

# Language Access for Bilingual School Children

## RISE OF BILINGUAL STUDENTS IN INDIANA

Indianapolis is a multicultural city and has one of the fastest growing immigrant populations in the United States. More than 120 nationalities are represented and 90 different languages are spoken. According to a poll by the Migration Policy Institute, Indianapolis ranked ninth in population change in the number of foreign-born residents. Foreign-born individuals living in Indiana made up 321,308 (4.9%) of Indiana's total population in 2015. Additionally, 146,012 (45.5%) of the 321,308 foreign-born individuals residing in Indiana are born in Latin America (South America, Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean).

Most of these immigrants come from Burma, Mexico, India, China, and the Philippines. While some immigrate to the U.S. for work, school, or to join family members, others who are fleeing death, persecution, and discrimination, come to the United States seeking refuge. According to statistics gathered by the Immigrant Welcome Center, the number of immigrants in Indianapolis seeking educational services will more than double in the following years. This increase in immigrants in Indiana's school systems means the number of bilingual students in Indiana will rise. Therefore, as the amount of bilingual and limited English proficient students grows in Indiana, there will be more educators facing the challenges of effective second language literacy instruction. Persons who are limited English proficient (LEP) are those who read, write, or speak English less than "very well," as classified by the Census Bureau.

LEP individuals confront language barriers to accessing important public benefits or services, understanding and exercising important rights, complying with certain responsibilities, or understanding critical information. The Pew Research Center projects that, by 2050, more than one-third of the nation's schoolchildren "younger than 17 will either be immigrants themselves or the children of at least one parent who is an immigrant," which will lead schools to rethink classroom strategies, family engagement practices, and how to best navigate cultural divides. How are schools upholding the (or their) commitment to provide LEP individuals and multilingual students with meaningful access?

## **PROVIDING MEANINGFUL LANGUAGE ACCESS**

Immigration to Indiana from those fleeing persecution in Burma has steadily increased over the recent years. Many of the Burmese refugees who have resettled in Indianapolis speak their native language(s) and until they learn English, face communication challenges. Their children also face challenges when they are enrolled in the school system and expected to learn English at an accelerated rate. These new situations can cause a lot of stress and pressure for these newcomers and their respective school systems. Perry Township School Corporation, which receives a large number of LEP students from Burma, instituted certain measures to provide meaningful language access to these LEP individuals to ease their transition into the school system.

The different steps Perry Township School Corporation is taking to meet their obligation under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 includes providing interpreters to assist new LEP students and their families with whatever they need to get oriented with the school,



providing interpreters for fire drills who explain what to expect during the fire drill procedures, as well as even providing translated versions of the school calendars for families who do not speak English. One of the most unique ways this school is providing language access is through the establishment of an “International Ambassador” club where experienced bilingual students are paired with same-language newcomer LEP students to help them around the school. The experienced students assist the newcomer students with finding their lockers, classes, and teachers.

“The school providing these things have improved my learning experience by wanting to engage more into the study because I know that even if I don’t understand the stuff, I will always have someone to go to for help,” says a LEP student attending Perry. In this student’s opinion, the school has taken extensive measures to make sure these LEP newcomer students are getting the help they need. All of these programs and steps taken to ensure bilingual students feel comfortable benefit the students, schools, and teachers.

Additionally, Indianapolis School System (IPS) initiated the “Newcomer Program” in 2016 to help integrate new LEP students into the education system. Due to English being the primary language spoken in classrooms, it’s imperative that these children have a solid understanding of the language. Their staff of bilingual assistants ensure comprehension between the teachers and the students.

## LANGUAGE ACCESS BENEFITS

As seen above, providing language access for bilingual students results in a variety of benefits for students as well as the school. Schools which provide cultural training, translation, and interpreting services all provide language access for these school children ensuring they understand materials which helps set them up for success. Students who feel their culture and language are appreciated rather than a burden to their school system are more comfortable and confident in their school system, are able to better perform in classes, along with being more likely to engage in clubs or activities.

Subsequently, these steps also take pressure off of teachers and faculty who require support interacting with a multi-cultural and multi-lingual classroom. Teachers who have practical, research-based information and resources, are capable of better teaching, evaluating, and nurturing bilingual students. Teachers receiving professional development and in-service cultural and language access training are better equipped with strategies on how to help bilingual students succeed in the classroom.

## ARE SCHOOLS REQUIRED TO PROVIDE LANGUAGE ACCESS?

Under Title VI any recipient receiving federal assistance is prohibited from engaging in practices which discriminate against individuals on the basis of race, color, or national origin. 42 U.S.C. Section 2000d. Policies of discrimination against persons of limited English proficiency (LEP) has been determined as equivalent to national origin discrimination by the Supreme Court. *Lau V Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974). Schools which receive federal financial assistance must be committed to provide LEP individuals with meaningful access to its programs, services, and activities.

## WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Providing meaningful language access can seem like a daunting task at first. However, taking the necessary steps will help to fulfill obligations under the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The information mentioned above is not an exhaustive list of ways in which language access can benefit your school. A language consultant can help brainstorm the tools and strategies available through a partnership with a language services company. LUNA Language Services, a language service provider in Indianapolis, has a vast menu of services aimed at bridging the linguistic and cultural gaps that your bilingual students may face. If you would like to learn more about how language access can benefit your school, please set up a meeting with one of our language access specialists today!

## RESOURCES

Immigrant Welcome Center, Statistics About Immigrants in Indianapolis  
<https://www.immigrantwelcomecenter.org/about-us-pg-2/diverse-indianapolis/>

Migration Policy Institute, Indiana Demographic & Social Profile  
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/demographics/IN>

National Education Association, English Language Learners Face Unique Challenges

[http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/ELL\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_Fall\\_08\\_\(2\).pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/ELL_Policy_Brief_Fall_08_(2).pdf)

Harvard Graduate School of Education, The Education of Immigrant Children

<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/14/12/education-immigrant-children>