

Policy Brief: Towards Strengthening Language Education in Connecticut's K-12 System

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Abstract

This policy brief advocates for strengthening Connecticut's K–12 language education through Two-Way Dual Language Immersion (TDLI) programs. Although the number of multilingual learners continues to grow, existing transitional bilingual policies could be strengthened to address achievement gaps more effectively. TDLI programs offer cognitive, academic, social, and economic benefits for all students while fostering bilingualism, biliteracy, and intercultural competence. The brief outlines the historical context of Connecticut's bilingual education law, reviews program models, and provides policy recommendations to promote equitable, community-driven implementation of TDLI programs. Thus, it calls on state leaders to support multilingual education as a strategic investment in Connecticut's future workforce.

Keywords: *Dual Language Immersion; Multilingual Learners; Education Policy; Connecticut K–12*

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Introduction

The 2025 Future of Jobs Report issued by the World Economic Forum highlights multilingualism as one of the core job skills that will significantly increase in importance by 2030 (World Economic Forum, 2025, p. 222). Employers emphasize that, alongside programming, teaching, and mentoring, multilingualism is projected to experience a higher-than-average demand globally (World Economic Forum, 2025, p. 68). Within the United States, while AI, big data, technological literacy, and cybersecurity are recognized as rapidly growing skill areas, multilingualism is also expected to show stronger-than-average growth in importance (World Economic Forum, 2025, p. 74). Despite these clear signals from the labor market, the state of Connecticut currently lacks a coherent policy for language education, leaving a critical gap in preparing students for the demands of a globalized workforce. Hence, there is an urgent need to establish robust language education programs—whether in support of students whose first language (L1) is not English or in the form of world language instruction for English-speaking students—to ensure that all Connecticut students are equipped with the language competencies necessary for future employment and civic engagement. A statewide adoption of Two-Way Dual Language Immersion (TDLI) programs would offer a means to meet these demands and address persistent achievement gaps. Rather than positioning TDLI primarily as a civil-rights or enrichment initiative, this policy brief frames language immersion programs as strategic, state-wide investments in Connecticut’s educational equity and future workforce capacity. TDLI programs are explicitly discussed within the historical and legal context of Connecticut’s bilingual education law, highlighting how existing transitional bilingual policies can be strengthened and enhanced statewide.

Background

English Language Learners, also referred to as English Learners (ELs), Dual Language Learners (DLLs), and Multilingual Learners¹ (MLs; Kanno et al., 2024), are a fast-growing population in K-12 public schools across the United States. Over the past ten years, the percentage of students classified as MLs in the state of Connecticut has increased from 6.49% in 2015/2016 to 11.32% in 2024/2025 (Connecticut State Department of Education, n.d.-a). This increase has been seen across both urban and suburban districts in Connecticut, with many districts reporting more than 100% growth in their ML population (Connecticut State Department of Education, n.d.-a). According to the School and State Finance Project (2024), urban school districts have seen the highest growth in total number of MLs, while suburban districts have seen the highest growth in terms of percentage increase, including districts with over 500% increases in MLs over the last ten years.

¹ Throughout this paper, we will use the term Multilingual Learners (MLs) in line with the amendment introduced in Public Act 23-150, effective July 1, 2023, which reflects Connecticut’s ongoing commitment to fostering an inclusive and equitable education system that supports students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. A key change made by this act is a terminology update in Subdivision (1)(E) of Subsection (a) of Connecticut’s bilingual education law, where the term “English language” was replaced with “multilingual.” This shift in language signals a broader recognition of the linguistic assets that students bring to the classroom and moves the focus away from English proficiency alone toward valuing multiple languages as educational strengths.

The History of Bilingual Education in the United States and Connecticut

Following a century of disjointed and contradictory local and state policies (Nieto, 2009), the United States passed the Bilingual Education Act in 1968, which provided federal assistance to states to teach English as a second language (ESL). The Supreme Court upheld educational supports for MLs in *Lau v. Nichols* in 1974, arguing that lack of instruction for MLs amounted to a violation of civil rights. *Lau v. Nichols*, along with the Equal Educational Opportunities Act passed by Congress just months later, established a national directive to meet the needs of MLs. Following this legislation, the state of Connecticut passed a mandatory bilingual education law in 1977. Proponents of this law saw its main purpose through multiple lenses: many believed the intent of the legislation should be to teach students English, while others argued that bilingual programs should help students continue to progress academically while learning English; a third group believed that bilingual education should maintain and protect the cultural identities of ML students. The final version of the bill that was passed into law focused on the first two goals (Lohman, 1998).

Connecticut's current bilingual education law is outlined in Sections 10-17e through 10-17j of the Connecticut General Statutes, establishing guidelines for supporting MLs in public schools. The statute mandates that school districts offer a transitional bilingual education program when there are 20 or more eligible students in a single school who share the same first (i.e., native) language. These programs aim to develop English proficiency while ensuring students meet academic standards in subjects like math, science, and social studies. Instruction begins in the student's first language and progressively incorporates English, with the goal of using English for more than half of the instructional time by the end of the first year (Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10-17f). School districts that are not required to offer bilingual instruction, or in cases where parents choose to opt out of bilingual instruction, must provide ESL services. The statute includes detailed descriptions of bilingual enrollment procedures, language proficiency testing, and limits the total amount of time spent in bilingual instruction to 30 months, excepting students granted an extension due to not meeting language proficiency standards. The law also includes a reference to dual language programs. It stipulates that "[e]ach local and regional board of education [...] is required to provide a program of bilingual education pursuant to this section shall investigate the feasibility of establishing two-way language programs starting in kindergarten" (Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10-17 i).

In line with this legislation, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) does not mandate, but only at best encourages school districts in instituting two-way language programs and providing early second language instruction for English-speaking students. To note, time spent in two-way language programs does not count toward the 30-month limit imposed on transitional bilingual education programs (Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10-17f). This exemption allows students to participate in two-way immersion programs without affecting the duration of their eligibility for other bilingual education services. In summary, Connecticut law stipulates a rather narrow model that focuses on a *transitional* approach,

aiming to move students into English-only classrooms as quickly as possible, rather than supporting long-term bilingualism and biliteracy.

Academic Performance of Multilingual Learners

Despite the existence of bilingual education requirements for nearly 50 years, performance data show MLs continue to lag in achievement when compared to native English speakers. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly known as “The Nation’s Report Card”, is an assessment of reading and math that is administered every two years to 4th and 8th graders across the United States (NAEP, 2025). Results from the 2024 NAEP show MLs in Connecticut scored lower than their peers in Grade 4 math and reading at the national level, as well as Grade 8 reading (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2025). These results are particularly troubling given that Connecticut students overall score higher than the national average on those same assessments, pointing to a significant disparity in the achievement of MLs in particular. This gap is also seen on Connecticut state achievement testing in both math and English Language Arts. According to 2023/2024 data, only 11% of MLs met or exceeded mastery criteria on the state Smarter Balanced Assessment in English Language Arts, compared to 54.2% of non-English Learners. In math, 13.7% of MLs met or exceeded mastery criteria, while 48.3% of non-English Learners met criteria (Connecticut State Department of Education, n.d.-b). It is clear from the data that Connecticut’s current policies surrounding bilingual education are not sufficiently meeting the needs of MLs and are in need of revision.

Benefits of Multilingual Education

Bilingualism offers a range of cognitive, academic, social, and economic benefits for students. From a cognitive perspective, research has shown that bilingual students often show enhanced skills in attention control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility (e.g., Tokuhamma-Espinosa, 2014). In addition to enhanced executive functioning, studies reported that students who use multiple languages have better problem-solving and multitasking abilities compared to their monolingual counterparts (Bialystok, 2011). Moreover, bilingualism enhances brain resilience as it contributes to long-term benefits such as delayed dementia onset (Alladi et al., 2013; Bialystok et al., 2007; Woumans et al., 2015). Bilingual students have also been found to demonstrate stronger metalinguistic awareness—an understanding of how language works—which supports reading and writing across subject areas (Bialystok et al., 2012; Ter Kuile et al., 2011; Torregrossa et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2017).

Moreover, research has shown that children who are educated in multiple languages generally achieve better long-term academic outcomes (Han, 2012; Morales, 2024; Steele et al., 2017; Umansky & Reardon, 2014; Valentino & Reardon, 2015; Vega, 2014). For example, Steele et al. (2017), using lottery-based admission data from seven immersion

cohorts, found significant reading gains by Grades 5 and 8, no negative effects in math or science, and earlier ML reclassification—especially when students’ home language aligned with the immersion language. Similarly, Thomas and Collier (2002), in a five-year national study across multiple U.S. sites, reported that students in well-implemented one-way and two-way bilingual programs outperformed monolingual peers in reading and content areas such as math and science. More recently, Morales (2025) found that native English-speaking students who gained entry into dual language immersion in kindergarten or first grade performed modestly but significantly better in reading and math during the early elementary years. Together, these findings suggest that dual language immersion supports academic achievement for both multilingual learners and native English-speaking students.

From a social-emotional perspective, multilingualism has been associated with a range of positive developmental outcomes, particularly in fostering cultural understanding and intercultural sensitivity (Ben Maad, 2016; Ikizer & Ramírez-Esparza, 2018; Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2020). For example, Ikizer and Ramírez-Esparza (2018) have shown that individuals who speak multiple languages demonstrate greater awareness of and appreciation for cultural diversity, which can enhance their ability to navigate social interactions across different cultural contexts. Moreover, research indicates that multilinguals develop greater adaptability and perspective-taking by regularly switching languages, which is associated with increased tolerance for ambiguity and comfort with complex or uncertain situations (Dewaele & Wei, 2013). More recent evidence across age-groups further supports the idea that extensive use of multiple languages correlates with heightened cultural empathy and open-mindedness (Ben Maad, 2016; Dewaele & Stavans, 2012), reinforcing the view that multilingualism contributes positively to socio-emotional development and intercultural sensitivity.

Finally, from an economic viewpoint, a growing body of evidence highlights the critical importance of developing a multilingual and interculturally competent workforce to maintain the United States’ global competitiveness. The *New American Economy* (NAE, 2017) estimates that nearly \$2 billion is lost annually due to language and cultural misunderstandings, highlighting the tangible economic cost of monolingualism. Importantly, the demand for bilingual skills is not confined to high- or low-skilled labor but spans the entire economy. Supporting this stance, the RAND Corporation has reviewed substantial evidence of the economic benefits associated with a multilingual population (Ayres-Bennett et al., 2022). Employer preferences reflect these trends: two-thirds of employers across sectors indicate a preference for hiring bi- or multilingual candidates when qualifications are otherwise equal (Porrás et al., 2014). Simultaneously, a growing number of middle-class families are recognizing the value of multilingualism for their children’s future in a globalized workforce (Luo et al., 2021). This awareness has contributed to increased demand among English-speaking parents for access to dual-language education programs (Ee, 2018)—the very aspect this policy brief is aiming to strengthen for the state of CT.

To summarize, research indicates that multilingualism supports not only cognitive and academic growth but also fosters emotional intelligence and intercultural competence. Collectively, these findings underscore that investing in multilingual education is both an

issue of educational equity and a strategic economic necessity—one that can be advanced through the mandated implementation of dual language immersion programs.

A Way Forward: Dual Language Programs

Connecticut’s bilingual education law, as articulated in Chapter 164 of the General Statutes and amended by Public Act 12-116, mentions dual language programs twice, highlighting a historical awareness of their potential to reduce language-related inequalities and demonstrating a deliberate effort to expand dual language education through the state charter school system. In particular, Section 10-66bb(f)(2) mandated that between July 1, 2012, and July 1, 2015, at least two of the four newly approved state charter schools must have a mission and instructional focus on “dual language programs or other models focusing on language acquisition for multilanguage learners” (Connecticut General Assembly, 2025). This provision reflects the state’s recognition of dual language programs as a valuable educational model for fostering bilingualism, academic achievement, and equitable access for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Although the law does not define dual language programs in detail, the specific inclusion of such models in charter school policy emphasizes Connecticut’s historic support and strategic use of dual language programs to address the needs of its ML population and to reduce racial, cultural, and economic separation in public education.

Types of Dual Language Programs

Dual language programs can offer critical advantages for MLs and newcomer students by incorporating their home languages into classroom instruction (Howard et al., 2022). As shown in Table 1, dual language programs have been grouped into two broad categories: one-way and two-way dual language programs. One-way dual language programs typically include students from a single language background such as only native speakers of English or MLs who speak a given home language (also referred to as the “partner language”). Accordingly, they include World/Foreign Language immersion programs and Heritage Language Immersion programs (for further details see OELA, 2023). By contrast, in two-way models, students from different language backgrounds—such as MLs who speak the partner language *and* native speakers of English—learn together in an integrated setting. Given our support for enhancing language education for *all* students, we will focus primarily on two-way dual language programs as a way forward.

Table 1

Dual Language Program Designs (adapted from New Jersey Department of Education, 2024, p. 68)

Feature	Two-Way Dual Language Immersion (TDLI)	One-Way Dual Language Immersion (ODLI)
Student Population	A mix of MLs and native English speakers—ideally 50/50, with a minimum of 33% from the minority language group.	Primarily English speakers, or MLs who share the same home/heritage language.
Languages Used	English and the home language of MLs (e.g., Spanish, Mandarin).	English and a designated partner or heritage language.
Staffing	One bilingual teacher or two teachers (one per language).	Same as TWDL
Time Allocation	50/50 model is most common, but programs may begin with 90/10 or 80/20 in early grades and move toward balance by upper elementary.	Similar structures: 90/10, 80/20, or 50/50, depending on language goals and student population.
Language of Instruction	Language of instruction varies by subject, teacher, or time (e.g., alternate days or weeks).	Same as TDLI.
Program Duration	Typically spans the full elementary cycle, with some programs extending into middle and high school.	Same as TDLI.
Program Size	Can be implemented as a strand within a school or as a whole-school model.	Same as TDLI.

Two-Way Dual Language Programs

TDLI programs, also referred to as “two-way immersion or dual language immersion programs” (OELA, 2023, p. 68), are educational models in which two groups of fairly equal numbers of students—those who speak English at home and those who speak another language at home—are integrated in the same classroom setting and are taught in the two languages, that is, English and a partner language (e.g., Arabic, Chinese, Spanish) throughout the school day or week (Faulkner-Bond et al., 2012). These programs extend for a minimum of four to six years, typically beginning in kindergarten and continuing through the elementary school years, and in some cases into middle and high school (Howard et al., 2018; OELA, 2023). Both groups of students are together for all instruction; they are not separated into groups by home language. The goals of TDLI programs are for all students to become bilingual and biliterate, attain high levels of proficiency in both languages, perform at or above grade level across all academic subjects, and develop cultural understanding (Howard & Christian, 2002). The academic standards and subject matter in TDLI programs are equivalent to those offered in traditional classrooms. That is, in these programs, all subject

areas are taught to full grade-level standards in both languages, with no reduction or simplification of content (Howard & Christian, 2002; Lindholm-Leary, 2020).

In terms of structure, TDLI programs usually follow one of two instructional models: the 90/10 or the 50/50 model (see Table 1). These models represent distinct approaches with schools typically choosing a model based on their educational goals, student demographics, and community context. In the 90/10 model, students receive 90% of instruction in the partner language and 10% in English in the early years, with the proportion of English gradually increasing until a balanced 50/50 distribution by upper elementary school is reached (Collier & Thomas, 2004; Grayson 2012; Howard & Christian, 2002; OELA, 2023). This model is often chosen to build a strong foundation in the partner language, particularly in contexts where most students are English-dominant. In contrast, the 50/50 model provides equal instruction in both languages from the outset and maintains this balance throughout the program. It is frequently used in classrooms with a more even mix of native speakers of English and the partner language. Both models aim to develop bilingualism, biliteracy, and academic achievement, but they differ in their initial emphasis and instructional progression (OELA, 2023).

With regard to instruction, TDLI programs have traditionally followed a language separation model, in which each language is allocated to specific subjects, teachers, or time blocks to maximize exposure and prevent one language from dominating the other. However, recent scholarship has challenged this rigid separation, highlighting the cognitive and pedagogical benefits of translanguaging (e.g., Delavan et al., 2025; Hamman, 2018; LaForett et al., 2023). Translanguaging is the dynamic process by which multilingual individuals use their full linguistic repertoire—across and beyond named languages—to communicate, make meaning, and learn (García et al., 2017). When used intentionally, translanguaging can enhance content understanding, promote metalinguistic awareness, and affirm students' multilingual identities (García & Wei, 2014). Although language separation remains a core principle in many TDLI programs, a growing number of educators are adopting more flexible approaches that integrate translanguaging to better reflect the dynamic nature of bilingual language use and support equitable participation in the classroom (see e.g., Delavan et al., 2025).

Regardless of the specific instructional approach implemented in a given program, research has shown that both the 90/10 and 50/50 models used in TDLI programs are effective in fostering bilingualism, biliteracy, and academic achievement (Howard et al., 2018). Students in both models typically perform as well as or better than their monolingual peers in core academic subjects by the upper elementary grades (Lindholm-Leary, 2020; Morales, 2025; Steele et al., 2017; Collier & Thomas, 2017). However, the 90/10 model—where the partner language is dominant in the early years—has been found to produce higher levels of proficiency in the partner language, particularly in reading and writing which is most likely due to the greater exposure in the early years (Lindholm-Leary, 2020; Howard et al., 2018). Importantly, this increased exposure does not hinder English development; students in 90/10

programs generally catch up in English by Grade 5 and often surpass their monolingual peers in standardized assessments (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

In sum, Connecticut has demonstrated longstanding support for dual language education, most notably through its bilingual education statute and charter school provisions, which explicitly promote dual language programs as a tool for educational equity and language development. Among dual language program models, TDLI programs in which native English speakers and MLs are learning together across two languages—are particularly effective in fostering bilingualism, academic achievement, and cross-cultural competence (Howard et al., 2018). TDLI programs generally follow either a 90/10 or 50/50 instructional model, each offering distinct advantages depending on the linguistic makeup of the student population. While many programs maintain a separation of languages for instructional purposes, emerging research advocates for more flexible approaches that incorporate translanguaging to reflect authentic bilingual practices and support MLs' identities. Research confirms the effectiveness of both models (e.g., Steele et al., 2017), with evidence showing that TDLI participants often meet or exceed the academic performance of their monolingual peers, and that greater early exposure to the partner language—especially in 90/10 models—can lead to stronger proficiency without compromising English development. Together, these findings highlight TDLI as a robust and equitable approach to multilingual education.

Policy Recommendations

In consideration of the significant achievement gap that has persisted under current bilingual education law and the substantial value of bilingualism for all students, we recommend the following short-, mid-, and long-term steps to establish, expand, and sustain high-quality TDLI programs statewide in a manner that promotes equity, academic excellence, and bilingualism for all learners.

Short-Term

1. **Strengthen current bilingual state law to strongly encourage school districts to implement dual language programs.** TDLI programs have the potential to decrease the achievement gap for MLs while simultaneously providing meaningful benefit to native English speakers. Bilingual programs narrowly focus on transitioning students into English-only instruction, while dual language programs such as the TDLI model can prepare all students for success in an increasingly global society.
2. **Build stakeholder engagement, including local education agencies, families, and community groups.** The goals and benefits of TDLI programming need to be clearly communicated to *all* stakeholders, with particular attention given to building a community-wide value of bilingualism (Howard & Christian, 2002).

3. **Local needs and demographics must shape the implementation of state-level dual language policies.** For example, a monolingual community's reasoning for supporting dual language programs differs from a community with many languages. Therefore, while the policy is state-originated, local education agencies must tailor execution to their specific context, carefully considering the benefits of TDLI programs for both MLs and native English speakers to develop appropriate local plans.

Mid-Term

1. **Reduce barriers to implementation of TDLI programs.** The CSDE can readily share research that supports multilingualism for all students, helping to build stakeholder support in each community. Sharing best-practice recommendations can help local districts establish and expand programs smoothly.
2. **Increase and update funding for Multilingual Learners to support TDLI programs.** State funding for transitional bilingual programs currently comes from increased "need-based" weights in the Education Cost Sharing Formula for MLs and the Bilingual Education Grant program (School and State Finance Project, 2024). Connecticut should increase this grant funding to reflect the real increase in MLs and prioritize its use for TDLI programming.
3. **Balance increased costs of TDLI programs.** TDLI programs are more expensive than transitional bilingual programs for MLs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 90), but the extra cost is offset by the broad benefit to all students, not only MLs. While traditional funding streams such as Title III and the state's Bilingual Grant Program are reserved for MLs, the state should investigate and create other funding sources to offset the cost of including native English speakers in TDLI programs, such as allocating funds used for world language programs and creating grant funding specific to dual language programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 90-94).
4. **Expedite implementation by shifting existing programs and/or begin on a small scale.** Districts with large populations of MLs can convert existing transitional bilingual programs into dual language programs (Collier & Thomas, 2003). Monolingual English-speaking communities might establish magnet schools to access native speakers for two-way dual language programs (Howard & Christian, 2002). TDLI programs can start small, with 1-2 classrooms at kindergarten or first grade, and gradually add a grade level each year (Howard & Christian, 2002). This phased approach allows for low-risk evaluation before scaling up. Implementation must be supported by district-specific policies and meet community stakeholder needs and values.

Long-Term

1. **Update evaluation and assessment methods to reflect the goals of bilingualism and biliteracy for ALL students.** Currently, student and program success relies on mandated English language proficiency testing (LAS Links) for English Language acquisition, and state Smarter Balanced (ELA/Math) and NGSS (Science) testing for content mastery (CSDE & RESC Alliance, 2024, p. 22-24). While LAS Links can continue to measure English Language Proficiency for Multilingual Learners (MLs), additional assessments should be adopted to measure partner language acquisition for both student groups. These new assessments must align with program goals, track progress toward bilingualism, biliteracy, and academic content acquisition, rather than just world language standards (Howard et al, 2018, p. 74).
2. **Track impact of TDLI programs over time.** Academic content outcomes will continue to be assessed using state testing data, with all students in dual language programs—those learning English and those learning the partner language—disaggregated to track the impact of dual language programs on academic outcomes over time. As TDLI programs increase in number, size, and scope across the state, these data can be examined to compare transitional bilingual education to dual language programs and guide future policy decisions.
3. **Ensure evaluation of TDLI is shaped by an equity framework.** Dual language programs provide meaningful benefit to all students, but it is imperative that they are critically assessed to ensure they do not inadvertently reinforce societal inequalities by unintentionally favoring English speaking students (Valdés, 1997). Policy decisions must consider that TDLI programs operate in an environment shaped by English-only testing and accountability mandates. Research shows that MLs are disadvantaged when tested on academic content in a language they are still learning (Menken, 2008; Wright, 2005). This testing pressure can force dual language programs to prioritize English instruction, diminishing the partner language and upholding English hegemony (Delavan et al. , 2025). Equity must guide all policymaking decisions, from planning through evaluation, to ensure that dual language programs benefit all students and families.

Conclusion

TDLI programs benefit both MLs and native English speakers by creating a pathway for all students to become bilingual and biliterate. Additionally, being educated in multiple languages has been shown to support cognitive and academic growth while fostering emotional intelligence and intercultural competence (Porrás et al., 2014; Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2014). Investing in multilingual education is both an issue of educational equity and a strategic economic necessity; TDLI programs offer a path forward for the State of

Connecticut. Recommendations for strengthening Connecticut's current bilingual education policies include:

1. The CSDE should readily share information on the benefits of multilingualism for *all* learners, including both native English speakers and MLs with state school districts.
2. Local school districts should engage stakeholders, including families and community groups, to build support for multilingualism in their unique communities.
3. CSDE should provide guidelines and consulting services to schools on how to conceptualize and implement a dual language program that fits their local needs (for an example of such materials and services see Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/guidance/default.html>)
4. CSDE should support local districts in implementing two-way dual language programs in the model that best fits the needs of the unique community through professional learning opportunities and updated funding streams.
5. Policy and program evaluation tools must include both language acquisition and academic content assessments that are valid and measure program objectives of bilingualism and biliteracy.

There is an urgent need to establish robust language education programs to ensure that *all* students in Connecticut are equipped with the language competencies necessary for future employment and civic engagement. Thus, we call on Connecticut's education leaders to act boldly to meet the needs of 21st century learners by advancing Connecticut's dual language programs.

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