

Reading A

English Learners Are Not Only English Learners – the Diversity within

An "English Learner" is a student who has enrolled in our schools from a family where a language other than English is spoken, and upon an initial ELPAC language assessment is determined to be sufficiently limited in English proficiency that he/she is deemed unable to access an English-taught curriculum. They are all labeled "English Learners", characterized by the shared fact that they aren't yet proficient in English. The approach to meeting their needs in schools is shaped by federal civil rights law and the Supreme Court *Lau v. Nichols* decision, which defined the needs of this population in terms of overcoming a language barrier to equal educational access – assigning to schools the affirmative obligation to support students to overcome the language barrier and provide access to equal educational opportunity. Yet there is no single "English Learner" profile. There is enormous diversity within the English Language Learner population. Student-responsive schooling begins with understanding this diversity and committing to understand the range of challenges and types of needs within the English Learner group.

Clearly English learners differ in their English proficiency, as measured in the annual assessments of English language proficiency and their designation at a specific level that informs instruction and placement – as well as in the strength of their home language. Depending upon their degree of English proficiency, and the strength of their home language as well, what they require by way of supports will differ. But the language issue is just one part of how to understand what they need from their schools. There is a host of unique needs and challenges facing English Learners, and issues particular to the experience of immigration and the reality of straddling cultures and nations. All of these needs must be addressed if English Learners are to access the curriculum, become full participants in our schools, and learn to the high standards required. Becoming a "needs responsive" school, as called for by Principle #1 of the English Learner Roadmap requires, therefore, knowing who our students are.

English learners are either immigrants themselves, or the children of immigrants – coming from every corner of the world, from many cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds. Most EL students have at least one parent who is an immigrant. Often, this means that their family experience and norms are rooted in another nation and culture, and they experience the complexities of being first- or second-generation Americans and forging binational and bicultural identities. They arrive at all ages with different levels of prior education. They speak close to 100 languages, although the vast majority is Spanish speaking. Some come from rural and isolated communities. Others come from major urban and major industrialized centers of the globe. Some come fleeing wars and political repression; others are reuniting with family, and still others are accompanying family members seeking work. Some live in the United States for a while, return to their homeland for a period of time, and then come back - transnational commuters. The needs that generate from each of these circumstances vary greatly. Those who are immigrant newcomers face making an adjustment to a new culture and language, but depending in great part on the above factors, some are far more at risk of failure than others. And those born in the United States to immigrant parents are straddling cultures and languages. Immigration trends shift. The student population you have this year may be very

unlike the students who enroll next year. The task of "knowing" your English Learners is, therefore, a continuous process.

One-quarter of the world's population is in migration - voluntary or not. Wars, natural disasters, political repression, economic devastation result in people leaving their homelands and seeking safer, more secure, more survivable conditions elsewhere. These conditions are not always predictable. The flow of immigrants to the United States has been continuous, but the composition of that flow is subject to change by an earthquake in one place, a civil war in another. Schools that are or have adjusted to Mexican farmworker immigrants by building up a Spanish bilingual program and migrant program suddenly find themselves with an influx of Russians or Somalis. Schools that adjusted to having newcomer refugees built newcomer services, but now find that there are few newly arriving students and that most of their English Learners are children of immigrants, born in the United States. As new populations arrive, there is new learning to be done about the cultures, the historic process that led to immigration, the needs of the new communities.

For all of these reasons, the process of "knowing" your English Learner population must be built into the life and culture of the school. Schools need to design their programs and responses around the needs of the students in their classrooms. Teachers need to know who their English learners are, and the experiences, factor and stories that shape the assets they bring to school and what they need by way of support. There is no one-size fits all approach. What one school has in place may not be sufficient or needed by another school – what one classroom of English learners needs may be quite different from another.

Educators throughout California search for effective ways of improving student achievement and engagement. Sharing ideas, models and experiences with others is an important component of finding solutions – but caution is advised. What works in one community may not be appropriate or sufficient in another. A school serving a mix of many different language and cultural groups faces different challenges and needs in grouping students and mounting a program than a school serving 85% Latino students. A newcomer class or program may be absolutely essential in one school, but not very useful in a community where English Learners are mostly born in the United States, already orally fluent in English and past the culture shock of moving from one nation to another. Resources are wasted and student needs are bypassed when programs are created that do not fit the needs of a particular school community. And students are ill-served when assumptions are made about their needs simply because they have the designation as an English learner. In schools where staff has less experience and expertise about English Learners, English Learners tend to be lumped together in discussions about programs and planning. In effective schools for English Learners, educators are aware of the diversity and complexity of their student population, and push for clarity. When there are discussions of English Learners, it is helpful for leadership to push for more clarity, asking questions such as: “Which English Learners are you speaking about? Our newly arrived students? Our Armenian speakers? The students who cannot read or write in their native language? Or the ones who arrived knowing several languages and were able to waltz through advanced courses in English?” Pushing for clarity, and being able to produce data that monitors

the progress and success of different groups of English Learners will go a long way toward supporting an effective program and being a needs-responsive school.

Reflection: What do I know/Want to know about the English Learners in my classroom?

What do I know about the English Learners in my classroom?

Use the provided space to answer this question. For example: What do you know about where their families immigrated from? What do you know about their immigration experiences? Their English fluency? Their home language? Prior schooling?

What would I like to know? What would you like to find out about your English Learners?

Use the provided space to answer this question.

Reading B:

Typologies of High School English Learner Students

The richness and diversity of the English Learner population makes clear that this is not a homogeneous group and should not be served as such. To build an appropriate program for English Learners, educators need to look beyond individual student characteristics and create typologies of academic needs among the school's English Learner population. There are ways of "clustering" students into typologies that can help in planning instruction, programs and services. In elementary schools, it is essential to know who the newcomer students are and their educational backgrounds, and to monitor students who become at risk of becoming Long Term English Learners. Several additional distinctions and typologies have been found particularly useful for secondary schools: the well-educated newcomer; the newcomer who is a Student with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE); the long-term English Learner (LTEL) student; and the Fluent English Proficient student who is still struggling and needs support.

- **Newcomers**

Some English Learners are newly arrived in the United States. Grappling with culture shock, newcomers need special orientation and transitional support in elementary school, transitional classes in secondary schools. They may arrive mid- semester as well. Their engagement and success in school is deeply impacted by generally little or no English language proficiency, and entering U.S. schools where the academic curriculum content seldom is aligned with what students had been learning in their home country. Newcomers include students who have strong prior academic backgrounds and strong literacy in their home language, as well as students who may have little foundational literacy in their home language and interrupted or minimal prior schooling. All face the challenge of adjusting to a new culture. For those who arrive in elementary school grades, it helps to provide orientation support, facilitate social connections, provide ELD with basic survival English in addition to strong scaffolded support for comprehension and participation. For those who arrive in the high school years, the challenge of gaining enough proficiency in English in order to meet high school graduation requirements can be enormous. They also need cultural orientation, support for culture shock, facilitated social connections, basic survival English, and attention to specific academic/educational challenges.

Well-educated newcomer students, who arrive in the United States with excellent education and preparation that may even exceed the expectations of U.S. schools often have the ability to whiz through typical U.S. high school curriculum with apparent ease. This can be the case even if the students come with little to no English language proficiency. Their effective study habits, foundation of strong content knowledge, strong motivation, high sense of efficacy and self-esteem as a learner facilitates learning difficult content in English. They can utilize resources in their home language (books, internet, etc.) to provide context and background for academic courses, and should not be placed in academic content classes that stall or repeat content they already know simply because their English is not yet developed. With supports (e.g., resource materials, tutoring in their home language, etc.) and with an accelerated sequence of English Language Development classes, these students can make accelerated progress. High level academic courses in home language should be offered where available, but these students can be placed in mainstream English classes with native language support materials and texts and can thrive. If appropriate credit is given for coursework completed in the home country, these students are often able to graduate from high school with their grade level peers.

- **Students with Interrupted Formal Education/Underschooled Students**

Newcomers who arrive in secondary schools with little or no prior schooling or interrupted schooling can face enormous challenges. Typically, they are from rural, impoverished or war-devastated regions of the world, and often have suffered trauma on their journey to the U.S., they may not have basic literacy or may read far below their grade level in their home language. They generally acquire English slowly and require an intensity of approach and support that other English Learners may not. In some cases, they end up placed in classes with students much younger than themselves - in other cases they are placed with their age cohort but the academic level is far over their heads. Both situations can be deeply demoralizing. Every effort should be made to teach literacy in their native language, and to provide options for extended time in high school with fifth and sixth year options to be able to complete requirements for a diploma.

- **Long-term English Learners**

The term "English Learner" often conjures an image of a student who is relatively new to the United States. Yet there is a significant population in most secondary schools of students who are still English Learners but have been in U.S. schools from the primary grades, or even been in U.S. schools from the start of their schooling. Many were born in the United States and schooled here their entire lives. Most are orally fluent in English (it may even be their dominant language by the time they arrive in upper elementary grades and secondary schools), and often their academic subject teachers in middle and high school don't realize they are English Learners, viewing them instead simply as students who are struggling academically. They usually read and write significantly below grade level. Some are discouraged learners - but many are overly optimistic about their prospects of graduating. The formal "definition" of a Long Term English Learner in California is a student who has been in U.S. schools for six or more years and not yet achieved English proficiency sufficient to reclassify. Those English learners who are not progressing, or progressing very slowly towards English proficiency in elementary schools may be at risk of becoming a Long term English Learner.

- **Fluent English Proficient Struggling Student**

The determination of when a student is reclassified as proficient in English is a somewhat arbitrary cut-point that has morphed at different points in our recent history due sometimes to politics and sometimes to emerging technologies for measuring proficiency. These cut points generally reflect a relatively low threshold – particularly if a student is reclassified in lower elementary grades. After a student has been reclassified, schools are legally required to monitor academic progress for up to four years. While many redesignated Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) students do very well, and outscore English Only students, others struggle academically. Secondary schools often find, for example, that for some RFEP students, grades and achievement decline after redesignation, signaling the need for additional support and intervention. A careful examination of language and academic assessments and teacher reports can diagnose areas of weakness in the student's English literacy that suggests specific areas of need. Individualized learning plans may be needed for RFEP students who are struggling academically.