

Tennessee's Dual Language Learners

Key Characteristics and Considerations for Early Childhood Programs

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Dual Language Learners (DLLs) are young children who have at least one parent who speaks a language other than English in the home. In Tennessee, about one-seventh (14 percent) of children ages 0 to 5—approximately 66,000 young children—are DLLs. These children possess many important strengths, including their home language skills and cultural assets.

Extensive research has demonstrated that high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services provide disproportionate benefits for DLLs, including in terms of their language development and future academic outcomes.¹ However, available data also show that DLLs enroll in such programs at lower rates than other young children.² This points to a need to address barriers that may prevent DLLs' families from accessing these programs as well as to ensure the relevance and quality of ECEC services for this population.

This fact sheet highlights important characteristics of DLLs' families in Tennessee that should be considered in ECEC program and policy design and implementation. This information is based on Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) for the 2015–19 period, pooled. This fact sheet accompanies a policy brief entitled *Overlooked but Essential: Language Access in Early Childhood Programs*,³ which looks at the characteristics of DLLs' families nationwide, federal and state language access policies in the early childhood field, and opportunities to improve language access to boost DLLs' participation in high-quality ECEC services.

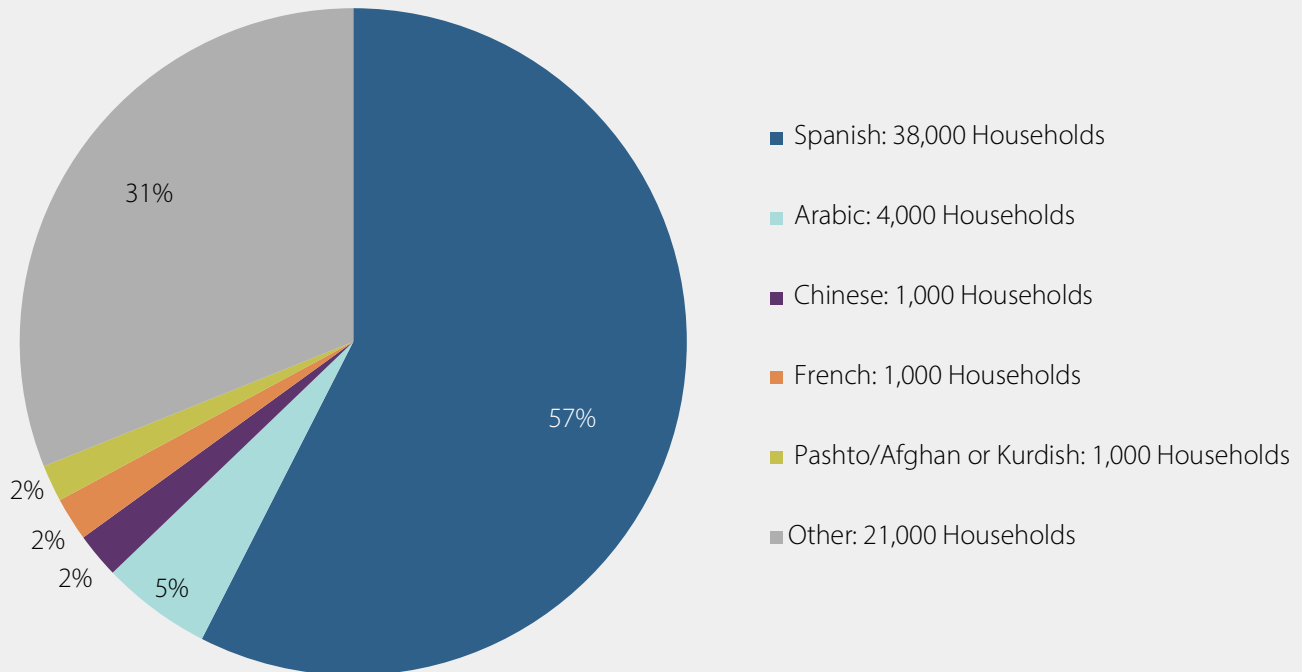
Language barriers and efforts to overcome them are likely to play a significant role in DLL families' access to early childhood services.

- ▶ Out of the 66,000 DLL children living in Tennessee in 2015–19, 55 percent had at least one Limited English Proficient (LEP) parent, meaning the parent reported speaking English less than “very well” in the ACS (either “well,” “not well,” or “not at all”). Either one or both parents for approximately 6,000 of these DLLs reported speaking English “not at all.”
- ▶ More than one-quarter (29 percent) of DLLs in the state lived in linguistically isolated households, which the U.S. Census Bureau defines as households in which all members who are age 14 or older speak a non-English language and also speak English less than “very well” (that is, they are LEP).⁴

- ▶ DLLs in Tennessee come from families who speak a range of languages. In 2015–19, while 57 percent of these families reported speaking Spanish in the home, approximately 43 percent spoke languages other than either English or Spanish—including, but not limited to, Arabic, Chinese, French, and Pashto/Afghan or Kurdish (see Figure 1). This information should inform the design of comprehensive language access services.⁵

FIGURE 1

Top Non-English Languages Spoken in DLLs' Households in Tennessee, 2015–19



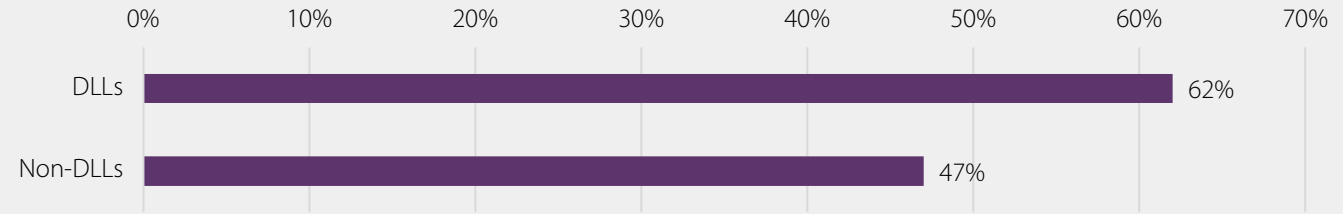
Notes: Languages spoken are self-reported in the American Community Survey (ACS). Shares may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding. “Chinese” includes Mandarin, Cantonese, and other Chinese languages. “French” includes French, Patois, and Cajun. Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2015–19 ACS, pooled.

DLLs are significantly more likely to live in low-income households than their peers, making them important targets for early childhood services.

- ▶ In Tennessee, DLL children were much more likely than non-DLL children (62 percent vs. 47 percent) to reside in low-income households in 2015–19 (see Figure 2). These are households with an annual income of below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.
- ▶ Although DLLs comprised 14 percent of children ages 0 to 5 in the state, they represented 18 percent of all young children living in low-income households.

FIGURE 2

Share of Tennessee Children Ages 0 to 5 Residing in Low-Income Households, by DLL Status, 2015–19



Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2015–19 ACS, pooled.

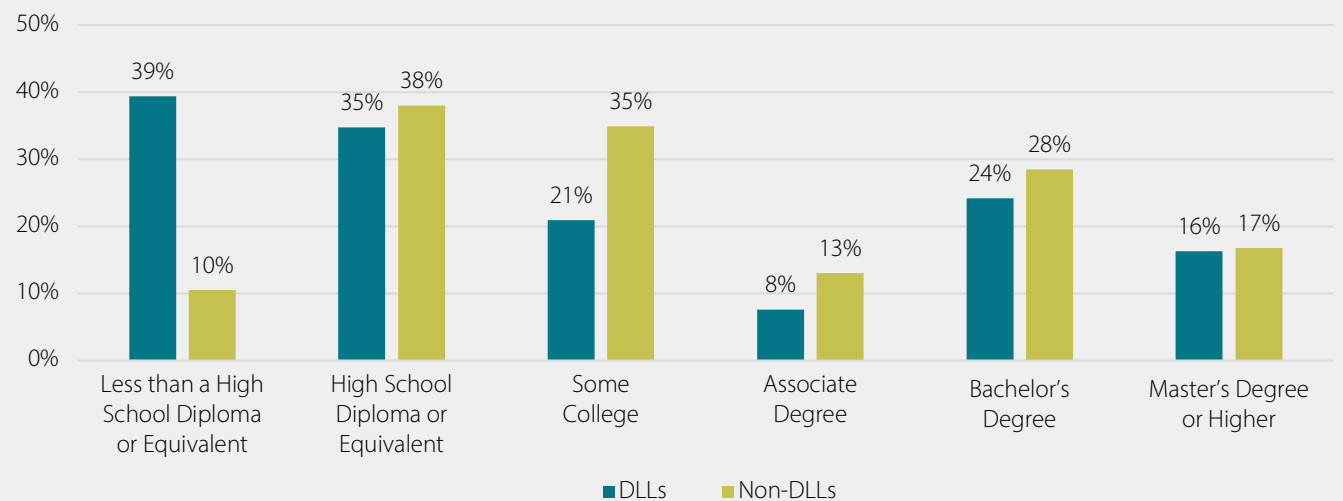
DLLs are more likely than other young children to have parents with lower levels of formal education.

- ▶ In 2015–19, DLLs were nearly four times as likely as non-DLL children (39 percent vs. 10 percent, respectively) to have at least one parent whose highest level of education was less than a high school diploma or equivalent (see Figure 3). Decades of research have demonstrated the correlation between parental educational attainment and a child's academic achievement and well-being, pointing to the importance of ECEC program participation especially for children whose parents have limited formal education to mitigate related risks for long-term success.⁶
- ▶ While DLLs comprised 14 percent of children ages 0 to 5 in Tennessee, they represented 39 percent of all children of this age with at least one parent whose highest level of education was less than a high school diploma or equivalent.

FIGURE 3

Parental Education Levels of Tennessee Children Ages 0 to 5, by DLL Status, 2015–19

Share of children with at least one parent whose highest level of formal education is...

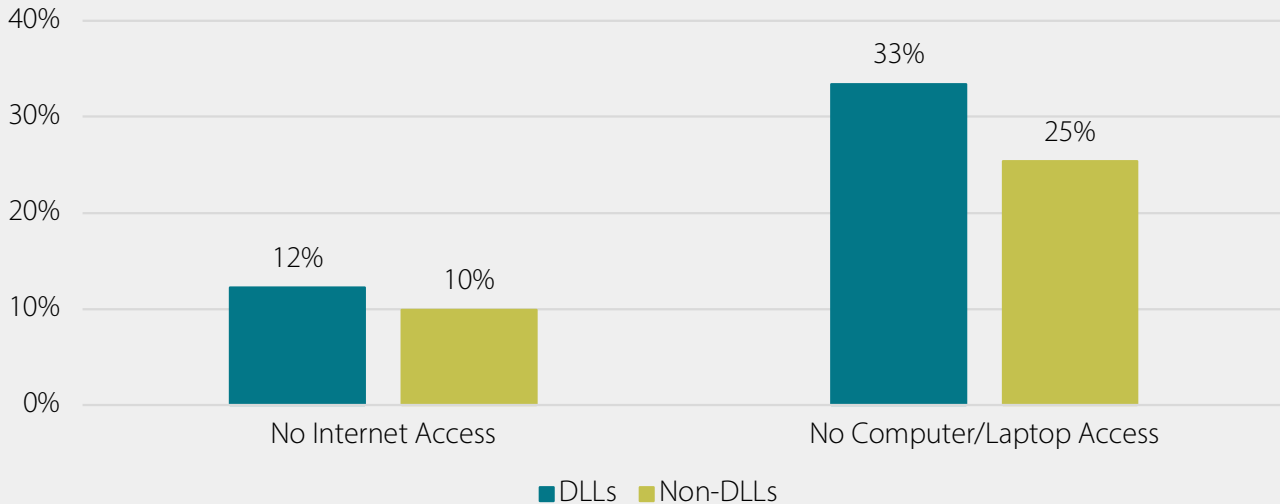


Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2015–19 ACS, pooled.

Limited access to the internet and digital devices is another significant barrier that can keep some DLLs' families from accessing early childhood services.

- ▶ DLL children were roughly as likely as non-DLLs to live in a household with no access to the internet, but notably more likely to have no access to a computer or laptop at home (33 percent vs. 25 percent; see Figure 4). In a household with limited digital access, caregivers may find it difficult to connect with early childhood programs and other resources, and children themselves are at an educational disadvantage compared to peers.⁷
- ▶ In 2015–19, DLLs made up 17 percent of all Tennessee children ages 0 to 5 whose households had no access to the internet, despite comprising 14 percent of the state's children in this age range.

FIGURE 4
Internet and Computer/Laptop Access in the Households of Tennessee Children Ages 0 to 5, by DLL Status, 2015–19



Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2015–19 ACS, pooled.

Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, Julia Gelatt, Gina Adams, and Sandra Huerta, *Supporting Immigrant Families' Access to Prekindergarten* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2014); Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2017); Noreen Yajejian et al., "High-Quality Early Education: Age of Entry and Time in Care Differences in Student Outcomes for English-Only and Dual Language Learners," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 32 (2015): 23–39.
- 2 Maki Park, Anna O'Toole, and Caitlin Katsiaficas, *Dual Language Learners: A National Demographic and Policy Profile* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2017).
- 3 Maki Park, Jacob Hofstetter, and Ivana Tú Nhi Giang, *Overlooked but Essential: Language Access in Early Childhood Programs* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2022).
- 4 Data on linguistically isolated households exclude individuals living in group quarters.
- 5 Maki Park, Jie Zong, and Jeanne Batalova, *Growing Superdiversity among Young U.S. Dual Language Learners and Its Implications* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018).
- 6 Robert Crosnoe, *Two-Generation Strategies and Involving Immigrant Parents in Children's Education* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2010); Thomas Gabe and Gene Falk, *Parents' Work and Family Economic Well-Being* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2006); U.S. General Accounting Office, *Early Childhood Programs: Parent Education and Income Best Predict Participation* (Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994); Lynn A. Karoly and Gabriella C. Gonzalez, "Early Care and Education for Children in Immigrant Families," *The Future of Children* 21, no. 1 (2011): 71–101; National Research Council, *Hispanics and the Future of America* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2006); National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2017).
- 7 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, *Parent and Family Digital Learning Guide* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2020); Angelina KewalRamani et al., *Student Access to Digital Learning Resources Outside of the Classroom* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

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