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Academic Progress for English Learners: The Role of School Language Environment and Course Placement in Grades 6-12

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Summary

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Over 40 percent of students in California’s K–12 education system speak a language other than English at home. Almost half of these students are considered English Learners (ELs), meaning they require additional language and academic support to succeed in school. In middle and high school, ELs face the dual challenge of attaining fluency in English while mastering the academic courses leading to a high school diploma.

This report examines two important types of ELs in Los Angeles and San Diego districts’ middle and high schools: long-term ELs, who have spent several years in US schools without being reclassified fluent in English, and late-arriving ELs, who first enroll in the district in grade 6 or higher and who enter with little English fluency. Our analysis uses student data from 2006–07 to 2015–16 and incorporates interviews conducted in 2017–18 with staff and teachers at the two districts.

Overall Trends

- Both districts saw a decline in enrollment of long-term and late-arriving ELs in middle and high schools. A principal reason is that the rate of reclassifying ELs as fluent in English before middle school has risen. Our interviews suggest that lower EL enrollment in middle and high schools may have led districts to group ELs of different English proficiency levels into the same class or to place them in general education coursework without integrated language supports.
- The share of late-arriving ELs within the EL student population has increased. In recent years, many of these students have been refugees or unaccompanied minors. Generally, long-term ELs have more English fluency and higher standardized test scores than late-arriving ELs, but late-arriving ELs make greater academic gains over time.

- Both districts faced challenges in assigning long-term and late-arriving ELs to appropriate English Language Development (ELD) coursework, as defined by district guidelines. In both districts, over 50 percent of long-term and late-arriving ELs were placed correctly in recent years. Many other long-term and late-arriving ELs also received ELD courses, but at too high or low a level, while some did not receive ELD courses at all.

School Language Environment and Course Placement

- Higher proportions of EL students at a school should not be seen as detrimental to the academic performance of fluent English speakers. In both districts, the percentage of ELs at a school was not related to the academic outcomes of native or initially fluent English speakers. We found mixed evidence on the relationship between the percentage of ELs in a school and the academic performance of ELs.
- Long-term ELs who do not take an ELD course have reduced academic performance. In both districts, higher rates of no ELD placement are associated with slower growth for long-term ELs on statewide tests of English language arts. These results suggest that efforts should be made to support ongoing ELD.
- In San Diego, we found some evidence that the presence of EL support teachers at schools led to better grades for long-term and late-arriving ELs, and faster English proficiency growth for late-arriving ELs. These results suggest school-level EL support teachers could help ELs progress more quickly.

Several recent reforms in California aim to improve educational outcomes for English Learners—and there are more changes to come. Given the diversity and size of this student group, it is critical that policymakers take into account the varying needs of English Learners.

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