



Policy Memorandum: Recognizing and Addressing the Diverse Needs of English Learners in Order to Propel Them Toward Academic Success

Sandra Peloquin, EL Teacher, Lorain Schools

*Alma D. Velazquez, Principal, Jason Lee Elementary
Portland Public Schools*

Who We Are

We are experienced educators, a teacher and a principal, working in public schools whose mission and focus is in the academic success of our growing populations of English learners (ELs) and Latino students in the states of Oregon and Ohio.

Sandra Peloquin provides EL services at Lorain High as an English language teacher and advocate with 28 years of experience. Her high school students are part of an urban district where 40% of the student population is Latino. In Ohio, 73.6% of EL students were born in the United States and 37.7% of all ELs speak Spanish as the dominant home language.¹

Alma D. Velázquez, she serves as principal at Jason Lee Elementary in Portland, Oregon. In her 12 years in education has served as a bilingual elementary school teacher, a teacher-developer in the area of language acquisition and language instruction, and a school administrator. Twenty percent of all Oregon students are ELs, and 40% of all students qualify for free and reduced lunch.² In her school right now, a quarter of all students are English learners and more than 60% qualify for free and reduced lunch.

We are Latino educators of effective public schools with significant numbers of Latino and EL students. We represent the high-poverty communities in Oregon and Ohio.

Background

Under the ESSA, states are able to identify all ELs as part of a single category. This means that states do not have to account for student progress in individual subgroups, making it

more likely that individual student subgroups will not receive adequate support to succeed academically, graduate high school, or have promising futures in college or career. This one category includes enormous and varying needs of services, from students newly arrived to this country to students born in the United States who grow up in bilingual homes. In order to support all of them successfully, we must start by breaking down the category of EL into different subgroups, known as EL *typologies*.

We know that the single most important factor in student outcomes is educator effectiveness. Teachers and school administrators need adequate professional development if they are to move students into English proficiency and towards academic success.

Our Ask

A federal reauthorization of ESSA should set meaningful goals while providing resources and supports that improve the academic outcomes for ELs. We believe that federal policy should reflect upon current national research on second-language learning and bilingualism to simultaneously develop ELs' language and literacy skills to allow them to engage in the full range of academic content learning. Federal law should build upon what states are already doing. For example, California's English Learner Roadmap³ offers a path by outlining rigorous expectations for their schools. Accordingly, we believe a national model under ESSA could borrow from the state's best ideas by requiring all states to:

- Align Title I and Title III grants around evidenced-based practices to support all typologies of ELs in order to ensure that they get the support they need to succeed.
 - ESSA needs to require states to implement uniform criteria for identifying, monitoring, and exiting ELs, using appropriate assessments and advancing the professional development necessary to use the assessment results when exiting students from EL services. We believe this would increase graduating rates and constitute a key lever for effective system improvement.
 - ESSA needs to recognize that ELs are more than one subgroup. Districts will need to and be able to identify students more precisely (e.g., newcomers, long-term ELs, students with interrupted formal education, students with disabilities, gifted and talented students). This change necessitates educational approaches that are differentiated and responsive to the student's typology.
 - ESSA should encourage educators to use best practices for serving ELs. Current research supports the need to attend to the following instructional factors:
 - Explicit literacy instruction especially in the early grades
 - Peer-assisted and small-group learning opportunities
 - Providing academic language support during content area instruction, balanced with structured explicit opportunities for oral and written language skills development
 - Appropriate assessment in various forms (e.g., formative, benchmark, summative) to understand and support student learning
 - Processes related to social-emotional development and identity formation
 - Professional development for teachers and school administrators who evaluate teachers' needs to include knowledge and practice in the use of evidenced-based approaches to serve the diverse typologies.
 - Culturally and linguistically responsive assessment tools and practices need to be established in order to track growth and provide adequate support to all EL typologies, as well as the data to evaluate any intervention approach.

- Increase to 10% from 5% the portion of Title III funding that can be allocated to professional development in evidence-based practices for each student subgroup or typology, as well as assessment tools to identify and monitor the progress of ELs in order to ensure their academic success. Currently, in Portland Public Schools in Oregon, EL specialists and teachers receive 90 minutes of professional development per month, but elsewhere the state and in other states such as Ohio, EL specialists have no requirements for ongoing professional development beyond the initial license. A deeper understanding of each student's diverse needs and the teaching and assessment practices necessary to support them, as well as new exiting criteria, will subsequently require additional professional development.

The Need

Educators know that not all students learn the same way or have the same needs. Misidentification of students can have different impacts, such as a student being thought to have a learning disability, when in fact they have simply lacked consistent instruction. When U.S.-born ELs are placed in classrooms designed for newcomers, the consequences in their academic achievement and emotional well-being can be damaging.⁴

Some estimates in the past 20 years point to a growing number of ELs as American-born. In 2001, a report from the Dallas public schools stated that 70% of their secondary EL students were born in the United States. Nationally over the past 20 years, the vast majority of ELs are American-born. We see a compelling need to support this group of students who are largely American citizens.

While ESSA made big steps forward for ELs in making English-language proficiency standards (ELPS) part of the accountability system, it did not do enough to help all ELs succeed. One missing link is the lack of understanding that ELs are not, in fact, one subgroup. ELs are different typologies and each requires its own set of supports and services.

EL student subgroups with distinct needs include:

The long-term EL (LTEL) is a student who has been enrolled in a U.S. school for six years or more but has stagnated in the development of English skills, which makes the student struggle in school. This typology of learner needs:

- Focused instruction on the lagging skills: Some benefit mostly from vocabulary expansion and grammar.
- Rigorous instruction: Schools often continue putting these students in classes that are designed for newcomers. They need to enroll in mainstream classes that demand a higher level from students, supported by trained educators who understand how the students' skills will develop and what instructional strategies support that development.

Newly Arrived with Adequate Schooling: Students who have recently arrived from countries where they experienced continued education and development of academic skills in their native language. They need:

- Teachers to use this students' educational background as a strength to develop skills in English. For some, their native language allows for an easy transition into English literacy. Many English words are very close to Spanish words, so students from Spanish-speaking countries can more easily make connections than those with other home languages.

- All newly arrived students need initial instruction that focuses on the social aspects of language, coupled with school- and home-based vocabulary would support their initial learning of English.

Newly Arrived with Inadequate or Interrupted Schooling: Some students will arrive in the United States from communities where schooling was inconsistent, not available, or frequently interrupted. They need:

- Proper assessment to determine their literacy levels in their home language as well as their skills in other academic areas. This would allow for more proper placement. Trained teachers need to develop a scope and sequence of academic standards and support that fills these gaps and attends to their varying needs in English.

Second-generation immigrants: Second-generation immigrants often grow up in homes with a language other than English or a mixture of English and their home language. They may be fully bicultural. Students included in this category are those who immigrated to the United States as babies or minors and who have fully adapted to American life while also speaking a home language other than English. This type of student can reach native levels of fluency, but the connection with the culture and language they have at home can influence the way they express themselves in English. Code switching is particularly common among these students and must be seen as an added asset in their linguistic repertoire.

A Compelling Need for Adequate Assessment

All of these different instructional approaches to student learning require the development of adequate assessment tools and assessment practices that ensure students' progress is measured against comparable student peers by typology, not measured against monolingual American students.

According to an analysis by the Migration Policy Institute, ESSA falls significantly short in other areas as well.⁵ It lacks guidance for states to address ELs who are unable to meet exit criteria past the maximum timeline or who do not reach proficiency before they age out of the system. Furthermore, ESSA includes little to no accountability for states who do not meet the academic and achievement and ELP goals as set up by the law.

According to data from Migration Policy Institute, EL students from Ohio who are most likely to exit EL programs are in grades two through four. In grade four, almost 30% will exit, but by the time they are in high school, only 7% will exit EL programs. In state testing, 45% of ELs score proficient, compared to non-ELs who score 63%. By high school, 15% of ELs score proficient on state testing as compared to non-ELs, who score 56%. This data further illustrates the need to view ELs in terms of their typologies. In Ohio's Lorain City School District, 26% of the EL students are LTELs. A successful component in Lorain is a system-wide monitoring protocol.

MPI data also notes that in Oregon, ELs experience a significant academic achievement gap in reading, math, and science, when compared to all student groups. For example, only 16% of all ELs in fourth grade met academic standards in English in 2017 assessments, more than 30 percentage points from the general population. This gap only increased as these students experienced more schooling, growing to a 60 percentage-point difference by the time the students arrived in 11th grade.⁶

Impact

ELs are a heterogeneous group of students and graduation rates highlight these differences. According to West Ed, only 49% of LTELs are likely to graduate, while 52% of recent arrivals will graduate within four years.⁷ A former EL will graduate 81% of the time and 85% of non-ELs will graduate on time.⁸

Focus needs to be on the typologies of ELs in order to close the significant discrepancy of ELs who test out and graduate at a timely rate and those who remain LTELs and do not graduate. It is imperative to address this situation as the LTEL population is growing significantly. From New York to California, LTELs range from 23%-74% of the EL population. In California alone the LTEL population in 2008 was at 62% and by 2017, was at 82%.⁹

From our own experiences in classrooms in Oregon and Ohio, we know the COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated the gaps already existing for ELs. ELs often include students living in poverty, with unstable housing and parents with low-wage jobs. These realities highlight the need for U.S. schools to support these diverse learners in a more equitable way, appropriate to their level of need.

More uniform identification, assessment, and evidenced-based instructional practices are necessary in order to recognize and adequately serve the different typologies of ELs, close achievement gaps, and help all ELs reach their full potential.

Endnotes

- 1 Julie Sugarman and Courtney Geary, "English Learners in Ohio Demographics, Outcomes, and State Accountability Policies," August 2018, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/EL-factsheet2018-Ohio_Final.pdf (accessed January 31, 2021).
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 California English Learner Roadmap State Board of Education Policy: Educational Programs and Services for English Learners, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/rm/elroadmappolicy.asp#ftnt1>, (accessed February 4, 2021).
- 4 Leslie Villegas & Delia Pompa, "The Patchy Landscape of State English Learner Policies under ESSA," February 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org>, (accessed February 4, 2021).
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 Julie Sugarman and Courtney Geary, "English Learners in Oregon, Outcomes and State Accountability Policies," August 2018, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/EL-factsheet2018-Oregon_Final.pdf (accessed January 31, 2021).
- 7 Regional Educational Laboratory West, "Long-Term English Learner Students: Spotlight on an Overlooked Population," WestEd, November 2016, <https://www.wested.org/resources/long-term-english-learner-students/#> (accessed January 31, 2021).
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 *ibid.*