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The Progress of English Learners in California Schools

Well over a million students who are unfamiliar with the English language attend California schools, constituting about one-quarter of the state's K–12 population. Although California represents around 12 percent of the nation's population, its schools contain more than 40 percent of the nation's English learners (ELs). Most (85%) speak Spanish, but over 50 other languages have been identified.

In 2001, California implemented the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) to measure English proficiency. Students who do not speak English at home are required to take the exam. Those who do not score at proficient levels are considered English learners and must retake the test annually until they are designated Fluent English Proficient (FEP).

EL students' test scores in academic subjects consistently fall below those of students who are familiar with English. Given that proficiency in English is vital to success in academic subjects and in the workforce, both state and federal policymakers consider English proficiency a major goal for EL students. The federal government's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 establishes mandates for improving both the number of students achieving *gains* in English proficiency and the number who are reclassified as FEP.

In their report, *English Learners in California Schools*, Christopher Jepsen and Shelley de Alth analyze how effective California schools are in achieving both NCLB goals. They examine the *school-level* characteristics that seem to affect the percentage of EL students who are reclassified as FEP, and the *student-level* characteristics that appear to affect gains in achievement on the CELDT.

At the school level, they find that academic achievement plays an important role in reclassification rates. They also observe lower rates of reclassification in schools that have a high percentage of EL students and more homogeneity in a language (such as Spanish) spoken at the school. They suggest that this homogeneity may demonstrate the effects of EL peers on reclassification and that if more students in the school spoke various languages as opposed to a single foreign language, reclassification rates would be higher. At the student level, the authors find that although Spanish is the dominant foreign language in California schools (and is more like English than most of the other languages), Spanish speakers do not demonstrate the greatest gains in English proficiency. Speakers of Korean, Mandarin, and Russian have the highest CELDT gains. These students tend to have well-educated and high-earning parents. Hmong and Khmer (Cambodian) speakers show much lower growth rates on the CELDT, and their parents tend to have lower education and income than parents of children speaking other languages.

Student Demographics

As shown in the table, EL students are present throughout the state, but some regions have substantially more than others. For example, the South Coast (Los Angeles, Orange, and Ventura Counties) is home to nearly half of the EL students in California. And as shown in the figure, EL students are concentrated in the earlier grades.

Number and Location of EL Students, Fall 2003

Region	No. of EL Students	Total Enrollment	% of EL Students
Bay Area	206,573	974,280	21.2
Central Coast	69,618	228,993	30.4
Far North	20,949	203,871	10.3
Inland Empire	173,828	783,941	22.2
Sacramento Metro	58,718	355,380	16.5
San Diego	139,081	534,471	26.0
San Joaquin Valley	201,565	786,172	25.6
Sierras	741	28,008	2.6
South Coast	793,165	2,403,653	33.0

SOURCE: Fall 2003 CELDT.

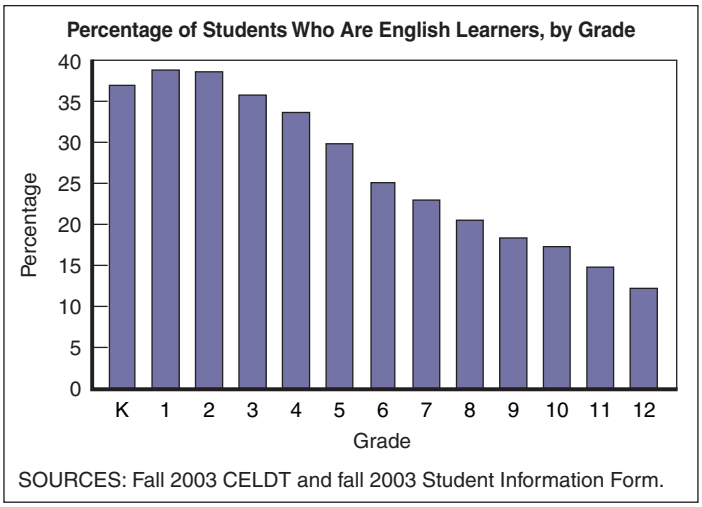
EL students are present in school districts throughout the state and, in most regions, represent from one-quarter to one-third of the student population.

A commonly held belief is that EL students have limited English skills because they are recent immigrants. However, most EL students (85%) are born in the United States of

immigrant parents. Since the passage of Proposition 227 in June 1998, which mandated English immersion classes rather than bilingual education, most of these students are enrolled in English Language Development or Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English programs. Only 6.5 percent are taught academic subjects in their primary language (i.e., through bilingual education).

Reclassification

To reclassify a student from EL to FEP, school districts use a combination of CELDT scores, academic achievement, teacher evaluation, and parental consultation. However, districts have great latitude in how they weigh these factors. For example, only about one-quarter of the English learners meeting board guidelines for reclassification on the CELDT are actually reclassified, suggesting that the CELDT scores



More than a third of all students below the fifth grade in California schools lack English proficiency.

are only one criterion used for reclassification and that district policies play a large role. Policies aimed at improving both CELDT and academic performance are likely to improve reclassification rates.

The authors also point out that the accountability standards in NCLB create counterincentives when it comes to reclassifying EL students: The standards mandate increases in reclassification rates but also hold EL students to the same performance standards as English-speaking students on academic content tests. The authors suggest that policies directed toward reclassification should attempt to resolve this incentive discrepancy and minimize the burden on EL students when meeting accountability targets. Additionally, if districts applied state reclassification guidelines more uniformly instead of adopting individual standards, the process of reclassification would be easier to monitor and to effectively modify at the state level.

CELDT Growth

The authors found that female students have higher growth rates on the test than male students, especially in elementary school. Students receiving special education services have substantially lower growth than other students, but this result likely suggests that this population is difficult to educate, not that special education services themselves have a negative effect. Students in bilingual education programs have lower CELDT growth than students in other programs, but again this may result from the placement of more at-risk students in bilingual education programs. Students who receive Title I compensatory funding for disadvantaged students also show less improvement on the CELDT from year to year than nondisadvantaged students. Finally, access to teachers who are authorized to teach EL students corresponds with slight improvements in CELDT growth, but other teacher characteristics seem to have little if any effect.

Policy Implications

This study identifies several categories of students who achieve lower CELDT gains than others. Understanding these differences in student demographics could help policymakers target EL students who are in need of special assistance and who may require additional resources or attention to achieve proficiency in English. EL students in secondary grades (6 through 12) are one such group that may benefit from a special focus because of their lower proficiency growth.

Policies aimed at improving CELDT performance are likely to improve reclassifications rates as well. Adequate resources are also important for reclassification. Schools with large EL populations must be able to undertake the individual, comprehensive review process needed for reclassification. Additionally, English learners must have access to teachers authorized to teach them to prepare for reclassification. Districts collect much more detailed data than the state does but have few resources available for research. Thus, the state should consider ways to support and use research with district-level data as well as continue to improve links between state-level education datasets.

This research brief summarizes a report by Christopher Jepsen and Shelley de Alth, English Learners in California Schools *(2005, 136 pp., $12.00, ISBN 1-58213-104-X). The report may be ordered online at www.ppic.org or by phone at (800) 232-5343 or (415) 291-4400 [outside mainland U.S.]. A copy of the full text is also available at www.ppic.org. The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.*

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