



The Education Trust–West

THE LANGUAGE OF REFORM: ENGLISH LEARNERS IN CALIFORNIA'S SHIFTING EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California is a state rich in linguistic and cultural diversity. Nearly 45 percent of Californians speak a language other than English at home, and in our schools, nearly 1 out of 4 students is learning English. California's diversity, economic strength, and geography have drawn families to the state for generations and have compelled them to make the Golden State their home. These families and individuals have fueled California's growth and have positioned the state as an economic powerhouse and world leader.

At the same time, California's schools wrestle with how best to serve this diverse population. English learners often face ill-prepared teachers, less rigorous coursework, and insufficient academic supports. On top of the linguistic barriers they face, about 85 percent of California's English learners live in low-income households.

Students who are learning English when they enter California schools, particularly those who are also low income, are less likely to demonstrate proficiency on the state standards, are more likely to repeat grades, are less likely to enroll in college-preparatory coursework in high school, and are more likely to drop out of school. It is not uncommon for English learners to spend half a dozen years in California schools without being reclassified as English proficient.

But it doesn't have to be this way. In this report, we highlight a number of California districts that are breaking this pattern. Through an analysis of unified district performance, we identify districts at the top of various peer groupings based on certain student demographic characteristics. We do so by considering performance relative to four indicators:

- *the proficiency of English learners and students who are Reclassified-Fluent-English-Proficient (RFEP), across three grade levels, on the English Language Arts portion of the California Standards Tests*
- *annual progression on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), which measures English fluency*
- *long-term English learner (LTEL) rates, which measure the percent of students who remain English learners for five years or more, drawing upon federal data*
- *reclassification rates at the elementary, middle, and high school levels*

OUR DEFINITIONS

ENGLISH LEARNER (EL)

A student who speaks a primary language other than English and who lacks certain English language skills

RECLASSIFIED-FLUENT-ENGLISH-PROFICIENT (RFEP) STUDENT

A student who was previously an English learner but who has met certain standards for English proficiency

"EVER-ENGLISH LEARNER" STUDENT

A student who is currently an English learner or who was an English learner but has been reclassified as Fluent-English-Proficient

LONG-TERM ENGLISH LEARNER (LTEL)

A student who has been an English learner for five or more years



THE LANGUAGE OF REFORM: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through our analysis, we identified 11 districts that perform well on multiple indicators. We talked with educators and field experts to surface practices and strategies that have contributed to positive results for English learners. While there is no consistent formula for success across these districts, common themes have emerged. These districts:

- *believe that students' native languages are cultural and linguistic assets*
- *offer professional learning opportunities and collaboration time to ensure all teachers are equipped with the strategies and skills needed to support English learners*
- *offer English learners access to a full Common Core-aligned curriculum that includes rigorous expectations, frequent formative assessments, and college-preparatory courses*
- *engage parents and forge strong home-school connections*

Much work remains to ensure all English learners can access the supports and structures necessary for success in school and beyond. The following

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recommendations for district and state leaders help address potential barriers to English learners' success:

1. Ensure English learners have full access to rigorous content and college-preparatory coursework aligned with the Common Core, English Language Development (ELD), and Next Generation Science standards, including the "A-G" courses at the high school level that are necessary for acceptance into the state's public universities.
2. Train teachers to support language development within the context of the core curriculum, not just in targeted ELD classes.
3. Monitor early implementation of the new Smarter Balanced formative and summative assessments to understand their impact on English learners.
4. When reporting test data on English learners' achievement, disaggregate results for long-term English learners.
5. When reporting data on English learners' achievement, focus on student growth, not just overall proficiency.
6. Ensure the needs of English learners are adequately addressed within Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs).
7. Support biliteracy as a viable instructional program so that districts may provide a range of language instruction options for students and their families.
8. Create clearer, more uniform statewide reclassification standards and guidelines.
9. Modify the Local Control Funding Formula to allow reclassified English learners to generate supplemental and concentration funds.

Addressing these policy and implementation challenges will better equip California districts, schools, and classrooms to support students who are learning English. Coupled with the opportunities that Common Core and increased funding bring, we are optimistic that more districts will meet the academic and linguistic needs of English learners.

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