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Bilingual Brilliance: The Impact of Prop 58 on English Learner Students in High School

Introduction

In the United States (U.S.), immigrant children have a federal right to an accessible public education regardless of their immigration status (U.S. Department of Education 2014). However, it is not enough for these children to have the right to a free education if that education is taught in a language they do not understand. California Proposition 58 (Prop 58) reflected the importance of bilingual education for all students, especially English learners. An English learner is defined as a K-12 student whose first language is not English, as reported on the Home Language Survey (HLS) and assessed in California to lack essential English skills for success in standard school programs (DataQuest English Learners Report). Prop 58 passed in 2016 as a response to California Proposition 227 in 1998 that required English learners to be taught in English-only classes and restricted bilingual programs (Legislative Analyst's Office 2014). Public schools are required by law to teach students the English language, written and oral, but bilingual programs were viewed as a hindrance to that rather than as additional support for students who aren't fluent in English.

A school's primary goal is to educate children, which begs the question: In California counties, what effect has Prop 58 had on the English proficiency levels of 9th-12th grade English learners and their high school graduation rates? To analyze whether bilingual education makes learning easier for English learners, I will be comparing 9th-12th grade students' English level proficiency scores before and after the passing of Prop 58. This research will allow us to measure the effectiveness of bilingual education in schools and use it toward more accurate educational policies.

Significance

Children who leave their native country face many obstacles that U.S.-born children do not. Language barriers, culture shock, socioeconomic issues, and familial obstacles, including being an unaccompanied minor, can have profound impacts on a child. In education, these factors can hinder their ability to process and retain new information, much more so if they are legally discouraged from learning in their native language.

California is home to the largest immigrant population in the nation and has the largest estimated percentage of immigrant students in K-12 education (Perez et al. 2023). In the 2022-2023 school year, the California Department of Education (CDE) reported that there were approximately 1.113 million English learners in public schools, with 81% primarily speaking Spanish (CalEdFacts 2023). Before the passing of Prop 227 in 1998, there were many guidelines to help aid in the development of “limited English proficient (LEP)” students, including a bilingual education (Legislative Analyst’s Office 1998). The proposition considerably changed the way that LEP students were taught in California, practically eliminating bilingual education, and providing less support for LEP students when they eventually integrated back into standard English classes.

In 2008, only 5% of the state’s English learners were taught in bilingual programs (Legislative Analyst’s Office 2014). Prop 58 aimed to remove the restriction imposed on bilingual programs to encourage schools to teach English learners in a variety of different programs, including bilingual ones. It also required that school districts discuss with community members about their opinions regarding how English learners should be taught (Legislative Analyst’s Office 2014). This is important as most often the individuals whom these policies impact are immigrants themselves who may be afraid to speak up for fear of persecution.

Bilingual programs benefit not only the students through the reassurance of understanding new material in their native language and being able to apply that knowledge to learning English, but also their family members, who often learn the language from the children. Immigrants benefit the economy when they receive a proper education, continue studying, and graduate college because they go into the labor force and get higher-paying jobs, pay more taxes, and contribute to the overall growth of the economy, which begins with a fair chance at a primary and secondary education.

Background

California is a more progressive states regarding immigration and has many policies protecting immigrants that other states do not have. This makes it arguably the most attractive state for immigrants. For example, California Senate Bill 54 in 2017 established California as a sanctuary state, meaning cooperation with federal immigration authorities is limited (Morse et al. 2019). For immigrants, this would mean an added layer of protection from possible deportation, access to services other places might not provide for undocumented individuals, a sense of community and safety, as well as better opportunities overall without as much fear of discrimination. If immigrants feel secure somewhere, they may be more likely to bring their children with them. Those migrant children are most likely unfamiliar with the English language and are therefore the main recipients of bilingual education.

The CDE considers English learners as part of their specialized programs meant to address the unique requirements of students in the state whose primary language is not English. English language development (ELD) standards are meant to “assist English learner students to build English proficiency, refine the academic use of English, and provide students access to subject area content” (CDE 2023). To develop their English proficiency, the CDE highlights

programs for English learners that utilize ELD standards in their instruction. These include but are not limited to: Dual-Language Immersion Programs, Transitional or Developmental Programs, and Structured English Immersion Programs (CalEdFacts 2023). Dual-language immersion programs focus on classrooms with both native English speakers and native speakers of different languages to promote bilingual proficiency and multicultural understanding (CalEdFacts 2023). Transitional programs provide instruction in the student's native language, and structured English immersion programs are taught in English, but the curriculum is designed for English learners (CalEdFacts 2023). These are examples of programs that Prop 227 restricted after 1998 but resurfaced with Prop 58.

Policies specifically regarding education and immigrant students include Title I and Title III, which benefit the education migrant students receive. Title I allows for funding to be allocated towards schools to support educational strategies that can help bridge the gap for students who may be struggling to keep up with academic standards (CDE 2023). Title III is more specific to immigrant students. It is a federal program that helps English learners and immigrant students with language instruction (CDE 2023). These policies and other education policies extend from state and local legislation to the federal level regarding how to help English learners and immigrant students succeed academically in this country.

Previous research analyzed the effect of Prop 227 on English learners after its passing in 1998, but there is limited research comparing the impact of Prop 58 before and after on English learners. This could partly be due to the proposition only having been in place since July of 2017. Previous research also looked at funding as having a major impact on bilingual education and English learners, as well as case studies looking at a specific cohort of students, or a school itself, and analyzing bilingual teaching and different programs' impact. Many studies show the

benefits of a multilingual education and how learning other languages is a great benefit for students. My research will build on the argument in support of bilingual education, specifically looking at the effect Prop 58 had on English learners.

Theory and Argument

I propose that with the passing of Proposition 58 in 2016, after 2017 there will be an increase in 9th-12th grade English learners English proficiency level and higher high school graduation rates. Bilingual instruction leads to higher English proficiency and higher graduation rates for English learners because those provided with bilingual instruction understand the language they are being taught in and therefore learn English faster and can continue their education towards graduation, with a satisfactory understanding of the language.

My independent variable is the implementation of California Proposition 58 in July of 2017. My dependent variables are English proficiency levels and high school graduation rates for English learners. English proficiency was divided into three performance levels based on the English Language Proficiency Assessment for California (ELPAC), a division of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), and prior to the 2017–18 school year, the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). These levels are Initial Fluent English Proficient (IFEP), English Learner, and Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP). IFEP defines a K-12 student with a reported non-English language on the HLS assessed in California and determined to be proficient in English. RFEP refers to a K-12 student entering a California public school identified as an English learner, then reclassified as proficient in English based on California Education Code Section 313 criteria, including ELPAC assessment, teacher evaluation, parental consultation, and CAASPP-ELA performance indicating sufficient proficiency for age-appropriate curriculum participation (DataQuest English Learner Report).

These levels are all calculated by “dividing the number of students at that performance level by the total number of students with scores in the selected year for this subject area” (ELPAC 2023). I measured graduation rates with the CDE Dataquest tool for “Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate” for all schools, students, and genders, but specifically “English Learners” (CDE 2022).

Immigrant students likely feel more confident learning in their native language because, while almost everything else is new in their environment, the language isn't. Establishing an understanding of a material in one language can help facilitate the understanding of it in another language, therefore increasing their English proficiency. For example, if an individual does not know any Spanish, they might find it easier to hear the word 'school' in a sentence and then the following sentence hear 'escuela' versus hearing the new word 'escuela' right off the bat because they have not established a foundation in the language. Prop 58 recognized this and allowed for the use of native languages in learning to make English learners more comfortable because they can understand the language that they are taught in. Through learning in their native language, students can more effectively understand English, which can move them towards higher English proficiency levels faster. Once they have achieved the required English proficiency levels to be reclassified as proficient in English, they continue their academic journey and graduate high school proficient in a new language.

Some limitations of this research include alternative explanations as to why there may be an increase in English-level proficiency and high school graduation rates for English learners. In 2013-14 California introduced the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to allocate proper funding for schools, specifically to increase financial support for high-needs students, comprising of low-income, English learners, homeless, or foster youth (LaFortune 2019). The

LCFF prioritized additional funding to be directed towards school districts with a higher population of high-need students. The LCFF was enacted a few years before Prop 58 and with more spending for high-needs students such as English learners, schools can provide more supplies in the form of school materials and teachers or aids. More physical resources mean more support in the classroom, and more support leads to higher educational success, which may be a reason for an increase in English learner English proficiency levels. However, because this change in funding allocation occurred three years prior, any drastic change in English proficiency for English learners after 2017 cannot directly be attributed to the LCFF. Another limitation of the data was the lack of consistent data for English learners as a population. There are limitations to using standardized testing as a unit of measurement for a child's educational success, but because the CDE has the most comprehensive data for educational statistics, there were little to no choices.

Research Design

I conducted a comparative case study across five California counties to compare quantitative data on English learners English level proficiency before and after the implementation of Prop 58. Specifically, I focused on examining five counties with the largest population of immigrant students before and after the passing of Prop 58 from the 2013-14 school year to the 2021-22 school year. According to the CDE, in Fall 2021 these counties were: Los Angeles, Orange, Santa Clara, San Diego, and Alameda (CDE 2022). Unfortunately, this data is not per capita and therefore, does not account for the difference in population sizes for these counties. Following Prop 58, I hypothesize that there will be a rise in the English proficiency levels of 9th-12th grade English learners. My independent variable is the implementation of Prop 58, and my dependent variables are English proficiency levels and high

school graduation rates for English learners. My unit of analysis focused on California counties, and I had five total observations. Ideally, a larger number of observations would yield more suggestive results, but due to the limited time allocated to this research, five counties made for an interesting study. The data for both independent variables was collected from the Department of Education's DataQuest tool.

To operationalize the concept of English proficiency I used the "Enrollment by English Language Acquisition Status (ELAS) and Grade" in the DataQuest English Learner Data subcategory. Then, to measure an increase in English proficiency levels, I calculated the percentage of English learners in each grade who had been reclassified in that school year. To compute this, I divided the performance level "Reclassified Fluent English Proficient" by the sum of all three performance levels and multiplied that by 100. I selected reclassification as the measure for English proficiency because, for a student to be considered reclassified, they must meet certain expectations, as previously mentioned established California Education Code Section 313 criteria. Once a student is reclassified, they are considered proficient enough in the language to be placed in standard English courses.

To test my hypothesis and measure the impact of Prop 58 on English proficiency, I calculated the difference in the percentage of students who were reclassified by grade level. To do this, I first found the average percentage of students who have been reclassified as proficient in English for each grade level in all counties. For example, for Los Angeles County, I calculated the average percentage of students reclassified before the 2016-17 school year for 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grade. I then found the average percentage of students reclassified after the 2017-18 school year for all grades. I calculated the difference between before and after and, to consolidate

the data by grade instead of county, I averaged the previously calculated differences for all 9th-grade English learners and repeated the process for all grades.

I also collected data on English learners' graduation rates to analyze whether they were graduating at a higher rate after Prop 58. This was the "Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate" filtered for English Learners specifically in DataQuest. There was limited data on English learner's graduation rates prior to the 2016-17 school year and therefore, there is only one school year in the dataset before the passing of Prop 58. However, despite the limitations in data on graduation rates, I felt it was important to have another variable to measure student success that is not dependent on standardized testing results due to their controversial implications.

While conducting my research, there were specific concerns regarding reliability, specifically when considering the change in the standardized testing. The English Language Proficiency Assessment for California (ELPAC) is part of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) but before the 2017–18 school year, it was known as the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). California law mandated that students from kindergarten to 12th grade, whose native language was not English, had to undergo an assessment to evaluate their English language proficiency. The CELDT authorized schools to identify students who needed supplemental support in their English proficiency, including their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills each year (CDE CELDT 2023). This test was in place from the 2000-01 through 2017-18 school years. Since 2018, the ELPAC has been California's current statewide assessment for English proficiency.

The criteria for which students are required to take the test remains the same therefore any student in K-12th grade whose primary language is not English is required by law to take the exam. According to the CDE, the ELPAC adheres to the 2012 California English Language

Development Standards and consists of two assessments for English learners: one for the initial identification of students as ELs and another for the yearly summative assessment. The second test measures a student's development in English learning and determines their level of English Language Proficiency (CDE ELPAC 2023). While the two exams are stated to measure the same variable, they have key differences. The CELDT was one annual assessment, while the ELPAC is two tests for two purposes. The CELDT was distributed in more grades, and the performance level classification is slightly different as well. This poses a threat to the reliability of the test results reported by the CDE. However, due to the lack of accessible data elsewhere, the CDE appears to have attempted a smooth transition of the data as all of it was collected in the same place and the same format. This does not disregard the consistency and validity of reclassification as a measure of English proficiency. For both assessments, the end goal is for non-native English-speaking students to become proficient enough to no longer need to be taught in individualized courses because they have enough of an understanding to succeed in standard English courses. The term English learner is meant to be temporary and placement in regular classes assumes that students possess the capability to comprehend and communicate effectively in English, as well as read and write at grade level.

One weakness in measuring English learners' success through reclassification rates is regarding the process of being reclassified. The Public Policy Institute of California published "English Learner Trajectories and Reclassification" in 2019 where Julian Betts et al. analyzed the optimal time for an English learner to be reclassified. They argue that an important consideration for K–12 schools in California revolves around the timing of reclassifying English learner students as English Proficient. They believe that reclassifying English learners prematurely could pose challenges in coping with core academic classes, while delaying

reclassification might lead to missing out on subjects they are capable of mastering (Betts et al. 2019). If reclassification as a measure of success is dependent on when the English learner is reclassified, the data could be incorrect, and the rates may be under or overreported. There likely are students capable of keeping up with standard English courses, but their CELDT scores may not reflect that and therefore they are stuck in English language development courses. This would mean the rates for English learners who are reclassified as proficient are less than those who may be proficient. This also goes back to the issue of standardized testing overall and its limits when measuring students' academic successes.

Graduation rates are also a valid measure of success, especially in education. Graduating symbolizes completing years' worth of learning and mastering different areas of knowledge. For English learners, this includes the English language. With a reclassification as proficient in English, English learners can continue their academic journey, focusing on subjects they are capable of understanding and excelling in. This increases the probability of a student graduating high school within the designated four years. Without the need for supplemental English language development courses and specific English instruction, reclassified English learners can shift their focus to other core subjects and dedicate more time to the course contents.

Findings and Analysis

In testing for a possible relationship between the passing of Prop 58 and English proficiency for English learner students, my findings suggested some support for my hypothesis. However, I cannot attribute my findings solely to Prop 58 and additional investigation and analysis would be necessary to more confidently say that there is a possible relationship between English proficiency levels and Prop 58. The findings suggest my hypothesis, that there would be a rise in the English proficiency levels of high school English learners after the implementation of Prop

58, is partially accurate. The second part of my hypothesis, stating that along with English proficiency, there would be a rise in the graduation rates of high school English learners, was mostly supported by the evidence as well. While a singular inconsistency in each analysis prevents me from confidently stating full accuracy for each hypothesis, the evidence overall appears to be consistent with my proposed hypothesis.

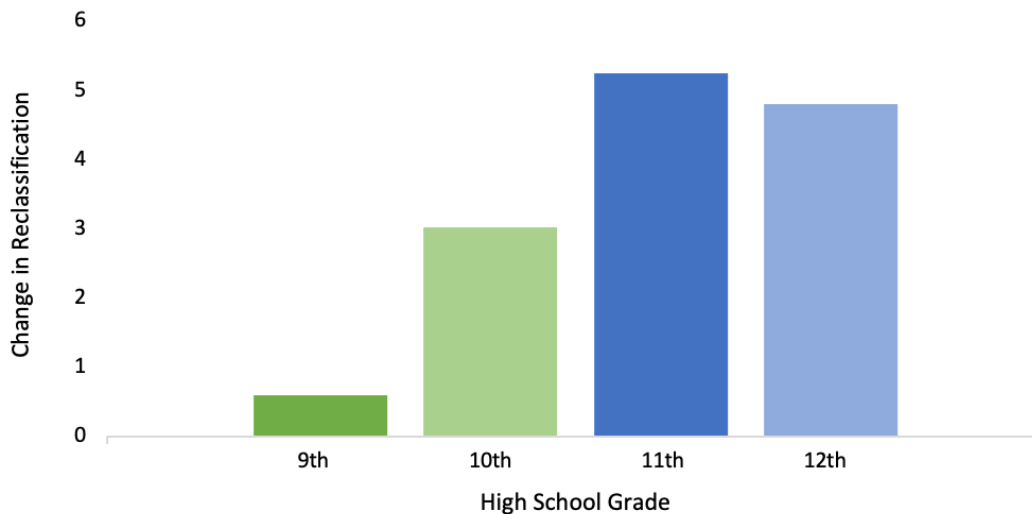
The results for my first dependent variable, English proficiency measured by students Reclassified Fluent English Proficient through standardized testing in California, are almost consistent with my hypothesis. Figure 1 below describes the average differences of students RFEP before and after Prop 58 for each grade, not divided by counties. See the appendix for the original data divided by grades and counties, Figures 5-8, used to calculate the differences presented in Figure 1. English learners in 9th grade had an average of 0.058 difference of students reclassified before and after Prop 58. For English learners in 10th grade the difference was 3.03, for 11th graders it was 5.26, and 12th grade students was a 4.81 average change in reclassification. This means that after Prop 58, the average rate of students who were being reclassified increased by 0.058 for 9th graders and so on. In Figure 1, the rates almost double for every grade except for 12th. This might suggest that the longer English learners are in bilingual education as per Prop 58, the higher the likelihood of that student being reclassified as fluent in the English language and proficient enough to be placed in standard high school English courses.

The decrease in 12th grade is the discrepancy that prevents me from stating that these findings fully support my hypothesis because, if they did, 12th grade should see the highest number of reclassifications. However, it is also possible that 12th graders who have not been reclassified by this point in their academic career no longer feel the need to put in as much effort or simply no longer care about school because they are seniors. The slight decrease, 0.45 points to be exact,

could be explained by any number of reasons, but the most likely is as teenagers get older, they begin to focus on other issues in their lives and academics may become less important for some, leading to a decrease in their grades including their English development courses.

Figure 1: Average Differences of Students RFEP Before and After Prop 58

Data Source: California Department of Education

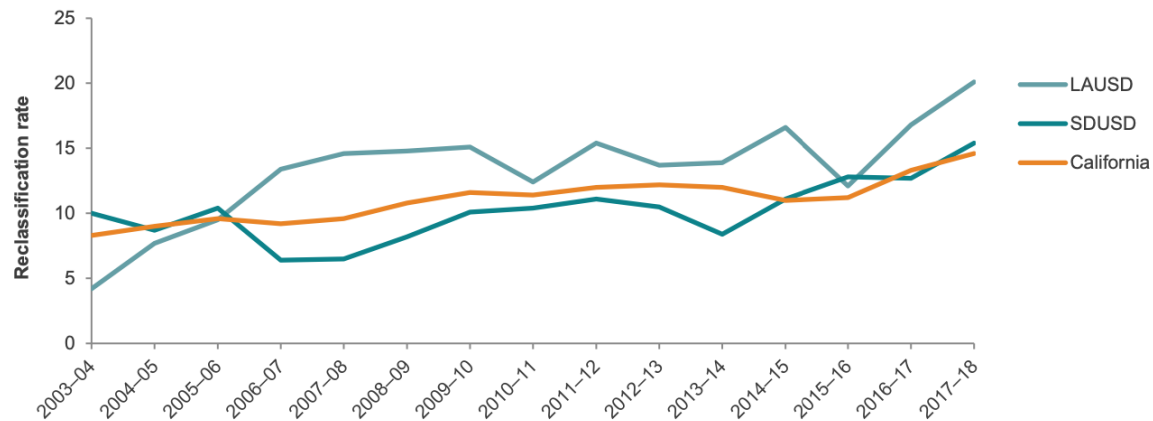


To further support my hypothesis, disregarding the decrease in 12th grade data for argument's sake, the Public Policy Institute of California published a paper by Julian Betts et al. in which Figure 2 describes the reclassification rates of English learners in the Los Angeles Unified School District and the San Diego Unified School District. These authors' findings suggest that my hypothesis was correct because while reclassification rates are steadily increasing, Prop 58 was in full effect beginning after the 2016-17 school year where there is a sharp incline for both Los Angeles Unified and San Diego Unified. The passing of Prop 58 could be a reason for the sudden increase in reclassification rates in the 2016-2018 school years. The overall California trend line does not increase as suddenly, but all of California includes counties with a very low population of English learners and therefore fewer bilingual programs and fewer students being reclassified as fluent proficient in English. Their data is also not divided by grade,

but it is nevertheless interesting to compare two school districts to their respective counties and see a similar pattern.

Figure 2: Reclassification rates in English learners

Source: Public Policy Institute of California



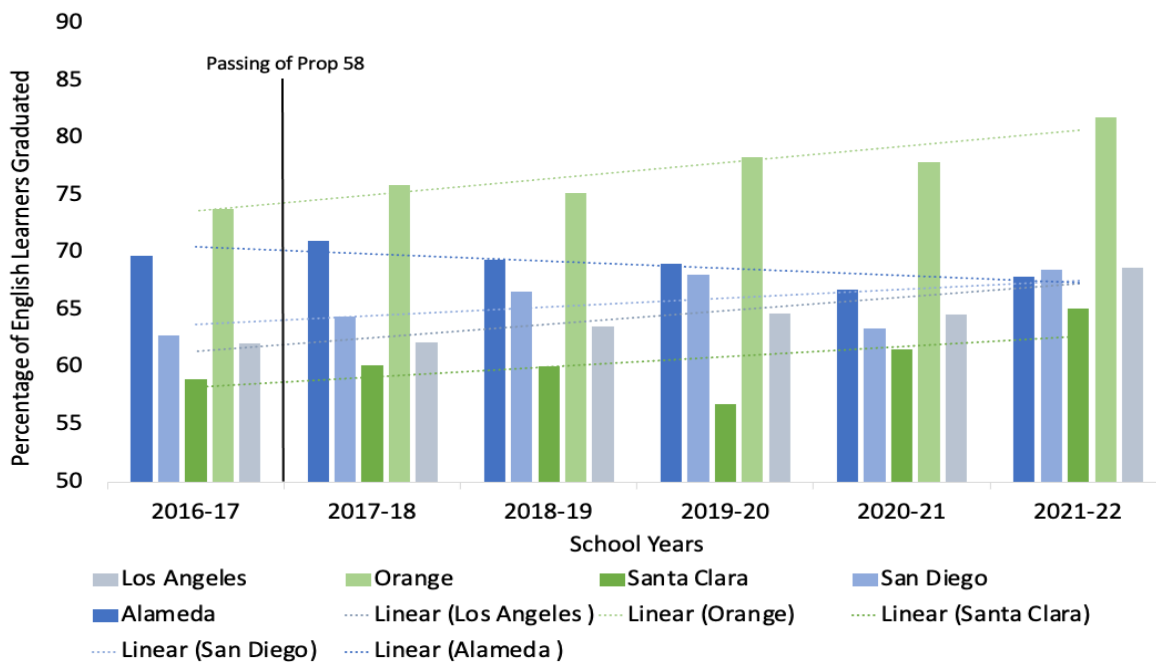
Now shifting to look at graduation rates, these results also align with my original hypothesis that there would be an increase in English learners graduating after Prop 58. As previously stated, there was limited data on English learner graduation rates prior to the 2016-17 school year on the CDE website. To remain consistent with the data, I decided to accept the limitations in the range of years rather than have graduation rates measured by another data source or multiple files within the CDE. Figure 3 shows English learner graduation rates from 2016-2022 for Los Angeles, Orange, Santa Clara, San Diego, and Alameda counties. I added linear trend lines to help visualize the pattern for each county's graduation rates over time.

The reason that I am hesitant to say these findings indicate that my hypothesis is correct is because of Alameda County. It is the only county that is decreasing overall from 2016 to 2022. All other data points gradually increase with some years slightly decreasing. All except for Santa Clara saw a decrease in graduation rates in the 2020-2021 school year likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and many schools shifting to remote learning. According to the New York Times, “UNESCO researchers argued in the report that “unprecedented” dependence on technology —

intended to ensure that children could continue their schooling — worsened disparities and learning loss,” (Proulx 2023). High-needs students, such as English learners, are usually more vulnerable to drastic changes, and shifting to remote learning and struggling to adapt to online learning could explain a decrease in graduation rates during that time. There is only one school year before the passing of Prop 58 to compare to the following years; therefore, it is difficult to say that disregarding Alameda County’s decline, an increase in graduation rates is due to the passing of Prop 58. It is interesting that the rates overall are increasing, again except for Alameda County, following Prop 58, but I cannot comfortably say there is a possible relationship between my independent and dependent variables because there is practically no data to compare before.

Figure 3: English Learner Graduation Rates 2016-2022

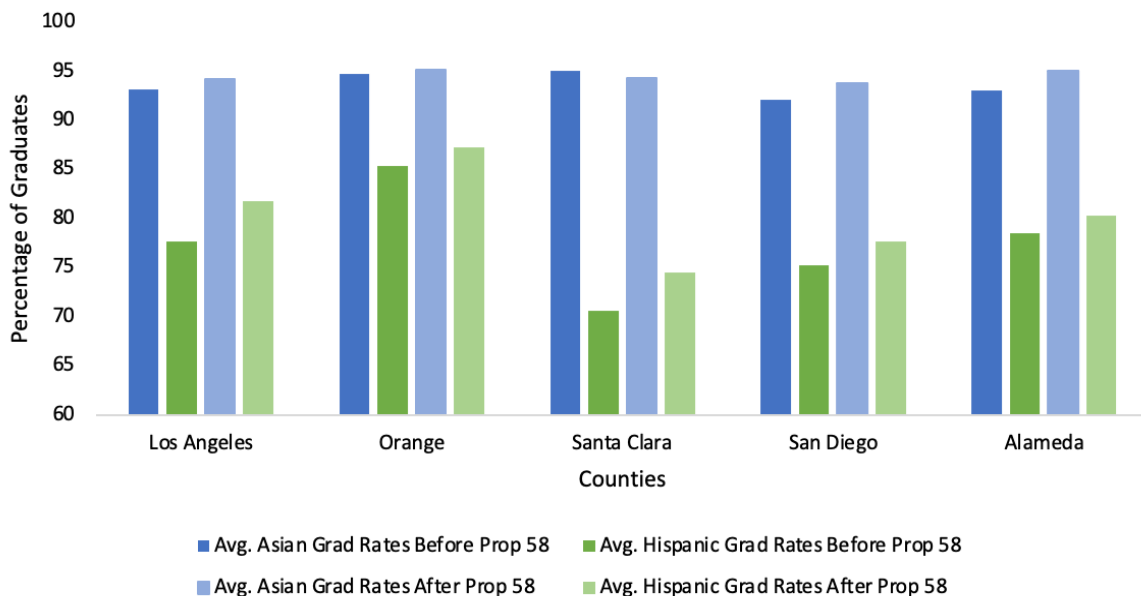
Data Source: California Department of Education



To take it one step further in analyzing graduation rates, I decided to look at Hispanic and Asian graduation rates within each county. The CDE reported that 56.1% of students enrolled in the state’s public schools are Hispanic or Latino and the next highest percentage of ethnic students, excluding whites, were Asian students who make up 9.5% (CalEdFacts 2023). I

decided that Hispanic and Asian rates would be the most like English learner rates because most immigrants in California are from Latin America (49%) or Asia (39%) (Perez et al. 2023). Not all immigrant students or children of immigrants will be English learners, but it is a fair assumption due to the statistics. In Figure 4, the darker shades represent average graduation rates before Prop 58, 2013-14 to the 2016-2017 school year, and the lighter shades represent after Prop 58, 2017-18 through 2021-22. In this figure, all counties saw an increase in the average Hispanic graduation rates after Prop 58 meaning the lighter bar was higher than the darker bar. For Asian students, however, almost all counties also had higher average graduation rates after Prop 58. Santa Clara County’s Asian students were the exception, as they had higher average rates before Prop 58. What this could suggest is that Prop 58 was not fully adapted in Santa Clara County for Asian students, and it would be interesting to examine whether demographics had something to do with Asian students not benefiting from Prop 58 or if it is a limitation of the proposition itself.

Figure 4: Average Graduation Rates % Before and after Prop 58 for Asian and Hispanics
 Data Source: California Department of Education



Implications and Conclusions

As mentioned throughout the paper, further research can and should be done on this topic. There were many data limitations to this research, most notably the lack of data available before Prop 58 for English learners. Although both of my hypothesis could not suggest a strong relationship between Prop 58 and English proficiency, the rates of English learners reclassified as proficient in English and their high school graduations did see an overall increase. Future research on the impact of Prop 58 could see a more significant relationship over a larger period and, ideally, with more available data.

Another possible variation of this study can be done on a state level. Prop 58 is a California proposition passed by California residents who have more positive views of immigrants than other states might (Perez et al. 2023). Immigrants are more likely to make up the English learner population and support bilingual education because it can benefit them and their children. Not all states share the same ideologies and immigration has become a more salient topic in the news and politics. A study comparing states with and without bilingual education policies and assessing the academic success of their English learner populations would reveal valuable insights regarding the benefits of bilingual education. Further research can also potentially look at Prop 58 and how it was adopted in schools, specifically looking at funding for bilingual programs, teachers hired, their language proficiency to teach in bilingual classes, and what languages were offered for bilingual instruction.

This researched aimed to analyze the impact of Prop 58 and bilingual education on English learners in California public schools. I looked at Los Angeles, Orange, Santa Clara, San Diego, and Alameda County, focusing on high school English learners and their English proficiency levels and high school graduation rates. The findings arguably imply that bilingual

education through Prop 58 benefits English learners because there is an overall increase in both their RFEP rates and graduation rates. However, it is necessary to mention that there were small inconsistencies in the results that could suggest my hypothesis was not entirely correct, and there is not a strong relationship between my independent and dependent variables. Nevertheless, my findings do show an overall increase and these findings can serve as evidence that bilingual education is a tool not a hindrance to teaching English to non-native English speakers. Research on the benefits of bilingual education can significantly change the way California determines education policy for English learners and California can be a leader in bilingual education policy.

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Appendix

Figure 5: Percentage of 9th Grade English Learners Reclassified Fluent English Proficient
 Data Source: California Department of Education

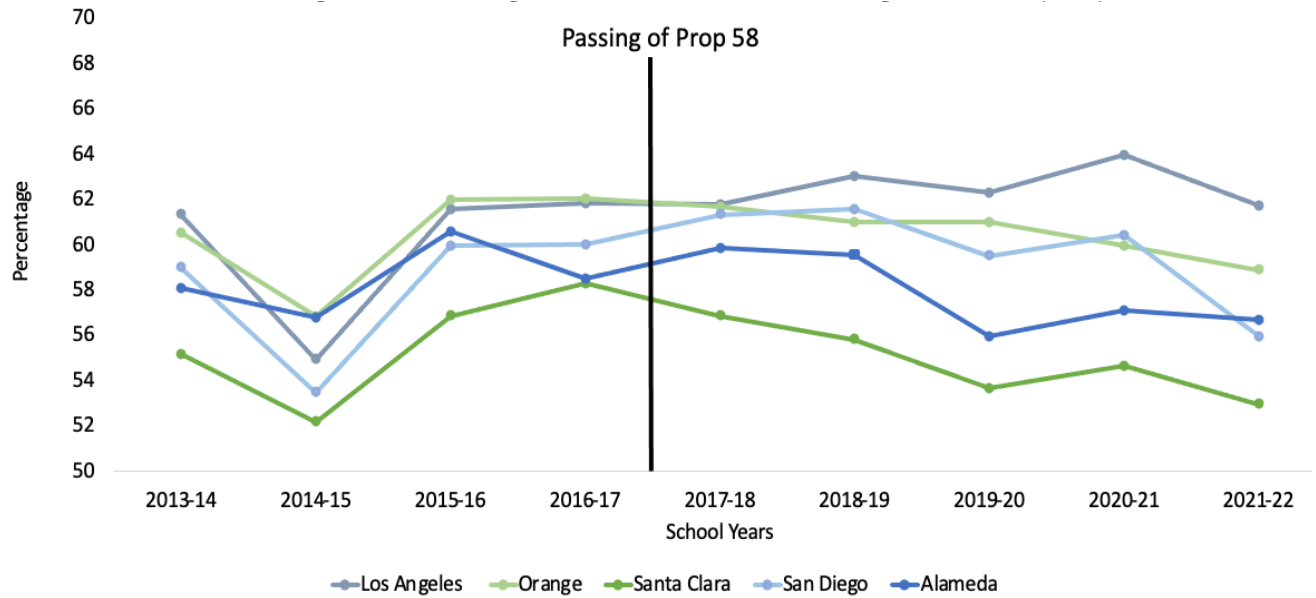


Figure 6: Percentage of 10th Grade English Learners Reclassified Fluent English Proficient
 Data Source: California Department of Education

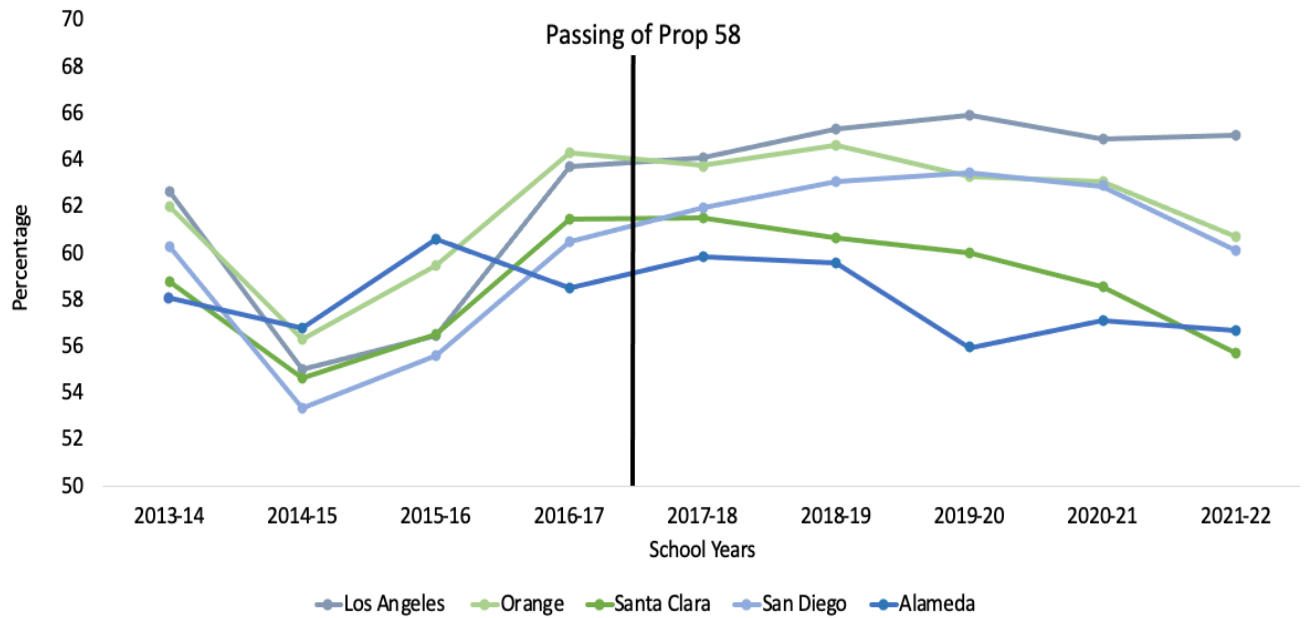


Figure 7: Percentage of 11th Grade English Learners Reclassified Fluent English Proficient
Data Source: California Department of Education

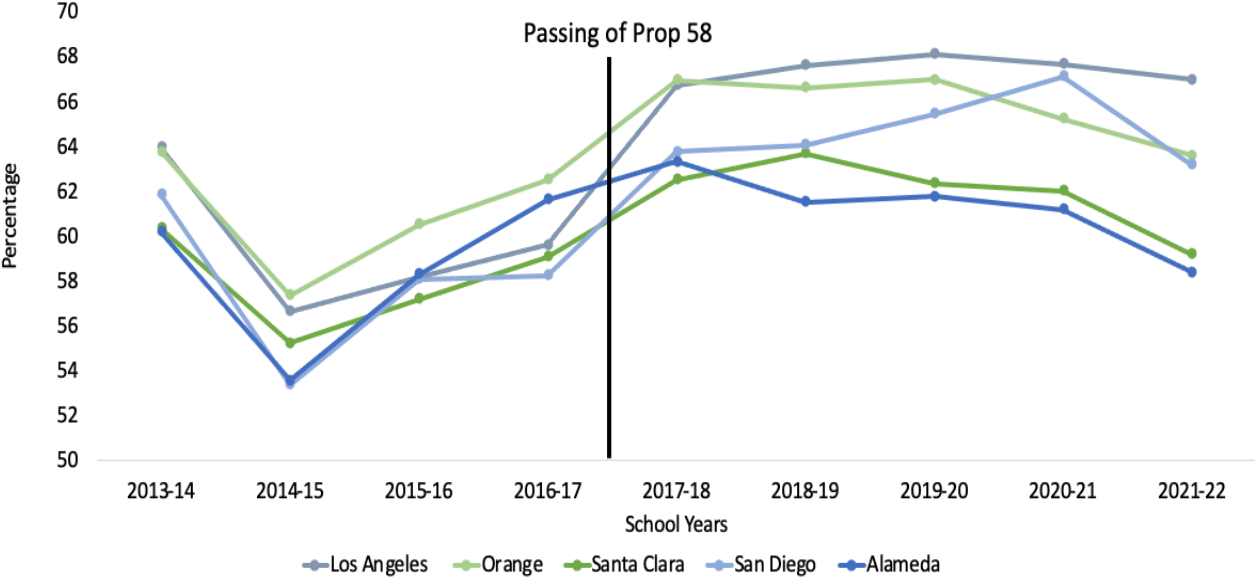


Figure 8: Percentage of 12th Grade English Learners Reclassified Fluent English Proficient
Data Source: California Department of Education

