

# Out of Reach: The State of Multilingual Learner Literacy in New York

By **Joanna Yip**, *Policy Lead II*

## The National Literacy Movement and Who It Leaves Behind

Literacy legislation aligned with the science of reading is now present in at least 45 states<sup>1</sup>, with 26 states, including New York, passing new laws since 2023<sup>2</sup>. While these policies are essential and in New York's case, long overdue, the needs of English Language Learners/Multilingual Learners (ELLs/MLLs) are often overlooked in state policy. Currently, only four states address research-based literacy practices for this growing group of students and there is no state that addresses bilingualism and/or biliteracy explicitly in their literacy legislation<sup>3</sup>.

Only

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States address research-based literacy practices for multilingual learners



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States explicitly include bilingualism or biliteracy in literacy legislation



## A Stark Reality: Literacy Outcomes for Multilingual Learners in New York

While New York has a strong history of supporting multilingual learners and bilingualism, much more needs to be done to ensure these students, who make up 12% of student enrollment in the state, are meaningfully included in state efforts to support evidence-based literacy instruction. Literacy outcomes for New York's multilingual learners are deeply concerning, with just 3% of fourth grade ELLs/MLLs proficient in Reading on the 2024 NAEP and only 5% of eighth grade ELLs/MLLs proficient on the 2025 New York State English Language Arts Assessment. (See [EdTrust-New York's detailed data analysis in the report, \*By the Numbers: Multilingual Learner Literacy Outcomes in New York\*](#).)

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of eighth grade ELLs/MLLs proficient on the 2025 New York State English Language Arts Assessment

Addressing these unacceptable outcomes will require state leaders to center the needs of multilingual learners as part of a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction for all students. This will require targeted policies and practices that are language-affirming, supportive of students and families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and designed for students who thrive in a bilingual environment while learning to read in a new language. Getting literacy right for all New York students must include strengthening literacy instruction for multilingual learners.

## A Strong Foundation: New York’s Legacy of Supporting Multilingual Learners

New York has a rich history of innovation on this issue that can serve as a foundation for future state policy development. In fact, New York State has historically led the way in literacy policy for multilingual learners and was the first to provide key resources to address the assets and needs of multilingual learners in literacy. These efforts included:



The [Multilingual Literacy SIFE Screener](#), funded by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) and released in 2016, is a home language assessment, primarily used in the process of identifying Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE)<sup>4</sup>. The assessment evaluates students’ comprehension and literacy abilities in 19 languages. Districts have begun utilizing the assessment not only for SIFE identification but for general literacy assessment, gathering critical information about students’ literacy assets in their home language.



Since 2011, NYSED has funded [Bridges to Academic Success](#), a project of the Graduate Center at the City University of New York, to design and deliver programs for SIFE and newcomer multilingual learners in English Language Arts (Integrated ELA with English as a New Language), Standalone English as a New Language, Spanish Home Language Arts, and mathematics. Programs include year-long curricula and professional learning available to all New York State school districts at no additional cost.



NYSED has funded professional development modules on immigration and education through [CUNY-IIE](#) that includes a curated set of immigration-focused literature to support literacy across grade levels.



The state’s [Blueprint for ELL success](#) (2014) and the [The Culturally Responsive-Sustaining \(CR-S\) Education Framework](#) (2018) were developed to articulate research and evidence-based practices to support culturally and linguistically diverse students in literacy and beyond.



New York State was a pioneer in developing statewide standards-aligned instructional materials with the release of EngageNY in 2014.

# Fragmented Progress: Where Current Literacy Policies Fall Short for Multilingual Learners

Despite a strong history of supporting multilingual learners, New York must go further to ensure new literacy efforts fully reach them—especially beyond New York City. State guidance and support have been fragmented, resulting in uneven implementation across the state. Most critically, previous efforts in literacy reform have not meaningfully included multilingual learners. The following is an overview of the current state of literacy policies and how well they address the needs of multilingual learners:

## *Back to Basics: Expanding Teacher Training to Include Multilingual Learners*

The state invested \$10 million in 2024 through the [Back to Basics plan](#) to provide science of reading microcredentials to train teachers. No funding was allocated in 2025. The final Enacted Budget in 2026 included \$3 million for SUNY and CUNY to offer their science of reading microcredentials to current educators.

**Degree of Multilingual Learner Inclusion:** The state teacher’s union, New York State United Teachers, was granted funding to develop a course but it was [found to have significant gaps](#) in the content regarding research in reading instruction. The Science of Reading Center at SUNY New Paltz developed the Science of Reading Fundamentals microcredential with modules and webinars on literacy for multilingual learners. The City University of New York offers microcredentials through [City College](#) and [Brooklyn College](#), which similarly include training in literacy instruction for multilingual learners.

### **Future Implications:**

- ❖ Future investments in teacher training in the science of reading funded by the state must engage experts in research *and* instructional practices in literacy for multilingual learners from across the state and nation.
- ❖ Microcredentials and other professional learning must provide greater attention to the role of multilingualism in literacy, including a stronger emphasis on oral language development, leveraging biliteracy instruction, and culturally and linguistically sustaining practices in literacy instruction for all students.
- ❖ Given the need to support foundational literacy skills in secondary grade levels, any training in the science of reading needs to include how to support multilingual learners with literacy in middle and high schools.

## *Instructional Materials Mandates: From Compliance to Quality and Inclusion*

In 2024, as part of the Back to Basics Plan, the state required all districts to certify that they are using instructional materials aligned to evidence-based and scientifically based reading instruction ([Ed Law Section 818](#)).

**Degree of Multilingual Learner Inclusion:** The law explicitly mentions instruction in background knowledge, oral language and writing, and oral skill development, which are critical components to literacy for multilingual learners. Importantly, the law requires alignment with the [Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework](#), ensuring that literacy instruction is not rolled out with a monolingual, monocultural lens. However, the attestation process does not require districts to review instructional materials for alignment with the CRSE framework, nor does it ask whether materials incorporate evidence-based instructional practices in literacy for multilingual learners.

At the same time, a recent report from EdTrust-New York found that many districts are still using curriculum that is not evidence and scientifically based, which can negatively impact the reading development of all students, including multilingual learners. (See EdTrust-New York's [curriculum analysis and findings](#).)

### **Future Implications:**

- The state must conduct a stronger curriculum audit process to determine whether curricula include research-aligned and evidence-based instructional materials. Districts should be required to conduct a thorough multilingual learner instructional materials audit to determine the extent to which their selected programs include bilingual materials and sufficient language support in core content and English as a New Language materials. These in-depth audits require a stronger set of criteria and process for reviewing instructional materials beyond NYSED's current [K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide](#).
- Districts must ensure that literacy instructional materials that are provided in students' home languages include sound biliteracy approaches (not haphazard, poor-quality translations of English texts) designed for implementation in transitional bilingual and dual language programs.
- Districts must adopt instructional materials in English that provide research-aligned approaches to language development within grade-level texts and content.
- Districts must adopt instructional materials in all core subject areas that include research-aligned language and literacy supports specific to the discipline.
- Districts must adopt programs for systematic, explicit phonics and foundational skills instruction that incorporate cross-linguistic approaches designed for multilingual learners.

## *NYSED Literacy Initiative: Strong Guidance, Limited Impact*

As part of the [NYSED Literacy Initiative](#), NYSED developed the K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide and published a series of literacy briefs on the science of reading, providing [guidance](#) to districts statewide.

**Degree of Multilingual Learner Inclusion:** NYSED included a set of criteria to review instructional materials, but the indicators for multilingual learners do not match the level of quality or rigor found in nationally used frameworks developed for instructional materials such as [EdReports](#) and the [English Learners Success Forum](#). Given how ill-equipped teachers generally feel about their ability to serve multilingual learners and the minimal training they receive, the handful of criteria in the review guide specific to multilingual learners are not likely to ensure teachers have the highest quality set of instructional materials to support students in their classroom.

The NYSED's science of reading briefs provided guidance on literacy for all students, and an additional series focused on multilingual learners was published in Fall 2025.

### **Future Implications:**

- ❖ Although NYSED's guidance is available for all districts, alignment to this guidance is optional and implementation is uneven. The [Science of Reading for Multilingual Learners Toolkit](#) was an important starting place for educators but operationalizing its practices on the ground requires stronger coordination of instructional systems at the state, district, and school levels moving forward.
- ❖ New York must build a coordinated professional learning infrastructure for supporting multilingual learners' literacy development at the state, BOCES, and district levels. This will ensure consistent, high-quality training aligned to the science of reading and evidence-based literacy practices for all students, including multilingual learners.
- ❖ Any professional learning in the science of reading funded and provided by the state and its vendors needs to address evidence-based literacy practices that are specific to multilingual learners.



## *Educator Preparation Programs: Closing the Training Gap for Multilingual Learners*

Through the [Path Forward](#) initiative, the state began to update its Educator Preparation Programs (EPP) to ensure that future educators are equipped with research-aligned and evidence-based practices in literacy and the science of reading.

***Degree of Multilingual Learner Inclusion:*** The current efforts to align EPPs with literacy research includes Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages programs, a necessary step to ensure stronger preparation of teachers to work with multilingual learners trained in the science of reading. While it is unclear how alignment is addressed in bilingual education EPP programs, individual programs such as [City College](#) have begun to redesign their bilingual education courses. The state’s [Framework for Integrating the Science of Reading \(SoR\) in Educator Preparation Programs \(EPPs\)](#) includes minimal information to guide EPPs in changing their approaches to linguistically responsive practices for multilingual learners.

Without a clear vision for culturally responsive and language-affirming literacy practices—and explicit changes required in EPPs to center literacy for multilingual learners—teacher preparation programs are unlikely to shift toward curricula and practice that meet the needs of the state’s culturally and linguistically diverse students and communities.

### ***Future Implications:***

- …❖ Training for general education teachers and administrators in serving multilingual learners is usually minimal (beyond ESOL and bilingual programs), so it is imperative that the current efforts to align EPPs with the science of reading provides greater attention to language-affirming approaches.
- …❖ All EPPs must include training on the research in language and literacy development, bilingualism and biliteracy, and culturally sustaining pedagogies, regardless of license area.
- …❖ There is no current requirement for adolescent and content-area EPPs to align with the framework, all but guaranteeing that the many adolescent multilingual learners in middle and high schools (who often need literacy support beyond what is provided) will continue to lack access to high-quality literacy instruction.
- …❖ While Path Forward is making important progress toward better preparing new teachers on best practices in the science of reading, thus far there is no attention to alignment in leadership preparation programs for school leaders who have an outsized impact in their roles on literacy outcomes for multilingual learners.

## *Dyslexia Support: Improving Support for Multilingual Learners with Learning Differences*

In 2025, the Legislature passed and Governor Hochul signed [A.2867/S.5569](#) to create a Center for Dyslexia and Dysgraphia within NYSED.

It is still to be determined to what extent this center will support the identification and instruction of multilingual learners who have learning differences such as dyslexia.

### ***Future Implications:***

- Given the problem of over- and under-identification of multilingual learners with disabilities, the state needs a strategic plan for how it will update its workforce and train educators, school psychologists, speech and language pathologists, Special Education professionals, and intervention teams in the research-aligned literacy instruction specifically for multilingual learners with language-based disabilities.
- Such training is necessary to decrease the number of multilingual learners who are inaccurately evaluated for Special Education when what they truly need is language and literacy support, while ensuring accurate identification of multilingual learners who have learning differences.



## *Assessment and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS): Building Language-Informed Systems of Support*

**Although New York does not yet have a mandate to use universal screening, some districts utilize literacy assessments and diagnostics as a part of implementing MTSS and reading interventions.**

### **Future Implications:**

- Schools and districts need state leadership that provides language-informed guidance to choose and administer literacy assessments for multilingual learners, including how to interpret literacy data and response to intervention.
- Districts need support and guidance to build educators' use of literacy screener and diagnostic data, along with formative assessments, through language-affirming approaches.
- The state must provide guidance on appropriate benchmarks for multilingual learners that measure progress in reading, and are aligned with the students' level of English proficiency, home language abilities, and schooling experiences.
- Educators need language-informed guidance on how and when it is appropriate to place multilingual learners in a reading intervention, and how to align reading intervention instruction with English as a New Language curriculum and programming.
- MTSS and progress monitoring in districts should also take a bilingual approach, prioritizing the development of literacy in a child's home language, so that students can build on those literacy skills as they learn English. This may prevent the need for intervention in the first place.
- Districts with bilingual programs need literacy screeners that have comparable assessments in both English and the home language. The state should develop or procure a new assessment to replace the Spanish LAB to provide actionable information on the literacy needs of newly arrived students. The state should also invest in greater development and utilization of the [Multilingual Literacy SIFE Screener](#) to understand how multilingual learners' proficiency rates in home language are interacting with current efforts to reach higher rates of biliteracy and English language and literacy proficiency.

# Lessons from Other States: Models for Inclusive Literacy Policy

Other states offer models New York leaders can use to ensure literacy policies and initiatives meaningfully include multilingual learners.

## Instructional Materials

A number of states hold a higher bar for what needs to be included in instructional materials to support multilingual learners to develop language and literacy proficiency; a bar most teachers cannot meet on their own without quality resources. These states not only have multilingual learner-specific criteria for materials, they also have vetting processes conducted by the state's teachers. For example:



- ▶ With the [ELA adoption](#) in California, no district can get away with using a program for literacy that does not align with English language development standards.
- ▶ The same is true in Texas, where the [Instructional Materials Review and Approval](#) process requires materials to have supports that address the needs of emergent bilinguals.
- ▶ Maryland has a robust [instructional materials framework](#) that includes comprehensive articulation of the role multilingualism plays in literacy development.
- ▶ The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education strengthened their materials adoption by evaluating whether core instructional materials meet the states' expectations for supporting multilingual learners through [CURATE](#). The state agency also developed the [High-Quality Next Generation ESL Instructional Materials Review Process and Rubric](#), setting a higher bar for quality English as a Second Language materials.
- ▶ Oregon has [local adoptions for English Language Development \(ELD\) materials](#) in addition to core content materials. Even if many commercially published ELD materials miss the mark in their alignment with research, the state's policy articulates how educators should select curriculum specifically for language development.



## Professional Development

Some states require training in research- and evidence-based literacy practices that include the role of multilingualism in literacy, and considerations for teaching literacy to students learning to read and write in a new language.



- ▶ In Texas, all Reading Academies include information on teaching reading to emergent bilinguals in both bilingual and English contexts.
- ▶ Rhode Island and Massachusetts have high [adoption rates of high-quality materials](#) in all districts. Both states centered multilingual learners in their implementation of instructional materials through [professional learning infrastructure and guidance](#) to ensure educators are equipped to implement language-informed and multilingual approaches to literacy.
- ▶ Virginia used state grants to create [literacy networks](#) to ensure that schools have the tools they need to serve multilingual learners in literacy.

## Guidance on Language-Affirming Literacy Practices:

A number of state agencies have developed strong guidance alongside broader literacy policies so that districts understand the importance of incorporating language-affirming practices aligned with the science of reading for multilingual learners.



- ▶ Delaware developed a [policy brief](#) on the science of reading for multilingual learners to support districts in rolling out new literacy curricula.
- ▶ The Massachusetts state agency's guidance for early literacy, [Mass Literacy](#), includes comprehensive information regarding how to support early literacy for young multilingual learners.
- ▶ The Rhode Island Department of Education developed a statewide [strategic plan](#) to ensure that literacy instructional materials adoption was situated in a broader effort to support multilingual learners.



These state examples combine multi-pronged systems and state-coordinated resources to [uplift literacy proficiency](#) for multilingual learners. These foundational literacy policies are necessary to address the literacy needs of all students and multilingual learners in particular at a broad scale that reaches across school systems in a state. Without centering multilingual learners within these literacy policy levers, such reforms will not produce equitable results.

# Toward a Comprehensive Statewide Multilingual Literacy Strategy in New York

New York’s current literacy policies fall short of the needs of multilingual learners and we risk leaving these students further behind. A comprehensive, multi-year state investment in evidence-based literacy instruction must explicitly prioritize multilingualism and provide targeted support for linguistically diverse learners.

## 1. Invest in High-Quality Bilingual Instructional Materials

- Develop or adopt bilingual materials for K-8 ELA and Home Language Arts for transitional bilingual and dual language settings in the state’s top home languages;
- Develop or adopt bilingual phonics programs for K-3 designed for transitional bilingual and dual language settings;
- Provide state-approved criteria that districts can review before adopting bilingual instructional materials (e.g. [Spanish Language Arts criteria](#) and the [Texas materials review process](#)).

## 2. Strengthen English as a New Language Instructional Resources

- Develop or adopt culturally and linguistically responsive materials for phonics and foundational skills instruction used in English instruction for multilingual learners;
- Develop or adopt high-quality materials for English language development in Standalone English as a New Language instruction, beginning with K-5 and expanding into middle and high school grades with future investments.
- Provide state-approved criteria that districts can review before adopting English as a New Language instructional materials (as states such as CA, OR, and MA have done; see [English Language Development Guidelines](#)).

## 3. Expand and Support Biliteracy Pathways and Quality K-12 Bilingual Education

- Develop quality K-12 bilingual education programs and systems that incorporate research-aligned practices for biliteracy.
- Create comprehensive partnerships with families, at-home bilingual resources, and resources in public libraries.
- Expand assessment options for multilingual learners to demonstrate proficiency in academic subjects in their home language.
- Support broader implementation of the State Seal of Biliteracy by providing:
  - Greater expansion of curricular and professional learning infrastructure for Home Language Arts, World Language, and Heritage Language programs;
  - Alternative biliteracy pathways including career-connected options.

#### 4. Prepare and Develop the Educator Workforce

- ❖ The emphasis on K-3 literacy overlooks the fact that newcomer multilingual learners arrive at different times with varying competencies in English and varied experiences in formal literacy in their home language. The state must provide evidence-based literacy support across P-12 for students who are new to the country and in the initial stages of literacy development in English.
- ❖ Middle and high school content area teachers (e.g. science, math, social studies, etc.) are often [not trained in literacy practices](#) needed to support literacy development for older students. Training content area teachers in literacy instruction to set them up for bilingual or English as a Second Language dual certification would increase district capacity to serve multilingual learners and improve literacy outcomes.

#### 5. Build Leadership Pipelines for Systemic Impact

- ❖ Fund additional bilingual and English as a New Language school district leader positions within districts and counties that work directly with superintendents and executive leaders to improve literacy outcomes at scale in key districts serving large numbers of multilingual learners.
- ❖ Create coaching positions to support literacy in content-area instruction for multilingual learners that strengthen the leadership pipeline, preparing a broader group of building and district leaders who are equipped to serve multilingual learners.
- ❖ Provide professional learning designed for administrators to develop foundational knowledge in leadership practices, strategic planning, and key administrative functions of school administrators that support multilingual learners and thriving bilingual learning communities grounded in NYSED's [existing resources for school districts](#).

#### 6. Incentivize Integrated English as a New Language Co-Teaching Models

- ❖ While schools currently use a range of approaches to staff English as a New Language and bilingual education, the state should incentivize co-teaching, co-planning and assessment with content and English as a New Language teams in the core literacy block in K-5.
- ❖ Provide grants for districts to implement and study research-aligned co-planning and co-teaching practices focused on literacy instruction and eliminate the use of inconsistent and ineffective models such as push-in instruction.

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# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Neuman, S. B., Quintero, E., & Reist, K. (2023). *Reading reform across America: A survey of state legislation*. Albert Shanker Institute. <https://www.shankerinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/ReadingReform%20ShankerInstitute%20FullReport%20072723.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Peak, C. (2025, October 16). *New reading laws sweep the nation following Sold a Story*. APM Reports. <https://www.apmreports.org/story/2025/10/16/legislators-reading-laws-sold-a-story>

<sup>3</sup> Howard, S. (2025). *Legislating literacy instruction: Where are multilingual learners?* [CAL Research Brief]. Center for Applied Linguistics. <https://www.cal.org/publications/legislating-literacy-instruction-where-are-multilingual-learners>.

<sup>4</sup> Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) are multilingual learners who have attended school in the U.S. for fewer than 12 months, and are two or more years below grade level in home language literacy and/or math due to inconsistent or interrupted schooling prior to their arrival.