

Supporting Bilingualism

How Teachers and Families Can Work Together to Support Bilingualism (wherever possible)

SEAL is fundamentally about building high-level language and literacy skills that enable children to read, write and have a powerful voice. For children who have a home language other than English, the goal is both full proficiency in English, plus (whenever possible) development and maintenance of the home language. We value and promote the development of bilingual and biliteracy skills. Young children’s brains are wired for the developmental tasks of learning to speak, use and master language. English Learners undertake these tasks straddling two language worlds and have the potential and opportunity to develop language proficiency in two languages.

Research has proven that the strongest foundation for academic success and high levels of literacy for these young, dual-language learners is the development of **both** their home language and English. Furthermore, bilingualism offers cognitive, social, and economic benefits. Children who grow up bilingual have more job opportunities, broader social networks, and closer connections to family and heritage. Studies have found that children have more extended and complex vocabulary and language skills if their home language continues to develop throughout the age 3-8 developmental phase. Furthermore, English Learners make more academic progress when they have the opportunity to learn in both languages. Systematic, deliberate exposure to English plus an ongoing development of the home language leads to the highest achievement in both languages by the end of 3rd grade and beyond. Students have more access to learning science, math, social studies and other subjects when they are studying in their home language, their strongest language, in addition to English. Additionally, there is no loss in English development as a result of developing the home language.

Yet there are widespread popular beliefs in communities that the best educational approach for children who are English Learners is through English only. Parents do not understand the research on the power of bilingualism, are not provided information about the benefits of bilingualism, and do not learn how quickly home language loss occurs quickly among children schooled in English-only instruction. The loss of home language has potentially negative long-term consequences for the English Learner child’s academic, social and emotional development, as well as family connection. Given the many advantages of bilingualism and biliteracy – intellectual, cultural, economic and familial – this knowledge is essential for families in making decisions about language programs for their children and in their own home language practices with their children. It makes a difference if families actively support and nurture the home language.

SEAL works with schools to strengthen bilingual and dual language programs, clarifying research-based program design and working with teachers to implement effective approaches to the development of the two languages. In those SEAL classrooms where it is not feasible to teach bilingually, teachers still affirm bilingualism by: providing books and homework in both English and in the home languages of the children,

exposing them to songs and chants in other languages, and encouraging children to value their home language. The SEAL approach builds a school climate supportive of bilingualism, and establishes supports for parents related to raising bilingual children and supporting biliteracy.

Families play an essential role in supporting home language development. Children learn from their parent's values about the importance of heritage language and culture. In the past, parents in the United States were discouraged from keeping their home language if it was different from English. They were told their children would have difficulty learning English if they continued speaking the home language, or their children would be discriminated against for becoming bilingual. Now we know that young children have the ability and the brain capacity to learn more than one language. Maintaining the home language does NOT interfere with the child's ability to learn English. In fact, the strength of the home language is a benefit that transfers to learning English. In many parts of the world, bilingualism is the norm.

It is not easy to raise children to become fully bilingual in the United States. It takes determination on the parts of families to keep the home language alive. It is through your home language that you can most powerfully share your culture and your wisdom. From the moment of birth, children are learning language (vocabulary, how language gets used) from the people in their family - and this continues throughout childhood.

Development and maintenance of the home language occurs through hearing the language being used, being engaged in conversations with family members in the home language, listening to stories in the home language, and being expected to use the language for multiple purposes and functions in their family and community. Without this, most children end up losing their home language. Many children learn a sense of shame about their home language, and turn away from it as they become English speaking. Even when children may express disinterest or refuse to speak in the home language as they internalize status messages about the superiority of English, parents should continue an emphasis on the importance of the home language. Now, as more and more families are realizing the high price of children losing the home language as well as are recognizing the benefits of bilingualism, there are increasing resources to support families to raise bilingual children.

It takes a partnership between families and schools to impart the message to children about the value of bilingualism.

What Schools Can Do

- Build strong bilingual and dual-language programs, and provide multiple language experiences and exposure to language enrichment
- Communicate with families about their choices of language programs
- Communicate the values of bilingualism and language diversity

What Teachers Can Do

- Provide many affirming messages about the benefits of bilingualism

- Celebrate language diversity - and expose all children to the languages spoken by the families in the classroom
- Learn basic phrases in the languages of the children and families (greetings, salutations)
- Be a model of reaching across language worlds through trying speaking in other languages and modeling the risk-taking involved

What Parents Can Do

- Share songs, stories in your home language
- Let their child know the beauty and value of the home/heritage language
- Express their pride and appreciation of the child's growing ability to speak, understand, read and write in two languages
- Read books to their child in the home language
- Be a model of wanting and trying to learn a new language
- If their child stops using the home language, parents should be advised to persevere and only speak the native language to them at home
- Help the teacher learn basic phrases in their home language, provide the teacher with songs in the language that she can teach the class