

Education of English Language Learners in U.S. and Texas Schools

Where We Are, What We Have Learned and
Where We Need to Go from Here

IDRA

INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

A 2009 Update

Education of English Language Learners in U.S. and Texas Schools – Where We Are, What We Have Learned
and Where We Need to Go from Here – A 2009 Update
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The Issue

Former Texas demographer Steven Murdock has warned that failure to improve the current educational trends in Texas will result in a decline in average educational levels of the state population and a corresponding \$6,300 decline in the average family income by the year 2020 if migration patterns for the prior decade remain constant (Texas Data Center, 2007).

Among the reasons for the dire predictions is Texas' continuing failure to effectively educate its minority students, including the state's large and expanding English language learner population. Because English language learners are among the fastest growing student populations in the country, improving the quality of programs serving them is essential to the state as well as to the country as a whole.

Despite decades of experience in attempting to address the language proficiency and academic needs of English language learners, research indicates that vast improvement is needed at the federal, state and local levels. These improvement needs include:

- More **enlightened policies** that ensure these students are appropriately identified, assessed and placed;
- More effective **instructional programs** that are truly responsive to the unique needs of ELL students;
- Better **professional development** that ensures that teachers and others providing instruction

“The bottom line is: schools are responsible for the education of children - for all children, be they Black, Brown, White, poor, rich, female, male, disabled, non-disabled, English-speaking or not.”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel,
IDRA President

and related support services acquire the skills and competencies required for successful instructional delivery;

- More effective **program monitoring and evaluation** services that identify effective efforts, inform improvements of those programs meeting with mixed results, and eliminate strategies deemed ineffective; and
- Increased and more **equitable targeted funding** that is based on cost of services needed.

The current status of English language learner education is a challenge, but it is also an opportunity for schools to demonstrate how English language learners can be more effectively served. For this to occur, however, major changes in state policy and local school and district practices are essential.

In the summer of 2008, a federal judge ruled that existing Texas elementary level programs were in need of improvement. Though Texas' elementary level bilingual education was reflecting some progress in closing achievement gaps among racial and ethnic groups, current English as a second language programs in middle schools and high schools were deemed “dismal.” The state was



ordered to revamp its program at this secondary level (see “Federal Judge Rules that Texas Services for its LEP Students Are Inadequate,” in the February issue of the *IDRA Newsletter*).

The status of English language learners in Texas portends a future that will confront communities throughout the country. Texas has a track record of responding to the educational needs of English language learners that dates back five decades. Over that timespan, Texas has had some mixed success in serving English language learners, which is not unique especially in its elementary level programs. Much can be learned from the Texas ELL experience. By the same token, we recognize that the conditions for English language learners and the state and local settings can vary extensively. This policy update summarizes key state and national ELL-related issues and offers policy recommendations for addressing initiatives needed at each level.

Increasing Numbers of ELL Students

In a report, researchers have noted: “The foreign-born share of the U.S. population more than doubled from less than 5 percent in 1970 to 12 percent in 2004... The share of children of immigrants among the school-age population has also grown rapidly, from 6 percent in 1970 to 19 percent in 2000” (Capps, et al., 2005).

Between the years of 1972 and 2004, Hispanic enrollment alone increased from 6 percent to more than 19 percent of the total U.S. school enrollment, constituting the fastest-

growing segment of the U.S. school population. Not all Hispanic students are English language learners, but the National Council of La Raza (NCLR, 2007) reports that about 45 percent of U.S. Hispanic students are considered English language learners. According to the latest U.S. Census, the number of students identified as English language learners has increased dramatically during the last three decades.

According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA, 2007), in the 2005-06 school year, an estimated 5 million English language learners were enrolled in U.S. schools. That number reflected an increase of 57 percent in a 10-year span dating back to 1995-96, when the national ELL enrollment totaled 3.2 million.

Texas schools had a comparable increase in the number of English language learners growing from about 514,000 in 1996-97 to 731,000 in 2006-07, reflecting a 51 percent growth in that 10-year period. The majority of states report increasing numbers of English language learners in their schools. Historically, schools in border states and some major points of entry needed to be equipped to educate English language learners, but now these needs are shared by ever-growing numbers of communities.

LEP Student Enrollment and Total Student Enrollment In Texas, 1993-94 to 2007-08

Year	LEP Count	Total Texas Public School Enrollment	LEP as Percent of Total Enrollment	Growth in LEP Counts	Percentage Increase
1993-94	425,940	3,601,839	11.8	25,284	5.9
1994-95	455,224	3,670,196	12.4	24,166	5.3
1995-96	479,390	3,740,260	12.8	34,749	7.2
1996-97	514,139	3,828,975	13.4	5,654	1.1
1997-98	519,793	3,891,877	13.4	13,948	2.7
1998-99	533,741	3,945,367	13.5	21,793	4.1
1999-00	555,334	3,991,783	13.9	14,919	2.7
2000-01	570,453	4,059,619	14.1	30,469	5.3
2001-02	600,922	4,146,653	14.5	29,226	4.9
2002-03	630,148	4,239,911	14.9	30,160	4.8
2003-04	660,308	4,311,502	15.3	23,699	3.6
2004-05	684,007	4,383,871	15.6	27,230	4.0
2005-06	711,237	4,505,572	15.8	20,067	2.8
2006-07	731,304	4,576,933	16.0	44,128	6.0
2007-08	775,432	4,671,493	16.6	*	*

Source: Texas Education Agency, Academic Excellence Indicator System, 1993-94 to 2007-08

* Data not yet available

Distribution of ELL Students

According to research from the Urban Institute, English language learners now account for one of every 10 students attending U.S. schools (Capps, et al., 2005). A noteworthy change in the ELL student population involves the geographic areas that now have ELL education needs. While a small subset of states continues to educate large numbers of English language learners (California, Texas, Florida, Illinois and New York), a trend emerging over the last decade is the growing dispersion of ELL students across the 50 states.

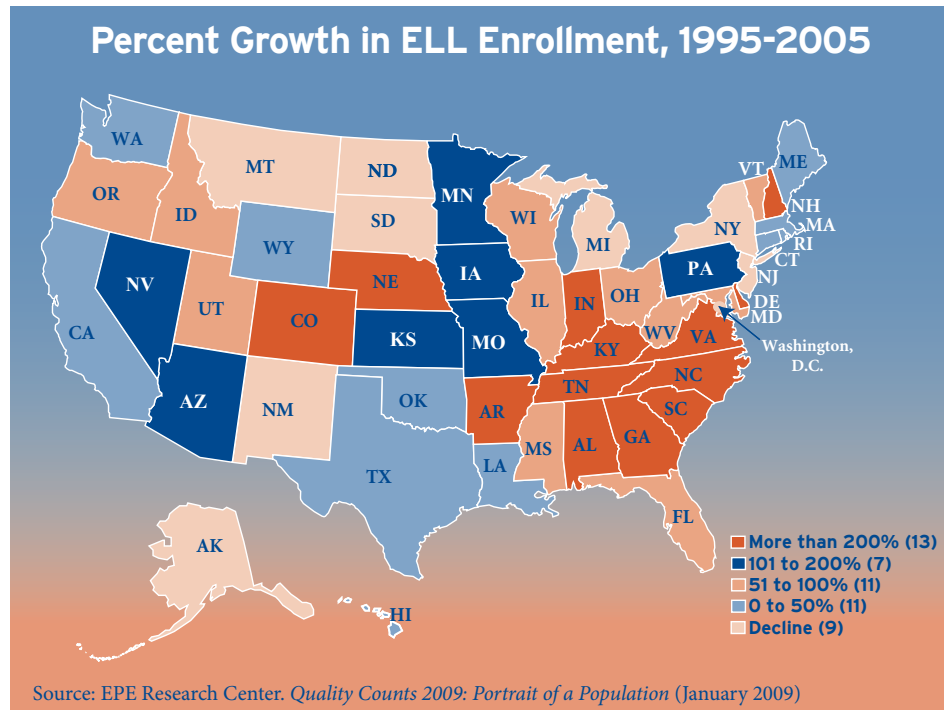
Growth in numbers of English language learners has varied from state to state. Some states (including Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee) and even some Midwestern states (including Nebraska) report notable increases in the percentages of English language learners served over previous decades. Education Week reports that six states saw their ELL population double in five years (EPE Research Center, 2009).

With the aforementioned diaspora, an ever-increasing number of schools and states is facing the task of effectively

serving this growing proportion of the U.S. student population.

Increasing Diversity within ELL Sub-Populations

Contrary to popular perceptions, there are notable variations in the U.S English language learner population. Most English language learners are not immigrant students. According to studies, in 2000, of the 10.8 million immigrant children in the United States, only 3.4 million, or 6 percent, were limited English proficient.



It is important to recognize, however, that a noteworthy proportion of English language learners are immigrants. Some of these immigrant students are relatively recent arrivals (less than one or two years in the country), while other immigrant English language learners may have lived in the United States three or more years.

The persistence of the native language among second- and third-generation students reflects the resiliency and valuing of native language in many Latino communities. But it also reflects the long-standing failure of U.S. schools

to educate and thus build upon that native language fluency in their ELL populations while at the same time developing their English language proficiency.

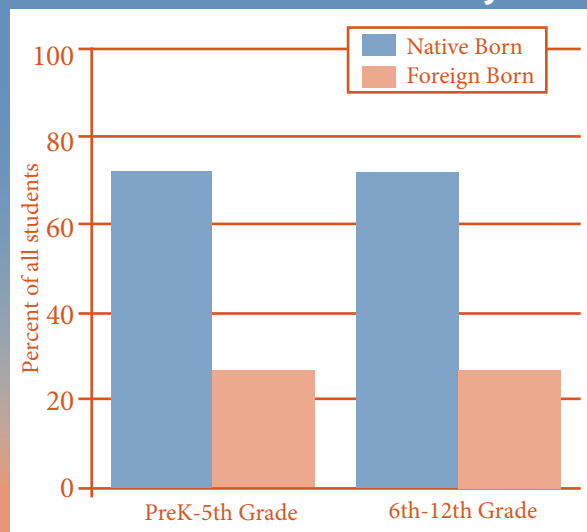
Varying Languages among ELL Students

The great majority of English language learners speak Spanish (76 percent of elementary ELL students and 71 percent of secondary ELL students). The large numbers of English language learners whose native language is Spanish has encouraged the development of specialized teacher preparation programs in some states and the development of an array of assessments and instructional materials that support implementation of programs that incorporate the use of students' native language for instructional purposes. It also has encouraged development of native language assessments and instructional materials, supporting development of program models that may be exportable to other language groups.

Though most English language learners report Spanish as their native language, the native languages of immigrants vary extensively. According to Capps, et al. (2005), many English language learners speak languages other than Spanish, with Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and Hmong/Miao accounting for another 7.8 percent of the total ELL population.

The differing concentration of language groups in the United States has resulted in varying pools of prospective teachers who are fluent in their students' native language and the production of varying amounts of instructional

Percent of Texas School Children Who are Native Born or Foreign Born



Source: *New Demography of America's Schools*, Urban Institute, 2005.



Education Week released its annual Quality Counts report, “Portrait of a Population,” with a focus on the status of English language learner education showing significant gaps in achievement between English language learners and non-ELL students. The gap is most striking at the middle school and high school level. (January 8, 2009)



materials in these languages. The differing availability of teachers and materials directly impacts the instructional options available for serving students from the various language groups.

Instructional Programs Provided to English Language Learners

Education of English language learners, like the education of all U.S students, is the primary responsibility of the individual states. But the federal government has a concurrent responsibility to ensure that all students have access to equal educational opportunity. Federal requirements related to education of English language learners is grounded in several court decisions that require all schools serving English language learners to provide some specialized instruction that is specifically adapted to address their needs (*Lau vs. Nichols*, 1974; *Castañeda vs. Pickard*, 1983).

Over the last decade, federal officials have exercised little oversight of state and local school system compliance with federal requirements, with the exception of issues related to the *No Child Left Behind Act*. This lack of oversight has resulted in widespread neglect of ELL student instruction, implementation of poor quality programs, and in some cases a total absence of specialized instruction for ELL students.

This has been compounded by xenophobic, language-focused discrimination of English language learners in states and communities around the country where state legislation or referenda have denied them access

to comprehensible instruction by prohibiting the use of native language for instruction. With the exception of Texas and a handful other states that have clearly delineated state policies related to educating English language learners, most states are providing a hodge-podge of instructional strategies that are failing many English language learners.

The type of instructional programs currently provided to English language learners varies extensively across the country and often within individual states, and in some cases even within the same school systems. These programs range from a complete absence of state policy prescribing specialized program requirements (mostly in states with low concentrations of English language learners), to very specific identification, placement and evaluation requirements in a few others. As noted earlier, some state policy variations now also include specific prohibitions against the use of a student’s native language in several “English only” locales (Arizona, California, Massachusetts), while a handful of others mandate the use of a student’s native language until the English language learner is ready to transition to an all-English curriculum (Illinois, Texas).

ELL program variations include numerous instructional “models” ranging from structured immersion where students are provided limited specialized instructional support using some native language for clarification, to transitional bilingual education programs where students remain enrolled only until they develop sufficient English proficiency to enroll in the all-English classes.



Secondary English language learners in Texas drop out at twice the rate of the all-students category. They are retained at rates consistently double that of their peers. And they perform worse than their peers by a margin of 40 percent or more on the TAKS.



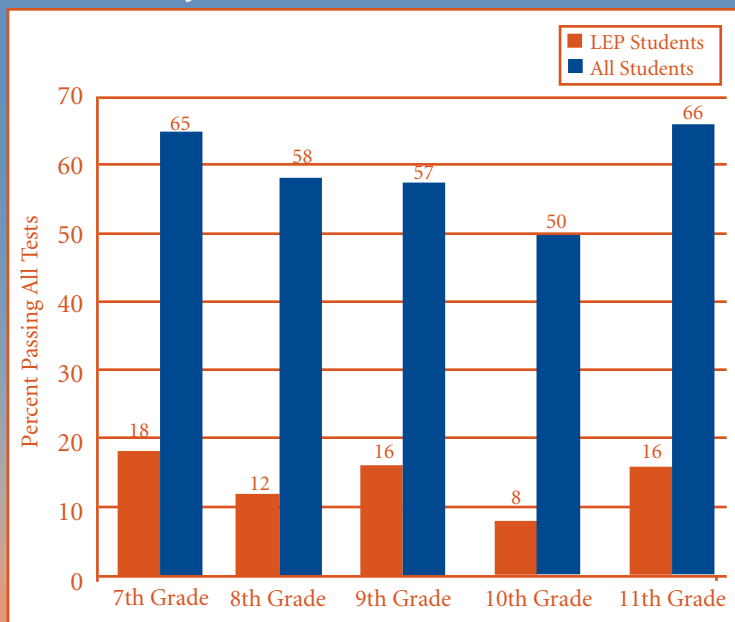
Other program variants include dual language instruction where the program is designed to develop and maintain students' proficiency in more than one language, to ESL where English language learners are provided specialized instruction in English, primarily targeted at accelerating English language skills development. Program variants include sheltered instruction in the major content areas that involve integration of strategies responsive to the varying levels of English proficiency among some English language learners placed in regular content area classes.

among both groups of students. Others may elect to implement transitional bilingual education or a basic ESL program.

This wide range of programs in turn results in widely varying levels of improvement in English proficiency and in academic achievement among the U.S. ELL population. In Texas where transitional bilingual education has been in place since 1981, elementary level English language learners do relatively well (though there is still room for improvement), but the state's minimal ESL program at the secondary level has produced extremely poor results.

A few other states require schools to provide bilingual education, while others allow districts to exercise local options as to which programs they may provide. One example of this is New Mexico where many districts have chosen to implement dual language programs. These programs include ELL and non-ELL students together and focus on developing proficiency in a second language

Comparison of Texas LEP vs. All Students Performance Percent Passing All TAKS* Tests 2006



* Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills

Source: Texas Education Agency, Academic Excellence Indicator System, 1993-94 to 2007-08

Funding Provided to ELL Programs

A related factor impacting ELL program implementation is the widely varying amounts of money provided to programs serving English language learners. The funding amounts range from thousands of dollars per student in states using pull-out programs (because they involve the hiring of extra teachers), to others that provide token revenues that are not based on real costs of implementing these programs, and a third grouping that provides no funding to address the unique needs of these pupils. This wide range in funding results in widely varying services to English language learners both within and across states.

Few states have conducted actual studies of the costs of providing specialized instruction to English language learners. In the few states where such studies have been conducted (Arizona and New York, for example), the research indicates that the allocations provided were well below what was needed.

Some of the challenge is attributed to the extensive variation in the elements that are deemed vital for inclusion in distinct cost models along with debates about what is essential *rather* than *supplemental*. A related factor is a lack of consensus on the extent to which student outcomes are integrated into the cost models.

Arizona has been in the midst of ongoing litigation focused on the amount of funding provided to schools

to serve their English language learners. Unless states improve funding practices for ELL programs, this may be a precursor to similar lawsuits around the country.

Studies dating back to the 1970 estimate bilingual program funding needs to be about 30 percent to 40 percent over those provided to regular program pupils. Additional research notes that actual add-on costs can vary by type of instructional model used, with higher costs associated with strategies that use extra teachers to provide specialized instruction, in contrast to those programs that use bilingual or ESL certified teachers in self contained classrooms.

Texas currently provides a 10 percent add-on funding for its bilingual and ESL programs.

Summary and Recommendations

What is Needed Now to More Effectively Educate ELL Students?

In 2008, following the ruling by Judge Justice in the Texas bilingual education case, IDRA presented a research-based framework that provides guidance for design, implementation and evaluation of an effective English language learner program (Robledo Montecel, 2009). IDRA then fleshed out principles to guide educational planning specifically for English language learners at the secondary level (Villarreal, 2009a and 2009b).

IDRA proposes that after more than four decades of delivering a range of instructional programs to English language learners, it is time for the following.

1. Examination and revamping of state and federal ELL policies on the basis of lessons learned about program effectiveness and best practices (policy and leadership reforms);
2. Major changes in the way schools and communities prepare administrators, teachers and support staff to better implement strategies found most effective for serving English language learners (staffing and professional development); and
3. A notable improvement in research focusing on English language learners and refinement of strategies used to evaluate programs serving them (research and evaluation).

Specific reforms needed in each of these areas include the following.

In policy and leadership development, next steps are to...

- Develop a set of criteria for assessing national, state and local policies that foster and promote educational equity and excellence for English language learners.
- Convene researchers, educators, parents and policymakers to assess state and national policies and their impact on the quality of education that English language learners receive.
- Identify states where ELL language proficiency and academic data suggest that some good efforts are underway and states that may be in need for policy reforms, all based on English proficiency and academic outcomes in the core content areas.
- Adopt new ELL education state policies informed by best practices and incorporating rigorous monitoring and state, district and school accountability requirements.

In professional development, next steps are to...

- Develop innovative new strategies to increase English language learner achievement in reading and writing, which form the foundation for all later academic achievement.
- Develop specialized programs focusing on math and science professional development for educators serving English language learners.
- Test the effectiveness of different professional development models in changing teacher practice that has impact on the education of English language learners.
- Finalize and test parent leadership models' effectiveness in creating parent-educator collaborative relationships that lead to greater participation of English language learners in a college readiness curriculum and to increased academic achievement.

In research and evaluation, next steps are to...

- Create guides for researchers to use in conducting research related to the education of English language learners (phrasing appropriate research questions, identification of research needs, a research agenda, etc.) to ensure that any new studies are focusing on the right issues and asking the correct questions.
- Develop new processes for comprehensive audits of state and local policies and practices that campuses follow in serving English language learners and their impact on students' participation, engagement and academic achievement.
- Create comprehensive guides for program evaluations that focus on the quality of services provided to English language learners and expand the pool of expert ELL program evaluators who conduct these evaluations.
- Convene researchers, practitioners and English language learners to review existing collaborative models for expanded cooperation of parents and educators, including creating a list of indicators that can be used to assess successful collaborative relationships that lead to greater programmatic inclusion and increased graduation rates of English language learners.
- Conduct extensive cost studies to inform national and state ELL funding practices.

Conclusion

Some states and localities have shown vast improvement in programs serving English language learners, moving from a time when these students were subjected to repressive discipline because they spoke a native language that was not English to programs trying to constructively address their unique needs. After decades of experimentation, there now exists islands of ELL education around the country where effective and promising instructional practices are successfully serving their ELL populations and are producing impressive student outcomes (Robledo Montecel, et al., 2002). The growing number, distribution and concentrations of English language learners make these islands of effective efforts no longer sufficient for addressing existing and expanding needs.

Many efforts are underway, and options for policy and practice abound but vary extensively. An expanded focus on identifying and replicating effective ELL programs – with commensurate identification of necessary policy, programs and funding implications – is essential.

Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA’s president, challenges us to “imagine a future in which the color of a child’s skin, the language a child speaks and the side of town that a child comes from are no longer considered barriers to a great education and a great life.” Like a country capable of electing its first African American to be its president, providing equal educational opportunity for all students, including English language learners, need not be merely a visionary dream, but be supported in ways that make this dream a reality.

The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals granted in January 2009 the Texas Attorney General’s request that Judge Justice’s order be stayed until the circuit court has an opportunity to review the case on appeal. The appeals court hearing was set for June of 2009. Without legal pressure, there is no assurance that the state will fix the serious flaws in the services provided to Texas children who are in the process of learning English that were uncovered by the district court. The legislature may now choose to move forward to address the key issues raised or to ignore them until it is forced to act. Given the state of Texas’ perpetual complaint against court mandates, it would be a refreshing change to see it take the initiative. The data presented at the district court trial strongly indicate that some improvements in the state’s bilingual education monitoring and secondary level ESL programs are critical and should be addressed immediately.

Resources

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