments but also from observations and other data sources can help provide a complete picture of the multilingual learner and support decision-making about instructional needs.
- **Family, student, and community engagement.** Families and caregivers are critical partners in understanding multilingual learners' strengths and needs. Interpreters, bilingual educators, and community language brokers can also help families understand their essential role.
- **Evidence-based practices.** Multilingual learners need support with both their language and literacy skills as well as academic content. Literacy interventions alone cannot take the place of critical English language development (ELD) services provided by an educator with specialized training. Multilingual learners also need regular, meaningful access to content that is taught using effective strategies for language learners.
- **Continuum of supports.** Multilingual learners should be included in Tier 1, 2, and 3 instruction and interventions to address their specific academic needs, in addition to having regular designated ELD services.

MTSS Framework and English Language Development Services

Within the MTSS Framework, MLs need additional ELD supports to access academic content. The diagram below illustrates how ELD must be embedded into all tiers with academic support.



Designated ELD can be provided across the academic tiers and in different ways but must include certain critical elements. The criteria for designated ELD instruction include:

- **Planning:** Instruction is designed by or with an ELD specialist or teacher with an ELL or Bilingual endorsement, is specific to the student's proficiency level, and targets English language development standards (WIDA ELD Standards Framework).
- **Instruction:** Instruction uses resources that are designed or adapted for multilingual learners and addresses all 4 domains of language, based on student needs.
- **Instructor:** ELD instruction is provided by or in consultation with an ELL or Bilingual endorsed teacher. Instruction can be provided by an ELD teacher, general education teacher, or paraprofessional as long as they have sufficient expertise in supporting MLs and are directly supervised or supported by an ELL or Bilingual endorsed teacher.

Similarly, multilingual learners need meaningful access to core academic content instruction. The criteria for providing accessible content instruction include:

- **Planning:** Instruction is designed collaboratively by a content teacher with an ELD specialist or teacher with an ELL or Bilingual endorsement. Instructional plans include academic language expectations using content and ELD standards.
- **Instruction:** Instruction addresses the most critical academic language functions and features and utilizes strategies such as GLAD, SIOP, and UDL to make content accessible.
- **Instructor:** Instruction can be provided by a general education content teacher with co-teaching or support from an ELD specialist or paraprofessional.

For more ideas on how to address the needs of multilingual learners through MTSS, visit mtss4els.org.

MLs who Qualify for Special Education Services

Multilingual learners who also qualify for special education services have unique and specialized needs. At a minimum, districts must:

- Ensure that English Language development is provided for all identified MLs who also qualify for Special Education;
- Ensure that an educator(s) with the proper knowledge and skills regarding language acquisition participates on the Child Study, Referral, and/or IEP team;
- Provide systems that support collaboration between EL Specialists, General Education Teachers, and Special Education Teachers; and
- Recognize the common misunderstandings and work to dispel the myths and provide professional learning for all educators.

Culturally Responsive Practices for Identification of MLs with Disabilities

The process to refer and identify an ML for special education services requires a pre-referral, whole-child approach which considers multiple factors. Because multilingual learners come from a wide range of educational, familial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, educator should consider multiple factors including:

Personal and family characteristics

Educators should utilize a holistic approach which seeks to understand the child's life at home and at school.

- What is known about primary caregivers, family/household members, languages spoken at home, and by whom?
- What are the cultures and traditions of this child's household, and how are those reflected in or honored by school systems to communicate that the child can utilize all personal, cultural, and linguistic assets at school?
- What are the child's interests, hobbies, talents, and activities after school?

When looking at multilingual learners, these characteristics help educators understand and learn to discern the differences between language/cultural differences and true learning disability.

Psychological characteristics

The language acquisition process often includes a phase where students produce little English as they begin to develop the ability to process and comprehend the input from classroom instruction in English. The extent to which instruction is contextualized and involves extensive opportunities for oral language development opportunities can impact the extent of an individual student's silent phase. Personality characteristics, such as being outgoing, reserved, or shy should also be considered as part of the pre-referral processes. It is helpful to observe the student in social and academic settings where English only is spoken as well as settings where the child's primary language is spoken in addition to one-to-one versus group settings as part of the information-gathering process.

Chapter 6 of the English Learner Toolkit contains other examples of manifested learning behaviors and indicators of possible disability versus indicators of language difference due to the language acquisition process.

Previous schooling experiences

Students' prior schooling experiences impact their current performance in US systems. While many MLs may have been educated only in US schools, others may have experiences from multiple international systems. Some MLs may have experienced interrupted schooling or trauma from war, immigration, and, most recently, the pandemic. All these factors must be considered when discerning language development from disability.

Learning environments and how they impact MLs

Systematic evaluation of the instructional environment is also a part of the process to distinguish disability-related behaviors versus language acquisition-related behaviors. This evaluation includes the quality and amount of English language development services that have been provided and the extent to which those services are integral to/connected to core-content instruction. It also includes an evaluation of the complete school experience and the extent to which meaningful access to all content instruction is being provided.

To what extent are the assets/functions of the bilingual brain considered when planning instruction? To what extent does learning occur in meaningful, cohesive contexts as opposed to separate, disconnected settings? To what extent is the WIDA ELD Standards Framework utilized in planning instruction in core content classrooms? The likelihood of over-referral is decreased if educators reflect upon the systems, structures, and instruction to determine to what extent they are providing adequate support and access to students acquiring English while being educated in English.

Cross-cultural considerations

Standardized tools for evaluating students often rely on comparisons to speakers of English. It is incumbent on the LEA to actively seek tools in the student's primary language as well as be mindful that interventions and instructional practices designed for speakers of English do not necessarily benefit MLs.

Oral language development in both the primary language and in English

Oral language is foundational to literacy and, as such, deserves robust and extensive focus. This should occur throughout the day and across content areas. Oral language is important in both the student's primary language and in English and is essential to develop student's literacy in either or both languages.

Literacy development in both the primary language and in English

It is important to look at the type of initial literacy instruction that was provided or is being provided. Learning to read in the primary language then transferring those skills to English is preferable. As seen in effective dual language programs, developing literacy in both languages results in stronger long-term outcomes for both MLs and speakers of English, including students with special needs.

Approaches to literacy development that are not designed or adapted for the unique needs of multilingual learners do not benefit MLs and can have a detrimental impact on MLs ability to read and comprehend academic English. It is vital that literacy instruction addresses oral language development, an emphasis on the similarities and differences between languages (cognates and false cognates) and be fully contextualized with visuals and realia. For more information, see the Early Literacy Screening section below.

The National Committee for Effective Literacy for Emergent Bilingual Students released a resource which outlines specifics of literacy instruction for MLs. *Toward Comprehensive Effective Literacy Policy and Instruction for English Learner/Emergent Bilingual Students*

Tiered Supports Prior to Referral for Special Education

Tiered supports are provided to MLs in a manner similar to that provided to speakers of English prior to any referral process for possible identification for special education. It is important that the tiered interventions/supports are designed or modified to address the unique needs of MLs, as interventions designed for speakers of English without modifications are inadequate to address MLs needs.

Referral Process

The English Learner Toolkit identifies four factors that may contribute to over-identification or misidentification of MLs for Special Education services:

- Poor instructional practices
- Evaluating professional's lack of knowledge base regarding second language development versus disabilities
- Weak intervention strategies utilized prior to referral
- Inappropriate assessment tools (normed/designed for English-only speakers).

Misidentification/over-identification is reduced when a collaborative multidisciplinary child study team with knowledge of second language acquisition, special education, English language development, and the core curriculum engages in a supported process to gather and evaluate information as outlined above. Each member of the team has an important perspective and expertise upon which the team draws to come to a shared decision regarding referral. This collaborative process helps to ensure due diligence in identifying true disability when considering referrals of students who are MLs for special education. Child study teams should document the evidence as well as the evaluative process as outlined above, in which they engaged prior to making the referral.

Chapter 6 of the English Learner Toolkit contains other examples of manifested learning behaviors and indicators of possible disability versus indicators of language difference due to the language acquisition process.

Early Literacy Screening

Early Literacy Screening of Multilingual Learners

Students with reading difficulties should be identified as early as possible, but it is important to not confuse language development with a reading disability. Multilingual learners without learning disabilities may exhibit reading behaviors and characteristics that look like native English speakers who have reading disabilities. Some multilingual learners struggle with both language and reading, and students of any language can have dyslexia regardless of their linguistic background.

For this reason, ALL eligible multilingual learners must be included in early literacy screening except during their first 4 months of U.S. schooling. Multilingual learners' screening results

should NOT be directly compared to grade-level norms. School teams should consider student progress and development of both language and literacy skills over time. Students may be screened in a language other than English if they have literacy skills in their home language or are enrolled in dual language programs.

Consider the following when using screeners in other languages:

- Screeners in other languages must be designed and normed for that language. Dialect variations must be considered. Use of an interpreter to provide sight translation of an English screener into another language is NOT appropriate and will not yield useful results.
- Screeners in other languages may not provide the whole picture for a multilingual learner. Most assessments have been normed for native speakers of that language, not children who are simultaneously developing two or more languages.
- If a student has skills in two or more languages, it is best to assess first in the student's dominant language and then assess in the second language to confirm and/or add new information about the student's skills.
- Consider the student's opportunity to learn in each language as well as previous and current exposure to literacy skills in each. Families and caregivers may provide useful information on students' language and literacy skills and use of their home language.

The following chart provides guidance on considerations for screening of multilingual learners at various language levels.

WIDA Overall Score Range (WIDA Screener or WIDA ACCESS)	Considerations for Screening
0-2.0	Newcomers are exempt from screening for the first 4 months. Students may screen in their home language (if possible). Grade-level norms will not be applicable in English.
2.1-3.9	Students should be screened (unless in their first 4 months). Students may screen in their home language (if needed). Grade-level norms may not be applicable in English. Look at progress over time.
4.0-6.0	Students should be screened. Students may screen in their home language (if useful). Grade-level norms may be applicable, but the team should consider progress as well.
Scores above a 4 in speaking and listening but lower in reading and writing may indicate warning signs and/or a need for literacy intervention.	

When reviewing and interpreting results of multilingual learners' early literacy screening, educators should consider the following:

- *What strengths does the student bring?* Look at other content areas for strength-based skills. Use observations and other data points in addition to literacy assessment data.
- *What does the student know in each language?* Multilingual learners may still be simultaneously developing language and literacy skills in two or more languages.
- *What can the student do when viewed across languages?* Assessment in a single language (either English or another language) may not fully capture all the student's skills. Reviewing skills across both languages may help show what the student "can do."

Using Screening Data with Multilingual Learners

The following questions may be useful when reviewing and interpreting the literacy screening results of multilingual learners. Data review teams may include classroom teachers, bilingual educators, ELD specialists, reading specialists, and/or special education teachers. The use of home languages may be more applicable to dual language programs and is not always possible in programs with multiple languages.

Skill	Questions to Consider
Phonological Awareness	• Does the student's home language break down words or sounds in this way? (syllables vs. individual phonemes) • Is the skill typical in the student's home language? (i.e., rhyming, alliteration, etc.) • If assessing in another language, is the task typical for that language?
Phonemic Awareness	• Has the student acquired these phonemes in their spoken English? • If assessing in another language, is isolating sounds/phonemes a typical linguistic practice? • What sounds does the student know in each language (if testing in multiple languages)? Is there overlap? • Are there sounds in English that are "tricky" for speakers of the student's home language (if known)?
Letter-Sound Knowledge	• What letters does the student know in each language (if testing in multiple languages)? Is there overlap? • Are there letters that are "tricky" in English for speakers of the student's first language (if known)?
Rapid Auto-matized Naming Skills	• Can the student name objects in either language? (How many can they name altogether across languages?) • Is the student using a "non-standard" term that still means something similar? • How does the student's speed correspond to their language development?

To build upon students' existing skills in one language as they develop another, school teams should use the WIDA Can-Do Philosophy.

While students of any language background may have weaknesses associated with dyslexia, multilingual learners are also overidentified for special education services in Washington state for specific learning disabilities. Because of this, referring multilingual learners for evaluation must be done with great caution.

Many districts use a critical data process to consider multiple factors, including the student's first language development and background, before considering a referral for testing. Separating Difference from Disability and The ELL Critical Data Process may be helpful in developing appropriate pre-referral processes for multilingual learners.

Supporting Early Literacy Instruction and Intervention for MLs

All students, including multilingual learners, benefit from instruction that is essential for students with language-based learning disorders, including:

- Integrating content, language, and literacy instruction.
- Strengthening oral language development.
- Teaching writing in connection with reading as an essential skill.
- Building on student's home languages and cultures.
- Focusing on comprehension to support academic literacy and student success.

Within the MTSS Framework, multilingual learners should be uniquely considered when determining intervention groupings for each tier of instruction and intervention. These considerations include:

- Tier 1 instruction that integrates content, language, and literacy and builds on students' home languages and cultures.
- Regular designated English language development (ELD) provided by or in collaboration with a specially trained educator.
- Explicit focus on oral language development and comprehension in addition to phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary.
- Intervention materials that are specially designed or adapted to ensure words/text are connected to meaning using visuals, context, or other means.
- Interventions provided in the student's home language in dual language programs or if available. Stronger first language literacy is associated with stronger literacy in English.

See mtss4els.org for more ideas on addressing the literacy needs of multilingual learners.

Resources

Collier, C. (2011). Seven steps to separating difference from disability. Corwin.

Escamilla, K., Olsen, L., and Slavick, J. (2022). Toward Comprehensive Effective Literacy Policy and Instruction for English Learner/Emergent Bilingual Students.

Gaab, N. (2017, February). It's a myth that young children cannot be screened for dyslexia! International Dyslexia Association.

OELA English Learner Toolkit

USDE Infogram on English Learners with Disabilities

Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Infographic on Identifying English Learners with Disabilities

OSPI webpage: Disproportionality Self-Study Overview and Resources

OSPI webpage: Providing a Continuum of Support for English Learners

OSPI Presentation: Identification of MLs with Special Needs (Presentation March 16, 2023)

Sandman-Hurley, K. (2020). Dyslexia and the English learner dilemma. Language Magazine.

For more information on creating an inclusive environment, see the U.S. Department of Education's EL Toolkit Chapter 5, and for information on addressing the needs of English learners with disabilities, see EL Toolkit Chapter 6.