

Issue Brief: English Language Learners

States and schools are tracking the progress of non-native English speakers more closely than ever before, thanks in part to No Child Left Behind. These students are often called English language learners (ELLs); other terms include limited English proficient (LEP), English as a second language (ESL) and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Whatever you call these students, their population is booming. American public schools enrolled 5 million in 2006, a 57 percent increase over 10 years. Now one U.S. student in 10 is an English language learner. And they're no longer isolated to California, Florida and the Southwest. For example, ELL enrollments in South Carolina, Kentucky and Indiana are increasing faster than anywhere else. Schools with emerging immigrant populations are having trouble meeting the need.

Enrollment Data

Tracking ELLs shows new sprouts of ethnicity before they bloom. Think of this: Hundreds of languages are spoken in U.S. schools. One of every four elementary ELLs is an immigrant; two of five secondary students are. This means stories not just about academics but also culture. Your districts and state keep enrollment numbers, and the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition is one of the best national references.

Assessments

ELLs take an ELL-specific English test to assess their competency in the language. They also usually take the general state test. Some states give these tests in students' native languages or modify them to make the English easier, but most do not. There is concern that the tests, therefore, are not assessing reading and math ability, as they are supposed to, but rather how proficient a child is in English. Schools must prove to the feds that their ELLs are making progress in both the state content tests and the English competency exams.

Quality of instruction

Federal law requires an ELL-certified teacher in an ELL classroom. And most states have standards that govern the maximum student load per teacher. But it can be hard to find enough certified ELL teachers. Some districts skimp by rotating a few to several different classrooms each day. Ask for a list of teachers, assignments and certifications from your state or district. Compare it to the total number of ELL students in the school.

There is no consensus on the "right" way to teach English language learners. It can be politically unpopular to teach immigrants in their own language, and some states and districts have limited or banned such instruction in favor of English immersion programs. Dual-language programs are popular in some places. In these classrooms, students learn academic subjects both in English and a foreign language—the idea being that they learn content as they learn the new language.

Every state has different standards for enrolling, testing, teaching and moving ELLs into mainstream classes. The quality of ELL teaching varies greatly by district and even classroom. Sit in the back of classrooms and watch. Sometimes ELLs are taught in separate classrooms all day;

NATIONAL
EWAA
Education Writers Association

sometimes they are pulled out for special services only, occasionally. They may be expected to follow the same curriculum as everyone else, or they may receive a special curriculum. These differences can be a matter of controversy worth investigating. But in every case, the teacher should be able to tell you which students are at what ELL levels, and how she adapts instruction so they learn science, math, history *and* English.

Schools struggle to engage parents who don't speak English, and those parents struggle to help their children academically. Seek parent contacts through ELL teachers, the school's or school system's community liaison (if it has one), local advocacy groups and the students themselves.

Sources

For demographic and other information on English language learners, try the **National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition**, **Pew Hispanic Center**, the **Civil Rights Project** at UCLA, the **U.S. Office of English Language Acquisition** and the **Intercultural Development Research Associatio**