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# TEACHER TALENT UNTAPPED

Multilingual Paraprofessionals Speak  
About the Barriers to Entering the Profession

JANUARY 2017

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## Acknowledgments

This work would not be possible without generous support from the Bill and Melinda Gates, Heising-Simons, and McKnight Foundations. Many thanks to Katarina Brito, Kathy Bruck, Natalia Duenas, Tracey Gaglio, Linnea Hackett, Linda Hamilton, Bernard Koontz, Florence Kreisman, Alexandra Manuel, and Victoria Moreland for help with recruitment and planning for the focus groups. Special thanks to Ann Duffett at FDR Group for invaluable contributions and moderating the focus groups and to Liliya Stefoglo for sharing her story. We thank our New America colleagues Laura Bornfreund, Lisa Guernsey, and Elena Silva for thoughtful feedback. Janie Tankard Carnock, Kristina Rodriguez, and Sammi Wong provided research and editing support. Thanks to Lea J. E. Austin, Tamara Azar, Esperanza De La Vega, Sabrina Detlef, Cara Jackson, Tamara Hiler, Saroja R. Warner, and Marcy Whitebook for reviewing drafts of the paper.

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Our work is made possible through generous grants from the Alliance for Early Success; the Buffett Early Childhood Fund; the Foundation for Child Development; the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund; the Heising-Simons Foundation; the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; the Joyce Foundation; the George Kaiser Family Foundation; the W.K. Kellogg Foundation; the Kresge Foundation; Lumina Foundation; the McKnight Foundation; the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation; the David and Lucile Packard Foundation; the Pritzker Children's Initiative; the Smith Richardson Foundation; the W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation; and the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation.

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## Report and Focus Group Methodology

To gain a deeper understanding of multilingual paraprofessionals' career aspirations and the barriers they face to becoming lead teachers, New America partnered with FDR Group, a nonpartisan public opinion research firm. From February to April 2016, FDR Group conducted six focus groups with 62 multilingual paraprofessionals across five areas: Washington, D.C.; Orange County, CA; Minneapolis, MN; San Antonio, TX; and the greater Seattle, WA area. New America staff selected the sites based on previous work in three of the five cities and on their geographic diversity. Each is situated in a state with varied teaching pathways and distinct rules on teacher certification (a "credential that demonstrates professional qualifications")<sup>1</sup> and licensure (which is granted by the state and confers the legal right to teach).<sup>2</sup>

Participants were recruited by a variety of individuals representing school districts, preschool programs, teachers unions, and nonprofits. In a few instances, New America assisted with recruitment efforts to ensure at least eight participants attended each focus group. FDR Group developed a recruitment

screening and moderator's guide after consulting with NA staff on key objectives for the research. The firm then had wide latitude in the focus groups' design and execution. Virtually all participants were multilingual public school paraprofessionals working in pre-K through third-grade classrooms.

There was considerable variation in terms of participants' native language, years of paraprofessional experience, previous teaching experience, and age. Nearly all were women and the most common language spoken among participants was Spanish. Other languages spoken by participants include Amharic, Chinese, Dutch, German, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Somali, Tagalog, Turkish, and Vietnamese. The groups were conducted in English and all participants had sufficient knowledge of English to be active in the conversation. About three-quarters of participants held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to one in five paraprofessionals in the U.S. at large. The group thus included an over-representation of paraprofessionals with bachelor's degrees.

## What is a Paraprofessional?

A public school paraprofessional can go by many names and is often called a paraeducator, a teaching assistant, or an instructional aide. These educators usually support instruction in special education, early education, and/or bilingual classrooms. Their responsibilities often include providing one-on-one tutoring, assisting with classroom management, instructing small groups of students, and translating between students, students' families, and the lead teacher.

In 2001, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which required that all paraprofessionals

in schools receiving Title I funds have a minimum set of qualifications. These include: at least two years of college, an associate's degree or higher, or a passing rate on a state or local assessment that demonstrates knowledge or skills in assisting math, reading, and writing instruction. Importantly, however, these requirements do not apply to paraprofessionals who are proficient in both English and another language and primarily serve in a translation or parental involvement role. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced NCLB at the end of 2015, maintains these qualifications.

## How New America Defines "Dual Language Learners" (DLLs)

A dual language learner is a child between zero and eight years old who is in the process of learning English in addition to his or her native language(s). This student may or may not be enrolled in a school where instruction is conducted in both languages.

# INTRODUCTION

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In 1992, Liliya Stefoglo came to America from Moldova and found work as a paraprofessional in Federal Way Public Schools in Washington State. As a speaker of English, Russian, and Ukrainian, three of the district's top five languages, Stefoglo was a critical resource in a classroom with many young dual language learners (DLLs), the linguistic conduit between her students, the teacher, and students' families.

While Stefoglo was happy to use her language skills in her new job, like many paraprofessionals, she faced low and stagnant wages and had the desire to advance in her career. Over time, she developed strong instructional competencies by facilitating small group instruction and supporting student learning. But despite her potential to lead, rather than assist instruction, Stefoglo remained a paraprofessional for ten years, lacking guidance from her district, supervisor, and colleagues.

When a new principal arrived and took notice of Stefoglo's instructional expertise, she learned how to advance her career. He encouraged her to become a teacher, a process she knew nothing about. He asked about her credentials. To his surprise, Stefoglo had both a bachelor's and a master's degree from her home country, the latter in linguistics and education. She had studied to become a teacher in Moldova.

But the process for applying to teach in the United States was laborious. Stefoglo first needed to get her credentials recognized by Washington State and then take multiple exams to become certified and licensed to teach. Her assistant principal connected her to a member of the state's teacher certification office who explained the financial implications of each step in the application process, from credential evaluation to test registration and administrative processing fees. Some of Stefoglo's peers scoffed at her pursuit of a teaching credential. One said, "there are other opportunities *for people like you*. You can't be a teacher in America with such a heavy accent."

She proved them wrong. One year and \$5,000 later, after cutting through much red tape, Stefoglo became a lead teacher—and a great one, prized by her students, school, and community. She went on to receive National Board Certification, a distinction that involves a rigorous, competency-based application process. Later, she became a director of English as a Second Language (ESL) services for another Washington school district.

While Stefoglo's circumstance is common, her advancement story is unusual. Paraprofessionals are twice as likely to speak a language other than English at home than their teacher counterparts, and many bring instructional knowledge and skills to bear in classrooms with DLLs and other diverse learners.<sup>3</sup> But most paraprofessionals lack

## Multilingual paraprofessionals represent a largely untapped pool of potential teacher talent—largely because policies have made it difficult for them to advance to lead teacher.

clear, accessible pathways for gaining teacher certification in the U.S. and often face many hurdles along the way. Multilingual paraprofessionals represent a largely untapped pool of potential teacher talent—largely because policies have made it difficult for them to advance to lead teacher.

Some research already exists on multilingual paraprofessionals and the barriers that they encounter when applying to teach.<sup>4</sup> Last June, we released a brief, *Multilingual Paraprofessionals: An Untapped Resource for Supporting American Pluralism*, that identifies hurdles—bureaucratic, financial, and linguistic—that paraprofessionals face on the pathway to teach, summarizes existing research on each, and begins to explore solutions.<sup>5</sup>

This report, based on conversations from focus groups with dozens of paraprofessionals across five cities, illustrates these hurdles from the paraprofessional’s perspective. Our work here amplifies paraprofessionals’ voices and their concerns in order to inform policy solutions grounded in community and stakeholder input.

To be sure, not all paraprofessionals desire to teach like Stefoglo: many are content in their current positions. And not all should become lead teachers. But according to a recent survey conducted by the National Education Association, about half of paraprofessionals do have the desire to step to

the front of the classroom.<sup>6</sup> What is more, there is evidence that paraprofessionals can have a positive influence on student outcomes—particularly minority student outcomes.<sup>7</sup> A recent study conducted by Charles Clotfelter, Steven Hemelt, and Helen Ladd in North Carolina found that paraprofessionals had a positive effect on students’ test scores in reading and minority students’ test scores in math.<sup>8</sup> And their impact was larger for minority students than for white students in both subjects and went beyond academic outcomes; they also helped to reduce rates of absenteeism.<sup>9</sup>

These potential teachers are valuable assets in our nation’s increasingly diverse school system. Dual language learners are a growing population and represent 10 percent of total public school enrollment in the U.S.<sup>10</sup> Research suggests that DLLs do best in schools that help them access rigorous academic content and learn English by continuing their development in their home languages. Bilingual education programs—including popular dual immersion models—establish strong academic foundations and help DLLs develop full academic proficiency in English and in their home languages.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, multilingual instructional approaches are only viable for schools that have multilingual teachers on staff (see sidebar: Why Multilingual Paraprofessionals Matter for DLLs on page 8). Ongoing, steady increases in the number of

DLLs enrolled in American schools mean that multilingual teachers are currently in high demand.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, 32 states and the District of Columbia report shortages of bilingual, dual immersion, and ESL teachers.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, most states and urban districts report a significant teacher diversity gap.<sup>14</sup> In fact, students of color make up a majority of the nation's student population while the teaching population is 82 percent white.<sup>15</sup> Since the paraprofessional workforce more closely reflects the diversity of the U.S. population on a variety of measures (see

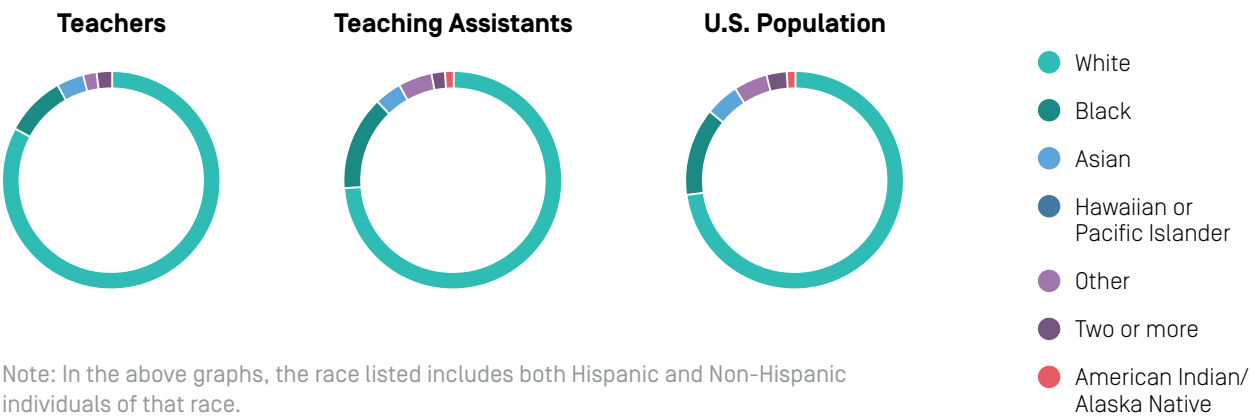
**Figure 1**), supporting its career advancement could help states and districts narrow this gap and increase the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of their teaching force.<sup>16</sup>

As the diversity of America's student population grows, it is critical that policymakers pave pathways for promising paraprofessionals to enter teaching and mitigate key barriers along their way. In turn, this could increase the diversity of the mostly white monolingual teacher workforce and help ensure that America's future teachers can best meet the needs of DLLs and other diverse learners.

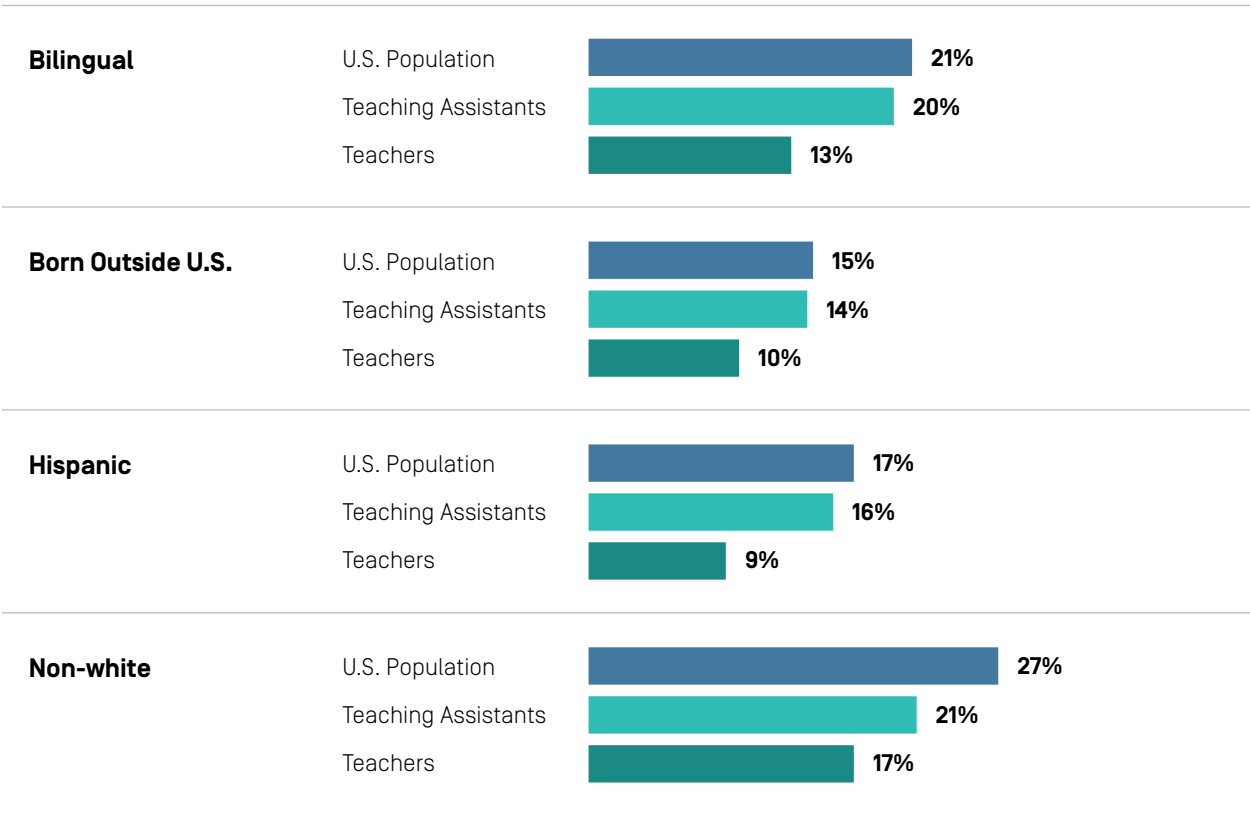


**Figure 1 | Teachers, Teaching Assistants, and the U.S. Population**

Diversity among teaching assistants more closely resembles that of their students on a variety of measures:



Note: In the above graphs, the race listed includes both Hispanic and Non-Hispanic individuals of that race.



Note: Adapted from “Paraprofessionals Could Help Solve Bilingual Teacher Shortages,” by Kaylan Connally and Kim Dancy.

## Why Multilingual Paraprofessionals Matter for DLLs

While multilingual education programs are increasingly popular with families, administrators, and students, relatively few teachers in the U.S. are fully proficient in languages other than English.<sup>17</sup> Many districts have started career pathway programs to help their multilingual paraprofessionals become teachers. And focus group participants recognize that their multilingualism is a key professional asset. For instance, the San Antonio group expressed a strong consensus that their multilingualism helped them in their work.

While descriptions of their responsibilities varied, many of the paraprofessionals said that they are active in delivering instruction, often in multiple languages. Some work with DLLs in small groups to provide both linguistic and academic instruction. Some described working with DLLs in their home languages to help them access content that they did not understand in general instruction. One Seattle paraprofessional said her school treats her and her colleagues like “bilingual tutors.” She described working with native Spanish-speaking DLL children in two stages: first, she focuses “on teaching math in Spanish,” so that students understand the concepts. Next, she teaches “the main words in English” to bridge their content knowledge across their two languages, “and now they can solve their problems!”

Others described working to help DLLs develop their language skills. One San Antonio paraprofessional sees building and correcting students’ use of languages as her primary job. Participants in a number of the focus groups identified the development of DLL oral language proficiency as a key element of their work.


Some multilingual paraprofessionals who work in dual immersion programs—where classroom instruction is split between English and a partner language—reported that they were responsible for the majority of partner language instruction. As one participant from Washington, D.C. told us, “I teach all day in Spanish, so anything the teacher does in English, I do in Spanish. We have whole days in our


school; we have Tuesdays and Thursdays where everything is in Spanish. On other days we do small groups in Spanish, so it’s Spanish, Spanish, Spanish. We do everything the teacher is doing.” In other words, these individuals’ linguistic skills are being leveraged as assets in the classroom and also providing them with opportunities to develop their instructional skills.

Nearly all participants mentioned that they serve as interpreters and brokers for building relationships with—and between—their students, teacher colleagues, administrators, and school communities. One focus group participant in San Antonio explained that many of the teachers in her district “speak Spanish-Spanglish most of the time.” She said that her current classroom teacher speaks limited Spanish, and thanks her for handling daily communications with Spanish-speaking families. A Washington, D.C. paraprofessional said that families that

don’t speak English ... will only talk to me or try to use me to translate to talk to the teacher. In my school there’s a lot of Hispanic descendants and it is not a bilingual school ... there’s a lot of parents who have trouble talking to teachers. Parents who have kids in other classes, they will ask me to translate.


This is valuable work. Research suggests that DLL families often face a number of obstacles to connecting and working with schools. Some need help navigating schools staffed primarily by monolingual English speakers and some can find the cultural norms and practices of U.S. schools unfamiliar and confusing. Multilingual paraprofessionals are well positioned to bridge these linguistic and cultural gaps. They generally have significant educational experience, are familiar with how U.S. schools function, and share linguistic and cultural backgrounds with their schools’ DLLs.<sup>18</sup> The connections that they build can help families advocate for their children, allow schools to better understand students and their families, and—most importantly—foster student success.<sup>19</sup>




 **Minneapolis**


“ They need us. We know the population of the school. We are native Spanish speakers. We have good connections with the families.




 **Seattle**


“ I do a lot of interpreting for families for all kinds of meetings, psychologists, speech therapists ... usually before or after school.




 **Orange County**

“ Sometimes just saying one word in their primary language changes the whole [thing], gets across the concept because they can't understand it, they can't visualize it, and then you say whatever term, and then they go, 'oh, I know.' Their brain opens up.




 **Minneapolis**

“ I was giving a lot of support to the principal and the office, but especially in the behavior part.... A kid that was in trouble, I was the one that needed to go and talk to him because some of these kids don't speak English.... Most of the parents don't speak any English so when you need to call you need to give the explanation in Spanish.



**Minneapolis**



“ I have seen that sometimes a parent will like to talk to me better than the teacher. Because I can explain to that parent in Spanish and with our own expressions. Then that parent will feel more comfortable talking in Spanish with me than with the teacher. It is not because she has something against the teacher. The cultural, the expressions that we use, our way to say the things between Latinos. Also the kids: sometimes they'll come to me and say something to me in Spanish that I will understand that the teacher won't. Maybe it is a TV show they want to share with me because I watch it too. So many things, so many examples I could give, the cultural part.


# BUREAUCRATIC BARRIERS

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## Baseline Credentials That Do Not Count


All states require K–3—and an increasing number of pre-K—lead teachers to possess a bachelor’s degree, yet only one in five multilingual paraprofessionals in the U.S. has this degree.<sup>20</sup> Some focus group participants had earned credits towards a BA, but lamented the process to get their credits recognized and transferred toward a degree in education. Many participants found it challenging to leave the workforce and pursue additional coursework or credentials.<sup>21</sup>

Even when multilingual paraprofessionals have a bachelor’s degree, it may not be in education, a common requirement for elementary teachers, or may not “count” in the U.S. About a quarter of participants in the focus groups had been teachers in their home countries. One had been a master teacher in Monterrey, Mexico for nine years. In order to become a teacher in the U.S., however, foreign-educated teachers must submit their credentials to an evaluation organization such as World Education Services (WES).<sup>22</sup> According to participants, this process can take time and be tough to navigate, particularly with limited financial support and time off work.




Seattle


“ I have a BA in finance. So if I do go into teaching I’ve got to get my master’s. I’m not sure if it is [the] right move for me yet.




Washington, D.C.


“ I did three years of social work and then I was going to the University of the District of Columbia, and I just stopped. Now I’m like, if I do become a teacher, all of that social work stuff will be thrown out, and I’ll be starting over again. I don’t want to do it. Forget it.




 **Minneapolis**


“ There are a lot more requirements here to become a teacher, which is why I didn’t pursue it—partly the effort to get credits transferred and accepted.




 **San Antonio**


“ I am a teacher [licensed in Puerto Rico]; I have my BA degree. But here we have to certify again.



 **Washington, D.C.**

“ If your college was not here, which is my case, you have to get your papers to an evaluation organization [such as] WES. You get evaluated to see that your credentials are equal to a bachelor’s in the U.S. so that makes you able to then go through the Praxis. It’s a process.



 **Washington, D.C.**

“ The documents are sent to the school. You translate or hire someone to translate. That was what took me the longest because I had to hire someone back in my country to translate for me. And then WES took like two weeks to give me the answer back of what my degree was equivalent [to] in this country.

Whether navigating additional credentials or getting current ones recognized, multilingual paraprofessionals must cut through multiple layers of bureaucracy to obtain the proper degree to teach. And once they clear that hurdle, they must navigate their state’s teacher licensure exams and student teaching requirements, which present additional challenges.

### **Rigid Licensure and Student Teaching Rules That Vary by State**

Applying for teacher licensure in the U.S. is not as clear as applying for licensure in other professions, like accounting, where there is only one exam.<sup>23</sup> There are over 600 different teacher licensure exams

in use, and the exams—along with the cut scores—can vary considerably by state.<sup>24</sup> Most states require prospective teachers to pass a basic skills test and one or more content tests, such as the Praxis exams.<sup>25</sup> However, many states have their own state-specific licensure exams.<sup>26</sup>

Some focus group participants said they were required to take as many as four exams to obtain a teaching license, and those who obtained degrees abroad were required to take even more after getting their credentials formally evaluated and transferred. States often require foreign-educated teacher candidates to take an exam or series of exams to demonstrate proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking English.<sup>27</sup>





Given these tests' wide variability, many states refuse to recognize or offer true reciprocity for out-of-state licenses, which makes teacher mobility between states more difficult.<sup>28</sup> Several participants who made it through the process of obtaining a teaching degree or license in one state had trouble getting their credentials recognized in another after needing to relocate, so they opted to continue working as paraprofessionals instead. In order to take the helm of a class, they would need to start from scratch and retake various exams or coursework, an undesirable or unfeasible undertaking for many.

Many participants had a sophisticated understanding of the myriad tests required to become a fully licensed teacher. Unsurprisingly, the tests varied across the five focus group sites. Participants often found state licensure rules—and even the content of the exams—arbitrary and unrelated to the practice of good teaching. A participant in San Antonio, for instance, bemoaned the need to demonstrate knowledge of Texas history in order to teach reading effectively at the elementary school level. Others lamented the exams' failure to assess the competencies of prospective teachers in real-world classroom scenarios or measure important skills for success (sometimes called “soft skills”) such as passion for and persistence in working with young children.<sup>29</sup> Some with aspirations to teach kindergarten found the PreK–6 teaching credential overly broad and much of the exams' content inapplicable to their career contexts.



On top of multiple—sometimes inapplicable—licensure exams, most states require prospective teachers to complete student teaching under the supervision of a mentor teacher as part of their preparation.<sup>30</sup> Many states specify a minimum length for the student teaching experience, and about half set the minimum at 10 weeks.<sup>31</sup> Focus group participants found state student teaching requirements baffling, given their substantial experience supporting instruction under a lead teacher. Many spend at least 35 hours in classrooms each week for an entire school year. Yet, as with foreign credentials, paraprofessionals' substantial work experience often fails to “count” toward

state requirements, even when they are co-leading dual immersion classrooms. Unsurprisingly, many participants found these requirements impossible to meet for financial reasons; they could not afford to leave their paid positions to do similar work as unpaid student teachers.

In sum, rigid and often untenable state licensure and student teaching requirements prevent many capable multilingual paraprofessionals from becoming lead teachers. These requirements can leave them feeling stuck in their roles, without hope of upward mobility. Given multiple barriers in place at the state level, multilingual paraprofessionals need resources and supports at the district and school levels to help them successfully pursue teaching credentials. However, these resources are often scarce, as we explore in the next section.

**Seattle**

“ I think it's hard for us to give up working for the three to five months or however long it is to do your student teaching.

**San Antonio**

“ In order for me to teach, I need to pass four tests.



 San Antonio

“ I heard just by talking to coworkers who are in the same level [that] if you pass the test and you get certified then you have to have the student teaching also [in order to be] qualified. They were saying then you need to quit your job, go to school, and do it for free for I don't know how long.



 Orange County

“ There are different tests. There's a CBEST that you pass to start [your] credential. It's very basic. A lot of districts require the test for instructional assistants as well. But to be credentialed there are subject-specific or multi-subject tests that you have to do. Test names are different depending on what you're teaching. It could be single subject, multiple subject.



 San Antonio

“ We have the Bachelor in Education in Mexico, so when we came here they tell us, 'if you want a certificate in Texas, first you have to take the TOEFL test.'



 San Antonio

“ They ask you about the history in Texas. If you were not born here, if you don't have anything related to it, it is very hard for you to give that information in a test.



 Seattle

“ I am not saying don't have the test—give us the training, give us the classes that we need in order for us to be crossing that little bridge.... It is hard. It is not one test, it is three of them.



 San Antonio

“ If I'm focusing on teaching pre-K, please make the test for pre-K. The EC-6.... I do not want to teach sixth grade or fifth grade. I want to stay in pre-K so give me an exam where I have my experience that I know about.

## Unreliable Information on Teaching Pathways

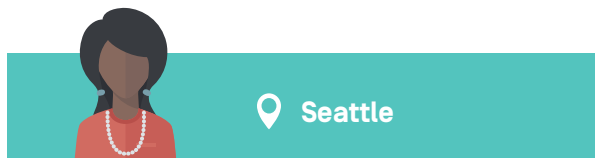
Many focus group participants expressed disillusionment with their state's slew of teaching requirements partly because they lacked reliable information on them from any source: state, district, or school. When participants did obtain the necessary information, it was often from colleagues or superiors willing to help. That is, most participants did not have access to a reliable source of information on possible career pathways.

Focus group participants repeatedly said that they have limited access to resources and professional development (PD) opportunities. When explaining how they understand their professional obligations and potential opportunities, participants implied that they are not included in routine dissemination of information at work. They regularly said things like, "I don't know if it's a rumor or it's true," "sometimes they don't tell me what they want from me," "she said there is no one person you can go to," and "I wasn't sure I could apply." Paraprofessionals' sources of workplace information often appear to be informal and indirect.

However, there were a couple of notable exceptions. A participant in the Seattle area explained that her school had a good system for helping multilingual paraprofessionals become teachers and access the information they needed. Likewise, a participant in San Antonio found reliable information through the Texas Education Agency's regional service center assigned to her district. She said,

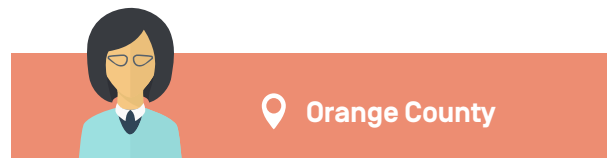
there's a place. It's called Region 20. And they tell you exactly where you're at. If you have paperwork, then you need to do this. If you have a bachelor[s] from here, you need to do this. So they kind of guide you.

Still, many paraprofessionals lacked ready access to clear information needed in order to become certified teachers. No participant mentioned gaining access to the necessary information from her district. Perhaps this is because districts vary in how they define paraprofessionals' roles, particularly as they relate to supporting instruction.




📍 Seattle


“ In my school it is different and I am grateful for that, because our principal is like, ‘Oh, you guys need to be a teacher ... these schools have program[s] for paras who want to be a teacher.’ They just went through this process, and they are going to financially help us to graduate and be a teacher. They encourage us to participate in this program, [and] that’s really nice.




📍 Orange County


“ I actually called the district to ask about [it], ‘cause I was a teacher in my home country, so I wanted to become a teacher here. I have done all [the] research. I called the district ... and they told me to check the educational department website. So I checked, and the list is 100 schools. I just went to the teachers that I work with.




 **Seattle**


“ Washington State, they don't have very clear info on how to become a teacher, they have all these obstacles, and you call them and they don't even know.




 **Washington, D.C.**


“ I asked my instructional coach, and she said there is no one person you can go to.



 **Orange County**

“ All they need to have is another webpage with resources and it will be up to us whether we want to reach out to those resources, but there's not even that.



 **Washington, D.C.**

“ I said I would like to become a teacher. Unfortunately, I do not have the requirements necessary to get there. [My principal] said, 'don't worry. I will get you through.' He has been looking for programs. He lets me know.

## Inconsistent Roles or Expectations

Paraprofessionals' roles and expectations varied by focus group site. Generally, the scope of work fell into two main categories: supporting multilingual classroom instruction or supporting various administrative tasks. In Orange County, Minneapolis, and Seattle, participants mostly supported small group instruction. Paraprofessionals served in mixed capacities in both Washington, D.C. and San Antonio. For instance, in D.C., participants in dual immersion schools directly supported instruction, while those in non-dual immersion schools often cleaned tables and maintained classroom order. Nearly all participants shared the responsibility of supporting teacher-to-student and teacher-to-parent communication through interpretation and translation. But many


participants in non-dual immersion schools felt underused for their instructional skills, and they desired more academic interactions with students.


Many participants said that districts do not always delineate or clearly codify paraprofessionals' roles in formal job descriptions or evaluations, particularly those related to supporting instruction. And even when expectations are made clear at the district level, educators deploy them in myriad ways at the school level. This may be partly due to the limited training that districts offer to educators on paraprofessionals' roles and how to use them most effectively. According to participants, few principals and teachers understand DLLs, let alone paraprofessionals' potential to influence their achievement.<sup>32</sup> Despite this lack of knowledge, principals across all focus group sites were

responsible for evaluating and supporting paraprofessionals. In some cases, teachers took it upon themselves to inform principals of paraprofessional performance even with no formal authority to do so.


Given that principals and teachers lack training, let alone *quality* training, on how to deploy paraprofessionals in the classroom, it is unsurprising that paraprofessionals lack quality training themselves. Many participants reported


that their performance evaluation and professional development opportunities failed to align with their actual instructional responsibilities at work. Meanwhile, many participants were excluded from bilingual teachers' professional development opportunities. In order to create on-ramps into teaching, state and district policymakers should develop evaluation and support systems that recognize, foster, and reward paraprofessionals' many competencies on the job.




 **Orange County**


“ I didn't know where my boundaries stopped or exactly [what] I was supposed to be doing under my job description until actually I went to see a union person on some other matter and then she was surprised to find I was teaching in a separate room without a teacher being there.




 **Seattle**


“ They want us to be teaching reading, reading, reading so they get the kids' skills up. Even though reading is important ... the ELL department at the district says you shouldn't only be teaching reading. The main job for ELL paraeducators is to teach language acquisition. Reading, writing, listening, speaking. The principal says one thing but the district says something else. I try to incorporate both.



 **Washington, D.C.**

“ We have a new principal. She doesn't know anything about early childhood education and that is very difficult for us, so we ask her what she expects for us. And we don't get [an] answer.



 **Orange County**


“ If I'm an instructional aide, I am aiding your instruction, not being a maid.






📍 Orange County

“ I had a teacher before that made me file all day, and I actually went to the district and told them, 'I'm actually capable of more than this. I'm not supposed to file. That's not my job.' So they pulled me out of that class and put me in a different class where I was actually helping kids, especially ELL [English language learners].




📍 Washington, D.C.

“ I would like to be more involved with the children. I don't want to be all day cleaning. That's what I do. Cleaning all day, wiping tables. We have to do it, but we would like to be more involved with the children or given more responsibilities to be with them, teach them.



📍 Seattle

“ The main problem for us as [instructional assistants] is the role—our role in school is difficult to understand for the teachers. Because they believe something wrong sometimes. We don't have the support of the principals because they don't know.



📍 Seattle

“ We get an evaluation at the end of the year. It is either done with the principal or the assistant principal.... But they don't watch us work on a daily basis, they really don't know for sure, they just give us good marks.

# FINANCIAL BARRIERS

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## Low Pay

Low pay constitutes a primary barrier to obtaining the credentials necessary to become a certified teacher, since they make it almost impossible for paraprofessionals to afford the cost of going back to school.

Consider: the majority of focus group participants reported earning significantly lower pay than their teacher counterparts. Those working in Washington, D.C.'s public schools noted that their salary was about one-third of what teachers earned: one participant said, “we start at 20 something [thousand]...they start at 60 [thousand].” Nationally, paraprofessionals earn about half of what elementary teachers make annually. In 2015, the median paraprofessional pay in the U.S. was \$24,900, while the median pay of an elementary school teacher was \$54,550.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, several participants said that they did not earn benefits, including sick leave and paid holidays. Others characterized their pay as a “ghost” and joked that workers at McDonald’s were likely paid more than they were. Indeed, the pay earned by many paraprofessionals approaches

the federal poverty level for a family of four.<sup>34</sup> And unlike for teachers, whose salaries vary based on education level and years in the classroom (and, in some districts, on classroom effectiveness), paraprofessionals’ pay is relatively flat.<sup>35</sup> In fact, due to their low pay, many paraprofessionals reported working additional jobs, like in their schools’ before-school and aftercare programs, but also as tutors, salespeople, property managers, and even lifeguards.

Multilingual paraprofessionals’ salaries do not reflect the myriad contributions they make to student learning and the multiple roles they serve. In San Antonio, Minneapolis, and Washington, D.C., several participants bemoaned the fact that they earned so much less than their classroom teacher despite fulfilling similar instructional duties. One multilingual paraprofessional felt that school districts were essentially “double dipping” by asking them to both aid teacher instruction and provide translation and interpretation services. Another characterized her bilingualism as an asset that the school district used to help “save money” on hiring a bilingual teacher, but otherwise did not value (see sidebar: Reliance on Visiting Teachers to Staff Multilingual Education Programs on pages 20–21).



 **San Antonio**

“ I am frustrated, oh my God. I am a teacher like her, but I can't have the same as her.... And when I sit with her planning, I have a lot of ideas and I share with her. I am thinking, 'okay, I am doing the same as you, but this is my paycheck, and this is your paycheck.' ”



 **Minneapolis**

“ I feel that as bilingual staff, it is almost like they are double dipping on us. We use our second language to provide much more than a regular paraprofessional would. I'm not saying they are less or we are more than we are, I'm just saying we are not really recognized for our second language. ”



 **San Antonio**

“ But our payment is a ghost. We make so little compared with how much [teachers] are making. ”



 **Minneapolis**

“ What is the differential between [paraprofessional] and teacher pay? Double, very large, twice as much. ”



 **Washington, D.C.**

“ One hard part is ... we're seen as an assistant, and inside the classroom we're co-teachers. We are planning, we're assessing.... But we're not getting compensated for that. ”



 **Washington, D.C.**

“ It's not even \$15 [an hour] if you take away taxes. It's really a lot less. They pay more at McDonald's perhaps. ”



Washington, D.C.

“ We’re supposed to do self-reflection called IMPACT, but we don’t get anything out of it. When teachers do it, and they get ‘highly effective,’ they get a bonus. What do we get? We’re supposed to be planning, assessing children, doing everything a teacher is doing. And we’re expected to do it along with the teachers, without that title. But we’re not getting compensated to do it.

## Reliance on Visiting Teachers to Staff Multilingual Education Programs

The surge in popularity of dual immersion programs—where classroom instruction is split between English and a partner language—has placed increased pressure on districts to find qualified multilingual educators. A recent report from the American Institutes for Research on dual immersion programs highlights the fact that several states have turned to visiting teacher agreements to staff multilingual education programs.<sup>36</sup> Utah, home to over 100 dual immersion programs, created an international guest teacher license that provides teachers from abroad with a three-year J-1 visa. According to the report, Utah has been able to draw in teachers from China, Spain, Mexico, Taiwan, and France using the international license. A substantial number of states (32 plus Washington, D.C.) have partnered with the Spanish Embassy to recruit and hire teachers from Spain to work in dual language, bilingual education, and foreign language programs.<sup>37</sup> These teachers are also hired under three-year J-1 visas and are expected to hold a bachelor’s degree, have their credentials verified, and have a background in bilingual education. In turn, school districts are expected to offer orientation and mentoring to help visiting teachers acclimate to working in a new setting and context.

This solution has drawbacks. Reliance on visiting teachers means that school districts are routinely investing significant resources (e.g., salary, visa sponsorship, benefits, professional development) in educators who will leave their schools within three years. Some visiting teachers may struggle with the cultural and pedagogical differences they face when working in the U.S. school system.

Focus group participants in Washington, D.C. and Minneapolis wondered why their districts would invest in teachers from abroad rather than commit to helping paraprofessionals become certified. Participants stressed that they already have connections to the community, are knowledgeable about their schools, and have shared cultural reference points with students and families. Indeed, the origins of “Grow Your Own” (GYO) teacher education programs—many of which target paraprofessionals—are rooted in the vision of developing culturally competent educators who are “insiders” in the community and hence particularly well prepared to address students’ needs.<sup>38</sup>



 Minneapolis

“ I have been very curious to know why the district has invested in bringing all these wonderful people from Spain. They are good teachers; they are wonderful. [But] they have been investing in bringing them to here instead of investing in people ... they already have in the district as a [paraprofessional]. Why not invest in us instead of bringing people from another country?



 Washington, D.C.

“ They get visiting teachers from Spain and they give them provisional license[s] for three years. The reason they do it is because they can't find enough teachers here. They haven't created a program ... [that] would support the paras to become teachers so instead they bring in teachers from Spain.



Minneapolis



“ We are already working. We are already here. We know the district. We know the policies. We know the families. We know the culture. We know how the building works. We know the kids, and the families. It makes me curious why? Why do they do that? I am assuming it is a lot of money to bring those people from Spain. And besides, some of them, the contract will end in three years—they'll go back.




## Lack of Resources to Pursue Additional Education

Many participants also cited time as a key barrier to pursuing the additional education needed to become a licensed teacher. The need to work (sometimes multiple jobs) and fulfill familial obligations leaves little time to devote to school. Some participants wondered how they could work 12 hours a day, take care of their children, and attend classes. Few saw further education as a realistic proposition; some were unwilling to sacrifice already scarce time with their families in order to obtain additional education and credentials.

Many individuals worried about the impact that going back to school would have on their family obligations and household budgets in the short term. The cost of higher education is substantial. A scan of public universities in the focus group states showed that in 2015, the average tuition and fees was \$13,790 at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, \$11,839 at the University of Washington-Seattle, and \$7,447 at the University of Texas-San Antonio.<sup>39</sup> These figures do not include the cost of books, which can be as high as \$1,000 per semester. Those are costs that many paraprofessionals cannot afford to take on.


Though multilingual paraprofessionals may want to make the jump to the front of the classroom, the basic structure of higher education can be tough for them to navigate. College and university courses may not fit their schedules or location, and even when they do, family obligations can make additional course completion difficult. For instance, many focus group participants cited the challenge of attending classes offered only on campus, at night, or on the weekends—times when they want to be with their families. Research on California’s BA cohort programs, which were designed to help linguistically and ethnically diverse early childhood educators earn their BAs, reveals that along with financial assistance, access to flexible class schedules “designed to meet the needs of working students” was essential to participants’ academic success.<sup>40</sup>

Time considerations are especially pertinent to multilingual paraprofessionals who lack a bachelor’s degree. Census data show that almost 27 percent of multilingual paraprofessionals only have a high school degree and almost 12 percent have no degree at all.<sup>41</sup> That has implications for the amount of time and money it would take to earn the bachelor’s degree necessary to obtain a teaching credential. A 2013 study of the Los Angeles Universal Preschool Child Development Workforce Initiative, a program that helped early childhood workers earn associate’s degrees and/or transfer to bachelor’s degree programs, found that some students who worked full-time were only able to take one or two classes per semester.<sup>42</sup> That staggered course load slowed their progress—at that rate it would take five to ten years to accumulate the 60 credits necessary to earn an associate’s degree—and made it difficult for them to qualify for financial aid. This is a problem faced by many non-traditional college students that requires tailored solutions.<sup>43</sup>



Seattle

“ I cannot quit my job to go to school. I have no choice.




Minneapolis


“ The juggling, how to pay, especially if you have a family, spending so much time going to school—I don’t think you could work full time going to school.

Several focus group locations had “Grow Your Own” (GYO) initiatives designed to help paraprofessionals with either a bachelor’s or associate’s degree become licensed teachers. These teacher education programs aim “to improve teaching and learning in high-needs schools by recruiting and preparing community based teachers and returning them to their local schools.”<sup>44</sup> Focus group participants from Washington State noted that Highline Public Schools’ Bilingual Teacher Fellow program, a partnership between the district and Western Washington University to provide a pathway to a BA and teacher certification, provides financial support to multilingual paraprofessionals who want to become teachers. Others said that there were a few programs in Washington State to help paraprofessionals become certified teachers, but that some were not structured in a way that made it feasible for them to participate. For example, two participants spoke about a one-year, fast-track


program, but noted that its tuition costs and weekly time requirements were both very high.


Meanwhile, the Minneapolis Residency Program (MRP) provides paraprofessionals interested in pursuing a teaching degree with a stipend, reduced tuition, hands-on teaching experience, coursework, and the guidance of a mentor teacher over the course of the rigorous 15-month program.<sup>45</sup> Focus group participants in Minneapolis had varying opinions on whether the structure of the program was the right fit for them. One participant saw the MRP as a good opportunity that would allow her to continue working as a paraprofessional for the duration of the program while several others worried about covering the cost of tuition and the time commitment involved. These perceptions highlight the challenges of creating programs that can meet, or seem to meet, the varied needs of paraprofessionals.




 **San Antonio**


“Most places don’t pay student teachers, so it’s adding more of your time.”




 **Minneapolis**


“I am really considering this [GYO] program. It seems like a good program.”




 **Seattle**


“If I can find a way that is more easy, less stressful, then maybe. But I need money. I cannot leave my job because I need to live.”




 **Washington, D.C.**


“I tried to go to college, but it’s expensive.... I have two daughters. My time goes to them. Sorry about my career, but my daughters are first.”




 **Seattle**


“ Add to that, being a mom, being a wife, and having other things to do. If you don't have kids ... you have the time. But if you have a career, you have kids ... there is no time.



 **Minneapolis**

“ I don't have the time and I don't have the money. I can't be between class and being a student teacher; I can't be from 7 to 7. My girls are three and six.



 **Seattle**

“ They are offering for them to pay a certain part. But if you don't have your BA degree, which you would have to pay yourself, that's the part that is kind of hard.... And in my case, you have to commit to Seattle Public Schools for five years and I don't want to commit to SPS for five years. I want to get my certificate, but I do not want to commit myself. I want to go on my own, take my time, one or two classes. I am a mom, I'm a wife, as you know that's a job. I want to take my time.



 **Minneapolis**

“ There was this program, Grow Your Own, I was very excited [about] and I went to all the meetings, but then when they say I needed to quit my job and be like one year studying, studying, studying, and also doing the internship, I was like, 'when I'm going to have time for my girls?'

# LINGUISTIC BARRIERS

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## Linguistic Abilities as Liabilities

While paraprofessionals' multilingualism is critical for their students, colleagues, schools, and districts, it is not generally reflected as an asset in policies governing their career trajectories. Across all of the focus groups, participants reported that their language skills, cultural competencies, and considerable educational expertise are undervalued. Many policies governing educators' careers are designed for a monolingual teaching corps. So despite being in high demand, these language skills can also be a hindrance to paraprofessionals' professional advancement.

Focus group participants flagged state licensure exams as a major hurdle to becoming lead teachers since none are offered in their native languages. Many explained that these English-only assessments were the most difficult obstacle to certification. Some noted that they had already navigated numerous financial, academic, bureaucratic, and familial challenges to satisfy their states' licensure requirements, only to come up just short on the exam. In several instances, participants were agonizingly close—just points away from meeting their states' benchmarks for obtaining licensure (a point made more painful by the fact that these exams frequently cover content not directly related to effective instruction of DLLs).<sup>46</sup>



Participants' responses to this situation varied. Some emphasized that they understood the value of their multilingualism and were primarily interested in continuing to teach in their native languages. They said that it was frustrating to have to pass an assessment in English to demonstrate their fitness to teach in other languages. Some chronicled evidence of their abilities—years of classroom experience, impressed colleagues, administrators offering to hire them as soon as they were licensed—while expressing frustration that there was no alternate way for them to demonstrate their knowledge and expertise other than an English-language exam. “They don’t need to have a test,” said one San Antonio participant. “They can observe me when I teach. I don’t need to pass any test. I already have my BA so why do they need me to take the test?”

Others argued that their current positions showed that their English skills were strong enough to work in schools, but lamented their state exams' reliance on technical terms that were not immediately relevant to their daily work. Many evinced a willingness to continue developing their English skills, provided that they were given the opportunity. One San Antonio paraprofessional said, “if it’s in English, well, okay. I’m in the United States. I know that I came here and one of the things is that they speak English. Well, okay, I’ll have to learn it, but help me out.”



Multilingualism has further implications for paraprofessionals' work. Participants described feeling out of the loop on key parts of their schools' operations. When describing how she is evaluated, a D.C. paraprofessional explained that her teacher told her that their principal asked if she spoke to the students in Spanish. In her eyes, this was the full extent of her school's communication of expectations and evaluation of her professional contributions. Another participant reported that school curricula were not available in DLLs' home languages, even when schools were teaching in

those languages. Finally, some complained that professional development opportunities were often available only in English.



All participants spoke English sufficiently well to participate in our English-language focus groups. However, nearly all identified language barriers as key obstacles to their professional success in the present and advancement in the future. Some of these barriers, like the struggles described with states' teacher licensure exams, hinged almost exclusively on English ability.

**San Antonio**



“ I took the [content] test three times already...and I didn't pass it. There were many reasons. The first one...is the language.

**Washington, D.C.**

“ We want to teach in Spanish. My higher score is in math because math is the same in every language.

**Washington, D.C.**

“ I can speak English fluently but my first language is Spanish. I said, '[what] can I do to pass this test?' And they said they can give me one hour more since Spanish is my first language. I took the opportunity.... I was not able to pass.

**Washington, D.C.**

“ The curriculum we have right now, the trainings are only in English so it's not helpful for us because we are doing Spanish all day. We are translating everything in Spanish our way, so there's not a Spanish structured curriculum in our school. There is no structure.





📍 Washington, D.C.

“ I know paraprofessionals who are in my school that have their bachelor’s but because of the language barrier and trying to take the Praxis, they aren’t able to take the test and able to make that move to become teachers. It’s not offered in Spanish. I think maybe it should be so they can have that advantage.



📍 Washington, D.C.

“ I didn’t finish my ... I didn’t get my degree for education in my country, but I continue here and I get my BA in Spanish. I took the four years for early childhood education—all the classes ... except “Methods and Materials” because they don’t allow me to do that without passing the Praxis.



San Antonio



“ The principal keep[s] asking me, ‘did you pass your test, I really need you in the bilingual class.’ Sorry, I didn’t pass it. She asked me two times, ‘I have the position. I’m not going to put it [on] the market, until you tell me, what is the result.’ I was like five, ten points [too] low. It was very frustrating because you think you got what you need.

## The Linguistic Stratification of Roles in Pre-K Classrooms<sup>47</sup>

In pre-K classrooms in the U.S., paraprofessionals or assistant teachers often spend the same amount of time as lead teachers interacting and engaging with young children.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, they are required to remain with their classes at all times due to state-mandated child-teacher ratios.<sup>49</sup> Both center- and school-based programs must comply with these regulations because of young children's greater need for individual attention.


As a growing number of children under five years old are linguistically and ethnically diverse, it has become increasingly important for the adults in pre-K classrooms to be able to interact with them and their families in their home languages as well as have the skills needed to understand diverse cultural practices.<sup>50</sup> The early childhood workforce, unlike that in K-12, is both ethnically and linguistically diverse, more closely paralleling the growing population of DLLs in America.<sup>51</sup>

Yet the diversity among the staff in pre-K classrooms is often stratified by position with respect to race, ethnicity, and language.<sup>52</sup> A 2008

survey of over 1,900 centers in California found that 49 percent of assistant teachers were able to communicate fluently in languages other than English with children and families, compared to only 37 percent of lead teachers.<sup>53</sup>


The prevalence of ethnically and linguistically diverse staff in the paraprofessional role can be problematic in the way children see themselves, their home languages, and their culture reflected in the classroom environment.<sup>54</sup> For instance, if an assistant teacher, who speaks the same language as a child's family does at home, is constantly cleaning, and the lead teacher, who speaks only English, is primarily in charge of classroom learning, is there an implicit message being communicated about power?

As the early childhood education field seeks to raise qualifications of teachers and assistant teachers in the workforce,<sup>55</sup> particularly in pre-K settings, it will be imperative to increase the diversity of lead teachers so that children see themselves reflected in leaderships roles.




📍 San Antonio

“ The relationship was great. She was really nice. But it was like, ‘I am the teacher and you are the assistant.’ It was very clear in that case. It was more, ‘help me out cleaning, and I’m going to be teaching.




📍 Washington, D.C.

“ When I come back to school as a teacher assistant, I feel like the teacher is here [indicates higher] and I am here [indicates lower], and I don’t know why.




📍 Washington, D.C.

“ When we go to meetings with the director or principal, he will say, ‘we can’t do it without you [paraprofessionals or assistant teachers], you’re the puzzle.’ We want to believe it, but sometimes when we do our stuff I [do] not think we’re validated.



📍 Washington, D.C.

“ I think the main role we’re assigned is support ... get this one that went to the bathroom, clean up the tables, and set what comes next. The person that is here to support the teacher for everything. We don’t have turns.



📍 Washington, D.C.

“ I ... keep the students engaged in activities, but doing it in Spanish, especially [for] the ones that are ELLs. The ones that don’t understand what the lead teacher is saying, it’s basically my job ... to make sure children are paying attention.... It’s basically a lot of redirecting, but everything is in Spanish.

# BROADER FINDINGS: PARAPROFESSIONALS' DESIRE AND ABILITY TO TEACH


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Despite multiple barriers standing in their way, many paraprofessionals desire to become licensed teachers, for various reasons. Several focus group participants expressed a passion for working with young DLLs, while others expressed the desire to advance their salary and career status. Several foreign-educated participants in San Antonio and Washington, D.C. had been teachers in their home countries, and many of the study participants had graduated from college. These individuals want jobs that reflect their instructional expertise and level of educational attainment. While supportive colleagues, particularly a cooperative lead teacher, may help mitigate some of the barriers to entering teaching, such support varied widely among focus group participants.

Still, not all multilingual paraprofessionals desire to become teachers and not all necessarily should. Several focus group participants questioned whether pursuing a teaching credential was worth all the trouble in the end, and some were perfectly content continuing to work in their current role. Participants in D.C., the greater Seattle area, and San Antonio described teaching as a stressful career with long hours and little reward beyond the pay boost. They voiced concerns about the additional


responsibilities associated with teaching, including managing paperwork, student misbehavior, and demanding parents and administrators. The lure of better compensation may not be enough to attract every high-quality multilingual candidate into teaching. However, better compensation paired with improvements in school working conditions, principal leadership, and teacher licensing portability might help attract high-quality diverse teacher candidates.<sup>56</sup>


Furthermore, since most districts lack robust evaluation and support systems for paraprofessionals, it is difficult to identify which participants would actually make effective teachers. That said, it is difficult to guarantee that *any* new teacher will be effective on their first day in the classroom.<sup>57</sup> Policymakers would be wise to adopt preparation and licensure policies that assess candidates' performance and competencies on the job. After all, the single greatest predictor of how well a teaching candidate will perform in year two is how well she performs in year one.<sup>58</sup> Since multilingual paraprofessionals are already on the job and supporting instruction, they represent an untapped pool of potential teacher talent that is ripe for public investment.




 **Washington, D.C.**


“ When I first started working there, I wasn't sure I wanted to be a teacher, but working with kids and getting the experience: I would definitely like to be a teacher one day.




 **Orange County**


“ I never thought I would teach. This was not my idea.... I have actually really enjoyed it.




 **Washington, D.C.**

“ It's hard for me since I come from a higher career path, and in my country, being an assistant is someone who doesn't have to write and learn. So for my family back there, it's like, 'oh, you're doing that after all your 10 years of study?' It's like, 'OMG, this is what you went to [the] United States for?




 **San Antonio**



“ My passion is working with the kids. And I feel like I am born to be a teacher. And it is really frustrating because no, I don't [have] my certification yet.





**Minneapolis**





“ I think it is more a personal thing. I love what I do. I would like to stay working in a Spanish immersion school. But .... I want to move up. I don't want to stay in the same position. And I feel ... if I stay here, ... I won't grow up. No other level. My salary also will be the same because you get to a point where you don't earn more money.

**Minneapolis**

“ I would love to be a teacher. I don't want to sound cliché. I found I don't know why I didn't study education when I lived in Colombia. I am good at it. It is my passion. I love to teach my first language, that's Spanish. I just haven't been able to get that paper that says [I'm a teacher].

**San Antonio**

“ I enjoy going home, not bringing anything with me. I can go home and disconnect from work, where [teachers] don't. They have to continue working because that's their reality. It is like a balance. I go home and I'm with my family 100 percent and my weekends are for myself. And that's not for them.

**Seattle**

“ I see the hoops that the teachers have to jump through. There's always something more that the principal wants, another meeting, another thing. The state puts all these burdens on the teaching industry. And now the federal government is getting into it. I don't want to jump through all those hoops. I like working one-on-one with the kids. I don't want to stand in front of a classroom and deal with all of the behaviors and all of the things that the teachers have to do. It is not for me.

# POLICY IMPLICATIONS: STARTING WITH STAKEHOLDER- DRIVEN SOLUTIONS

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America's DLL population is growing steadily, as are multilingual instructional programs.<sup>59</sup> However, the teaching population has failed to keep pace with this trend. While more than one-fifth of students speak a language other than English at home, only around one in eight teachers do.<sup>60</sup> This linguistic diversity gap can be narrowed. Teaching assistants or public school paraprofessionals are twice as likely to speak a language other than English at home and more closely reflect their students' backgrounds than their teacher counterparts.<sup>61</sup> As states and districts face shortages of bilingual and ESL teachers, they should look to paraprofessionals to help fill these key roles. But it will not be easy.

Paraprofessionals face a host of barriers to becoming teachers. Though limited, there are some data on public school paraprofessionals, their career interests, and the barriers they face in attaining teacher certification and licensure—from bureaucratic to financial to linguistic.<sup>62</sup> The conversations outlined here, the real voices of public school paraprofessionals, help us amplify that data and understand policy barriers from the perspective of a group of educators often overlooked by U.S. education systems. These voices should help us shape potential policy solutions grounded in stakeholder input.

Focus group participants suggested a variety of potential approaches targeted at removing the barriers they face in pursuing a teaching career, from small tweaks to big lifts (see sidebar: Multilingual Paraprofessionals Tell Us How to Help Them Advance to the Head of the Class on page 34). For instance, several cited such obvious steps as providing accessible, streamlined information on teacher preparation pathways and state licensure policies or providing test preparation assistance. Others suggested more comprehensive reforms such as GYO or residency-style preparation programs that recruit candidates from within the school or community who already have a bachelor's or associate's degree. One participant from Orange County suggested that the district prioritize "growing [and] incubating new teachers starting from instructional assistants who already know the school, know the family, know the student, know the teacher, and just have that pipeline. I think it makes so much sense in terms of district investment, time, and resources."

Indeed, several focus group sites, including the greater Seattle area and Minneapolis, have already begun implementing such innovative models. Next year, New America will visit GYO programs

### Multilingual Paraprofessionals Tell Us How to Help Them Advance to the Head of the Class

- Provide accessible, streamlined information on teacher preparation pathways and state licensure policies.
- Provide test preparation assistance.
- Support the creation of alternate career pathways, including GYO, residency, or other innovative programs that are tailored to the needs of paraprofessionals and nontraditional teaching candidates and offer financial, academic, and social supports.
- Adopt or expand performance- and competency-based approaches to teacher licensure and certification, particularly for those who already have a BA and teaching experience.
- Pilot the use of licensure exams in languages other than English for linguistically diverse candidates.
- Clarify instructional responsibilities through robust performance standards and aligned job descriptions.
- Support and recognize paraprofessionals' contributions to teaching and learning through aligned professional development, evaluation, and career ladder systems.

in several states to learn more about their design, implementation, challenges, and outcomes.

However, such programs remain pockets of innovation and are by themselves insufficient. As of now, current state licensure and certification requirements can work against—rather than with—the GYO or residency approach to teacher preparation. State policymakers might consider redesigning licensure and certification policies to make them more outcomes-based. Participants suggested that policymakers look to adopt or expand performance- and competency-based approaches to teacher licensure and certification, particularly for those who already have a college degree and teaching experience.

Rather than asking teacher candidates to spend time and money taking additional coursework or tests that may or may not have any bearing on actual classroom effectiveness, participants suggested policymakers offer practical ways to demonstrate mastery of key knowledge and skills, including through direct observation of performance and recommendation for licensure by districts. Toward that end, districts could create robust paraprofessional evaluation and development systems that accurately identify, support, and recognize paraprofessionals' many competencies. States might then consider “counting” paraprofessionals' work experience toward student teaching requirements so long as it has been deemed effective.

Still, research on new competency-based licensure assessments (most notably the edTPA) remains limited.<sup>63</sup> What little work exists suggests there might be an adverse impact for Latino candidates, a group which encompasses many multilingual teacher candidates.<sup>64</sup> At the very least, policymakers should question whether current instruments for licensing teachers are effective measures of teaching quality. For multilingual paraprofessionals in particular, policymakers could examine whether licensure tests measure reading and writing abilities in English or whether they measure actual instructional abilities and knowledge. If the former,



policymakers might consider a pilot program that offers linguistically diverse candidates licensure exams in their home languages and test whether the program identifies effective teachers (with some backstop accountability measure if it fails).

Of course, these are all incremental and piecemeal—rather than systematic and holistic—policy solutions. The entire design of the teaching profession is built around the minimum requirement of a bachelor’s degree. And this structure can be beneficial: individuals with a bachelor’s degree are better off economically and socially than those without.<sup>65</sup> And without the bachelor’s requirement, teachers’ baseline pay and educational qualifications could fall. Since only one in five multilingual paraprofessionals holds at least a bachelor’s degree, on-the-job GYO or residency programs can provide targeted financial, academic, and social supports to individuals on the path to the BA.

Luckily, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) grants considerable leeway to states regarding teacher certification and licensure requirements, and such flexibility could lead to greater innovation in teacher training.<sup>66</sup> For instance, ESSA Title IIA allows states to reform teacher certification and licensure requirements and invest in licensure reciprocity agreements with other states. Expanding reciprocity would provide teachers more geographic mobility, and could in turn make pursuing teacher licensure more attractive to paraprofessionals.


Additionally, states can use ESSA Title IIA funds to establish residency programs and expand alternative routes into teaching for paraprofessionals, particularly in high-needs areas like bilingual education. States can also reserve up to 2 percent

of their total Title IIA allocation to create new teacher preparation academies that operate outside of higher education and some state regulatory hurdles such as credit hour and faculty credential requirements. Academies receive state authorization so long as candidates receive significant clinical training under an effective mentor teacher and demonstrate their effectiveness in advancing student outcomes prior to full-time teaching.

This ESSA provision presents a prime avenue for states to innovate in designing quality outcomes-based pathways for nontraditional teacher candidates like paraprofessionals, so long as states establish consistent high expectations for their authorization, oversight, and accountability. Districts may also use ESSA Title IIA funds and Title III National Professional Development grants to develop career ladders with differential pay and advancement opportunities to encourage paraprofessionals to enter teaching.


As many states and districts face shortages of bilingual and ESL teachers, many multilingual paraprofessionals are willing and able to teach. But, as our focus group findings show, paraprofessionals must overcome a host of obstacles in order to lead classes of their own. Policymakers should advance new pathways to teaching, with fewer arbitrary and more outcomes-based entrance requirements, to ensure America’s multilingual teacher supply is adequate to serve its multilingual student demand.

Liliya Stefoglo’s story of career advancement does not have to be an exception. Policies should enable all effective and willing paraprofessionals to advance to lead teacher and foster their own—and their students’—full potential.




📍 Seattle

“ Take a look at our evaluations. Our work. That speaks for itself. Observe.




📍 Seattle

“ How can they evaluate me if they don't know what is my role?




📍 Washington, D.C.

“ We need options, another choice—not only the Praxis.




📍 San Antonio

“ Better salary for assistants.



📍 Seattle

“ One thing that would be helpful is to waive the test for whoever is in the field already by taking PD.




📍 Washington, D.C.

“ Maybe they can create a program at University to take some classes, pass the classes, instead of the PRAXIS.




📍 Washington, D.C.

“ We need a Praxis in Spanish. We are teachers in Spanish. I am teaching in the classroom in Spanish.




📍 Minneapolis

“ They always every year come up and say we are going to have an evaluation but we really don't.




📍 Washington, D.C.

“ Pay more. If you have more money, you can save money for education.




📍 Seattle

“ Transfer credits. Appreciate that we went to school, [and] at least we are trying.




📍 Seattle

“ Demonstrate that you have that prior knowledge. I don't know the term right now, you don't have to take the whole class; you can take maybe a test that demonstrates prior knowledge, competency.




📍 Orange County

“ I didn't have any job description when I first started as an instructional assistant. The title was given as instructional assistant, but it was whatever the school administrator or teacher would ask me to do.



📍 San Antonio

“ So they can come to the place, see us working because, no offense, there's a lot of teachers with certifications that suck big time.... And there's people like us. We really like it, and we are passionate about it.



📍 Orange County

“ I think [the] easiest way to foster the career path for the current para will be [for] the district to have a certain system, a program that ... provided time away from [your] current job ... within that same school. You're just changing the role, but you're still doing the same thing. Then you don't have to risk your current job to pursue your dream.

## Notes

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[download?doi=10.1.1.949.1148&rep=rep1&type=pdf](http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.949.1148&rep=rep1&type=pdf); and Kerri J. Wenger, Tawnya Lubbes, Martha Lazo, Isabel Azcarraga, Suzan Sharp, and Gisela Ernst-Slavit, “Hidden Teachers, Invisible Students: Lessons Learned from Exemplary Bilingual Paraprofessionals in Secondary Schools,” *Teacher Education Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2004): 89–111, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ795248.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Conor P. Williams, Amaya Garcia, Kaylan Connally, Shayna Cook, and Kim Dancy, *Multilingual Paraprofessionals: An Untapped Resource for Supporting American Pluralism* (Washington, D.C.: New America, June 2016), [https://na-production.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/DLLWH\\_ParasBrief6.1.pdf](https://na-production.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/DLLWH_ParasBrief6.1.pdf).

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<sup>10</sup> “Table 204.27,” *Digest of Education Statistics 2015* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016014.pdf>.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>63</sup> Anna Duncan and Kaylan Connally, “The edTPA: What We Do and Don’t Know,” *EdCentral* (blog), New America, June 28, 2016, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/edtpa-what-we-know/>.

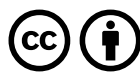
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<sup>65</sup> Mary Alice McCarthy, *Flipping the Paradigm: Why We Need Training-Based Pathways to the Bachelor’s Degree and How to Build Them* (Washington, D.C.: New America, 2015), <https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/11652-flipping-the-paradigm/Flipping-the-Paradigm.8ac8a0a5405d4f52a3a6657b62d0b3db.pdf>.

<sup>66</sup> Every Student Succeed Act, Pub. L. 114-95, December 10, 2015; Kaylan Connally, “How Will ESSA Influence States’ Teacher Quality Efforts?,” *EdCentral* (blog), New America, January 11, 2016, [https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/essa\\_teacherquality/](https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/essa_teacherquality/); Thomas Arnett, “ESSA Unlocks Teacher Preparation Innovation,” *Brown Center Chalkboard* (blog), Brookings Institution, January 28, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2016/01/28/essa-unlocks-teacher-prep-innovation/>.







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