

Changing Course

for Long Term English Learners

New research sheds light on what happens to English learners over the years they spend in school, and what effective programs for Long Term English Learners look like.

English learners have been part of the landscape of California public schools for decades. Since No Child Left Behind defined English language learners as a “significant subgroup,” the urgency of ensuring ELL achievement has become a major focus for schools throughout the state.

Fortunately, this is an era in which much is known about how to teach English learners in ways that make good on the promise of a quality education for all. And yet, the significant investment that has been made in school improvement has not shown the hoped-for results for ELLs. In fact, here in California, the achievement gap has grown for English learners in the past decade.

Now, new research sheds light on what happens to English learners over the years they spend in school, and identifies a large group of Long Term English Learners (LTELs) – students who enroll in the primary grades as ELLs and arrive in secondary schools seven or more years later without the

English skills needed for academic success, and having accumulated major academic deficits along the way. Who are these students? Why is this happening? What can be done to meet their needs? What can be learned from their experience that sheds light on work to be done across the preschool to 12th grade spectrum in order to better serve ELLs?

What is a Long Term English Learner?

Formally, English learners are students who are foreclosed from equal educational opportunity because they don’t have sufficient proficiency in English to fully access the academic curriculum of schools. They are generally viewed, therefore, simply in terms of where they are along the continuum toward English proficiency. Policy, program design, curriculum development and research have focused primarily on ELLs in elementary school. And yet, almost a third of California’s ELLs are in grades 6 - 12.

At the secondary level, while ELL courses

and curriculum are designed primarily for newcomer students, many coordinators of ELL programs have recognized for years that there is another distinct group within the adolescent ELL population. Various terms are used informally for this “other group:” ESL Lifers, Five Plusers, the 1.5 generation, Threes Forever, protracted ELLs, and other labels. In 1995, a California Tomorrow publication posited a set of typologies distinguishing among secondary school English learners: Newcomer (well educated), Newcomer (underschooled), Normatively developing English Learner, Over-age for grade English Learner, and Long Term English Learner. Since that time, Long Term English Learner has become a term used more frequently in the field.

In the fall of 2009, the coalition Californians Together conducted a statewide survey to document the extent of this Long Term

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English Learner phenomenon, and commissioned the research that led to the release in June 2010 of “Reparable Harm: Fulfilling the Unkept Promise of Educational Opportunity for California’s Long Term English Learners.”

Forty school districts responded to the survey, providing data on 175,734 ELLs in grades 6 through 12 – almost one-third of the state’s secondary school ELLs. The data represents all regions of California, and the responding districts vary in size from 1,300 students to more than 680,000. Some have a small concentration of ELLs (9 percent) and several of the districts are almost all ELLs (81 percent). A third are urban districts, a third are suburban, and a third are rural.

Districts were asked to provide data on ELLs by grade level (6 through 12), by the number of years students have been in U.S. schools, California English Language Development Test levels, and academic failure rates for these students. Districts were asked whether they have a formal definition of LTELs, and how they serve this population.

Survey data revealed that a majority (59 percent) of secondary school English learners are “long term” (in United States schools for more than six years without reaching sufficient English proficiency to be reclassified). This indicates that statewide there are 330,000 LTELs. Children who enroll as ELLs in kindergarten or first grade have a three in four chance of becoming a Long Term English Learner, not attaining English proficiency, and struggling academically.

Despite the magnitude of this population, there is no shared definition or means of identifying or monitoring the progress and achievement of this population. Only one in three districts that responded to the survey reported having a formal definition – and their definitions vary in the number of years considered “normative” for how long it should take for ELLs to reach English proficiency.

How long is too long?

English learners face a double challenge of learning a new language while mastering all the same academic content as their English fluent peers. In ruling on the legal obligation of districts to address the language

barrier facing ELLs, the courts recognized that during the period when students are still learning English (especially if all their academic instruction is in English), they might incur academic deficits.

They made clear, however, that school districts are required to remedy those deficits so that they do not pose “a lingering educational impediment.” ELLs cannot, in the words of the court, “be permitted to incur irreparable academic deficits” during the time in which they are mastering English. While there is no timeline specified by law, school districts are obligated to address those deficits “as soon as possible,” and to



ensure that their schooling does not become a “permanent dead-end.”

At what point should an English learner be identified as being on a pathway toward a permanent dead-end? When Proposition 227 passed in California it mandated a structured English immersion program as the default program for ELLs, suggesting that one or two years in a “special” program would be sufficient. California’s “Annual Measurable Achievement Objective #1” for No Child Left Behind accountability expects most ELLs to advance one CELDT level per year toward English proficiency – taking five years to complete progress through the Level V advanced.

Linguistic research indicates that normatively it takes five to seven years to reach English proficiency. Clearly, an English learner who is still an English learner seven or more years after entering U.S. schools has reached a point at which concern is warranted. And yet, even this is not sufficient as a definition. Some students may be proficient but simply

haven’t yet gone through the process of reclassification. Some may be able to do well academically, get decent grades and pass CAHSEE, but do not score well on CELDT.

A good working definition includes, then, both a designated length of time and evidence of academic difficulty: “A Long Term English Learner is a student who has been enrolled in U.S. schools for more than six years, is making inadequate progress toward English proficiency (at CELDT Level III or below, or has remained at the same CELDT level or fell behind a CELDT level for several years), and is struggling academically.”

How does an English learner become a Long Term English Learner?

When parents leave a 5-year-old child at the schoolhouse door for the first time, when a kindergarten teacher greets her new students, and when an English learner sits in the circle on that first day of school, none suspect that the child is embarking on what will be a journey of years of struggling to master academic content they cannot access, and that they will end up years later still not proficient in English. Yet this is what happens to the majority. They become LTELs in the course of their schooling experience.

Studies of student Cumulative Files and student educational histories identify several factors that seem to contribute to becoming a Long Term English Learner:

- Periods of time in which the students received no language development program at all. (In the past 10 years in California, the percent of ELLs placed into mainstream classrooms has increased steadily.)
- Elementary school curricula and materials that weren’t designed to meet English learner needs.
- Enrollment in weak language development programs and poorly implemented English learner programs. In a decade in which there has been an increasingly strong and convergent research conclusion about the important role that primary language instruction plays in developing English literacy, the number of ELLs receiving primary language development or instruction has dwindled to just 5 percent. At the same time, there has been a significant increase in the number of ELLs placed into mainstream

classes – the “program” that produces the worst outcomes over time (highest dropout rates; lowest levels of English proficiency).

- History of inconsistent programs and inconsistent placements. Many LTELs have experienced a “ping pong” pattern of placement in one kind of program for a period of time, then into another kind of program, and back again. Each move in and out of a program results in gaps in language development and access to the academic content.

- Narrowed curricula and only partial access to the full curriculum. In response to unsatisfactory achievement in language arts and math, many schools with large numbers of ELLs have largely cut out science, arts and social studies to allow increased time for English and math. This contributes to knowledge gaps and results in fewer opportunities to develop the academic language required for success in those subjects.

- Social and linguistic isolation.
- Cycles of transnational moves.

Characteristics and needs of LTELs

By the time LTELs arrive in secondary schools, they are struggling academically. They have distinct language issues. LTELs can function well socially in both English and their home language – but it is imprecise and inadequate for deeper expression and communication. They have very weak academic language and significant deficits in reading and writing skills.

Despite the fact that English tends to be the language of preference of these students, the majority of LTELs are “stuck” at intermediate levels of English proficiency or below. LTELs have significant gaps in academic background knowledge. In addition, many have developed habits of non-engagement, learned passivity and invisibility in school.

Yet, the majority of LTELs say they want to go to college, and appear unaware that their academic skills, record and courses are not preparing them to reach that goal. Despite struggling in school, neither students, their parents nor their community realize that they are in academic jeopardy.

Few districts have designated programs or formal approaches designed for LTELs. Instead, the typical “program” for LTELs in secondary schools appears to be inappropriate

placement in mainstream (no program) or being placed and kept in classes with newcomer ELLs. They are taught largely by unprepared teachers, are overassigned and inadequately served in intervention and support classes, are precluded from participation in electives, and have limited access to the full curriculum.

“Reparable Harm” articulates basic principles for more effectively meeting the needs of LTELs: urgency and acceleration, recogni-



tion of the distinct needs of LTELs, the need for language development (not just literacy development), the need to address both academic gaps and language development, the crucial role of primary language development, the importance of rigor and relevance, relationships matter, and maximum integration with other students must be achieved without sacrificing access. A comprehensive secondary school program for LTELs based upon these principles might look like this:

- A specialized ELD course designed for LTELs, emphasizing writing, academic vocabulary and engagement.
- Clustered placement in heterogeneous and rigorous grade-level content classes mixed with English proficient students and taught with differentiated SDAIE strategies.
- Explicit language and literacy development across the curriculum. Teachers need to know their students and engage in careful analysis of the language demands of the content they are teaching, as well as develop skills in implementing appropriate instructional strategies.
- Native speakers classes (in an articulated sequence through Advanced Placement levels).
- Systems for monitoring progress and triggering support, and a master schedule designed for flexibility and movement as students progress.

- A school-wide focus on study skills.

Districts piloting these approaches report positive outcomes such as more student engagement, fewer course failures, increased Latino college-going rates, and improved CAHSEE passage.

A high school program is just one piece of the solution, however. Elementary programs and instruction need to be strengthened, with more consistency district-wide and across classrooms within schools.

The role of the district and the state

It is the role of the district to ensure high quality implementation of research-based programs for LTELs. This requires addressing common challenges, such as inadequate data and student information systems; a shortage of teachers prepared with the knowledge and skills to effectively teach LTELs; lack of appropriate curriculum and materials targeted for this population; contradictory mandates and counsel; general lack of knowledge about research on effective practices for LTELs; inadequate assessments and systems to know how ELLs are doing or to identify ELLs who are not adequately progressing; widespread lack of understanding related to English Language Development and misunderstandings about what constitutes English proficiency.

Some of this can be addressed at the district level (see district checklist, next page). But the Long Term English Learner issue is, fundamentally, a systems issue, a policy issue, and a leadership issue.

“Reparable Harm” offers six state-level recommendations to move California toward preventing and remedying the harm that has been done to LTELs. These include:

- Calling for a standard state definition of LTELs, and data collection to support monitoring, early identification, planning and response.
- Ensuring the availability of appropriate and effective English Language Development materials and academic content materials.
- Setting benchmark expectations for ELL student progress, and developing consistent state messages and counsel (across accountability, corrective action and compliance functions) based on ELL research and speak-

ing to the differentiated needs of LTELs.

- Support professional development for teachers and administrators so they are more prepared and skilled to work with LTELs.

- Ensure that ELLs have access to the full curriculum.

- Provide parents with the information needed to monitor the impacts of the schools' services and programs on their students, to know whether their children are progressing normatively, and to play an active role in helping shape their child's education and future.

Avoiding a permanent dead-end

A large number of Long Term English Learners are ending up in California secondary schools. Despite many years in U.S. schools and despite being close to the age in which they should be able to graduate, these LTELs are still not English proficient, and have incurred major academic deficits. Their education threatens to become exactly what the courts cautioned against – a permanent dead-end.

By better understanding the characteristics and needs of this student population, schools can do a better job of supporting their learning. It is time to recognize that weak programs and approaches are foreclosing life options for many students who struggle along, year to year, falling further and further behind. This is wholly reparable, and it is in our power to create policies and practices and to mobilize at the state and district levels to provide direction and support for schools to address the needs of LTELs in secondary schools, and to turn around the conditions in elementary grades that result in the creation of long-term failure. ■

To order copies or to obtain a PDF of the full report, "Reparable Harm: Fulfilling the Unkept Promise of Educational Opportunity for California's Long Term English Learners," go to www.californianstogether.org.

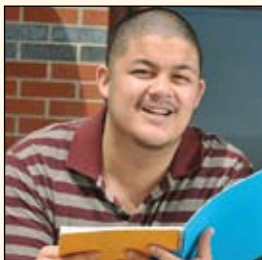
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District checklist: Steps for addressing the needs of LTELs

District and school leadership should be knowledgeable about the diversity of the English learner enrollment (typologies) and understand the implications of that diversity for program design, program implementation and instructional practices. District systems should be created to prevent the development of LTELs and serving those LTELs who are enrolled in secondary schools across the district.

A district addressing the needs of LTELs should have the following in place:

- A formal definition for LTELs
- Annual benchmark expectations designated for ELLs by number of years in United States schools and by progress toward English proficiency. Long Term English Learner candidates are identified in fourth grade and a catch-up and program-consistency plan are developed for those students.



- The English Learner Master Plan describes research-based programs for different typologies of ELLs, including a designated program and pathway for LTELs. All administrators are trained related to the content.
- The data system analyzes English learner achievement data by length of time in United States schools and by English proficiency level, provides longitudinal data, and disaggregates achievement by type of program. This system triggers regular review by leadership to inform district planning.
- Secondary schools provide specially designed English Language Development to focus on the unique needs of LTELs, including academic language and writing. LTELs are in classes with high quality SDAIE instruction – in clusters within rigorous classes along with English fluent students.
- Schools support the development of a students' native language to threshold levels of rich oral language and literacy – and students have the opportunity to develop their native language through Advanced Placement levels.
- Elementary school programs are research-based and we use the most powerful models of English learner language development. The district monitors and ensures these are well-implemented with consistency.
- All administrators, teachers, English learner students and their parents know about and understand the reclassification criteria.
- The district has adopted and purchased English Language Development materials, and teachers receive professional development in their use.
- LTELs are knowledgeable about the purposes of the CELDT and implications of their CELDT scores. They know what they need to do in order to reach reclassification criteria.
- Professional development and collaborative planning time for teachers of classes with LTELs is a high priority for the use of professional development funds.
- Student course schedules are monitored to ensure that ELLs have access to the full curriculum.
- Supplementary materials and relevant literature are provided for academic classes with LTELs in order to enhance access, engagement and academic success.
- Secondary school counselors receive professional development in appropriate placements and monitoring for LTELs, and work together with district/site EL coordinators in developing each individual ELL's schedule and in planning the school master schedule to facilitate flexible and accelerated progress.