

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction: Council to support students from linguistically diverse backgrounds

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MADISON — “In a world where the majority of adults are multilingual, speaking more than one language provides significant advantages,” said State Superintendent Tony Evers as he announced the formation of his Advisory Council to Support Linguistically Diverse Students. The council’s first meeting is May 3 in Madison.

In the 2015-16 school year, Wisconsin had more than 46,800 students learning English, attending school in 355 of the state’s 422 public school districts. Spanish is the most common of the 135 languages spoken in Wisconsin’s public schools, followed by Hmong. Students learning English, or English Learners (ELs), represent 5.7 percent of the public school student population, up from 4.6 percent in the 2000-01 school year. “These students bring a wealth of knowledge, skills, and experiences that enrich our urban and rural communities, yet these assets often aren’t reflected in our achievement data,” Evers noted.

Achievement gaps in Wisconsin disproportionately affect students from linguistically diverse backgrounds as many of these students struggle to demonstrate knowledge in both English and academic subjects. The most recent Forward and ACT statewide

exams show achievement gaps and the four-year graduation rate for EL students is more than 26 percentage points lower than for their English proficient peers.

Members of the new advisory council — representing schools, community organizations, and business and civic leaders — will share their knowledge and expertise to help Wisconsin better understand and expand opportunities for linguistically diverse students. These students may be immigrants, migrants, or refugees, or come from a multilingual background.

“The richness of our state and nation comes from our differences. This diversity of heritage, background, and language makes us stronger,” Evers said. “Our schools must be safe places where learning languages and being exposed to other cultures are important school lessons. It makes sense to strengthen our support for dual language learning for all students and especially for kids who come to our schools learning English.”

State and federal law require school districts to provide language education services to students who are learning English, but provide little guidance on how those programs should be constructed. Currently there are 51 school districts that serve about half of the state’s English learners. These districts tap into the state’s bilingual-bicultural categorical aid program for partial reimbursement for bilingual staff and programs. Nevertheless, Wisconsin school districts face major challenges in: 1) making high-quality bilingual programs and English language support services available to all students who need them, 2) finding qualified teachers, and, 3) funding to provide services.

“These challenges surely contribute to disparities in academic achievement for students learning English,” Evers noted. “We want to support equity in educational opportunities across the state, and I am counting on this council to help shape a vision for how we can do that.”

The council will examine policies and practices related to bilingual and dual language education, which include childhood initiatives, family engagement, funding, licensing, standards, and assessment. The expected outcome for the council is threefold:

- to address issues affecting students from diverse language backgrounds,
- to recognize the assets linguistically diverse students bring to Wisconsin schools and communities, and
- to challenge educators and policymakers to expand language development

opportunities for all students.

“There is interesting data on the benefits of being bilingual,” Evers said. “Switching between languages helps kids think quickly, and they learn empathy because they have to consider other perspectives to communicate. And learning to read in one language provides a foundation to transfer this knowledge to another language. These skills strengthen the increasingly global and diverse workforce and can extend throughout life for the individual. Our challenge is to expand language learning opportunities in our schools to ensure that all kids are successful and ready for college and careers,” he said.