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*Focus: Early Learning*

## Current Proposals for Texas’ Investment in English Learners Still Not Enough

by Morgan Craven, J.D.

Since 1981, Texas has had one of the most comprehensive laws for educating elementary English learner students. School districts are required to offer a bilingual education or special language program when they have at least 20 English learners in the same elementary grade who speak the same primary language. Elementary schools with fewer than the 20 students must offer English as a second language (ESL) instruction. IDRA served a critical role in providing analysis and expert testimony in the known as the *U.S. vs. Texas* litigation and resulting Texas Bilingual Education Act (SB 477) that still stands today.

Programs for English learners also must be compliant with federal law. The Civil Rights Act and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act require that schools develop educational programs that ensure the meaningful and equal participation of English learners. The federally-funded IDRA EAC-*South* and its predecessors at IDRA have worked with schools to protect the civil rights of English learners.

**Types of English Learner Instruction**

Bilingual education programs, when implemented correctly, are highly effective methods of instruction and are used primarily in elementary schools, benefitting Texas’ youngest learners. They emphasize the importance of building skills across academic subjects while learning English and drawing on students’ knowledge of their primary language.

Bilingual programs may be designated as either *early exit* or *late exit* depending on the amount of time students are kept in the program, which typically ranges from a minimum of two years (early-exit) to six years (late-exit).

Dual language programs are particularly effective bilingual education programs. They focus on developing proficiency in a student’s primary language and in English while achieving grade-level literacy in both languages. Dual language programs can be *one-way*, in which English learners with the same primary language are in a classroom together, or *two-way*, in which English learners and non-English learners are in a classroom together.

**Insufficient and Outdated Funding**

English learners in Texas make up about one-fifth of the public school population, or 1 million students. Most are in elementary schools. Support for English learners is especially critical during the time of early education and pre-K, when students are developing the most basic skills needed for academic and social success. These students are an asset to their communities and to Texas. Funding their education, starting early, should be seen as an investment in the future of the state.

In the mid-1970s, IDRA led a research effort to examine the funding levels needed for effective implementation of bilingual education, finding  
*(cont. on Page 2)*

*“Successful early childhood programs take what we know from brain research and provide meaningful reading and writing activities that appeal to children’s eagerness to learn about the world around them. All children benefit when these programs are accessible, well funded and have well prepared teachers.”*

– Celina Moreno, J.D.,  
 IDRA President and CEO

(Current Proposals for Texas' Investment in English Learners Still Not Enough, continued from Page 1)

that most programs suffered from significantly inadequate funding.

Over four decades later, English learners still receive far less than their fair share of funding in Texas. State law assigns a percentage (or weight) that schools receive per English learner student to pay for such costs as assessment, curriculum and bilingual materials, and teachers trained in English learner instruction.

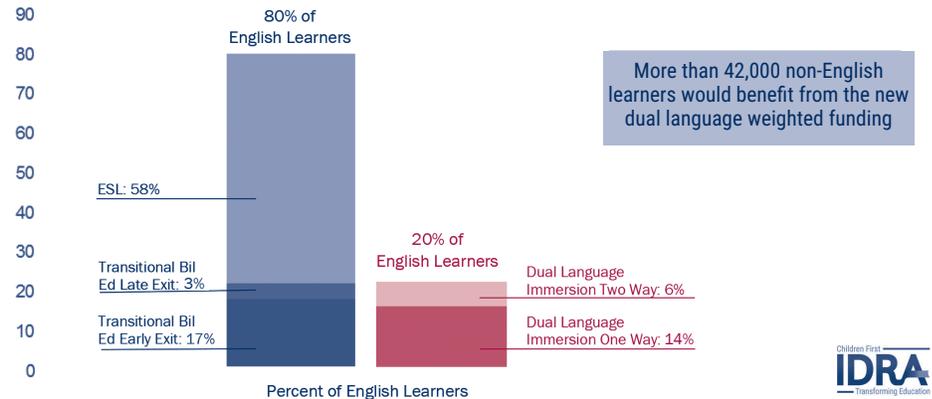
Currently, the weight for English learners in Texas is 0.1, so schools receive 10% more funding than for the average student. The 0.1 weight was set in 1984 by the Texas Legislature, which did so in an arbitrary manner. At the time, the recommendation from researchers, including at IDRA, was that English learners receive 40% more funding than the average learner, or a weight of 0.4. That recommendation was ignored, and the original low funding weight has not been increased since then.

### Limited Proposals Being Debated

In the current Texas legislative session, the major school finance proposals would increase funding to serve some English learners. Those proposals seek to incentivize the implementation of dual language programs. They maintain the same low 0.1 weight for most English learners, but create an additional new 0.05 weight for English learners enrolled in dual language programs.

The House Bill 3 also creates a 0.05 weight for *non-English learners* (students whose primary language is English) who are in two-way dual language programs. The proposals also include an additional weight for English learners in kindergarten through third grade – money that, under both plans (SB4 and HB3, can be used to fund a district's pre-K program.

## Most English Learners Are Excluded from the Proposed Dual Language Weight in Texas



More than 42,000 non-English learners would benefit from the new dual language weighted funding



Data source: Texas Education Agency, 2019. The figures from TEA include masked data for privacy. IDRA used a proxy to conduct this analysis. Thus, the counts are not exact. Figures include traditional public and charter schools.

Funding dual language programs is important. These programs are highly effective and help students to develop bilingualism, biliteracy, and, in two-way programs, an appreciation of a culture that may not be their own.

But, we cannot ignore the fact that most English learners will not benefit from this proposed change. IDRA's analysis of data obtained from the Texas Education Agency shows that 80% of English learners in the state are not in the dual language programs that would receive funding under the proposed changes to the law. That means that 80% of English learners in the state – roughly 800,000 students – would be left with the same insufficient funding weight that has been in place since 1984. That includes students in ESL programs but also a significant number of young students in other types of bilingual education programs. Even if the 0.05 added weight reached all English learners, the state would still be grossly underfunding their education.

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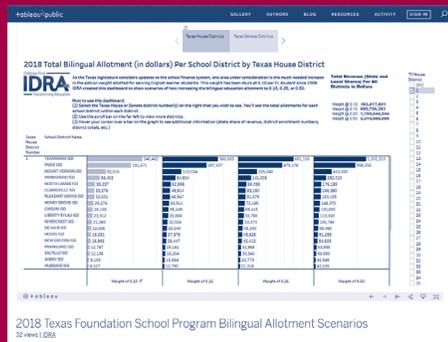
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As the Texas Legislature considers school funding proposals, IDRA has provided expert analysis, tools and testimony.

IDRA created a dashboard to show scenarios of how increasing the bilingual education allotment will impact schools within each Texas House and Senate district.



**WEBSITE** See IDRA's Bilingual Allotment Dashboard <https://idra.news/BEdataDashboard>

IDRA has developed a number of infographics and policy briefs on the state share of education funding (at right) and English learner education funding.

IDRA analysis finds...

# 80%

of English learners in Texas would be **excluded** from the proposed dual language weight

Texas must ensure all English learners have access to an excellent education

#txlege #txed

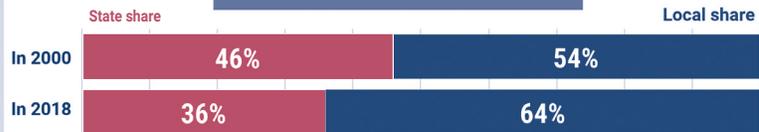
<https://idra.news/EL-funding>

**REPORT** See IDRA's policy tools & graphics: [www.idra.org/education-policyYT032619](http://www.idra.org/education-policyYT032619)

# Texas' Divestment of Public Education

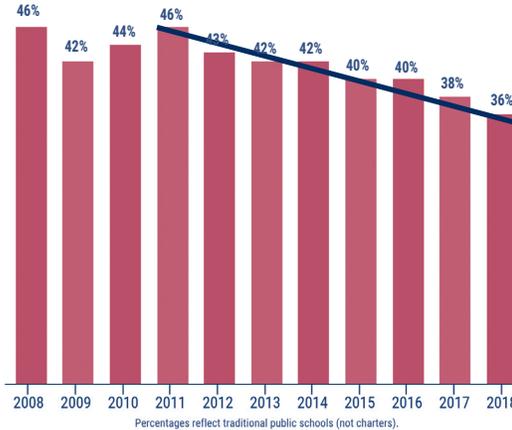
The Texas Constitution requires the State to provide education for all students. But state's share of education funding has dropped, not risen. During the last almost two decades, the state has reduced its contribution from 46% in 2000 to 36% in 2018.

## #1 Who is paying?



Percentages reflect traditional public schools (not charters). Local share includes intermediate funds. State share includes federal funding, which is relatively small and variable.

## #2 Trending down, not up!



Every percentage point represents millions of dollars.

In the last decade, state cuts to education and increases in property values have resulted in local communities footing the bill for K-12 public education.

**The result?: Inadequate and inequitable resources for school children.**

## #3 Texas ranks 38<sup>th</sup>



In 2018, Texas received a **D** on a national school finance report and ranked **#38** in the country.

As the state abdicates in its responsibility to fund education, most school districts in Texas, especially property-poor districts, are stressed to raise taxes and are unable to deliver the quality education that all students deserve.

# It doesn't have to be this way

Data Sources: Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, 2019; Is School Funding Fair? A National Report Card, Education Law Center, 2018

# Fixing Asset-Based Early Childhood Education

by Hector Bojorquez

In teacher training sessions across the country, teachers repeatedly ponder a powerful shared idea: “We must value our students’ innate gifts and talents.” This understanding facilitates the ability of students, families and communities to be active participants in schooling. But in early childhood classrooms, we often see this idea twisted into language that implies the need to fix deficits in the home.

The education community itself has been known to carry the same incorrect messages, like low-income parents don’t read to their children, poor children don’t get beneficial life experiences like other students do, poor children’s vocabulary is stunted, and poverty damages children’s brains. Apart from being wrong and empirically untestable, these ideas leave little room for agency on the part of educators. They represent the very definition of deficit-thinking, and they set a problematic and despairing narrative for children.

There is no doubt that early childhood education is important and benefits all children. However, we must approach it bearing in mind decades of experience around asset-based practices. IDRA recommends that educators consider the following fundamental ideas:

- Early childhood education is the beginning of an investment that continues until graduation from college;
- Asset-based practices must honor language, culture and diverse backgrounds; and
- Asset-based practices must be grounded in strengths and actively engage students and families.

## A Necessary but Insufficient Investment

A solid early childhood education is important and absolutely necessary, but it is not a vaccine against future educational inequity or undereducation. It is the foundation of a building, but it is not the entire building. Policymakers, educators and researchers must stop treating it as a panacea

for all societal and educational ills, particularly when we fail to sustain equitable education throughout the k-16 pipeline.

Too often, discussions describe early childhood education as the sole key to preventing drop-outs, the most important weapon against future poverty, or the crucial foundation for college access and success. It is and is not all of those things.

Early childhood education does help to advantage students in at-risk situations but not because they are broken and in need of fixing. When we fail to view students as assets, we change the conversation. We demean them and their families. And, worst of all, we do violence to their potential future by seeing them as blank slates with neither culture or language.

Rather, early childhood education should be seen as the first in a long series of investments. We must recognize our students by what they are capable of and ensure they have excellent and equitable educational opportunities.

## Honoring Culture

Even after decades of bilingual education and dual-language successes, many teachers and administrators across the country still refer to English learner struggles as “first language interference” or to accents as a “problem.” Families are consistently viewed as a hindrance.

The early childhood classroom is the place where many of these attitudes begin, as students are viewed as victims of poverty without any background knowledge or experiences. Our responsibility is to engage all of our underrepresented students with the same degree of respect, expectation and dignity as any student from a middle-class background.

## What Asset-Based Practices Are and Are Not

The Association of College and Research Librarians  
*(cont. on Page 8)*

*Our responsibility is to engage all of our underrepresented students with the same degree of respect, expectation and dignity as any student from a middle-class background.*

## IDRA EAC-South

For more information about the IDRA EAC-South or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or [eacsouth@idra.org](mailto:eacsouth@idra.org). The IDRA EAC-South serves Region II, which includes Alabama, Arkansas, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

Additional resources are available online at <http://www.idra.org/eac-south>

*funded by the U.S. Department of Education*

# Building Culturally-Relevant Libraries for Young Learners

by Nilka Avilés, Ed.D., and José A. Velázquez, M.Ed.

Children are attracted to books that represent their culture, with characters like themselves. That connection promotes meaningful literacy involvement. And it helps children build cognitive, linguistic and affective skills needed for developing competencies in expressing, imagining, understanding, reading and becoming more socially and academically engaged individuals.

When children are exposed to culturally-relevant text, educators and parents can tap into their social and emotional state of mind. This more profoundly advances literacy skills deeply connected to reasoning and critical thinking skills (Piña, et al., 2015).

At IDRA, we believe that diversity of language, race, culture, human experience and expression are strengths and gifts for all humanity to cherish. Proficiency in reading readiness skills that lead to mastery of reading by third grade is the gateway to future academic success (Meloy, et al., 2019).

## Steps for Expanding Your Literature Library

For children who are learning English, the classroom teacher and the school's librarian can work together to identify not only age-appropriate literature but also literature that is culturally-authentic and relevant (Bauml & Mongan, 2014; Ebe, 2010). That requires vision and intentionality. The following represent key elements in this process.

- Conduct deep reflection grounded in knowledge of the community you serve.
- Consider the cultural history of the community as well as recent demographic changes.
- Be fully transparent with parents, students and educators in your network as you share your vision for building a classroom library that reflects the diversity of the community. Request their input regarding topics, authors, areas of interest, positive role models, cultural traditions and social equity issues.

- Take inventory of what you currently have and identify gaps that need to be filled.
- Invite parents and students to suggest titles and conduct Internet searches and consult award-winning literature for young scholars to develop a “wish list” of books that reflect cultural diversity of the classroom.
- Review the generated wish list, discuss findings with students and parents, and use a decision-making process that produces a final list that realistically reflects your budget.

A community approach to building a culturally-relevant library that involves all stakeholders ensures an inclusive decision-making process. Be sure to extend your search beyond the traditional large publishers. Books by local authors could be rich additions to your collection.

## Semillitas de Aprendizaje Books

In one example, IDRA's Semillitas de Aprendizaje is a unique set of bilingual materials that are closely connected to the Latino experience in the United States. The 10 stories are culturally-appropriate and capitalize on the power and attraction of the culturally-cherished art of storytelling (see Page 7). Their use helps build literacy by valuing diversity and richness of language, history and print for early childhood and primary grades.

Children listen, view, read along, and interpret the authors' purpose in the inviting and engaging stories. When children begin to repeat the stories and learn the art of creating their own, they are inspired to love learning and creativity and to grow their sense of pride and identity with their first language and culture.

Exposing children to a series of books that provides a rich source of knowledge and cultural familiarity leads children to want to learn even more. During the development stages of life, the opinion of peers is of major importance to children for personal development and growth. Storytelling bridges the connection of self with

(cont. on Page 6)



*Play-based learning is key for children in the early stages of life. Books that incorporate culturally-relevant song, dance, rhyme, rhythm, repetition and thematic content can enhance play-based learning in ways that meaningfully engages children and their families.*

(Current Proposals for Texas' Investment in English Learners Still Not Enough, continued from Page 5)

the author's intent and sense of inspiration. The art of storytelling not only gives children a voice, it inspires them to become creative writers and actors themselves. Libraries equip children with learning opportunities and literacy skills.

The Semillitas de Aprendizaje teacher guide contains play-based learning activities, comprehension skills, morning songs, storytelling, literacy connections, centers activities, phonemic awareness, writing and alphabet knowledge and English transition. Play-based learning is key for children in the early stages of life. Books that incorporate culturally-relevant song, dance, rhyme, rhythm, repetition and thematic content can enhance play-based learning in ways that meaningfully engage children and their families. Play-based exploration and discovery invites children to investigate the world around them on their own. They are naturally curious about everything, from tiny insects under a wooden log to the stars and prehistoric creatures.

IDRA will soon publish a new reader's theater component of Semillitas de Aprendizaje to further engage students in developing oral fluency and declamation – critical factors for reading comprehension. Children can explore, demonstrate and portray the emotions that are reflected in the lines of each story through facial expressions, body language and rhetorical exercise. As children act out stories, they learn to engage with the main characters. They expand their vocabulary by associating word meanings with the characters' emotions.

The set also has 15 early math books that focus on numeracy and social and emotional development to complement the illustrated stories. The



teacher guide provides lessons that draw on both the math books and the storybooks.

Semillitas de Aprendizaje also connects the classroom with the home through its Cartitas, which are letters so that families can expand on the stories at home. These letters are designed to support home-school dialogue around shared stories, educational growth and learning. Building strong teacher, student and family relationships is the foundation of IDRA's classrooms of excellence model where parents are valued as their children's first teachers and recognized as full partners in education.

Many teacher preparation programs do not equip teachers to engage with diverse parents and community members. But doing so builds healthy, vibrant and energetic relationships that recognize parents as assets in the process of raising student achievement. This helps strengthens the quality of the school (Chavkin, 2017). Culturally-relevant literature can help facilitate partnerships between home and schools as librarians create opportunities for parents to assist their children in selecting stories that reflect their heritage and life experiences.

Our classrooms today are increasingly diverse; thus, there is no single story. We have the power to share many stories created by students' own narratives that enrich classroom libraries with meaningful stories for children. In the process, we also affirm children's identity that, in turn, inspires them to become authors to advance the literacy skills of young learners.

## Resources

- Bauml, M., & Mongan, K. (2014). "Getting to Know You: Sharing Time as Culturally Relevant Teaching," *Dimensions of Early Childhood*.
- Chavkin, N.F. (2017). *Family Engagement with Schools: Strategies for School Social Workers and Educators*. Oxford University Press.
- Ebe, A.E. (2010). "Culturally Relevant Texts and Reading Assessment for English Language Learners," *Reading Horizons*.
- García, J.C. & Rodríguez, R. (April 2015). "Margarita's Necklace – Beads, Patterns and Algebraic Thinking for English Learners," *IDRA Newsletter*.
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(Texas' Investment in Youngest English Learners Still Not Enough, continued from Page 2)

In Texas, 414,110 kindergarten through third grade students were identified as English learners in 2017-18. While the additional funding for English learners in kindergarten through third grade is a step in the right direction, the House and Senate measures (as of the time of writing) allow districts to use the funds for prekindergarten programs for educating both English learners and non-English learners. Funding prekindergarten is critical, but the fact remains that many English learner students in bilingual education programs in early grades will not benefit from the

targeted and specific increase in funding in the bills. Texas is still leaving many students behind.

In order to support English learners in Texas and ensure they have meaningful and equal access to educational opportunities from early education on, we must invest in them. Funding matters, and how and where dollars are spent speaks volumes about how we view the potential of students.

*Morgan Craven, J.D., is the IDRA National Director of Policy. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at morgan.craven@idra.org.*



## Bilingual Literacy Development Materials

### Perfect for Summer School!

Designed for early childhood and primary grades

#### Take a look at the materials

**10 Storybooks & 10 Big Books** – With rich vocabulary, each book tells its beautiful story with vibrant characters. The Big Books are abridged versions of the full storybooks.

**15 Math Books** with a focus on numeracy and social-emotional development.

**Teacher Guide (Manual de Maestro)** – 10 units in 196 pages of classroom activities.

**Cartitas - Letters Home** – Set of 20 letters (10 English, 10 Spanish) with activities related to the stories that bring the story home like book sharing, the art of play, and family traditions.

**Storytelling & Storyreading Videos DVD**

**Scope & Sequence for Teacher Guide**

**Scope & Sequence for Math Books**

**Vocabulary List for the 15 Math Books**

#### Help your pre-K and kinder students' reading readiness!

This summer, extend the school year and deepen your young learners' ability to read with Semillitas de Aprendizaje, IDRA's early childhood resources.

Semillitas de Aprendizaje is a bilingual (Spanish/English) supplemental early childhood curriculum, created by IDRA, based on the art of storytelling. The teacher guide contains **10 units** to lead your students through the Semillitas de Aprendizaje stories. Each unit has a set of classroom activities that include a morning song, storytelling, literacy connection with **STEM explorations**, learning center activities, phonemic awareness, writing and alphabet knowledge, English transition, family connections and informal assessment.

In addition, we have provided **planning tools** connected to knowledge, skill and concept objectives along with suggestions for using technology in early childhood classrooms. The stories, accompanied by a detailed teacher guide and scope & sequence, can help your teachers focus on comprehension strategies, encourage questioning, build on prior knowledge, guide students to develop mental images from text, and build vocabulary.

With Semillitas de Aprendizaje, you can provide the required eight-week bilingual summer school to students through a variety of interactive activities that generate excitement as students connect with the characters.

IDRA also can provide customized technical assistance and training, classroom demonstrations and coaching for success. Examples include:

- Integrating the teacher guide unit activities into your curriculum
- Capitalizing on the art of storytelling as a way to channel language learning
- Using interactive activities to engage children and develop their communication skills
- Strengthening connections between school and home

### Order Your Classroom Set Now!

Available from IDRA for \$464 per set plus shipping. Components are also sold separately.

[www.semillitasdeaprendizaje.com](http://www.semillitasdeaprendizaje.com)

## Focus: Early Learning

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*Fixing Asset-Based Early Childhood Education, continued from Page 4)*

ies provides a useful definition: “Asset-based teaching seeks to unlock students’ potential by focusing on their talents. Also known as strengths-based teaching, this approach contrasts with the more common deficit-based style of teaching which highlights students’ inadequacies” (2018).

IDRA’s decades of implementation around asset-based practices (also referred to as our “valuing model”) has taught us the following: All students and families must have active engagement in positions traditionally reserved for those deemed gifted or privileged. An asset understanding in education is premised on the fundamental recognition of the intelligence, potential, and wide skill and competency possibilities in all human beings. It is the conviction that all students can and will succeed.

But it is not simply a point of view or a philosophy. It is not a pre-recorded litany of daily affirmations that attempt to cover up a *pobre-citos* or bless-their-hearts attitude. Instead, it is best based on action. In the case of the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, students who are in at-risk situations are not simply told that they are leaders; rather, they are put in leadership positions. In IDRA’s Education CAFE Network, families who are not typically part of decision making in schools provide leadership to change policies. For your youngest learners, the asset lens allows you to see deeply into the workings of the child’s mind, experiences and curiosity, and to design the learning environment so that the child connects and engages.

Asset-based practices recognize that all children can learn complex subjects if taught appropriately

and are supported in their learning, and all children and their families have abundant cultural, linguistic gifts and experiences that contribute to the educational process.

### Resources

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- Dudley-Marling, C., & Lucas, K. (2009). “Pathologizing the Language and Culture of Poor Children,” *Language Arts*, 86 (5), 362-370.
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