Are Schools Pushing Multilingual Learners Toward Incarceration?

The Overlooked Students in the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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Prison. Prisión. 监狱. السجن. Prisão. Same words. Same meaning. Same locked door.

California's Multilingual Learners bring linguistic talent, cultural assets, and global perspectives into our public-school classrooms every day. Yet, we cannot answer a critical question: How many of these students eventually enter the prison system?

California closely monitors their language proficiency, support classes, test scores, graduation, and college readiness. But once these young people enter the justice system, the state stops tracking the very information that could reveal whether its schools helped place them on a path toward incarceration.

Without this information, California cannot determine whether Multilingual Learners are disproportionately entering the justice system, identify where their academic pathway begins to narrow, where schools are failing these students, or interrupt the pathways that may lead from educational exclusion to incarceration.

As a global gateway, California is home to the largest Multilingual Learner population in the nation. Nearly two million students enrolled in California public schools are classified as Ever-Multilingual Learners [1]. Representing approximately one in every three students across the Golden State, their long-term outcomes should be central to California's definition of educational success. Yet one critical piece of that future remains largely unexamined. Instead, the evidence reveals warning signs, and they begin appearing behind classroom doors long before students leave school.

According to California Department of Education, Multilingual Learners fall far below the state standard in both English language arts and math [1]. Long-Term Multilingual Learners, students who have sat in U.S. public schools for seven or more years classified as a Multilingual Learner, face troubling outcomes: 24% are chronically absent, 8% are suspended at least once (more than twice the statewide rate), 76% are not prepared for college or careers, and one in five does not graduate from high



school [1]. The state's English Learner Progress Indicator measures the percentage of current Multilingual Learners who progress toward English proficiency or maintain their level. In 2025, 64% of did not progress [2].

These outcomes do not occur independently. California requires Multilingual Learners to receive targeted English Language Development support during the school day. Although this instruction is intended to provide support, districts often schedule it as a separate class replacing an elective, advance course, career program, or another opportunity for students to develop belonging and purpose. Chronic absenteeism can produce further academic loss. Academic frustration may be treated as defiance. Discipline removes the student from instruction yet again. Eventually, leaving school can appear less like a single decision and more like the conclusion of a pathway shaped by years of restricted opportunities.

For many Multilingual Learners, language classification can therefore become more than a temporary designation. It can influence course placement, access to advanced instruction, disciplinary interpretation, and how educators perceive a student's ability. When schools respond to emerging bilingualism as a deficiency rather than an asset, they can narrow students' educational opportunities long before those students reach adulthood. Failing to graduate does not predetermine that a young person will go to prison, but it can leave far fewer doors open and make the prison door dangerously easier to open. Being multilingual is not a risk factor for criminal behavior. The danger begins when schools compound poverty,

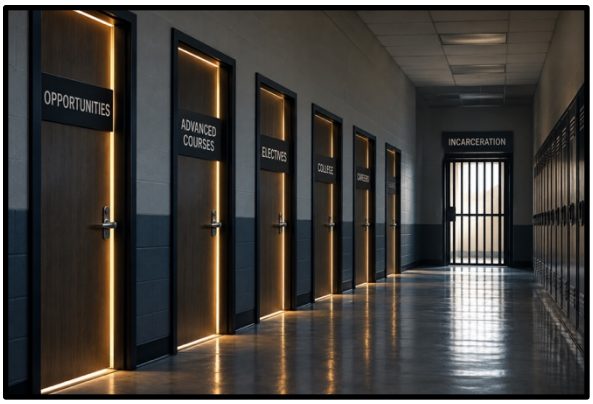
> "**Multilingualism does not create the pipeline.** Institutions that repeatedly exclude, punish, and abandon Multilingual Learners do."

disability, racism, immigration related barriers, school exclusion, and unequal access to opportunity through academic exclusion and punitive discipline [3]. Research connects the consequences of

suspension and disengagement. This results in leaving school without a diploma and a heightened risk of arrest and incarceration. “Multilingualism does not create the pipeline. Institutions that repeatedly exclude, punish, and abandon Multilingual Learners do.”

California’s failure to follow Multilingual Learners beyond school is like recording every point Kobe Bryant scored for three quarters, then turning off the scoreboard during the fourth and claiming not to know how the game ended. The state collects enough information to know that tens of thousands are struggling, but not enough to determine what happens to them after they walk out our school doors.

California’s incarceration rate sits at 494 per 100,000 residents, and more than one-third of incarcerated people were reportedly first arrested before the age of 16 [5]. Research from Northeastern University further indicates that high school dropouts are 63% more likely to become incarcerated, while 70% of incarcerated individuals did not graduate from high school [4]. When California repeatedly closes doors of opportunity to its Multilingual Learners, it risks steering them toward the one door designed to lock behind them.



These figures demand that California investigate the educational histories of justice-involved people, including whether they were once classified as Multilingual Learners, how long they remained classified, whether they received special education services, and whether they experienced suspension, chronic absenteeism, academic tracking, or disengagement.

The limited data available doesn’t prove that California schools are sending Multilingual Learners to prison. They reveal something even more troubling: California does not collect the information necessary to know.

If the state wants to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, it must stop allowing Multilingual Learners to disappear from the data. California must follow their paths beyond school to determine how many enter the justice system and what happened in their education before they arrived there. California cannot keep closing doors of

opportunity and then claim not to know how its students ended up behind a locked one.

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