Factsheet

Who are English Language Learners?

English language learners (ELLs) are a diverse group of children, but they all face a formidable challenge. Arriving in American schools with little or no English, ELLs must master academic subjects and a new language at the same time, while struggling to keep pace with English-proficient students. Their unique needs also create challenges for schools in designing and funding programs that work for these students.

ELLs represent a substantial and growing sector of our school population – currently one in nine U.S. students in grades K-12. Largely because of immigration and higher birthrates in language-minority communities, their enrollments have more than doubled since the early 1990s. At current rates of growth, ELLs will account for one of every four U.S. students by 2025, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2006).

About two-thirds of ELLs are concentrated in five states: California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Illinois. But over the past 15 years, their growth has been most rapid in Oregon, Washington, Nevada, North Carolina, Georgia, and Kansas.

While ELLs speak about 460 different languages, 75% come from Spanish-speaking backgrounds. Other important language groups include Vietnamese, Hmong, Chinese, Korean, Haitian Creole, and Navajo.

Only 35% of ELLs are foreign-born. More than two-thirds of these students were born in the United States, including 46% with immigrant parents and 19% who are at least third-generation Americans. According to surveys by the Urban Institute (2003), about one-third of ELLs in New York and Los Angeles live below the poverty line – more than double the poverty rate of English-proficient children.

ELLs are among the most segregated groups of American students; 70% are concentrated in 10% of schools. On average, schools with at least one-quarter ELL enrollments are 77% minority, and 72% of their students receive free or reduced-price lunches. Teachers in such schools are less likely to be fully certified and more likely to be new to the profession.

According to a federally funded study (Development Associates, 2003), 43% of U.S. teachers had ELLs in their classrooms in 2002 – up from 15% ten years earlier. Of these teachers, 11% were certified in bilingual education, 18% in English as a second language. They reported, on average, just four hours of special training to serve ELLs over the past five years.

Under the Supreme Court’s decisions in Lau v. Nichols (1974) and Plyler v. Doe (1982), respectively, school districts are required to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers and provide ELLs access to the curriculum, and they may not deny an education to any child on the basis of immigration status.

Among approaches for teaching ELLs, research has consistently shown that bilingual education is more effective than all-English methodologies. Yet, between 1992 and 2002, ELLs’ enrollment in bilingual classrooms plummeted from 37% to 17%. Further declines have occurred as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act.

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NCLB: More Harm than Good for ELLs

With its one-size-fits-all mandates, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) violates the spirit, if not the letter, of Lau v. Nichols (1974). To provide ELLs an equal education, the Supreme Court ruled, it is necessary to address their different educational needs. NCLB ignores this principle in two important ways:

1. Its accountability system relies heavily on standardized tests in English. Assessing ELLs’ academic progress in a language they have yet to master is neither valid nor reliable. Yet these inaccurate tests are used for high-stakes purposes in rating schools.
2. ELLs, by definition, are students who score less than proficient in reading and math because of language barriers. Thus they are a “subgroup” doomed to failure under NCLB. As new ELLs enter with limited English and as advanced ELLs exit after learning the language, average test scores fall, creating a treadmill effect. Even if individual students reach proficiency, the subgroup never will.

Rather than ensuring true accountability for ELLs, NCLB “holds schools accountable” for failing to achieve the impossible. Its refusal to consider what is unique about these students has produced perverse effects:

- Limiting or eliminating native-language instruction because of pressure to pass English-language tests.
- Narrowing the curriculum in favor of an obsessive stress on English phonics and English language arts.
- Emphasizing test preparation and other drills in low-level skills rather than critical thinking.
- Retaining ELLs in nontested grades and even encouraging school dropouts to boost test scores.
- Demoralizing educators, who face punitive action when ELLs fail to meet arbitrary, unrealistic targets.

Meanwhile, NCLB has done nothing to improve ELLs’ achievement. In reading, their scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress have remained essentially flat since 2002. The “achievement gap” between ELLs and other students has barely narrowed at the 4th grade level; it has increased among 8th graders.

Indeed, ELLs were making significantly greater academic gains in the years before NCLB was enacted.