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Unlocking Opportunities:

How Dual Language Immersion Can Promote Equity and Integration

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INTRODUCTION

Dual Language Immersion (DLI) programs offer a powerful vision for education—classrooms where students from diverse linguistic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds learn side by side in two languages.

As one of the most effective and widely adopted bilingual education models, DLI represents a key opportunity to advance equity, integration, and academic excellence in public schools. By placing native English speakers and speakers of minoritized languages in shared learning spaces, DLI programs reimagine the classroom as a space where bilingualism and biliteracy are cultivated through shared learning and mutual respect, where students not only learn together but also learn from one another. In theory, these programs can help disrupt traditional power dynamics by promoting racial and economic integration and by legitimizing historically marginalized languages, which in turn may contribute to elevating the social status of their speakers.

Nearly 4,900 DLI programs now operate across the U.S. (duallanguageschools.org), in both regions with long-standing movements for language rights and areas with little history of bilingual education. While this rapid growth reflects the rising popularity of DLI, it also raises concerns about equitable access, particularly for historically marginalized communities. Scholars warn that DLI programs, originally designed to serve language-minoritized students, are increasingly vulnerable to "gentrification" (Delavan, Freire & Menken, 2021; Valdez et al., 2016). As these programs gain traction within the school choice landscape, they may disproportionately attract more affluent, English-dominant families, shifting resources, teaching practices, and cultural priorities to reflect their needs—often at the expense of the communities DLI was meant to prioritize (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017; Flores & García, 2017). This brief synthesizes findings from a study of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), which has the highest number of DLI programs in the country. Drawing on two decades of enrollment data, the study examined how DLI programs are influencing integration and equitable enrollment within and across schools, analyzed outreach efforts to inform families about these programs, and offers actionable recommendations to ensure DLI serves all students equitably.

Study Methods and Data

This study utilized publicly available enrollment data from the California Department of Education, focusing on LAUSD elementary schools (grades K-5 or K-6). The analysis included data from LAUSD-affiliated charter schools, excluding independent charters, alternative schools, and special education schools. Data analysis included:

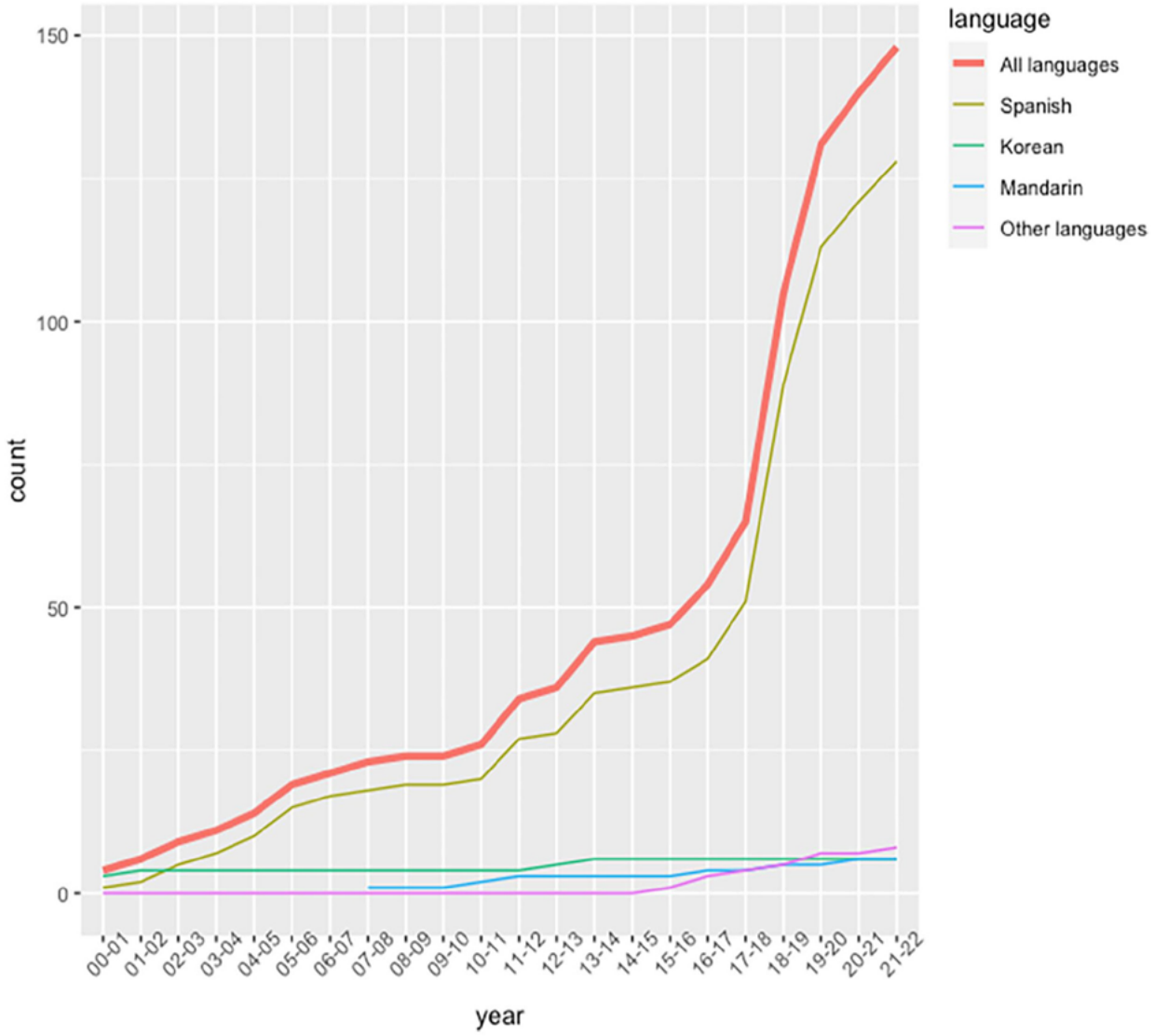
1. **Enrollment patterns** from 2001–2002 through 2021–2022 across schools with and without DLI, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, English Learner (EL) status, and socioeconomic status.
2. **Racial, linguistic, and economic diversity** using metrics such as entropy, exposure/isolation, and concentration indices.
3. **Critical discourse analysis** of the text used to inform families about DLI programs on school websites and social media platforms.

KEY FINDINGS

01 DLI programs grew after Proposition 58 passed, removing California's English-only law.

Under Proposition 227, which restricted English learners' access to bilingual education, DLI programs in LAUSD grew at a relatively slow pace. Following the passage of Proposition 58 in 2016, which lifted those restrictions, the district significantly expanded Spanish-language DLI programs, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, benefiting English learners and heritage speakers of minoritized languages. The expansion also includes non-Spanish programs in languages like Armenian, Korean, and Mandarin.

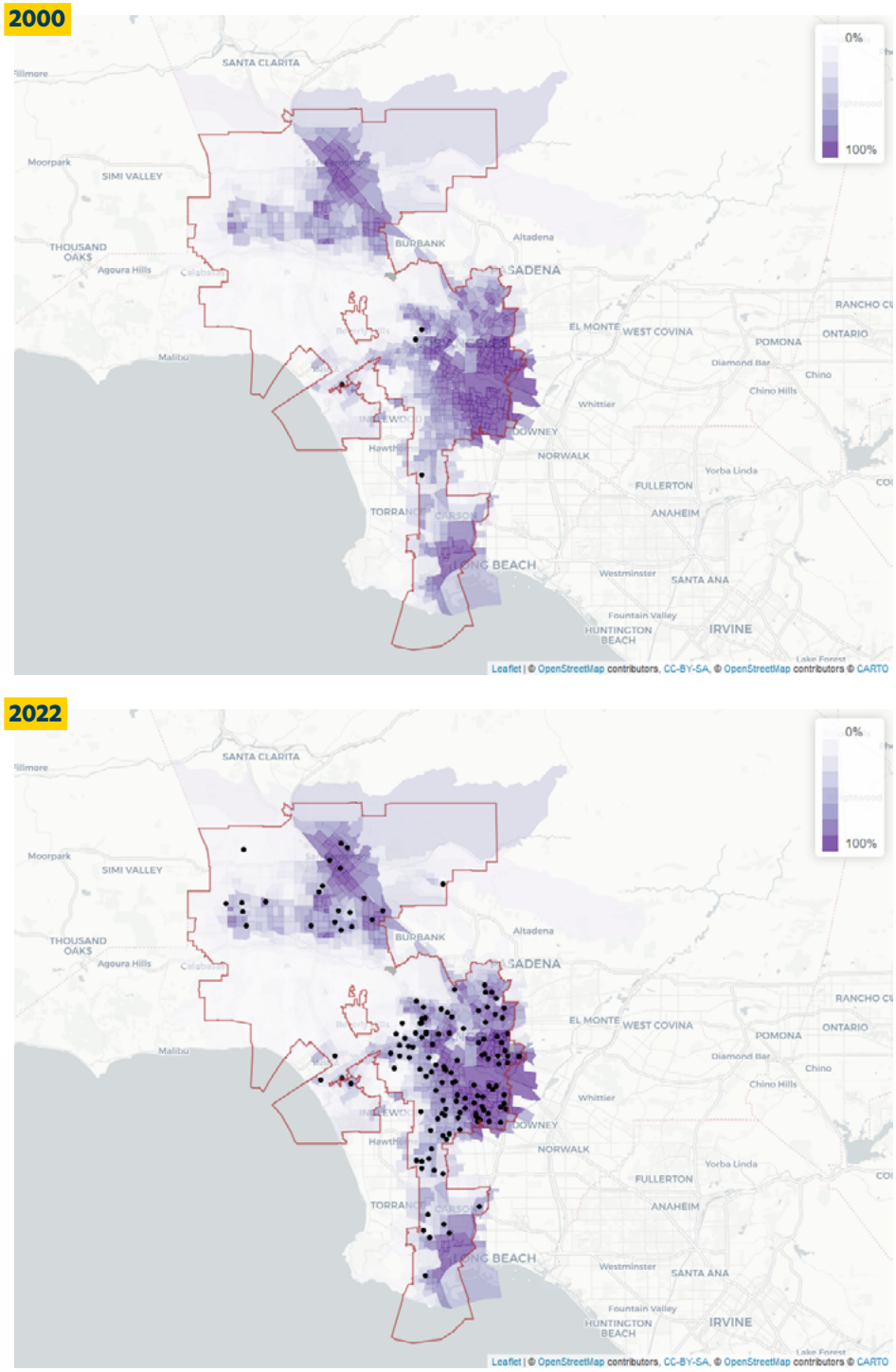
Figure 1. Growth of DLI Programs in LAUSD (Adapted from Asson et al., 2025)



Note. "Other languages" category includes Arabic, Armenian, French, and Japanese.

Because LAUSD has established most DLI programs in neighborhoods with populations that particularly benefit from bilingual education, such as racial groups most likely to speak the partner languages, non-English speaking communities, and low-income residents, in most cases, LAUSD has been able to safeguard DLI from gentrification.

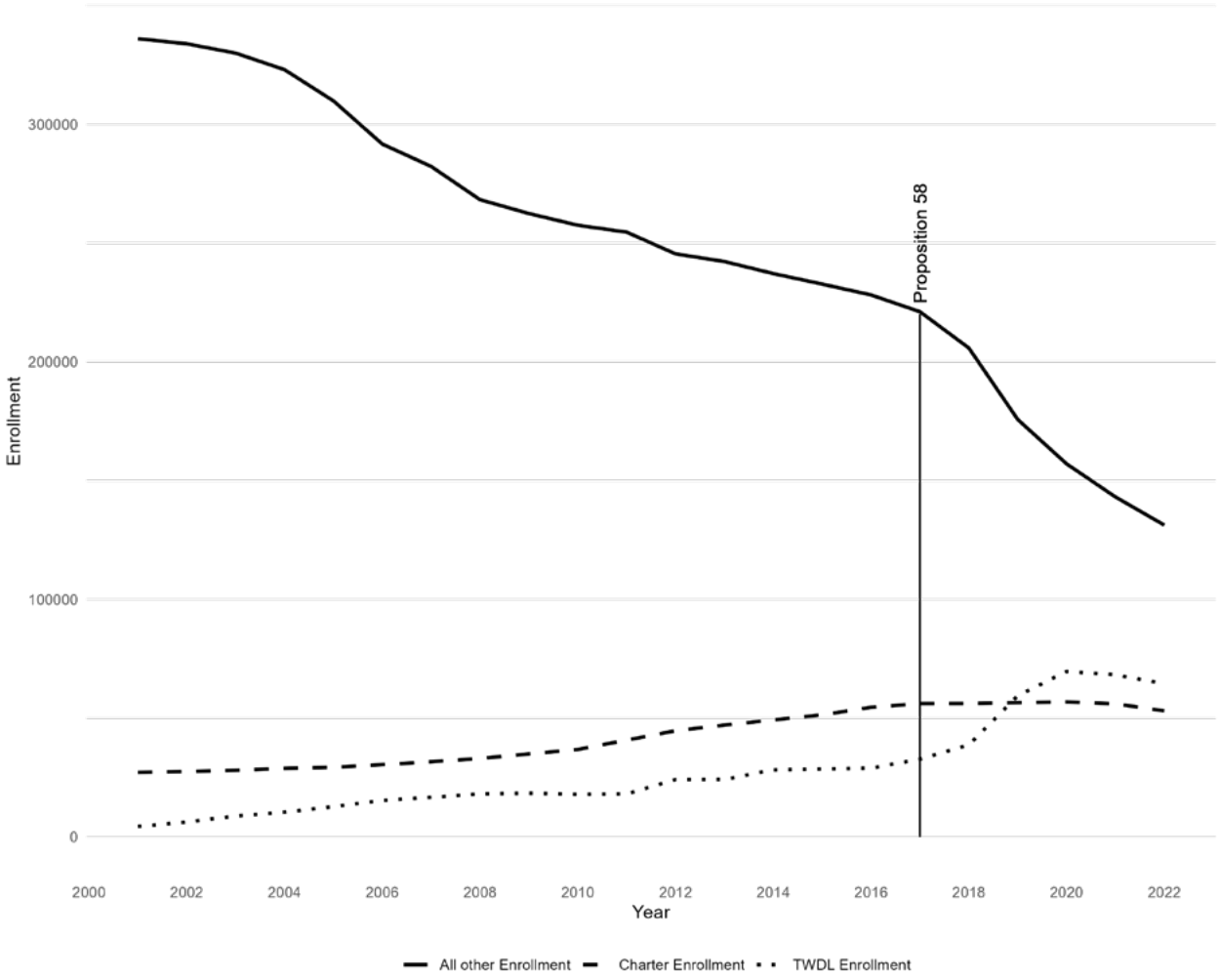
Figure 2. Proportion of Hispanic/Latinx Residents and DLI Dispersion, 2000 and 2022 (Darriet & Santibañez, 2024, p. 73)



02 Equitable Access and the Role of School Choice

LAUSD has many types of school choice policies, intended to provide families with more educational options. Among these, DLI programs have gained attention for their potential to attract and retain students. As the district faces declining enrollment and increased competition from charter schools and alternative education models, DLI programs are seen as one way to stabilize attendance and help maintain the funding necessary for long-term financial sustainability (Darriet & Santibañez, 2024).

Figure 3. Change in District Elementary, Charter, and Two-Way Dual Language (TWDL) Enrollment (Darriet & Santibañez, 2024, p. 63)



Note: TWDL and DLI are used interchangeably.

While these choice policies have made DLI programs more widely available, they can also inadvertently benefit wealthier families with the resources to navigate complex enrollment processes, secure transportation, and access information about options, deadlines, and other procedures. In the case of LAUSD, for example, more advantaged families, including those from predominantly English-speaking backgrounds, are more likely to enroll in non-Spanish DLI programs (i.e., Mandarin, Korean, and Japanese), contributing to potential gentrification.

In LAUSD, nearly 45% of DLI students do not live within their school's designated attendance zones. Since the district does not offer universal transportation, this suggests that DLI programs may be more accessible to families with greater financial and logistical resources. As a result, families from low-income or marginalized communities—especially those without reliable transportation—may face additional barriers to enrolling in these programs, reinforcing existing educational inequalities.

For instance, non-Spanish dual language programs (such as Korean or Mandarin) enroll very few African American students, a number that closely reflects the low percentage of African American residents in the surrounding neighborhoods. Notably, out-of-zone African American students enrolled in these programs travel an average of 3.8 miles compared to 1.3 miles for Latinx students. This suggests that African American students living outside of these attendance zones may face added structural barriers—such as distance and lack of transportation—that limit their access to DLI opportunities.

School websites, a widely used tool to learn about potential school choices, often offer limited outreach information about DLI programs for language-minoritized families, with many either lacking relevant details or providing them exclusively in English. For example, only 41% of the DLI school websites include information in Spanish, and 6% in Mandarin or Korean.

03 Diversity and Integration

While DLI programs have led to modest increases in school-level racial and linguistic diversity while avoiding gentrification—especially since the passing of Proposition 58—these programs often still operate within segregated neighborhoods. For example, Spanish DLI programs predominantly serve Latinx students from low-income families, limiting opportunities for integration with students from other racial or economic backgrounds. Similarly, non-Spanish DLI programs tend to attract wealthier, English-speaking families, which may result in less diversity and higher risks of gentrification.

Figure 4. Enrollment in Schools with TWDL Programs by Student Race/Ethnicity and Two-Way Dual Language (TWDL) Program Language (Asson et al., 2025, p. 10)

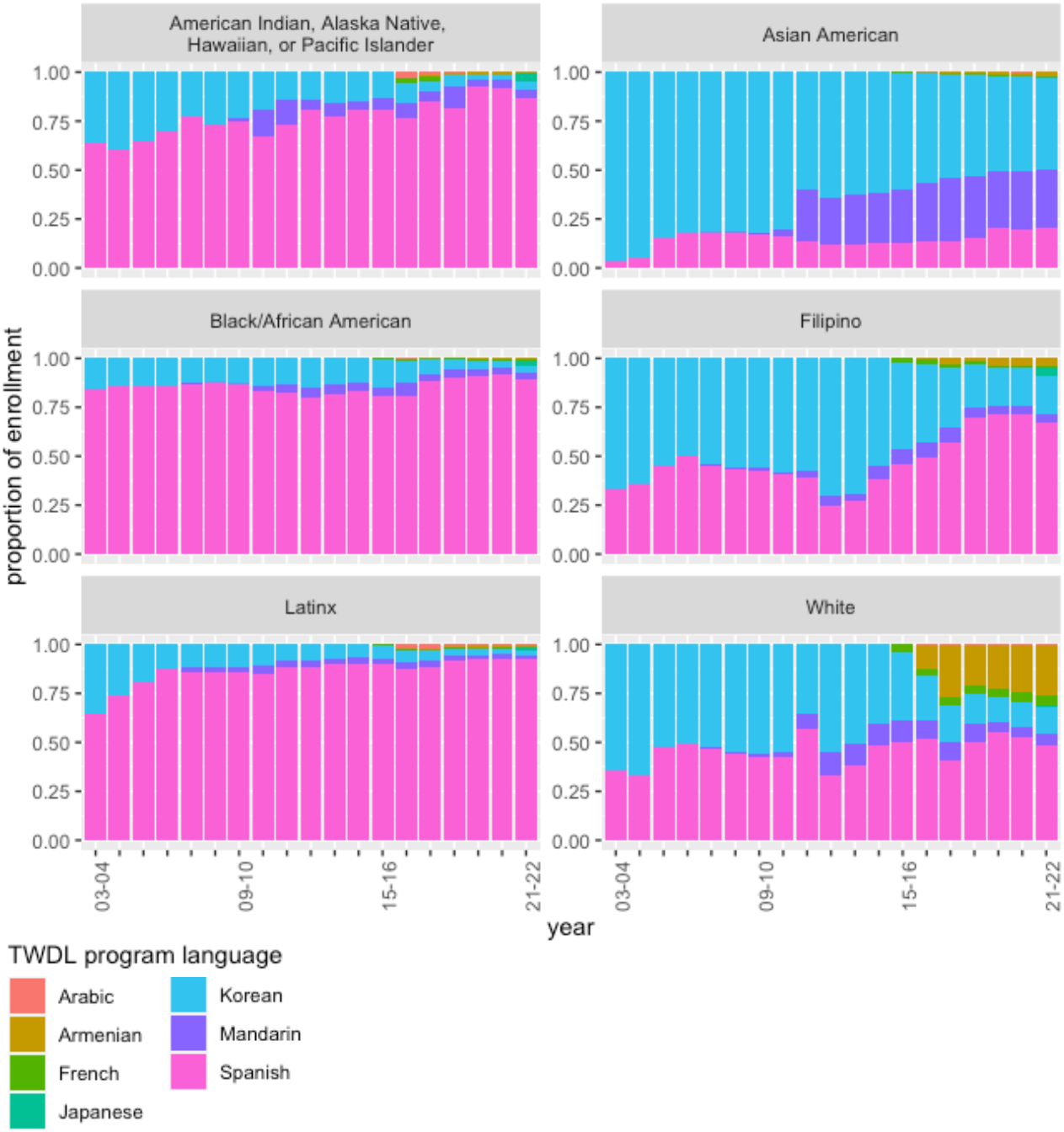
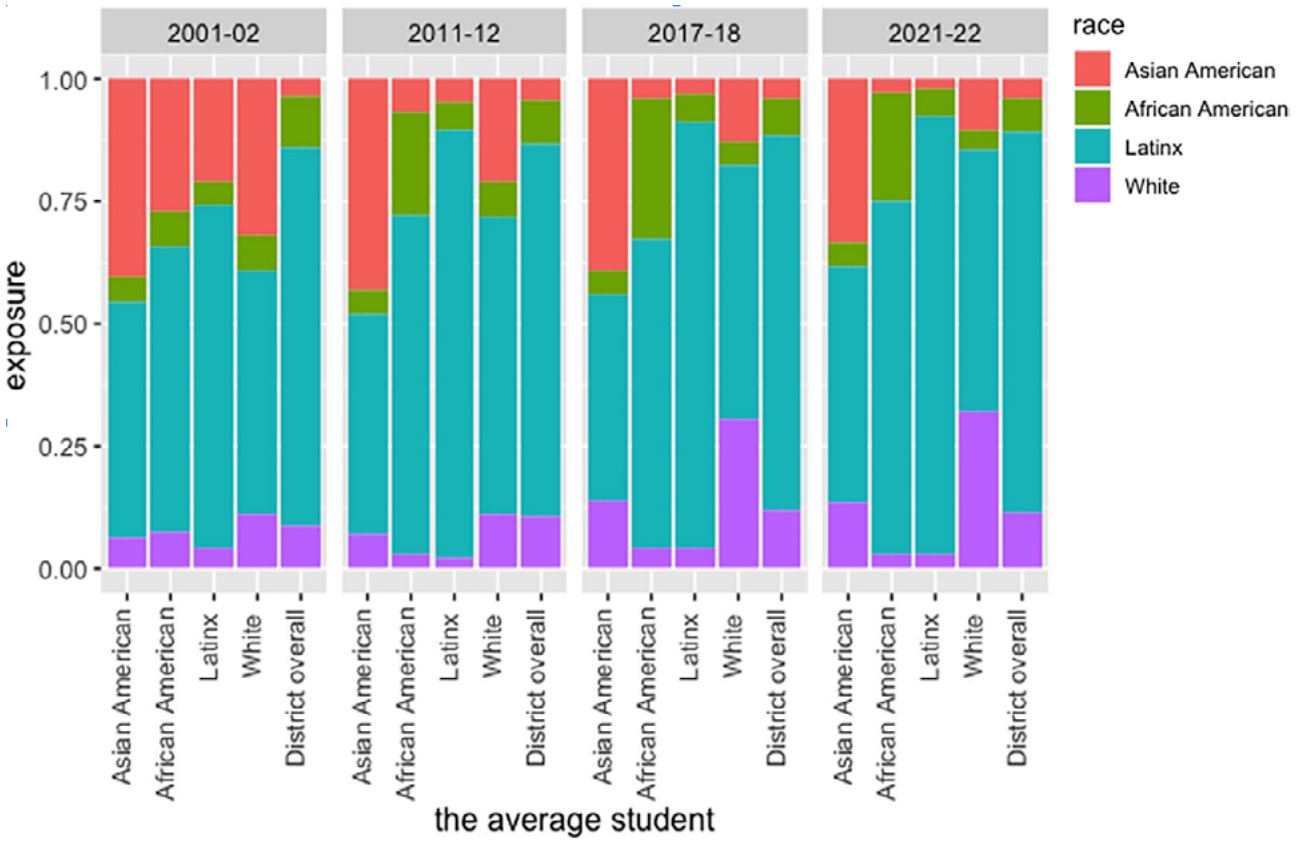


Figure 5. Interracial Exposure for Students in Schools with DLI Programs, Selected Years (Asson et al., p. 13)



African American students, in particular, remain underrepresented in DLI programs. This is especially true in Spanish DLI programs, where enrollment of African American students often fails to match neighborhood demographics even when programs are located in predominantly African American neighborhoods. This underrepresentation raises important questions about why these programs may not be attracting African American families and calls for deeper inquiry into what aspects of DLI design, outreach, or school climate may be deterring their interest and engagement. It also prompts reflection on who these programs are implicitly designed for—what messages are being sent about the intended audience and purpose, and who sees themselves as welcome or valued within these spaces.

POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase Access and Transportation Support

1. **Provide transportation for out-of-zone students from historically marginalized or low-income communities to ensure equitable access to DLI programs.** Students can't choose DLI programs if they don't have a way to get to the school where the program is located.

2. **Ensure that outreach and program information is accessible and culturally and linguistically responsive to African American and non-English-speaking families.** This includes providing materials and website information in multiple languages, hosting community outreach events, and using culturally relevant channels to communicate program benefits and enrollment processes.

3. **Outreach efforts must actively engage with communities where DLI programs have the greatest potential to support students, and ensure that families from historically marginalized communities are informed and included in decision-making processes.** Consider hiring community liaisons or establishing focus groups from the communities that most need to be prioritized, such as African American families, to help identify local interests and needs, ensuring that outreach strategies and information dissemination are both effective and culturally responsive.

Prioritize Balancing Racial and Economic Integration while Combating Gentrification

1. **Locating DLI programs in low-income, predominantly minoritized neighborhoods can expand access to the communities who may benefit the most from them, but it may not address broader patterns of segregation.** Drawing students from outside the neighborhood can promote racial and economic integration, yet overreliance on out-of-zone enrollment risks gentrifying the program. While integration and anti-gentrification efforts may seem at odds, a balanced approach is possible through careful monitoring of enrollment trends.

2. **For schools with more demand than available seats, consider the use of a weighted lottery in determining which students are able to enroll.** Choice programs often use lotteries, and by using a weighted lottery, can align enrollment management with district goals, such as prioritizing enrollment for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

3. **More importantly, redefining what integration means may be key.** For instance, Spanish DLI programs in majority-Latinx neighborhoods could promote diversity by actively engaging African American and Asian American families within the same communities. This requires rethinking how these programs are marketed and expanding the narrative around who they are meant to serve.

4. **Actively recruit and support African American students to enroll in DLI programs, particularly in neighborhoods with large African American populations.** This could involve targeted outreach efforts, such as hosting informational sessions in African American communities, and offering incentives such as transportation support to overcome the barriers to enrollment. Offer support and training for school leaders about best practices to recruit students from communities that would enhance equitable access and diversity in DLI programs. Additionally, invest in building strong school-community partnerships to better understand, engage with, and learn from African American families, ensuring that DLI programs reflect their needs, goals, and perspectives.

Foster Critical Consciousness Among Educators

1. **Develop professional development programs for educators and administrators to cultivate critical consciousness** (Heiman et al., 2023), helping them understand and address the power dynamics that shape educational opportunities and outcomes. This includes training on how to challenge biases, combat deficit thinking, and ensure that DLI programs are inclusive of all student identities, particularly those from underrepresented racial and linguistic backgrounds.
2. **Engage teachers in regular reflection and discussions** about the role of DLI programs in promoting or perpetuating social, cultural, and linguistic hierarchies, and ensure that the programs are culturally sustaining for all students.

Expand Culturally Affirming and Inclusive Curricula and Combat Deficit Thinking

1. **Ensure that DLI curricula are culturally affirming, celebrating the languages and cultural practices of all student groups.** This includes integrating African American culture and language practices into Spanish-language programs and ensuring that non-Spanish DLI programs reflect the diversity of their communities and of the larger society, making space for Latinx and African American cultural contributions.
2. **Address deficit thinking in outreach and curriculum development.** Promote asset-based messaging that highlights the value of bilingualism and the cultural richness that language-minoritized students bring to the classroom. This can help counteract perceptions that Spanish and other languages spoken by marginalized communities are "remedial" or "less valuable." Additionally, carefully examine and reflect on implicit practices and discourses that might stigmatize or undermine the authentic language practices of students and their communities, such as a range of Spanish language variations and translanguaging.

CONCLUSION

DLI programs present a powerful opportunity to enhance bilingualism, academic achievement, and cross-cultural competence, but they must be managed carefully to ensure equitable access and prevent the entrenchment of existing educational inequalities. The findings from LAUSD highlight the successes of DLI programs in promoting diversity and serving historically marginalized students, but also point to the challenges posed by residential segregation and school choice policies. By implementing targeted policies focused on access, diversity, and cultural responsiveness, LAUSD can ensure that DLI programs fulfill their potential to serve all students equitably, fostering integration and cross-cultural competence across racial and linguistic divides.

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