



## How Can Educational Systems Better Serve English Learners?

**Integrate Language and Content Instruction, Attend to Individual Needs Beyond Classification, and Measure Progress Meaningfully**

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### Executive Summary

**An estimated 10 percent of the nation's public school students—nearly 5 million students—are working to acquire English language proficiency. To better serve these English learners, the authors make the following recommendations:**

- Language and literacy instruction for students should be tied to science, social studies, and other content areas so that students can develop disciplinary understandings and language and literacy skills simultaneously.
- Educators should take into account the diverse academic skills and educational histories of English learners when they are choosing curricula and instruction for these students, rather than relying on their English learner classification alone.
- States should implement assessment systems to hold schools accountable that appropriately combine information about English learners' progress in language proficiency and content areas.

Linguistic diversity has become the norm, not the exception, in U.S. classrooms. According to the 2010 U.S. Census,<sup>1</sup> 21 percent of school-aged children speak a language other than English at home. English learners—the subset of this group that are still in the process of acquiring English language proficiency—constituted nearly 5 million students or nearly 10 percent of the nation’s public school population in 2012–13.<sup>2</sup> In the last decade, the English-learner population has grown at more than six times the rate of the overall school population.<sup>3</sup>

The enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015 creates both opportunities and challenges for improving education for English learners. ESSA continues and extends the important focus that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) had on holding schools accountable for serving English learners. At the same time, it shifts considerable responsibility to states by restricting the federal role in promoting common content standards across states and providing greater flexibility to states in developing their own accountability systems. These changes raise the stakes for states, districts, and schools as they make curricular, instructional, assessment, and policy decisions for educating English learners. In this brief, we make three recommendations for states, districts, and schools to leverage the opportunities presented by ESSA to better serve English learners while avoiding pitfalls.

#### Recommendation 1:

### Content-area goals should drive language and literacy instruction for English learners.

If English learners are to be ready for college and careers, they cannot be held back from grade-level content until they are deemed to be proficient in English. Past approaches to language instruction have focused on decontextualized vocabulary and grammar rather than the uses of language necessary to learn and succeed in school. These approaches also fail to capitalize on the real-world contexts and purposes for communication that the content areas can provide. Moreover, the more time English learners spend on decontextualized language instruction, the less access they have to rigorous content in mathematics, science, social studies, literature, and the arts.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, literacy curricula (for all students) has too often focused on generalized skills and strategies divorced from the conceptual knowledge and practices of the disciplines—leaving students unprepared for the challenges of reading to learn, and writing to argue, explain, and evaluate complex disciplinary ideas.<sup>5,6</sup>

Across content areas, students must engage in disciplinary practices, not just learn and memorize discrete facts and information. Such practices are fundamentally language-intensive. For example, students should engage in argumentation as they make a claim, provide relevant and sufficient evidence to support the claim, and offer sound reasoning.<sup>7</sup> Thus, curricula and instruction to promote English learners’ language development must be not only integrated with, but guided by, goals for their content-area learning. More recent research converges in supporting curricula that give English learners access to grade-level content while providing appropriate supports so that they can develop disciplinary understanding, language, and literacy simultaneously.<sup>8,9</sup>

Implementing content-driven language and literacy instruction for English learners will require

that all teachers and administrators in a school share responsibility for the education of these learners.<sup>10</sup> Content-area teachers will need to learn to adjust their instruction so that it is inclusive of English learners. Similarly, English as a Second Language (ESL) and/or bilingual education teachers will need to plan their language instruction so that it supports content-area learning. Such distributed responsibility and coordinated instruction for English learners will require collaboration among all educators in the schools and substantial investments in resources and teacher professional development on the part of districts and states.

#### Recommendation 2:

### Attend to the individual needs of English learners, not only to their classification.

Classifying students as English learners signals to educators that they need to focus on the particular needs of this historically underserved population. The English learner classification also has an important basis in civil rights decisions (*Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563, 1974; *Castañeda v. Pickard*, 648 F. 2d 989, 1981) affirming that students who are not yet proficient in the language of instruction have a fundamental right to equal access to a meaningful education.<sup>11</sup> However, the English learner classification is too often interpreted by educators as the only basis for determining students' educational needs. There is a broad consensus among researchers that any group of English learners is likely to be diverse in their academic profiles,<sup>12,13</sup> as well as their educational histories and cultural and linguistic resources.<sup>14</sup> Thus, choosing appropriate curricula and instruction for English learners cannot be based solely on their classification.

To better understand the individual needs of English learners, educators must look beyond their classification and the information provided by state English language proficiency assess-

ments. Such assessments are broad measures that identify which students should be provided specialized language services, but offer little information about what those services should look like. Teaching English learners requires careful use of formative and diagnostic assessments designed to identify their individual strengths and needs in both language development and content-area learning.<sup>15,16</sup> In particular, these students' strengths frequently lie in home language resources that are too often overlooked in schools.

Moreover, the English learner classification should not be allowed to mask other factors that may constrain these students' academic achievement. For instance, some English learners—just like some monolingual students—struggle to learn basic reading skills, while many others do not.<sup>17</sup> Intervening early for these students is essential, but requires identifying them accurately and then matching interventions to their assessed needs, rather than to their classification.<sup>18,19,20</sup> Similarly, English learners who are gifted are rarely identified and thus denied of learning opportunities for their full potential.<sup>21</sup>



Recommendation 3:

**Accountability systems should monitor English learners' progress in English language proficiency and content-area learning in meaningful ways.**

ESSA will provide new opportunities for states to solve some fundamental problems with the treatment of English learners under NCLB-era accountability systems.<sup>22</sup> NCLB required states and districts to assess English learners' English language proficiency annually and to establish goals for their progress on these assessments. However, these requirements were sidelined under Title III, so they did not receive the same attention as the Title I accountability requirements. As a result, schools' successes or failures in promoting students' English language proficiency received little attention relative to their performance in raising scores on reading/language arts and mathematics assessments. In contrast, ESSA fully integrates requirements for English language proficiency assessment and accountability into Title I, a step that civil rights advocates have called a "sea-change."<sup>23</sup>

To take advantage of this change, states need to develop accountability systems that can provide meaningful information about school performance in improving English learners' language and content-area learning.<sup>24,25,26</sup>

First, this requires that states use carefully designed English language development standards and assessments. This is an area in which substantial progress has been made in recent years through the work of multi-state consortia, including the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA21) consortium ([www.elpa21.org](http://www.elpa21.org)) and the WIDA consortium ([www.wida.us](http://www.wida.us)). While earlier generations of English language proficiency assessments were criticized for being disconnected from curriculum and emphasizing basic conversational English skills rather than the types of language that students need to learn and succeed in school,<sup>27</sup> the assessments produced by

ELPA21 and WIDA consortia are up to the challenge more than ever.

Second, states need to set ambitious, but realistic, goals for English learners' progress toward English language proficiency.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to some policymakers' assumption that students can learn English in a year or two, research consistently finds that developing sophisticated academic English skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, typically requires four to seven years.<sup>29,30,31,32,33</sup> States should use evidence specific to their standards and assessments to set ambitious, but realistic, goals for determining whether and when students are making progress toward English language proficiency.

Third, states can provide more meaningful information about how schools serve English learners by combining data from English language and content-area assessments appropriately.<sup>34,35</sup> When students are in earlier stages of acquiring English, their growth on the English language proficiency assessments is a better gauge of their progress than their scores on grade-level content-area assessments in reading/language arts and mathematics. As students move into more advanced stages, their growth on the content-area assessments become better indicators of their preparation for college and career. So, setting goals and weighing these measures based on students' stage of English language proficiency will more accurately assess their progress<sup>36</sup> and thereby more accurately identify schools that are succeeding or failing in serving English learners.

## Conclusion

States, districts, and schools should implement a content-driven approach to language and literacy instruction and promote attention to individual students' needs beyond their classification as English learners. Doing so will require that educational systems promote shared responsibility for the education of English learners, increase support for formative and diagnostic assessment, and invest in building the capacity of all educators. At the same time, states should implement a more meaningful accountability system for monitoring English learners' progress that combines information about their English language development and content-area learning. These shifts in curricula, instruction, assessment, and policy would directly benefit English learners as they become ready for college and career. They would also benefit the nation by realizing the untapped potential of this fast-growing student population.

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## Endnotes

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