



BEST PRACTICES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATING ENGLISH LEARNERS

**WHEN ENGLISH LEARNERS
SUCCEED, WE ALL SUCCEED**



KAREN GARIBAY-MULATTIERI, SENIOR POLICY ANALYST
DR. REBECCA VONDERLACK-NAVARRO, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION POLICY AND RESEARCH

Overview

This paper outlines recommendations for school leaders and decisionmakers to improve policies and practices for English Learners in Illinois and nationwide. These recommendations are based on the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research study “English Learners in Chicago Public Schools: A New Perspective.”

Many students nationwide begin their schooling needing support with the English language. In Illinois, one-in-eight students identify as English Learners, and more than seventy percent of these students are native Spanish speakers.ⁱ Within Chicago Public Schools, where the study takes place, close to 19 percent of students are identified as English Learners or needing support in developing English Language proficiency.ⁱⁱ

These students’ academic progress has long been insufficiently tracked and misleadingly reported by school-accountability systems. According to these systems, English Learners consistently appear to be behind their native English-speaking peers academically. By collecting more specific data over the long term, this study offers empirical evidence to the contrary: **With proper support, English Learners not only perform far better academically than current standards suggest, but in fact outperform their native English-speaking peers. The narrative of English Learners in America has been a deficit-based narrative, when it should be an asset-based one.**ⁱⁱⁱ

This paper begins with a summary of the study’s context and findings, followed by a review of the study’s implications. The final section offers practical policy recommendations for improving school-accountability systems so that they can better serve English Learners and more accurately report their progress.

Context: Data Monitoring of English Learners

Practitioners have long contended that current data-reporting and accountability systems have misrepresented the academic performance of English Learners.^{iv} In 2017, the Latino Policy Forum, a policy and advocacy organization focused on educational equity for Latinos and English Learners, saw an opportunity to explore new ways of analyzing and reporting on English Learner data. The Forum approached the University of Chicago about conducting a study on English Learners.¹

1. The Forum did not commission this research but sought funding for the project and convened an advisory group of experts to inform the study. The Forum did not participate in the study design, data collection, or analysis, in order to maintain the intellectual integrity of the research. The Forum continues to be a partner in the dissemination of the findings to policymakers, practitioners, and immigrant parents.

Most data analysis of English Learners focuses on their standardized test scores at one point in time, while they are still developing English. Once they have acquired English, their academic progress as English Learners is no longer tracked. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed in 2015 and requires every state to monitor and report on English Learners' progress with the English language and their achievement on standardized tests.

The researchers of this longitudinal study conducted a retrospective data analysis of more than 18,000 English Learners (90 percent of whom were Latino students) from kindergarten through eighth grade, in three nine-year cohorts of students. The study also captured more than just test scores, highlighting other important metrics including attendance and grades in core subject areas.

Context: Bilingual Education in Illinois

School districts incur additional costs when serving English Learner populations.² Federal regulations place the responsibility on schools to translate information for parents, to provide equity in all educational programs and extracurricular activities, and to ensure that English Learners are successful over the long-term.^v

In Illinois, state bilingual education funding supports some of these additional costs. For more than forty years,³ Illinois law has funded and supported certain components to English Learner education, including qualified bilingual education teachers, specialized professional development, native-language family engagement, and dedicated funding for English Learner programs.^{vi} Chicago Public Schools adheres to the bilingual mandate, but also provides bilingual and world language enrichment programs (for a fuller description see Appendix A).

Research contends that employing quality bilingual educators is the single most important educational factor for optimal English Learner achievement.^{vii} One major challenge to implementing bilingual education in Illinois, however, is the chronic shortage of qualified bilingual educators. The Illinois State Board of Education regularly projects teacher shortage areas, and bilingual is consistently among the most pronounced.^{viii}

2. According to Article 14C of the Illinois School Code: "Sec. 14C-12. Account of expenditures; Cost report; Reimbursement. Each school district shall keep an accurate, detailed and separate account of all monies paid out by it for the programs in transitional bilingual education required or permitted by this Article, including transportation costs, and shall annually report thereon for the school year ending June 30 indicating the average per pupil expenditure. Each school district shall be reimbursed for the amount by which such costs exceed the average per pupil expenditure by such school district for the education of children of comparable age who are not in any special education program. At least 60% of transitional bilingual education funding received from the State must be used for the instructional costs of transitional bilingual education." Accessed on August 6, 2020: <https://law.justia.com/codes/illinois/2016/chapter-105/act-105-ilcs-5/article-14c>

3. Illinois legislature passed the Transitional Bilingual Education Act⁷ which mandates, as of July 1, 1976, the establishment of a bilingual education program in any district having 20 or more children of limited English-speaking ability. For more information see: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=2735&context=law-review>

Findings

“English Learners in Chicago Public Schools: A New Perspective” contradicts many misconceptions regarding English Learners, including that they are a drain on the system and do poorly academically. The research shows that English Learners in Chicago Public Schools⁴ go on to be academically successful and have better attendance and grades in core subject areas than native English speakers.^{ix}

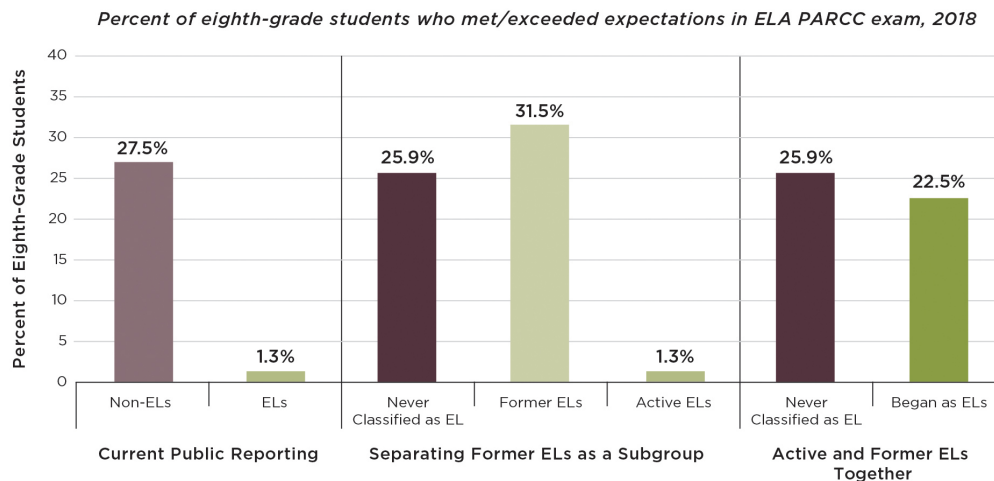
The most critical findings, per the Consortium, are outlined below.

- Publicly-reported statistics often appear as though ELs are behind non-ELs. On average, from kindergarten to eighth grade, students who began as ELs actually had similar achievement and growth, and higher attendance, compared to students never classified as ELs. They also had similar Freshman OnTrack rates in ninth grade.
- More than 76 percent of CPS students who began kindergarten as ELs became proficient in English by fifth grade.
- The nearly one-quarter of ELs who did not attain English proficiency by the end of fifth grade were unlikely to reach proficiency before high school. Only an additional two percent reached proficiency by eighth grade for a total of 78 percent of ELs achieving English proficiency before entering high school.
- Students who began as ELs and demonstrated English proficiency by eighth grade had higher attendance, math test scores, and core course grades than their peers who were never classified as ELs; reading test scores and Freshman OnTrack rates were similar.
- About one-fifth of students who began kindergarten as ELs did not reach English proficiency by the end of eighth grade. This group of students was more likely to be male, much more likely to be identified as needing special education services, and in first grade, had significantly lower scores on the state English proficiency exam (ACCESS).
- ELs who did not achieve English proficiency by eighth grade also struggled with declining attendance by the middle grades, considerably lower grade point averages, and lower Freshman OnTrack rates.
- Future research could develop a method of identifying this group of students early on so that educators could design and implement more effective supports.^x

4. For more information about bilingual education in Chicago Public Schools, see Appendix A

Implications

Reporting Only Active English Learners Misses How Well Most English Learners Perform



The chart displayed above depicts three different ways that English Learner performance data can be displayed. In the first column, the English Learner subgroup consists only of students who are actively receiving services and who are not yet English-proficient. This is how data has historically been reported showing a significant achievement gap between English Learners and non-English Learners. In the second column, a new subgroup is included, which depicts the performance of students who began as English Learners but reached English proficiency by eighth grade (i.e. former English Learners). The performance of former English Learners is *better* than students who were never classified as English Learners. The final column aggregates the data between active and former English Learners into one subgroup, which lessens the achievement gap.

Many students who begin as English Learners perform well over time, but current public reporting lacks the rigor and nuance to reflect their true overall performance. These methods do not follow students once they reach English proficiency and leave services. The study exposes a massive, critical difference in academic performance once the distinction is made between former English Learners and active English Learners.

By solely focusing on active English Learners, accountability systems have unfairly depicted student performance in schools with large numbers of English Learners.

Another implication of the study has to do with the fact that nearly one-quarter of English Learners did not achieve English proficiency by eighth grade. (These students are commonly referred to as long-term English Learners.) They typically struggled with attendance, grades, standardized achievement, and 9th grade OnTrack metrics. The study exposes the need to develop a method of early identification for these long-term English Learners and determine appropriate supports.

It is important to note that the data from the Chicago Public Schools English Learners occurred within a state context that has consistently mandated bilingual education for more than forty years. Many of these students benefited from native language instruction, qualified bilingual educators, and financial support for their services.



Policy Recommendations

Recommendation	Rationale
Monitor Progress of Children’s Language Proficiency	Federal ESSA guidelines for state accountability, state departments of education, and local school leaders must include monitoring the progress of children’s English language proficiency in the early years. According to the study, English Learners who are at academic risk can be identified as early as first grade through English language proficiency data. Districts should therefore identify and support these students as early as possible. This will help provide a holistic view of a bilingual student’s performance in areas including native language development, early literacy, and early numeracy. Research has long contended that intervening as early as possible provides the maximum benefit for long-term achievement. ^{xi}
Data Collection	Federal ESSA guidelines for state accountability plans and local school district data analysis must include the collection of longitudinal data through high school of English Learners even after they are English proficient and no longer receiving services. A complete understanding of the quality of an ESL education, bilingual education, or dual-language program requires more than just cross-sectional data from year-to-year. A comprehensive look at English Learners’ achievement must go beyond one-point-in-time standardized test scores.
Invest in English Learner Programming	State departments of education must provide adequate and consistent financial investment in English Learner programming. Part of the success of the bilingual programs in Chicago Public Schools is that there has been stable bilingual programming with appropriate and adequate investment of resources. Consistent policies set the groundwork for this success.
Invest in Bilingual Educators	State departments of education must increase investments in building pipelines of qualified bilingual educators. A growing body of research contends that the most important factor influencing English Learner achievement is access to certified and endorsed qualified bilingual education teachers. ^{xii}

Conclusion

For far too long, bilingual education has been perceived as a remedial program and English Learners have been viewed as a deficit. The groundbreaking University of Chicago Consortium on School Research study presents empirical evidence that English Learners do, in fact, perform well academically.

There is tremendous potential if education policies, practices, and accountability systems are informed by empirical research. This brief provides concrete recommendations on how educators and decisionmakers can revise policy to measure the true progress of English learners and shift the broader narrative to one that is asset-based.



Appendix A

LANGUAGE PROGRAMMING IN CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) offers two bilingual education program models: Transitional Bilingual Education and Dual Language Education for English Learners. CPS has focused on expanding dual-language programs over the past decade, and now more than 40 schools offer the program in elementary, middle, and high schools. Dual-language programs offer instruction bilingually in English and a language other than English (for CPS, Spanish) in order to develop high levels of biliteracy, cross-cultural competencies, and academic achievement. CPS also offers:

- **Transitional Bilingual Education:** Support in native language instruction and English as a Second Language (ESL) beginning in preschool until a student reaches English language proficiency.
- **Transitional Programs of Instruction:** ESL direct instruction, often used with students who speak low-incident languages and may include some resources in the native language.
- **World Language Education program:** Any student can opt to enroll in one of the elementary language academies or chose to study one of many languages in the high school years.

Sources

- i. Illinois State Board of Education (2020). Illinois Reportcard
- ii. Chicago Public Schools Demographics. Accessed on August 17, 2020: <https://www.cps.edu/about/district-data/demographics/>
- iii. De la Torre, M., A. Blanchard, E. Allensworth, S. Freire (2019) "English Learners in Chicago Public Schools," University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. Accessed July 2, 2020: <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/English-learners-in-Chicago-public-schools>
- iv. Gándara, P., Maxwell-Jolly, J., & Driscoll, A. (2005). Listening to teachers of English language learners: A survey of California teachers' challenges, experiences professional development needs. Policy Analysis for California Education, PACE (NJ1). Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED49170>; Lucas, T. (2011). Teacher preparation for linguistically diverse classrooms: A resource for teacher educators. New York: Routledge; Menken, K., & Antuñez, B. (2001). An overview of the preparation and certification of teachers working with limited English proficient (LEP) students. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.
- v. Gándara, P. and M.E. Zarate (2014), "Seizing the Opportunity to Narrow the Achievement Gap for English Learners." Accessed on April 29, 2020: <https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/language-minority-students/seizing-the-opportunity-to-narrow-the-achievement-gap-for-english-learners-research-based-recommendations-for-the-use-of-lcff-funds-1>
- vi. Gándara, P. and M.E. Zarate (2014), "Seizing the Opportunity to Narrow the Achievement Gap for English Learners." Accessed on April 29, 2020: <https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/language-minority-students/seizing-the-opportunity-to-narrow-the-achievement-gap-for-english-learners-research-based-recommendations-for-the-use-of-lcff-funds-1>
- vii. Carnock, Janie (2018) "Rethinking English Learner Data: Illinois' approach to EL issues represents a compelling example of trying to navigate data quandaries thoughtfully." Accessed on March 12, 2019: <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/policy-papers/rethinking-english-learner-data/>
- viii. de Jong, E. J., Harper, C., A., & Coady, M. R. (2013). Enhanced knowledge and skills for elementary mainstream teachers of English language learners. *Theory into Practice*, 52(2), 89-97; Lucas, T., & Grinberg, J. (2008). Responding to the linguistic reality of mainstream classrooms: Preparing all teachers to teach English language learners. In M. Cochran-Smith, S. Feiman-Nemser, & J. McIntyre (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring issues in changing contexts* (pp. 606-636). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- ix. Hopkins, M. (2012). Building bridges through bilingualism: Parent-teacher communication in the southwest. Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Vancouver, British Columbia; Olivos, E. M., Jimenez-Castellanos, O., & Ochoa, A. M. (2011). *Bicultural parent engagement: Advocacy and empowerment*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- x. Flores, B. B., Sheets, R. H., & Clark, E. R. (Eds.). (2011). *Teacher preparation for bilingual student populations: Educar para transformar*. New York, NY: Routledge; Maxwell-Jolly, J. & Gándara, P. (2012) Teaching all our students well. Teachers and teaching to close the academic achievement gap. In T. Timar & J. Maxwell-Jolly (Eds.) *Connecting the dots and closing the gap: Multiple perspectives for closing the academic achievement gap*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

- xi. Meltzer, J., & Hamann, E. (2004). Meeting the needs of adolescent English language learners for literacy development and content area learning, Part 1: Focus on motivation and engagement. Providence, RI: The Education Alliance at Brown University; Hopkins, M., Martinez-Wenzl, M., Aldana, U. S., & Gándara, P. (2013). Cultivating capital: Latino newcomer young men in a U.S. urban high school. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 44(3), 286-303. doi: 10.1111/aeq.12026; Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- xii. Gándara, P., Maxwell-Jolly, J., & Driscoll, A. (2005). Listening to teachers of English language learners: A survey of California teachers' challenges, experiences professional development needs. *Policy Analysis for California Education*, PACE (NJ1). Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED49170>; Lucas, T. (2011). *Teacher preparation for linguistically diverse classrooms: A resource for teacher educators*. New York: Routledge; Menken, K., & Antuñez, B. (2001). *An overview of the preparation and certification of teachers working with limited English proficient (LEP) students*. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.
- xiii. Gándara, P. & Contreras, F. (2009). *The Latino education crisis: The consequences of failed social policies*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- xiv. ISBE (2019). *English Learners in Illinois SY2017-18 Statistical Report*.
- xv. de la Torre, M., A. Blanchard, E. Allensworth, and S. Freire (2019) "English Learners in Chicago Public Schools. A New Perspective." University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. Accessed May 11, 2020: <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2019-12/English%20Learners%20in%20CPS-Dec2019-Consortium.pdf>
- xvi. Accessed on August 6, 2020: <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/English-learners-in-Chicago-public-schools>
- xvii. Aigner-Treworgy, S., E. Regenstein, & R. Eddy (2016). "Early Learning User's Guide for Illinois School Boards." Ounce of Prevention Fund and Illinois Association of School Board Members. Accessed on January 3, 2019: <https://www.theounce.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/IASB-Ounce-EL-Users-Guide-full.pdf>
- xviii. Gándara, P. and M.E. Zarate (2014), "Seizing the Opportunity to Narrow the Achievement Gap for English Learners." Accessed on April 29, 2020: <https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/language-minority-students/seizing-the-opportunity-to-narrow-the-achievement-gap-for-english-learners-research-based-recommendations-for-the-use-of-lcff-funds-1>