



Designing Dual Enrollment to Reach English Learners:

Boosting College Success for California Students

At a Glance

English learners have tremendous potential but too often are held back from participating in the courses that lead to postsecondary degree completion and career success. Dual enrollment can be a powerful tool to increase college enrollment and success rates, especially if implemented with attention to English learners' unique assets and needs. This brief explores the current state of dual enrollment participation for English learners, highlights promising practices, and provides recommendations for creating a more seamless transition between high school and college for this group.

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About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. Join us as we build a future that works.

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Introduction

California's public schools boast the nation's largest population of English learners—approximately 1.15 million in the 2019-20 school year.¹ The potential civic, intellectual, economic, and cultural contributions of this group of multilingual students are enormous. Yet too often, their assets remain undervalued and untapped because traditional educational settings treat English proficiency as a prerequisite for rigorous academic courses. With limited exposure to opportunities intended to prepare students for college and careers, English learners often fall through the gap between the state's disconnected high school and college systems. The vast majority of English Learners do not meet the State's definition of college and career readiness upon high school graduation, and fewer than half enroll in college in the following year.²

Dual enrollment represents a possible bridge between high school and college for English learners, especially if implemented with attention to their unique assets and needs. With support from the Stuart Foundation, JFF has been exploring the potential of dual enrollment as a college transition and success strategy for English learners as well as for other special populations including students with disabilities, foster youth, and homeless students. This brief highlights promising practices for expanding dual enrollment opportunities for English learners that our research surfaced.

JFF reviewed the research literature and education policies that shape dual enrollment, English learning, and their intersection. We engaged researchers and advocates to better understand key design considerations for English learners. Our work also included interviews with representatives of high schools, districts, and community colleges throughout California known for their promising approaches to supporting English learners' college transitions. Finally, JFF convened a small cross-sector community of practice to discuss the implications of our findings and inform recommendations. (*See Appendix for a list of individuals and organizations represented at this convening.*)

This brief begins with an overview of dual enrollment in California, including key legislation and quantitative data about participants, followed by an overview of the state of college readiness and postsecondary degree completion for English learners. We then provide a summary of qualitative findings from interviews with districts and colleges, including spotlights on two innovative dual enrollment programs designed for English learners.

High-level themes from our research include:

- **Dual enrollment for English learners builds on promising practices that support dual enrollment for other underrepresented student populations.** These foundational practices include: outreach to students and parents; an expectation that all students will complete college courses before high school graduation; elimination of transportation barriers and scheduling conflicts; and leveraging counselors as champions and navigators.
- **Promising practices for English learners in dual enrollment combine access and support.** Innovative programs take an intentional approach to enrolling English learners in courses that relate to their career interests, leverage their primary language skills, add extra academic assistance, and, in unique cases, bring college-level English as a Second Language (ESL) courses into the high school.

The paper concludes with three sets of recommendations to encourage deeper consideration of how dual enrollment could be designed and scaled with a focus on English learners. One set of recommendations is directed toward partnerships between high schools and colleges, with an emphasis on strategic planning, wraparound supports, curricular alignment, and professional development. Another set of recommendations considers the role of state education system leaders and policy advocates in elevating promising practices, enhancing collaboration between K-12 and postsecondary education, and promoting equitable access to dual enrollment. A final set of recommendations suggests areas of further research that would build upon this report's findings, with the intent of revealing the impact and effectiveness of dual enrollment for California's large and diverse EL population.

Throughout our exploration and analysis, a guiding principle that transcends research, policy, and practice emerged. It can be used as a lens to view the findings and analysis in this brief.

Guiding Principle

English learners benefit from acceleration rather than remediation, and have the potential to succeed in college courses while in high school.

Innovative districts and colleges have shown that English learners can master rigorous college-level content while simultaneously building English proficiency. This principle is consistent with a wide body of research that demonstrates English learners thrive when language learning is integrated with engaging content instruction that connects to students' college and career goals.

Key Context

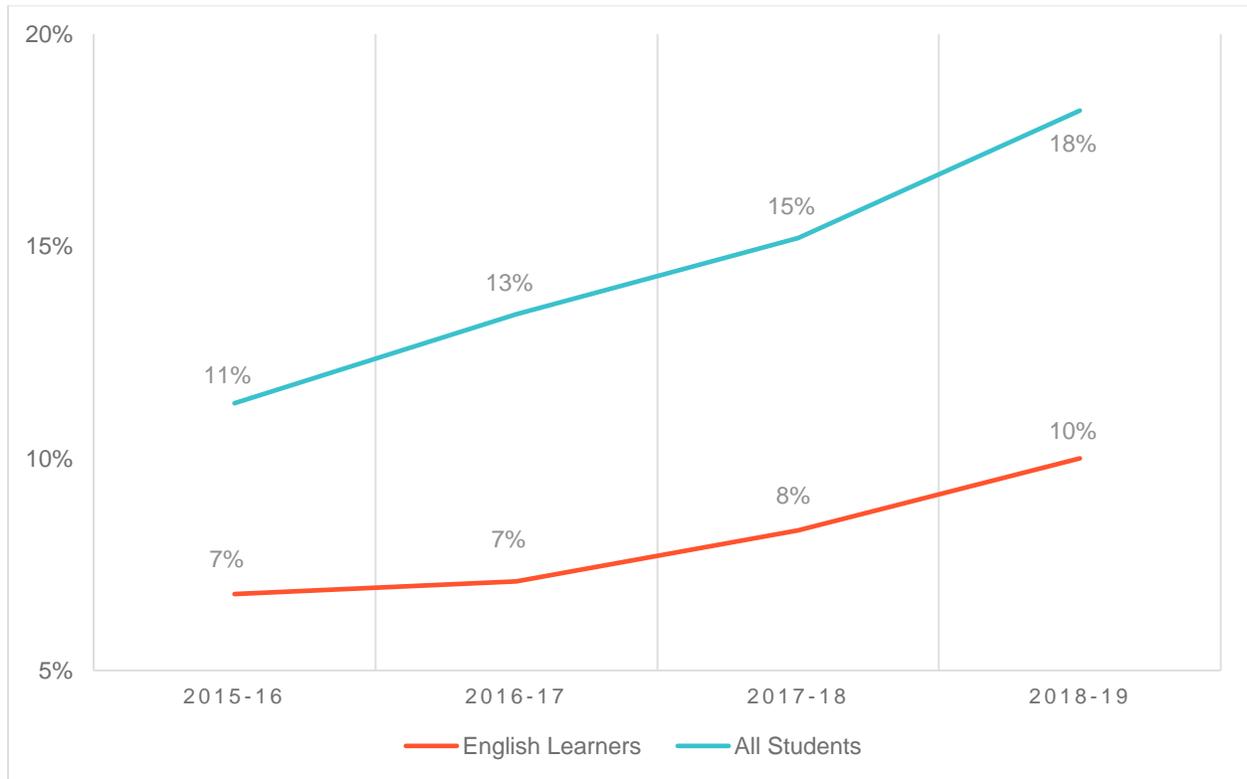
Dual Enrollment in California

The term “dual enrollment” refers to high school students taking college courses for transcribed college credit. In some cases, these courses simultaneously confer credits that meet high school graduation requirements. National research has demonstrated that dual enrollment improves student success in high school and college, including higher rates of high school graduation and college enrollment and completion.³ These positive effects extend to low-income students, students of color, and those with lower GPAs.⁴

Assembly Bill 288 (2015) attempted to expand dual enrollment opportunities for underrepresented populations in California by developing a framework for secondary-postsecondary partnership agreements and making college courses easier to implement on high school campuses. Since the bill’s passage, there has been a substantial rise in dual enrollment course-taking in the state. A University of California-Davis statewide study found that 18.2% of all 2019 California high school graduates took at least one community college course during high school—up from 11.3% for the class of 2016.⁵ While participation has increased for all subgroups, equity gaps have remained. For the class of 2019, dual enrollment participation rates for Asian and white graduates were 26% and 22%, respectively, compared to 16% for Latinx and Black graduates.

UC Davis also provided the first statewide analysis of dual enrollment participation by English learners, finding that growth rates have not been equitable. According to their research, 7% of English learner graduates in 2016 had taken at least one community college course while in high school, compared to 11% of all students. By the class of 2019, the dual enrollment participation rate for English learners had increased only three percentage points, compared to a seven percentage point increase for all students (*see Figure 1*).

Figure 1. Percent of California High School Graduates that Completed Dual Enrollment Courses, 2015-16 Through 2018-19



Source: Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research, A Rising Tide: Dual Enrollment is Growing Among California High School Students (Davis: Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research, 2020), https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/wheelhouse_infographic_dual_enrollment_1-page.pdf

A Portrait of English Learners in California⁶

In the state's K-12 public school system, students are classified as English learners based on their responses to a home language survey followed by an assessment of listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency in English.

During the 2019-20 school year, over 41% of California's K-12 students spoke a language other than English at home. Approximately 19%—1,148,024 students—were classified as English learners.

While more than 80% of the state's English learners are native Spanish speakers, there are also more than 75 other native languages spoken by California students.

Educators and advocates often refer to a typology of English learner characteristics that describe their unique academic and linguistic needs, including:

- **Newcomers** are immigrant students born outside the United States, enrolled in U.S. schools for three years or less. There were 177,476 newcomer students in California's K-12 schools in fall 2019.
- **Long-term English learners** are students who have been enrolled in U.S. schools for six or more years and have not met the criteria for reclassification as fluent English proficient. There were more than 204,00 of these students in 2019-20.
- **Reclassified fluent English proficient**, also referred to as "former English learners," are students who were previously classified as English learners in California public schools and later deemed proficient in English, based on scores on English language proficiency assessments along with other criteria. There were more than 1,131,000 of these students in 2019-20.

College Readiness and Transitions for English learners in California

In California and nationwide, English learners often lack access to grade-level content and college-preparatory courses while in high school. For the class of 2019, just 16.8% of English learners earned the “prepared” designation for the college/career indicator in the California School Dashboard, which reports school, district, and subgroup performance on state and local accountability measures for K-12 education.⁷

Compared with other subgroups, English learners also had lower rates of “A-G” completion—a sequence of required courses for admission to the University of California and California State University systems. They were also less likely to attend college in the 12 months following high school graduation.⁸ More than 80% of English learner high school graduates who go directly to college enroll in a California Community College.⁹ National longitudinal research has found that English learners who attend community colleges are less likely to transfer to four-year institutions, compared to their English-proficient peers, and if they do transfer, they’re less likely to complete a bachelor’s degree.¹⁰

At the K-12 level, the California English Learner Roadmap (2017) calls for “alignment and articulation within and across systems” that support postsecondary success.¹¹ Presently, there are few examples of high school-college partnerships that focus on academic, linguistic, or social-emotional support for English learners.

“Rather than a smooth transition from K-12 to the postsecondary level, the educational journey for English learners can often be described as an abrupt handoff, reflecting a disconnect between the policies for English learners in high schools and postsecondary institutions.”

The designation criteria used in the K-12 system to identify students as English learners, track their proficiency levels, and reclassify them as “fluent English proficient,” have no bearing at the college level, where English learners are not even identified as a subgroup. California Community Colleges have historically lacked a consistent approach to assessment and course placement for students with home languages other than English; in some cases, English learners bypass college ESL courses completely while in other cases, students who were already reclassified out of the English learner subgroup in K-12 education are pushed back into ESL classes in college.¹² However, systemwide developmental education reform—most notably the implementation of Assembly Bill 705 (2017)— may result in a more standardized approach.

California Community Colleges now have a directive to place incoming students into transfer-level courses as quickly as possible instead of requiring lengthy and historically ineffective sequences of remedial math, English, and ESL. One specific provision is that incoming English learner students who attended four years of high school in the U.S. must be allowed to enroll immediately in transfer-level coursework, bypassing ESL requirements.¹³

These recent policy initiatives at the K-12 and postsecondary levels signal that the time is ripe for exploring dual enrollment as a intersegmental strategy for supporting English learner college transitions and success.

Research on Best Practices for Building College Readiness and Success for English learners

Building College Readiness in High School

In recent years, a growing body of research and best practices have prompted a rethinking of conventional approaches to educating English learners at the secondary level. Traditionally, many school systems have placed English learners into multi-period, standalone English Language Development (ELD) programs and “support” courses, limiting their access to grade-level content and electives.¹⁴

Instead, evidence suggests that English learners benefit from an integrated approach that builds language learning into all academic subjects.¹⁵ Integrated ELD gives English learners opportunities to develop academic language skills and build subject-specific vocabulary in all classes—not just in designated ELD courses. To make this approach work, all teachers must be trained to support academic language development.¹⁶ English learners also should be given ample opportunities to continue building their oral and written language skills.

The literature also demonstrates the long-term benefits of approaches promoting bilingualism and biliteracy, leveraging students’ home languages as assets.¹⁷ Biliteracy can also signal student achievement and potential; the State Seal of Biliteracy is used as one metric of college and career readiness in the California School Dashboard.

Accelerating Progress in Community Colleges

In community colleges, ESL programs serve various purposes, ranging from academic language development to conversational English skill-building for adults of all ages. For students pursuing transfer to a four-year university, the road is long and success rates are low if they begin in ESL courses. For example, a recent analysis found that just one-third of all degree-seeking English learner students successfully completed transfer-level English within six years.¹⁸ Traditionally, college ESL programs have separated skills such as speaking, writing, grammar, and vocabulary into distinct courses—a very-time consuming sequence students must complete before accessing required transfer-level English composition. Just as in high school, spending too much time studying language in isolation stops many English learners from accessing high-level academic content.

In response, many California Community Colleges have adopted curricular reforms to shorten ESL sequences and accelerate students' momentum into transfer-level courses—a movement that has gained traction with the implementation of AB 705. Changes have included compressing multiple language skills and ESL levels into fewer courses, allowing students to skip levels based on their proficiency, and ensuring that ESL sequences lead directly to transfer-level English. An analysis conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California found that many of these accelerated models have positive effects on students' completion of transfer-level English and other long-term academic outcomes.¹⁹



Barriers to Dual Enrollment and Promising Practices for Expansion

After reviewing relevant literature and consulting with researchers, JFF conducted interviews with sites recommended for their innovative approaches to launching English learners into college courses before high school graduation. Practitioners named a variety of factors that affect dual enrollment participation for underrepresented students, including those particularly relevant for English learners. The high school English learner population is extremely diverse, so there is no “one-size-fits-all” set of strategies. We conclude this section with brief profiles of two very different sites that have designed dual enrollment programs to meet the needs of distinct populations of English learners.

Barriers Affecting Access to Dual Enrollment

Uneven access to information and challenges navigating the complex enrollment process are two factors that may lead to unequal rates of dual enrollment participation. The digital divide also limits access to online college courses for many low-income and rural students—a challenge that has assumed much greater significance in the context of COVID-19.

For English learners, opportunities may be further constrained by low expectations from school staff, as well as structures that treat language learning and academic content acquisition as separate and sequential endeavors. In many cases, high school English learners are unable to access dual enrollment and other college-preparatory opportunities because their schedules are impacted by required language support classes.

Promising Practices Supporting Dual Enrollment for Underrepresented Groups

- **Intentional outreach:** Top districts provide proactive—and, in many cases, multilingual—outreach to students and parents about dual enrollment opportunities in a variety of ways. In-class presentations, parent nights, fliers, and emails can spread awareness and educate the community on a large scale. These efforts demystify dual enrollment and create excitement around the opportunity to earn college credit while in high school.
- **Expectations of college course-taking for all students:** Some of the high-performing districts have set an expectation that all students complete at least one or two dual enrollment courses before high school graduation, often as part of career-themed pathways. In one small district that we spoke with, the superintendent established a goal of getting all students on a career-themed pathway in 9th grade—culminating in a postsecondary degree and/or an employer-valued certification. Setting this standard sends a message that the job of a high school is to launch all students into postsecondary success.

- **Integrating dual enrollment into the school day:** Many interviewees voiced a preference for offering dual enrollment courses during the regular school day on the high school campus, instead of on the college campus. This model promotes equity by eliminating transportation barriers and after school conflicts, particularly for students with jobs and family responsibilities. It also makes it easier to embed support from teachers trained in meeting the needs of students from special populations. Yet other interviewees pointed to the advantages of taking courses on a college campus with college-aged students who can serve as role models. The experience can also help high school students develop a college-going identity.
- **Utilizing the capacity of counselors:** In many districts, well-informed counselors are key to the success of dual enrollment programs. They tout the advantages to students and parents, and work with administrators to provide access to as many students as possible. Additionally, counselors help guide students through the complex college registration and course-selection processes and collaborate with their college counterparts to address challenges that arise.



Promising Practices Supporting Dual Enrollment for English learners

- **Promoting career and technical education for English learners through pathways-based dual enrollment courses.** Several districts spoke to the powerful impact of early dual enrollment experiences that allow students at all levels of English proficiency to pursue career interests and envision themselves as college students. In one district, long-term English learners are encouraged to participate in cybersecurity and engineering pathways leading to college degrees. Another district implemented a college welding certificate program to increase engagement and improve the career prospects of late-arriving newcomers who often need to work immediately after high school.
- **Providing opportunities for English learners to dually enroll in advanced college language courses in their primary languages.** Some districts encourage current and former English learners to take college courses in their primary language—such as advanced Spanish grammar and composition—as part of pathways to degrees in fields including agriculture mechanics or plant science. These rigorous language courses help create bilingual, biliterate high school graduates and also confer humanities credits that transfer to four-year universities. While these efforts are laudable, JFF did not uncover widespread use of dual enrollment in students’ primary languages. This approach may be particularly beneficial for students pursuing the California Seal of Biliteracy or for newcomers who lack other opportunities to demonstrate college readiness.
- **Bringing college ESL courses into high schools—and making these courses count for both high school and college credit.** High schools can ease students’ scheduling constraints and provide opportunities to earn postsecondary credit when they introduce college ESL courses into the high school ELD curriculum. Mountain Empire High School and Cuyamaca College have aligned their approach to language learning, allowing students to complete course sequences that include both A-G completion and transferrable college credit (*see profile, “Mountain Empire High School and Cuyamaca College”*).
- **Adding extra support to bolster English learner’ success.** Some schools provide study sessions and tutoring for their English learners participating in dual enrollment through designated class periods, after school programs, or push-in support. These supports are particularly effective if delivered by educators with training and expertise in supporting English language acquisition. Oakland International High School provides extra academic support for newcomer students taking dual enrollment courses through Laney College (*see profile, “Oakland International High School and Laney College”*).

Mountain Empire High School and Cuyamaca College

Bridging the High School-College Divide Through a Shared Language Curriculum

Mountain Empire High School, located in rural eastern San Diego county near the Mexican border, serves many Spanish-speaking English learners. Nearly all of the school's English learners earn college credit by graduation. Beginning in the 2018-19 school year, Mountain Empire adopted Cuyamaca College's three levels of ESL courses as its ELD sequence, provided through dual enrollment. The curriculum focuses on discussing and writing about rigorous English texts, a best practice for language acquisition. Mountain Empire teachers deliver these courses as college adjuncts with training from Cuyamaca's ESL department. Students can earn up to 15 college credits, with the first two courses meeting A-G requirements and the final one conferring credits that are transferrable to four-year universities. Graduates now arrive at Cuyamaca College with credits in hand, better prepared academically, and confident in their identities as college students.

Oakland International High School and Laney College

Supporting College Success for Newcomer Students

Oakland International High School (OIHS) is an urban school serving newcomers from more than 30 countries. The average student takes at least one dual enrollment course in math, ESL, or media studies through Laney College before graduation. OIHS offers a dual enrollment math sequence that includes one pre-transfer-level trigonometry course in the fall semester followed by a transfer-level pre-calculus course in the spring semester that satisfies college math requirements for business and STEM pathways, or a transfer-level statistics course in the summer for students on a liberal arts pathway. Students have an extra class period during the school day to receive support with college assignments from OIHS teachers who are highly trained in facilitating language development.

OIHS is part of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, a successful national coalition serving recent immigrant English learners. The network embraces “language and content integration” as a core principle, along with experiential learning that prepares students for college, careers, and civic participation.

Recommendations

Throughout JFF’s research and field engagement, we posed a central question to practitioners, advocates, state agency staff, and researchers: ***How do we design and scale dual enrollment so that the needs of English learners are at the forefront?*** Responses to this question helped shape our recommendations.

Recommendations for High School-College Partnerships

1. **Adopt data-informed strategic plans and structural changes to increase English learner participation in dual enrollment.** Schools, districts, and postsecondary partners should collaborate to analyze student transcripts to better understand how dual enrollment is or is not reaching the groups facing the greatest barriers to transitioning to college. K-12 districts can formalize their commitment to closing equity gaps by incorporating dual enrollment into their Local Control and Accountability Plans as part of their goals related to English learners and other targeted subgroups. Schools can incorporate dual enrollment into the school day, include it in career-themed pathways, and adjust master schedules to eliminate common conflicts for English learners.
2. **Commit to providing the wraparound supports needed for access to and success in college courses, including support for distance learning.** Equitable outcomes will require culturally and linguistically competent outreach, tech support, and counseling for English learners and families, as well as academic support. Secondary-postsecondary partnerships should embed supports into the college courses commonly taken by both long-term English learners and newcomers, including academic tutoring, English language development, and digital literacy.
3. **Align required high school and college courses for English learners to reduce unnecessary course-taking and build a coherent pathway to four-year college admission or transfer.** High school and community college ELD/ESL departments should utilize dual enrollment pathways to eliminate course duplication between their institutions, accelerate English language proficiency, and lead to English learners’ successful completion of freshman English composition—a key transfer requirement. Similarly, dual enrollment partnerships should also focus on ensuring that English learners have access to gatekeeping math courses. Together, completion of transfer-level math and English represents a pivotal milestone toward degree attainment.
4. **Provide professional development to enable all educators to support English learners’ language development and content learning from grades 9 through 14.** Research on English language acquisition confirms the importance of training teachers, including dual enrollment instructors, to support

academic language development in all subjects. High-quality dual enrollment for English learners should include evidence-based approaches for reinforcing literacy and oral language skills, regardless of who teaches the classes (high school teachers or college faculty) or where they are hosted (high schools or community colleges). High schools and community college partners can incorporate EL-focused training and resources into professional development and support for instructors.

Recommendations for State Education Systems and Policy Advocacy

1. **Elevate and disseminate promising examples of dual enrollment partnerships that focus on English learner access and success.** The California Department of Education (CDE) and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office should highlight innovative examples of dual enrollment design and implementation, with a focus on English learners and equity-driven approaches.
2. **Convene an intersegmental task force of high-level stakeholders focused on alignment between secondary and postsecondary education for English learners.** Leaders must collaborate to advance CDE's English Learner Roadmap's principle of "alignment and articulation within and across systems" and address the disconnects. With the implementation of AB 705, which seeks to accelerate student progress and completion of transfer-level courses in community colleges,, the time is ripe for revisiting the handoff between grades 9-12 and 13-14. Dual enrollment should be part of a more aligned strategy.
3. **Leverage existing legislation to promote equitable access to a college-bound curriculum for English learners.** Assembly Bill 2735 (2018) prohibits K-12 districts and schools from denying English learners access to core and advanced courses, including Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses, "on the sole basis of the pupil's classification as an English Learner." While this policy does not specifically mention dual enrollment, it establishes an expectation of equal access to rigorous coursework. Work remains for state systems and advocates to monitor and support implementation of this bill at the local level, and to ensure that English learners have opportunities to prepare for and succeed in college-level courses.

Recommendations for Research

1. **Analyze longitudinal student-level data to better understand the impact of dual enrollment on college and career readiness and success for English learners.** More research is needed to better understand how and to what extent the benefits of dual enrollment that have been documented for low-income and underrepresented students also apply to English learners. Additional studies can also explore the impact of career-focused dual enrollment programs on the labor-market outcomes of students from immigrant families.

2. Pilot different types of dual enrollment courses that reflect the diversity of the English learner population and compare their effectiveness.

Research can help illuminate the relative benefits of differentiated approaches to dual enrollment for different groups of English learners. Approaches worth investigating further include:

- College liberal arts and CTE courses taught in students' primary languages to help newcomers satisfy high school graduation requirements and earn college credit
- Advanced college-level foreign language courses to promote biliteracy among long-term and former English learners
- Gatekeeper courses in math or English with integrated ELD to improve long-term English learners' success in meeting transfer requirements

As a whole, the leaders that JFF engaged in this research were enthusiastic about the possibilities that dual enrollment can offer for English learners. At the same time, it is clear that opportunities remain limited for this group and will require focused efforts to remove access barriers and targeted strategies that build on their assets and potential.

Appendix: External Advisors

JFF extends our gratitude to all of the external partners who helped inform this publication, including the numerous practitioners, administrators, researchers, and nonprofit organizations with whom we consulted throughout this process. We are grateful to all of our interviewees in California schools, districts, and colleges that are focused on supporting English learner success.

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Megan Hopkins, **University of California-San Diego, Department of Education Studies**

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