Identifying and Supporting Dual Language Learners in California's Early Learning System

Background

A strong and growing body of research shows the long-term benefits of bilingualism. Children who acquire bilingual fluency generally outperform their English-only peers across multiple academic measures. Even more, California's rich language and cultural diversity contributes to the strength of its social and economic systems. With the overwhelming passage of Proposition 58 and the unanimous adoption by the State Board of Education of the California English Learner Roadmap policy, the state has demonstrated that it collectively rejects the notion that home languages are barriers to learning and success. Rather, when nurtured alongside English fluency, home languages are rich *assets* young children bring to their learning, development, and understanding of the diverse world around them. However, it is important to build Early Learning environments that are responsive to the unique needs and strengths of Dual Language Learners (DLLs). This includes ensuring that instruction and assessment practices, staff and teacher competencies, and family engagement strategies are designed to support them.

Problem

Despite the state's positive shift acknowledging linguistic and cultural diversity as assets, and although 60% of children ages birth to five live in households in which a language other than English is spoken, **there is no consistent manner of identifying Dual Language Learners (DLLs) in California's Early Learning system**. The absence of information about the state's DLLs impairs the ability of state policymakers to make informed decisions over resources and other critical elements of Early Learning programs that could be leveraged to nurture and develop the early linguistic assets of these children for their benefit and the greater benefit of California.

Solution

Starting with the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), develop a standard process for providers to identify the DLLs they enroll and serve, and require providers, through contract requirements, to report key information about DLLs that inform future policy and program decisions, such as ensuring that Early Learning professionals receive the training to support this significant portion of California's children. Include the following concepts in a bill to systematize the identification of DLLs in CSPP:

- A definition of DLLs.
- A process, along with appropriate guidelines, for providers to follow to ensure that a child is (1) being accurately identified as a DLL; and (2) evaluated for their linguistic and related developmental needs and strengths as a DLL. Importantly, this information is used to inform the institutional and program policies and practices that are necessary to support the simultaneous development of a child's home language and English.
- A requirement of providers to report key information about their DLLs to the State Superintendent as part of their existing reporting procedures.
- A requirement of the Superintendent to aggregate the data and develop an annual count and report for the state and by county of DLLs and post it on their website.