In the STARlight

Issue 7

A Closer Look at Long Term English Learners: A Focus on New Directions

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Students of Today Achieving Results

In the STARlight

This research report includes data on 175,734 secondary school English Learners in 40 California school districts, and draws upon existing research literature and inquiries conducted in secondary schools.

Definition

A Long Term English Learner (LTEL) is a student who has been enrolled in U.S. schools for more than six years, is no longer progressing towards English proficiency and is struggling academically. They do not have the English skills needed for academic success, and have accumulated major academic gaps in their elementary school and/or middle school years.

Findings

- The majority (59%) of secondary school English Learners are LTELs. English Learners who enroll in kindergarten have a 50% chance of becoming a LTEL.
- Only one in three districts has a formal definition and process for identifying and monitoring services for LTELs. Their definitions vary.
- Factors that contribute towards ELs becoming LTELs include: periods of time in which ELs received no language development support; elementary school curricula that weren't designed for English Learners; enrollment in weak program models and poorly implemented English Learner programs; limited access to the full curriculum; a history of inconsisten placements; placement into interventions designed for native English speakers and treatment like struggling readers rather than addressing ELD needs; social and linguistic isolation; and transnational moves.
- By the time LTELs arrive in secondary schools, they have significant gaps in academic background. They have very weak academic language, and significant deficits in reading and writing skills. The majority of LTELs are "stuck" at Intermediate levels of English proficiency or below. Many have developed habits of non-engagement, passivity and invisibility in school. Most LTELs want to go to college, and are unaware that their academic program is not preparing them for that goal.
- Few districts have formal approaches for serving LTELs. The typical program for LTELs in secondary school is: inappropriate placement in mainstream classes, inadequately prepared teachers, overassignment and inadequate service in intervention and support classes, no participation in electives and limited access to the full curriculum.

Misconceptions

Several misconceptions undergird practices and policies that contribute towards the creation of LTELs.

- *"The sooner and more fully immersed in English, the better. Time spent in the home language takes away from learning*
- *English".* Research consensus is that continued development of the home language in school along with English benefits English proficiency and overall language and literacy and long term academic success.
- *"Just good teaching works for all students. English Learners don't need special curriculum, services or instruction."* Research confirms that English Learners need instruction and materials to be adapted and supplemented to address the language barrier. Oral language development is particularly important for English Learners.
- *"English is more important than other subjects. If they aren't doing well in English, devote more time to English language arts. Science, social studies and art can wait."* And yet academic language is best learned in the context of learning academic content. Language development needs to occur throughout the full curriculum in order to foster academic language and prevent academic gaps.

Promising Approaches

Principles for effectively meeting the needs of LTELs are: urgency, a focus on the district needs of LTELs, strategies to address academic gaps and language development, primary language development, primary language development, rigor and relevance, relationships, and integration without sacrificing access.

The School

A *comprehensive secondary school program* for LTELs includes: a specialized English Language Development course designed for LTELs; clustered placement in rigorous grade-level content classes mixed iwth English proficient students and taught with differentiated SDAIE strategies; explicit language and literacy development across the curriculum; native speakers classes in which the students have the opportunity to develop language and literacy skills in their native language like Spanish for Spanish Speakers (through Advanced Placement levels); systems for monitoring progress and triggering support; and a focus on study skills. Districts piloting these approaches report more student engagement, fewer course failures, increased college-going rates, and improved CAHSEE passage.

The District

It is the *role of the district* to ensure high quality programs for English Learners through: clearly defined pathways and research-based program models; professional development (including coaching and collaborative time) for teachers and administrators; curriculum materials that facilitate differentiation for varying levels of needs; published expectations of growth and achievement for English Learners by length of time in program and by proficiency level; monitoring student progress; articulation between levels; and increased access to preschool programs designed for English Learners.

The State

- Adopt a standard state definition of LTELs and require data collection to support monitoring early identification, and response
- Adopt appropriate and effective English Language Development materials and academic content materials with language objectives
- Provide consistent state messages and counsel (across accountability, corrective action and compliance functions) based upon English Learner research
- Provide professional development resources to prepare teachers and administrators to work effectively with English Learners
- Ensure that English Learners have access to the full curriculum.

Implications for Teachers

Teachers need to know which students in their classes are LTELs, and use differentiated teaching strategies to support their access to the content. Planning for each lesson should include analysis of the language demands of the content being taught, and lead to precise language objectives. Active student engagement and oral academic vocabulary needs to become a focus in clssrooms with LTELs.

Book List

California Department of Education (2010). *Improving Education for English Learners: Research-Based Approaches*. Sacramento: California Department of Education.

Olsen, L. (2010). *Reparable Harm: Fulfilling the Unkept Promise of Education Opportunity for California's Long Term English Learners*. Long Term English Learners. Long Beach, CA: California Together. November 22, 2010, from http://www.californianstogether.org/docs/download.aspx?fileId=12

Online Resources

California Together
(A statewide coalition focused on English learner policy; commissioned the research for Reparable Harm.)
www.californianstogether.org

Long Term English Learner Project
Research Institute for the Study of Language in Urban Society
http://web.gc.cuny.edu/dept/lingu/rislus/projects/LTELL/index.html
(A research project designed to explor the characteristics and educational needs of Long-Term English Language Learners (LTELLs).)

Menken, K. and Kleyn, T. (2009, April). the Difficult Road for Long-Term English Learners. *Educational Leadership* (online only, 66(7). Retrieved November 22, 2010, from http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/apr09/vol66/num07/The_Difficult_Road_for_Long-Term_English_Learners.aspx
40(2), 26-29.

Robles, J.W. (2010, November/December). Participatory leadership for English learner success. Leadership, 40(2), 26-29.

The Research Institute for the Study of Language in Urban Society's Long Term English Learner project
http://web.gc.cuny.edu/dept/lingu/rislus/projects/LTELL/index.html.

In the STARlight

STUDENTS OF TODAY ACHIEVING RESULTS

Questions for Reflection

1. What are the characteristics of LTELs you know in your school?

2. Are the "factors" discussed in the research brief that lead to ELs becoming LTELs present in your school/district? What else contributes towards the creation of LTELs?

3. What are the biggest misconceptions that you think are underlying the practices and policies in your school/district that result in mis-serving English Learners?

4. What are some explicit language and literacy development strategies across content areas that could be effective for LTELs?

5. What policy changes would make the most difference to enable teachers to meet the needs of their LTELs?

6. As educators, what can we do to bring about an end to the practices and policies that are resulting in students becoming LTELs?

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