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Bilingualism and School Readiness

The elements of the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework guide all key aspects of Head Start program implementation. The framework describes ten different domains of development that must be nurtured in the Head Start classroom in order for children to be ready for school when they enter kindergarten. These domains are aligned with the five national Common Core domains and are reflected in the New York State prekindergarten standards which govern UPK classrooms in New York City.

The Head Start domains describe the developmental building blocks that are most important for a child's school and long-term success. Domains include areas of learning such as Language, Literacy, Science and Math, as well as areas of development such as Social, Emotional, and Physical Health. Head Start children are expected to progress in all the areas of child development and early learning outlined by the Framework.

How do bilingual children fit into this framework? In Head Start, there is an additional domain called English Language Development that applies only to Dual Language Learners, those children whose home language is other than English. The New York State Bilingual Common Core Initiative specifically addresses how the Common Core standards apply to Dual Language Learners. Both these documents stress that dual language learners can meet the expectations outlined for all students. However, dual language students may require additional time and teacher support, as they are acquiring both English language proficiency and content area knowledge at the same time. They must also be assessed very carefully, as an English-language assessment may not accurately reflect what they know.

Another common element in both documents is the importance they attach to the home language. Both refer to research that indicates that school readiness and success for children who are dual language learners is tied directly to mastery of their home language. In other words, children who speak one language well can more easily learn a second (or even a third!) language.

Parents whose home language is not English, and whose children are in an English-speaking environment in school, should continue to speak, tell stories, and read to their children in their home language. If children speak their home language well and have a large vocabulary in this language, it will make learning English easier for them. And, since being bilingual has so many advantages, parents will ultimately be doing them a lasting favor.

In fact, in recognition of the many positive effects of bilingualism, a broader goal of bilingualism for *all* students is embedded in the Common Core!

