RESEARCH BRIEF

At-a-Glance

Improving Literacy Outcomes for English Language Learners in High School: Considerations for States and Districts in Developing a Coherent Policy Framework

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KEY ISSUE

States and districts need to redesign literacy work for English language learners in high school by moving from remediation to academic acceleration and enrichment.

Primary Findings

- English language learners who are able to negotiate entry into high-level courses develop higher levels of literacy than do ELLs of similar proficiency who are tracked in low-level courses.
- Latino English language learners are overrepresented in special education.
- Latino English language learners, who comprise the largest group of English language learners, have the lowest graduation rate of all students.
- ELL students have a better chance to achieve at high levels when academic barriers to college preparation and accelerated courses are removed. College preparatory courses can be accompanied by enrollment in academic support classes when necessary.

INTRODUCTION

The development of strategies to promote literacy among adolescent English language learners (ELLs) is a critical component of improving a variety of their educational outcomes. There are significant opportunities for states to support grade-level literacy among English language learners at the high school level and to thereby increase the chances that more students are able to graduate.

The following are some of the key issues to consider when improving schooling for English language learners: high school course patterns, overrepresentation of ELLs in special education, school completion and graduation requirements, English literacy and college completion, and professional development for teachers. Many of these issues cross-cut through organizational structures of state education agencies and require a coordinated approach for supporting ELLs that will enable them to succeed in high school and beyond.

THE CHALLENGE

No matter what the level of English proficiency, amount of prior schooling, or status as foreign or U.S. born, English language learners face structural and instructional barriers to developing academic literacy in discipline-specific courses (Walqui, 2000). Instead of accelerating the linguistic and academic achievement of secondary English language learners, high schools track English language learners into remedial literacy and mathematics courses and lower-level core academic courses (Gándara et al., 2003; Parrish et al., 2006), despite the body of research findings that attest to the deleterious effects of such stratification (Callahan, 2005; Oakes, 1992; Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005; Valdés, 2001).

THE CONTEXT: LOW EXPECTATIONS YIELD DIMINISHED RETURNS

Teachers hold lower expectations for the academic achievement of English language learners across all subjects (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2001). Instead of developing students' capacity to read, discuss, and write substantive texts in multiple genres (Langer, 2002; Schleppegrell, 2002), teachers typically address the increasingly diverse linguistic needs of students by taking a

TAKE-AWAYS

State Level

- States need to provide leadership to ensure that English language learners in high school are provided accelerated and enriching academics rather than remediation.
- To build the capacity of teachers to appropriately identify which ELL students would benefit from special education services and which would benefit from more inclusive strategies, states need to be explicit about what is expected of professional development and teacher preparedness in this regard.

reductive approach of simplified content, and a focus on isolated basic skills (Garcia, 1999; Knapp et al., 1995; MetLife, 2001).

By the time English language learners enter high school, they lag far behind their classmates in literacy achievement. Nationwide, the average score of ELLs on the 2003 NAEP eighth-grade reading assessment was 41 points lower than of non-ELLs.[i] In contrast to the 70 percent of ELLs who scored below basic in reading on this assessment, 70 percent of non-ELLs scored above basic (NCES, 2003).

One consequence of enrolling English language learners in remedial and basic skill literacy courses is that the literacy achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs at the secondary level remains unacceptably consistent (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000; Snow, 2002; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). A gap similar to the eighth-grade NAEP results in reading exists in the performance of ELLs and non-ELLs on the literacy portions of high school exit exams. In most states, ELLs score 40 or more percentage points below non-ELLs on their first try at the reading/language arts/English portion of exit exams (Center on Education Policy, 2005).

The consequences of underpreparation in literacy are dire for all minority students, but for Latino English language learners they are particularly grim. Latino English language learners, who comprise the largest group of ELLs, have the lowest graduation rate of all students (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). Of every 100 Latino students, many of whom are ELLs, only 61 will graduate high school, 31 of those who graduate will complete some postsecondary education, and only 10 will graduate with a bachelor's degree (Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst & Usdan, 2005). For too many English language learners, graduation from high school, let alone college, remains but a dream.

KEY POLICIES AND INTERVENTIONS: BUILDING CAPACITY AND CHANGING STRUCTURES

There is a growing body of knowledge about schooling that makes a positive, lasting difference for high school students who are enrolled in high-risk schools, typically minority students and ELLs in urban, high-poverty areas, and for students who fail coursework in high school. We now know that the academic rigor of courses students take, along with appropriate support, matters more than do their grade point average or SAT and ACT scores (ACT & Education Trust, 2005; Education Trust, 2005; Hall & Kennedy, 2006). Indeed, the academic intensity of student coursework is the strongest predictor of college success (Adelman, 1999; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003).

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KEY POLICIES AND INTERVENTIONS (CONTINUED)

Data about subgroups, particularly for ELLs, are not available in studies on course-taking patterns and achievement. It has been established, however, that if underprepared students are enrolled in rigorous, college preparatory courses, their achievement on norm-reference tests increases, regardless of their entering level of achievement (Barth & Haycock, 2004). Indeed, a consistent characteristic of schools where previously low-achieving minority students, many of whom are ELLs, achieve at high levels is that academic barriers to college preparation and accelerated courses are removed. In these schools, academic support classes accompany concurrent enrollment in college preparatory courses rather than replace academically intense courses (ACT & Education Trust, 2005; Education Trust, 2005; Kirst & Venezia, 2004).

Existing Barriers: Tracking and Placement of English Language Learners

What are the ramifications of this research on the development of literacy at the high school level? Instead of providing access to college preparatory courses and increasing the level of support provided, ELLs in many districts are placed in several periods of remedial English courses a day. Because of their performance on standardized tests, they are judged to be unfit for mainstream college preparatory classes. English language learners who may attend already segregated schools are further segregated by their exclusion from high school-level courses (Valdés, 2004).

Developing literacy at the secondary level entails reading, writing, and speaking about ideas through interaction with texts and with one's peers. For English language learners, the introduction to the ways of making meaning, to the specialized ways of reasoning and using language in different disciplines, is a critical component of developing literacy in English. Harklau (1994) found that the exposure English language learners had to the type of rich oral and written interactions that characterize academic literacy varies by track. English language learners who negotiate entry into high-track courses develop higher literacy levels, while those who remained in low-track courses continue to repeat and respond to low-level questions. Callahan (2005) found that the track placement of English language learners predicted academic achievement more than did English level proficiency.

Recent findings from the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth offer possible reasons for the increased literacy development of ELLs in high-level classes as compared to peers in low-level classes. Though most studies of reading comprehension in a second language focus mainly at the lower and middle elementary levels and lack detailed information about the reading comprehension subskills measured, the studies analyzed by the National Literacy Panel clearly point to the need for instruction in text-level literacy that develops English language learners' ability to use prior knowledge, make inferences, and build structural and semantic coherence. Along with developing text-level skills, literacy instruction must also integrate the metacognitive skills of monitoring and planning and the linguistic and cognitive skills needed for word-level literacy (Lesaux et al., 2006). An important finding of the Panel is that developing word-level skills alone does not support the development of higher-level thinking needed to develop text-level skills (Lesaux & Geva, 2006). That is, word-level skills are distinct from text-level skills. These findings emphasize the need to provide adolescent English language learners with high-quality instruction that develops advanced literacy skills. The differences in the literacy development of English language learners at similar levels of achievement or proficiency who are enrolled in different tracks may well be due to the quality of instruction in complex literacy skills provided in high-level classes as compared to an overall emphasis on word-level skills in lower-level classes.

Students, both ELLs and non-ELLs, who want to attend college are often surprised to find that the work completed in low-level track academic courses does not count towards admission to four-year colleges (Antonio & Bersola, 2004). Additionally, these students are often unaware that two-year colleges require prospective students to take a

KEY POLICIES AND INTERVENTIONS (CONTINUED)

battery of entrance tests that determine whether students are tracked into remedial courses in college or are able to enroll in classes that count toward completing a degree (Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Orfield, 2004). Even "successful" English language learners who graduate from high school and go on to college often fail or are required to enroll in remedial English and writing courses because their academic English literacy skills are not up to par (Harklau et al., 1999).

The Special Case of Special Education

Three decades of national surveys reveal evidence of persistent overrepresentation of minorities in special education (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Losen & Orfield, 2002). The most recent survey conducted by the National Research Council Panel (Donovan & Cross, 2002) shows, once again, that black, Native American, and Latino students are, in descending order, disproportionately more likely than white students to be placed in resource specialist programs or special day classes. The study also found that "schooling independently contributes to the incidence of special needs or giftedness among students in different racial/ethnic groups through the opportunities it provides" through presence or lack of quality teachers, challenging classes, and adequate funding. Analyses of placement and opportunity to learn data also reveal that minority students who are in special education receive more exclusive and lower quality services than do white students (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Both findings are consonant with research on the ways in which social processes in and out of the classroom contribute to the construction of failure (McDermott, 1987; McDermott & Varenne, 1999; Mercado, 2001).

Though Latino students rank behind African American and Native American students in levels of overrepresentation at the state level, recent research in urban California districts reveals that when district-level data are disaggregated by grade level and language program subgroup, the picture changes dramatically. Artiles, Rueda, Slazar, and Higareda (2002, 2005) found that compared to English proficient students, Latino English language learners are overrepresented in special education beginning in grade 6 and that placement increases through grade 12. Their analysis also found that placement in special education programs (mentally retarded (MR), language and speech (LAS), and learning disabled (LD)) increased for students who were in English immersion programs. That is, students who participated in programs that included native language support for concept learning were less likely to be in special education than those students who were in English-only programs, a finding that warrants further research and investigation into the role of teacher knowledge and adequate assessment practices in the referral of ELLs to special education (Valdés & Figueroa, 1996).

Key policy and practice changes needed to overcome errors in special education placement occurring because of lack of knowledge about the language development of ELLs or exclusionary practices in providing instruction for ELLs who are properly designated include:

- Examining Latino subgroup data for placement rates and for type of services provided to ELLs;
- Identifying which assessments of ELLs' linguistic and content knowledge are adequate to monitor language development and content knowledge over time (August & Shanahan, 2006); and
- Providing all pre- and in-service elementary and secondary teachers with preparation and ongoing professional development in assessing ELLs' development of language proficiency and content knowledge.

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THE BOTTOM LINE

The development of strategies—both at the policy and instructional level—to promote literacy among adolescent English language learners is a critical component of improving educational outcomes, including increasing high school graduation rates and 4-year college and university completion rates. Adolescent literacy at the high school level entails the development of disciplinary knowledge and the use of that knowledge in oral interactions, reading and writing. Consequently, states and districts need to redesign literacy work for English language learners in high school as a change from remediation to academic acceleration and enrichment.

Effective literacy instruction includes teaching students to read critically in content areas in multiple modalities, including that of the Internet (Alverman, 2001). In grades 6–12, for example, content area teachers are also literacy teachers who teach students to discuss ideas, read, and write in their discipline, and this implies that new strategies are required to help teachers retool their teaching. As indicated by the overrepresentation of ELLs in special education classes, knowledge about the development of literacy for adolescent English language learners is essential.

English language learners, particularly adolescent English language learners, arrive at school with a number of strengths linked to their first language that can be tapped to support literacy development in English. They are able to think critically about how English compares to their native language by making comparisons about how each language works and by actively transferring what they know about literacy in their home language to English. Findings from the National Literacy Panel's analysis of second language literacy learning research emphasize the role of cross-language transfer in second-language literacy development. For example, August and Shanahan (2006) conclude that second language literacy skills such as word reading, cognate vocabulary, reading strategies, reading comprehension, and writing are related to similar constructs in the first language. Dressler's (2006) analysis of cross-language research on the role of cognate vocabulary in second language literacy development identifies the affordances and constraints provided by the degree of typographic similarity and orthographic overlap between the home and target language, and by students' ability to discern systematic relationships among morphemes such as suffixes. The studies examined by the Panel provide confirmation of small-scale qualitative studies of bilingual readers. Jiménez et al. (1996), for example, found that bilingual readers who used reading strategies such as monitoring the background knowledge, text structures, and vocabulary (cognates) used in Spanish literacy activities for usefulness in aiding comprehension of English reading selections were able to compensate for lack of vocabulary knowledge in English and were more successful readers in the target second language than students who did not use cross-language reading strategies. Though much more research in the literacy development of adolescent English language learners is needed, the importance of taking into account the role of transfer when planning and implementing instruction is warranted.

Part of improved literacy instructional practice is also having high expectations about student performance and offering high support so that students achieve; thus, an important component of change is developing the skills and dispositions of accomplished teachers of English language learners (Walqui, 2001). The need for sustained, rigorous professional development that strengthens teachers' capacity to promote rich literacy practices among adolescent English language learners is central to improving literacy achievement for all students (Walqui, van Lier, & Koelsch, forthcoming).[iii]

CAVEATS

Improving instruction alone will not be adequate for ensuring success for ELL students so long as the same structures that track students into academically segregated courses are still in place. The focus of this brief has been on implementing structural changes that reconfigure the educational opportunities available to English language learners.

Along with a focus on improved instruction, educational agencies at the state and local levels need to ensure that adolescent English language learners participate in rigorous, college preparatory courses and that they receive the instructional support needed to succeed in these courses.

END NOTES

[i] In contrast to the 12th-grade NAEP, the 8th-grade NAEP reading assessment is administered nationwide.

[ii] The Center for Instruction is currently preparing a Guidance Document on Adolescent Literacy that presents research on instructional practice and has recently released a series of three ELL Practical Guidelines for the Education of English Language Learners, available at www.centeroninstruction.org.

[iii] See, for example: (1) Shoenbach, R. & Greenleaf, C. (2000). *Reading for understanding: A guide to improving reading in middle and high school classrooms*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. (2) Finkelstien, N., Hanson, T., & Farr, B. (2006). *Report of a field study of quality teaching for English learners (QTEL)*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

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RESEARCH BRIEF

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