Pennsylvania’s Dual Language Learners
Key Characteristics and Considerations for Early Childhood Programs

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Dual Language Learners (DLLs) are young children who have at least one parent who speaks a language other than English in the home. In Pennsylvania, about one-fifth (21 percent) of children ages 0 to 5—approximately 168,000 young children—are DLLs. These children possess many important strengths, including their home language skills and cultural assets.

Extensive research has demonstrated that high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services provide disproportionate benefits for DLLs, including in terms of their language development and future academic outcomes. However, available data also show that DLLs enroll in such programs at lower rates than other young children. This points to a need to address barriers that may prevent DLLs’ families from accessing these programs as well as to ensure the relevance and quality of ECEC services for this population.

This fact sheet highlights important characteristics of DLLs’ families in Pennsylvania that should be considered in ECEC program and policy design and implementation. This information is based on Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) for the 2015–19 period, pooled. This fact sheet accompanies a policy brief entitled *Overlooked but Essential: Language Access in Early Childhood Programs*, which looks at the characteristics of DLLs’ families nationwide, federal and state language access policies in the early childhood field, and opportunities to improve language access to boost DLLs’ participation in high-quality ECEC services.

Language barriers and efforts to overcome them are likely to play a significant role in DLL families’ access to early childhood services.

- Out of the 168,000 DLL children living in Pennsylvania in 2015–19, 41 percent had at least one Limited English Proficient (LEP) parent, meaning the parent reported speaking English less than “very well” in the ACS (either “well,” “not well,” or “not at all”). Either one or both parents for approximately 7,000 of these DLLs reported speaking English “not at all.”

- About one-fifth (21 percent) of DLLs in the state lived in linguistically isolated households, which the U.S. Census Bureau defines as households in which all members who are age 14 or older speak a non-English language and also speak English less than “very well” (that is, they are LEP).
DLLs in Pennsylvania come from families who speak a wide range of languages. In 2015–19, while 40 percent of these families reported speaking Spanish in the home, approximately 60 percent spoke languages other than either English or Spanish—including, but not limited to, German, Chinese, Arabic, French, Russian, Vietnamese, Hindi, Nepali, and Dutch (see Figure 1). This information should inform the design of comprehensive language access services.\(^5\)

**FIGURE 1**

Top Non-English Languages Spoken in DLLs’ Households in Pennsylvania, 2015–19

- Spanish: 67,000 Households
- German: 17,000 Households
- Chinese: 6,000 Households
- Arabic: 6,000 Households
- French: 4,000 Households
- Russian: 4,000 Households
- Vietnamese: 2,000 Households
- Hindi: 2,000 Households
- Nepali: 2,000 Households
- Dutch: 2,000 Households
- Other: 56,000 Households

Notes: Languages spoken are self-reported in the American Community Survey (ACS). Shares may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding. “Chinese” includes Mandarin, Cantonese, and other Chinese languages. “French” includes French, Patois, and Cajun. “German” includes German, Pennsylvania Dutch, and Swiss.

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2015–19 ACS, pooled.

DLLs are significantly more likely to live in low-income households than their peers, making them important targets for early childhood services.

- In Pennsylvania, DLL children were much more likely than non-DLL children (53 percent vs. 36 percent) to reside in low-income households in 2015–19 (see Figure 2). These are households with an annual income of below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

- Although DLLs comprised 21 percent of children ages 0 to 5 in the state, they represented 28 percent of all young children living in low-income households.
**FIGURE 2**
Share of Pennsylvania Children Ages 0 to 5 Residing in Low-Income Households, by DLL Status, 2015–19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DLLs</th>
<th>Non-DLLs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>53%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2015–19 ACS, pooled.

**DLLs are more likely than other young children to have parents with lower levels of formal education.**

► In 2015–19, DLLs were more than three times as likely as non-DLL children (29 percent vs. 9 percent, respectively) to have at least one parent whose highest level of education was less than a high school diploma or equivalent (see Figure 3). Decades of research have demonstrated the correlation between parental educational attainment and a child’s academic achievement and well-being, pointing to the importance of ECEC program participation especially for children whose parents have limited formal education to mitigate related risks for long-term success.6

► While DLLs comprised about one-fifth of children ages 0 to 5 in Pennsylvania, they represented nearly half (47 percent) of all children of this age with at least one parent whose highest level of education was less than a high school diploma or equivalent.

**FIGURE 3**
Parental Education Levels of Pennsylvania Children Ages 0 to 5, by DLL Status, 2015–19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Less than a High School Diploma or Equivalent</th>
<th>High School Diploma or Equivalent</th>
<th>Some College</th>
<th>Associate Degree</th>
<th>Bachelor’s Degree</th>
<th>Master’s Degree or Higher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29%</td>
<td>35% 36%</td>
<td>22% 26%</td>
<td>10% 15%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>20% 23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2015–19 ACS, pooled.
Limited access to the internet and digital devices is another significant barrier that can keep some DLLs’ families from accessing early childhood services.

- DLL children were three times as likely as non-DLLs to live in a household with no access to the internet (16 percent vs. 5 percent), and nearly twice as likely to have no access to a computer or laptop at home (see Figure 4). In a household with limited digital access, caregivers may find it difficult to connect with early childhood programs and other resources, and children themselves are at an educational disadvantage compared to peers.7

- In 2015–19, DLLs made up nearly half (45 percent) of all Pennsylvania children ages 0 to 5 whose households had no access to the internet, despite comprising approximately one-fifth of the state’s children in this age range.

![Internet and Computer/Laptop Access in the Households of Pennsylvania Children Ages 0 to 5, by DLL Status, 2015–19](image-url)

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2015–19 ACS, pooled.
Endnotes


4. Data on linguistically isolated households exclude individuals living in group quarters.


About the Authors

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Prior to joining MPI, Ms. Giang completed an English teaching fellowship in Vietnam with Princeton in Asia. She interned with an education policy team in the U.S. Senate, researched education development while studying abroad in Nicaragua, and interned with a grassroots development organization in Uganda. During her undergraduate studies in South Central Los Angeles, Ms. Giang worked in local middle and high schools with students from Latino immigrant families and participated in migration-focused service learning at the U.S.-Mexico border.

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