

The Achievement Progress of English Learner Students

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The Need

With both English learner (EL) and former EL student populations continuing to grow in U.S. schools, policymakers and practitioners at all levels have increased impetus to better understand and serve these students so as to improve their achievement and narrow the academic gap between them and their peers whose home language is English. To that end, members of the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) English Learner Alliance, who represent Arizona, Nevada, and Utah, requested that REL West research the patterns of achievement progress of EL student subgroups in their respective states, over time and disaggregated by student characteristics.

Study Overview

The Achievement Progress of English Learner Students examines the progress of students who were designated as English learners in 2006–07, tracking them from that year through 2011–12 in the three states, looking specifically at their development in English fluency and in mastering core academic content in English language arts and math.

Researchers tracked the students in three cohorts: students who, at study’s start, were enrolled in the state’s public schools in grades K, 3, and 6. Arizona and Utah analyses include EL students statewide; Nevada’s analysis includes EL students in the state’s two largest school districts, Clark County School District and Washoe County School District, which together serve nearly 90 percent of the state’s EL students.

Researchers reviewed the percentages of the EL students in each cohort who reached three academic milestones during the study period:

1. Scoring at or above the level on the state English language proficiency test that is required for being reclassified as fluent English proficient.
2. Passing the English language arts content test for the first time.
3. Passing the math content test for the first time.



The study examined how meeting these criteria varied by students’ English language proficiency level at the start of the study, eligibility for special education services, eligibility for free and reduced-priced school meals (a proxy for low-income status), gender, and grade level in 2006–07.

Findings Across the Study States

Although the research examined the EL students under different state contexts, student outcomes were strikingly similar across the three states:

- ◇ EL students in lower grades did better than EL students in higher grades on subject-matter tests.
- ◇ EL students who were eligible for special education services had lower passing rates on all tests than EL students who were not eligible. This was especially true for EL students who received special education services in the grade-6 cohort. These older students had the lowest passing rates and

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mostly remained classified as EL students through the end of 2011-12 (grade 11).

- ◇ EL students who started the study at lower English language proficiency levels generally had lower passing rates on all tests than students who had started at higher proficiency levels.
- ◇ EL students who were eligible for free and reduced-price school meals scored lower on all tests than their EL peers who were not eligible.
- ◇ Male EL students had lower passing rates than female EL students on the English language proficiency and English language arts tests, but scored about the same—mostly slightly higher—on the math test.
- ◇ Annual progress in English proficiency varied widely across EL subgroups based on different initial English proficiency levels. A majority of the EL students did not meet the timeline for reclassification as expected by state’s annual measurable achievement objectives.

Practice and Policy Considerations

While some instructional and assessment approaches have shifted in each state since the study period of 2006-07 through 2011-12, the consistency of findings across such diverse contexts underscores the challenge of successfully meeting the needs of EL students. The findings also hint at an approach that might move us closer to success. As noted earlier, the study shows that there is great variation in the achievement by some EL subgroups, suggesting that, when

it comes to serving these students, differentiation is essential—and especially so for certain subgroups identified as being among the poorest performers of the groups, such as EL students with disabilities and EL students from low-income households.

Considerations:

- ◇ Differentiated support by students’ English language proficiency levels may be needed to help students at the lowest proficiency levels succeed on current and future subject-matter tests.
- ◇ Although all EL students who are eligible for special education services will likely need differentiated supports to be successful, further research needs to be done to determine the most effective supports for EL students by disability category.
- ◇ Further investigation into more effective practices for improving the achievement of EL students—especially older EL students—who are eligible for special education services also appears warranted.
- ◇ More flexible objectives and/or timelines for reclassification of English proficiency that consider the starting proficiency level and grade level of each EL student may be helpful.

The complete study reports can be found online at <https://relwest.wested.org/resources/225>.

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