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POLICY-TO-PRACTICE BRIEF

NATIONAL COMPREHENSIVE CENTER FOR TEACHER QUALITY

# Teaching English Language Learners: A Complex System

Recruiting and preparing teachers of English language learners (ELLs) involves learning a complex educational subsystem. Many variables affect the education of ELLs, including changing demographics, policies at the federal and state levels, requirements for teachers, and program models. The goals of this brief are to set the policy and practice context of educating ELLs and to explain how this context affects teachers and teacher quality.

## NEW CHALLENGES

With shifting demographics shaping the education landscape, states with no previous ELL populations are facing new educational challenges. States and districts must now design instructional programs for students to learn English as well as recruit the right teachers for their new student populations. This brief provides an overview of the major components that school systems need to understand in order to design ELL programs and recruit teachers of ELLs.

### In This Brief

This brief is intended to help regional comprehensive centers and state policymakers as they develop policies to prepare, recruit, and retain teachers of ELLs.

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# Talking About ELLs

The first question people often ask is "How should we refer to this student population and the programs that serve them?" The following terms and acronyms are commonly used in the research:

- *Limited English proficient* (LEP) is used in legal and legislative documents, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act, to refer to students in need of language-acquisition services. LEP students typically have not yet passed English language proficiency assessments.
- *English as a second language* (ESL) refers to a type of English instruction received by English language learners (ELLs) in some schools and districts. This term does not refer to bilingual education, a distinction addressed later in this brief.
- *English as an additional language* (EAL) refers to a type of instruction offered to ELLs in some schools and districts and is similar in theory to ESL instruction.

Two general terms used to describe the population as a whole are *ELLs* and *English learners*. Both terms refer to the subset of the student population either classified as LEP or enrolled in various language programs. In this brief, the term ELLs will be used. ELLs may or may not have passed English language proficiency assessments, but they are still in need of instructional support to fully understand academic content in the classroom. ELLs are a diverse student population. Although approximately 75 percent speak Spanish, there is wide variation among the remaining 25 percent, with more than 100 languages and dialects spoken (Editorial Projects in Education, 2009).

# Changing Demographics

The number of ELLs in our nation's schools has increased rapidly during the last four decades. According to U.S. Census data, the percentage of immigrants in the school-aged population more than tripled between 1970 and 2000 (Capps et al., 2005). This growth has led to increases in the number of students considered LEP and enrolled in language programs in school districts across the country. According to the Common Core of Data, collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, the 50 states and District of Columbia educated 4.5 million ELLs during the 2005–06 school year, which is 9 percent of the total student population (Editorial Projects in Education, 2009). This

figure represents a 57.2 percent increase in the number of ELLs in our nation's schools between 1995 and 2006, whereas the PK–12 population as a whole increased by only 3.7 percent during the same period (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs [NCELA], 2007; see Table 1). Some of this increase is due to higher levels of immigration. According to 2007 data from the American Community Survey, 35 percent of ELLs in the United States are foreign-born; however, a majority are second- and third-generation citizens (Editorial Projects in Education, 2009).

Furthermore, ELLs are spread out across the country. In fact, six states have experienced particularly high ELL growth rates (more than 100 percent): Delaware (184.4 percent), South Carolina (181.7 percent), Kentucky (151.6 percent), North Dakota (130.2 percent), Alabama (129 percent), and West Virginia (111.3 percent) (Editorial Projects in Education, 2009). Although western and southeastern states have a higher density of ELLs (Editorial Projects in Education, 2009; NCELA, 2007), this extremely rapid growth poses significant challenges for states that have not previously had to consider this special student population.[1]

**Table 1. Growth in the ELL Population in U.S. Schools**

| Enrollment | 1995–96 | 2005–06 | Percentage Change |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total PK–12 | 47,582,665 | 49,324,849 | +3.7 |
| ELL | 3,228,799 | 5,074,572 | +57.2 |

*Source:* NCELA, 2007

# Policies Related to ELLs

Since the implementation of the current provisions of ESEA, certain issues have come to light regarding ELLs, particularly their achievement on high-stakes tests and the equitable distribution of highly qualified teachers (HQTs) to serve them. The current Title III provisions of ESEA provide federal dollars to support instructional services for ELLs. ESEA also requires ELLs to pass high-stakes assessments in order to graduate from high school. In addition, ELLs are tested every year until they are proficient

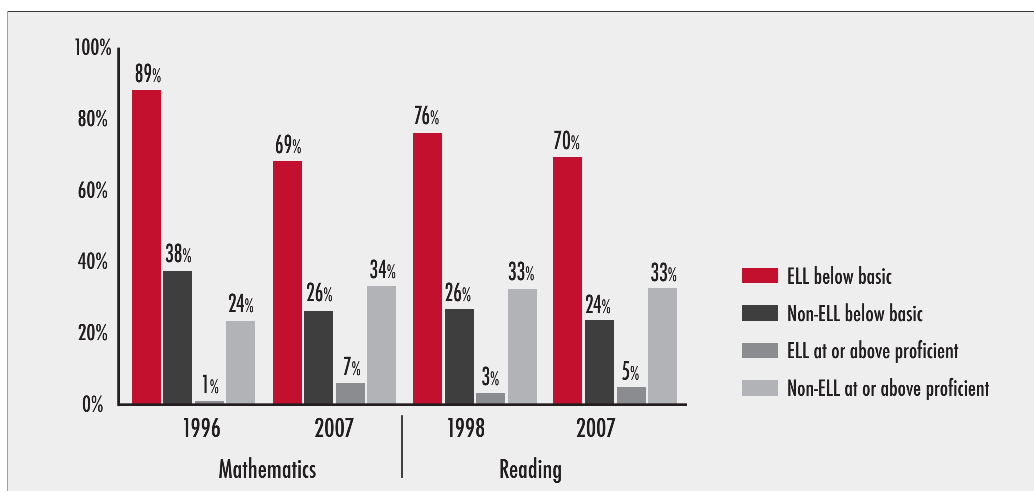
[1] It is important to note that the two sources cited used a combination of data sources. NCELA (2007) used data from both the U.S. Department of Education's Survey of States' Limited English Proficient Students and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data, which includes data on student participation in programs for ELLs. Editorial Projects in Education (2009) used data from the NCES Common Core of Data and the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. Although the numbers from these different sources may not match exactly, the same trends appear across sources.

in English (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006). Since 2001, the number of ELLs not receiving a diploma has increased, which can be linked to the high-stakes testing requirements as outlined in the current provisions of ESEA (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). Furthermore, unlike special education teachers, teachers of ELLs are not required by the current Title II provisions of ESEA to have special certification or endorsement. Nevertheless, there is evidence of a lack of access to HQTs in districts with large ELL populations (Clewell, 2007).

# Gaps in Student Achievement

Although the number of ELLs is increasing rapidly in U.S. schools, ELLs are not achieving at the same rates as their English-speaking peers. Figure 1 depicts data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for Grade 8 reading and mathematics. Achievement on the NAEP is categorized into four levels: below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced. Although the academic achievement of ELLs has improved over the last decade, in 2007, only 7 percent of ELLs scored at or above the proficient level in mathematics, and only 5 percent achieved at the same level in reading. In contrast, more than one third of non-ELLs nationwide performed at or above the proficient level in both mathematics and reading in 2007. Even more disturbing is the large percentage of ELLs performing at the below-basic level: 69 percent in mathematics and 70 percent in reading in 2007—rates that are nearly three times as high as those of non-ELLs. As these large achievement gaps indicate, ELLs need high-quality teachers to help them improve their academic growth.

**Figure 1. Percentages of Grade 8 ELLs and Non-ELLs Scoring at the Below-Basic Level and at or Above the Proficient Level in Reading and Mathematics on the NAEP for Selected Years**




*Source:* National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.

# Program Models

A variety of programs have been designed for the instruction of ELLs. School systems determine which of these programs to implement based on multiple factors, including the linguistic goal of the program, the native language of the students, the language of the instruction, the age of the students, and state policies.

Furthermore, for any given combination of these factors, multiple program models can be applied. The number of factors involved has led to a variety of state and district policies related to the recruitment and preparation of ELL teachers and ELL instruction. In Tables 2–4, the models are broken down by program goals.

**Table 2. Bilingualism or Focus on Developing Literacy in Two Languages**

| Program Type | Native Language of Students | Language of Instruction | Language of Content Instruction | Language Arts Instruction |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Two-Way Bilingual, Bilingual Immersion, Two-Way Immersion | Ideally, 50 percent of students are English-speaking, and 50 percent are ELLs. ELLs should share the same native language. | Instruction is provided in English and the native language, usually throughout elementary school. | Instruction is provided in English and the native language. Program begins with less English and increases until it is 50 percent of the curriculum. | Instruction is provided in English and the native language. |
| Developmental Bilingual Education, Late-Exit, Maintenance Education | All students speak the same native language. | Instruction is provided in English and the native language. | Instruction is provided in English and the native language. More native language is used at the lower grade levels transitioning to English. | Instruction is provided in English and the native language. |
| Heritage Language, Indigenous Language Program | All students speak the same native language. | Instruction is provided in English and the native language. | Instruction is provided in English and the native language. | Instruction is provided in English and the native language. |

*Source:* NCELA, n.d.

## Table 3. Focus on English Acquisition; Rapid Transfer to English-Only Classrooms

| Program Type | Native Language of Students | Language of Instruction | Language of Content Instruction | Language Arts Instruction |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Early-Exit, Transitional Bilingual Education | All students speak the same native language. | Instruction is provided in English and the native language. | First, both languages are used with quick progression to all or most instruction in English. | Instruction is provided in English.<br>Native language skills are developed only to assist in transition to English. |

*Source:* NCELA, n.d.

## Table 4. Focus on Developing Literacy in English

| Program Type | Native Language of Students | Language of Instruction | Language of Content Instruction | Language Arts Instruction |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sheltered English, Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English, Content-Based English as a Second Language, Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol | Students speak the same native language or may come from different language backgrounds. | All instruction is provided in English and adapted to students' proficiency levels. Instruction can be supplemented by gestures, visual aids, and manipulatives. | Instruction is provided in English. | Instruction is provided in English. |
| Structured English Immersion | Only ELLs are present in class, preferably sharing one native language. | All instruction is provided in English and adapted to students' proficiency levels. | Instruction is provided in English, but teachers should have receptive skills in students' native language. | Instruction is provided in English. |
| English Language Development, ESL Pull-Out | Students speak the same native language or may come from different language backgrounds; generally no native language support is provided. | Instruction is provided in English. | All instruction is provided in English and adapted to students' proficiency levels. Instruction can be supplemented by gestures and visual aids. | Instruction is provided in English. Students leave their English-only classroom to spend part of the day receiving ESL instruction often focused on grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills (no content). |
| ESL Push-In | Students speak the same native language or may come from different language backgrounds. | Instruction is provided in English. Students are served in mainstream classroom. | Instruction is provided in English. ESL teacher or instructional aide provides clarification and translation if needed. | Instruction is provided in English. |

*Source:* NCELA, n.d.

As part of the current ESEA Title III reporting requirements, states must document and report on the types of instruction delivered in their districts and schools. According to the most recent data, 46 states (of the 48 reporting) support English-only programs. However, 36 states also provide dual-language programs. The most commonly reported program type is content-based ESL, used in 43 states, and ESL pullout instruction, used in 42 states. Only 16 states offer developmental bilingual programs. Nine states still have bans on, or restriction of, native language instruction (Editorial Projects in Education, 2009).

Significant disagreement still exists among ELL researchers about the program model that is best for students, specifically regarding the language in which instruction is delivered. Outside pressures also affect this decision. For example, the current provisions of ESEA focus on testing requirements and adequate yearly progress, and there is pressure for students to learn English quickly. Some states have responded with programs designed to teach students English quickly, such as the early-exit and transitional bilingual programs. However, some research suggests that students with long-term instruction in their primary language eventually have higher levels of achievement in English. Other experts contend that such research has not used adequate experimental controls and that it is not possible to say what type of instruction is best for promoting the academic achievement of ELLs (Goldenberg, 2008).

Tension also surrounds the idea of academic literacy. Some researchers believe that oral English development can be accelerated, but this does not necessarily translate to full English proficiency in academic languages. Most researchers agree that there must be a compromise between oral literacy and academic literacy and that effective second-language instruction provides not only explicit teaching that helps students learn features such as grammar, syntax, vocabulary, pronunciation, and norms of social usage but also opportunities to use the second language in a meaningful way. A combination of the two allows ELLs to understand both the content taught in core academic subjects and instructions on the high-stakes assessments that they must pass in order to graduate. Research has not yet demonstrated whether there is an optimal balance between oral language instruction and academic language instruction (Goldenberg, 2008). This issue becomes increasingly significant for adolescent ELLs, as language acquisition becomes more difficult the older students are when they begin (Maxwell-Jolly, Gándara, & Méndez-Benavídez, 2008; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003).

## Teacher Supply and Demand

The limited supply of ELL teachers continues to be a challenge. Despite a significant need for HQTs as a result of both increasing numbers of ELLs and their low levels of academic achievement, the National Center for Education Statistics (2004a, 2004b, 2004c) reported that 35.7 percent of public schools in the United States had teaching vacancies in the field of ESL in 2004. Moreover, 31.4 percent of the administrators in those schools reported they were either unable to fill or had great difficulty filling those vacancies during the school year. This lack of ELL teachers is even more apparent in urban districts, as 67.5 percent of the school districts that responded to a survey conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools reported an immediate need for bilingual teachers at the elementary level (Fideler, Foster, & Schwartz, 2000). Finally, the U.S. Department of Education recently reported to Congress that states anticipate a need for an additional 104,394 bilingual and ESL teachers during the next five years to meet the needs of ELLs (Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students, 2008). As a result, states and districts will have to use innovative recruitment strategies to fill these positions with HQTs.

## Conclusion

All of these variables have combined to create a situation that significantly affects teacher quality with respect to ELLs. Preparing and supporting teachers of ELLs can be difficult because of the varied nature of programs for ELLs within schools, districts, and states. To respond to the increased recruitment needs of states and districts, the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality has created a TQ Source Tips & Tools Key Issue titled *Recruiting Teachers for Schools Serving English Language Learners* (Garcia & Potemski, 2009).

The growing population of ELLs across the country also underscores the need for more research on effective instruction for ELLs and preparation of those who teach them. The opportunity exists to move beyond the old debates about language of instruction to more in-depth research on effective preparation and professional development for teachers of ELLs and instructional supports that are most likely to increase ELL achievement in schools.

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