Pathways to Fluency
Examining the Link between Language Reclassification Policies and Student Success

May 2014

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with research support from Joseph M. Hayes

Supported with funding from the Donald Bren Foundation and the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund

SUMMARY

Nearly 25 percent of the students attending California’s K–12 public schools are English Learners (ELs). Their EL designation is intended to last only as long as they need supplemental language support to succeed in school. Some students attain English fluency quickly, but others remain ELs for six years or longer. Because outcomes for students reclassified as English proficient are much better than for students who remain ELs, policymakers are seeking answers to questions about how quickly EL students should be reclassified, whether reclassification criteria should be standardized, and the links between reclassification and academic success.

These issues are especially urgent now that California is implementing a major overhaul of K–12 standards, testing, and funding—as well as many elements of EL instruction. Because the new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) provides additional funding to districts with high numbers of ELs, there is more interest than ever in making sure that districts have the right incentives to help these students succeed.

In this report, we examine reclassification policies and the academic performance of ELs and former ELs in the two largest school districts in California, Los Angeles Unified and San Diego Unified, which together serve approximately 15 percent of the state’s EL students. Using longitudinal student data over ten years, we can follow a cohort of 2nd grade students through their 12th grade year.

We find that students reclassified in elementary school (grades 2–5) have very strong academic outcomes throughout middle and high school. These students perform as well as or
better than native English speakers on state standardized tests and are as likely or more likely to make on-time grade progress. There is no evidence that the removal of language supports for ELs who are reclassified hurts their academic progress relative to that of native English speakers.

Reclassification criteria in both San Diego and Los Angeles are more stringent than minimum guidelines recommended by the State Board of Education (SBE). These more rigorous criteria are associated with somewhat improved outcomes for students but also lower reclassification rates.

Despite differences in reclassification criteria between the two districts, the factors that predict successful outcomes for EL students reclassified in elementary school in Los Angeles and San Diego are remarkably similar. The two standardized tests currently used to reclassify students—the California Standards Test (CST) and the California English Language Development Test (CELDT)—are individually strong predictors of future academic outcomes such as performance on middle school standardized tests and the high school exit exam. Elementary school marks are less useful as predictors.

Our findings lead us to recommend the following:

• Use the CELDT as the sole assessment for reclassification decisions until the CST replacement is available. More generally, consider allowing districts to reclassify students on the basis of just one test.

• In designing new English language development (ELD) tests and reclassification standards, consider the relative rigor of reading and writing requirements—our data suggest that the current CELDT writing requirement is relatively easy in comparison to the reading requirement.

• Reconsider the use of reclassification criteria that are more rigorous than those suggested in the State Board of Education guidelines. We find evidence in the state’s two largest school districts that English learners would benefit as a group from being reclassified slightly sooner, through an easing of reclassification standards.

• Consider a uniform standard for reclassification across school districts. Evaluating districts’ successes with ELs is very difficult when classification and reclassification policies vary.

Over the next few years, many elements of EL instruction, funding, and testing will be changing. Many policymakers have long been frustrated with the pace at which EL students are reclassified as fully English proficient and are concerned that the additional funds directed toward ELs under the LCFF might increase district incentives to delay reclassification for students on the cusp of English fluency. This is an ideal time to draw lessons from the recent past to inform state and local reclassification policies in 2014 and beyond.