



# Young Multilingual Children in Pennsylvania

Exploring Parent Perceptions of Children's Language  
Development, Family Engagement Practices, and Decision-  
making about Early Care and Education

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

## Purpose

This study explores the perceptions, experiences, and decision-making of parents of young multilingual children, ages birth to five years, with regard to children’s language learning and development, family engagement practices, and children’s participation in early care and education (ECE) programs.

The term **multilingual children** is used to refer to culturally and linguistically diverse children, ages birth to five years, who are learning two or more languages. Multilingual children are exposed to multiple languages in their homes, communities, and/or early care and education settings, and they develop and use language in dynamic ways. In the field, these children are commonly referred to as dual language learners, or DLLs.

## Research Questions

Three questions guided this study:

1. What goals, aspirations, fears, and concerns do parents have for their children’s language learning and development?
2. What are parents’ perceptions about family engagement practices used in early care and education programs and the extent to which these support children’s language learning and development?
3. What roles, if any, do their goals, aspirations, fears, and concerns about children’s language learning and development play in their decision-making about early care and education?

## Methodology

Data were collected between February and April of 2020 from 13 parents across three ECE program sites in urban and suburban Pennsylvania. Table 1 presents an overview of data collection methods, along with some demographic information about the participants. This study honors parent voice by using the demographic descriptors provided by them.

**Table 1: Summary of Data Collection**

Site Number	Number of interviews	Interview Language	Countries of Origin Represented	Home or Heritage-Language
1	6	Spanish	Guatemala, Mexico	Spanish
2	5	English	China, Colombia, Mexico, Jordan	Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish
3	2	English, Mandarin	China, Turkey	Cantonese, Mandarin, Turkish

The first phase of data analysis occurred soon after each interview and resulted in initial concepts and themes tied to individual sessions (e.g., interview or focus group). The second phase of analysis consisted of re-examining the initial concepts and themes and coding all of the data. This resulted in a list of major themes and patterns that make up the study findings.

# Findings

The parents in this study have a deep desire for their children to speak more than one language. The factors that influenced their aspiration include their children’s ability to maintain ties to all family members, feel pride for their home country and culture, be good citizens, and pursue promising future career opportunities. Parents’ main concern regarding their children’s language use is that they may experience a loss in ability to speak their home language. Parents also reported various family engagement practices that made parents feel welcome and engaged. Some family engagement practices reported by parents supported their home language and culture. Finally, the majority of parents considered the role of their home language in their decision-making about ECE enrollment. The findings point to various ways in which state leaders and ECE program staff can additionally support the goals of families of multilingual children.

# Recommendations

This report highlights the critical need for *language-focused family engagement*, an approach to family engagement that keeps the unique needs and experiences of multilingual children and their families at the center of every home and ECE setting interaction (Cuéllar et al., 2018). We invite state leaders to explore ways to offer statewide support for language-focused family engagement across six key areas<sup>1</sup> (see Figure 1). Doing so promotes a systemic approach to enhancing family engagement. In addition, we offer five recommendations below, which are based on information that parents shared with the research team throughout their participation in the study or which are implications from the study findings that could strengthen programming and services for young multilingual children and the engagement of their families in ECE programs. The recommendations also reinforce the foundational practices for effective family engagement in the Pennsylvania Family Engagement Birth through College, Career, Community Ready Framework. The recommendations discussed in this report include:

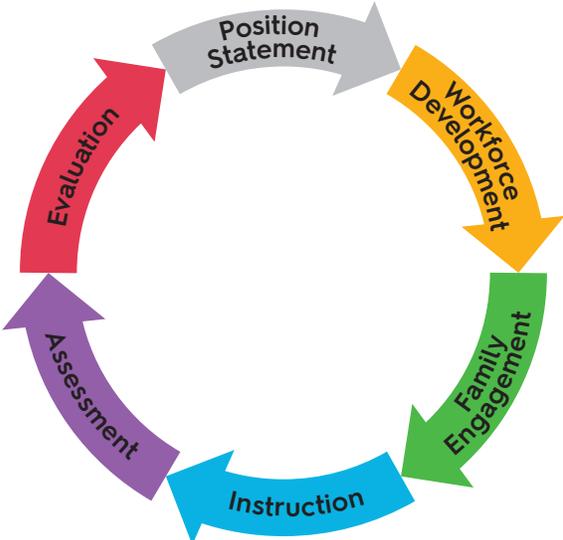


Figure 1: Six Key Areas for Statewide Support for Multilingual Children and Families

- Augmenting the number of ECE programs that use additional languages through additional funding
- Providing professional learning opportunities for engaging families from a funds of knowledge lens
- Implementing strategies to better understand children’s perspective on their language experiences in their programs
- Encouraging families to communicate with one another about their goals and aspirations for their children’s multilingualism
- Funding large-scale studies to measure the impact of various family engagement practices that bolster home language use

<sup>1</sup> The six key areas are adapted from the *2019 Practical Guide for State Education Agencies to Promote Success of English Learners Pre-K–Grade 3* written by Alexandra Figueras-Daniel, Ph.D., for the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO).



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