

Shaena Engle, engle@gseis.ucla.edu
(310) 206-5951

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New Study by UCLA Researcher Examines Needs of English Learners in California Schools

California shortchanges English learner students at its own peril, study says

A new study released today reports that English learners in California schools cannot catch up with their English-speaking peers unless the state rethinks the way resources are allocated for these students. English language learners — whose first language is not English and who lack or have only beginning proficiency in English — represent one-fourth of all public school students in the state.

“If we do not figure out how to adequately meet the needs of these 1.5 million students, California cannot meet the goals of No Child Left Behind or compete successfully with other states and nations for a well-prepared workforce, since about half of these students will eventually drop out of school,” said Patricia Gándara, UCLA professor of education and author of the study, titled “Resource Needs for California English Learners.”

Gándara presented the study’s data and recommendations on the costs and resources needed to adequately educate English learners at a hearing on school financing today at the state Capitol in Sacramento. Gándara’s research is part of the “Getting Down to Facts” project, a series of studies and presentations intended to raise awareness among state policymakers and other education stakeholders about the educational needs of students in California’s elementary and secondary schools.

The study concludes that because there are relatively few bilingual teachers in California classrooms, the state incurs extra costs by hiring additional bilingual personnel to help students, translate for parents and adapt curricula. The presence of more bilingual teachers, the study argues, would not only control costs but would provide the opportunity for all of California’s students to achieve biliteracy.

The study was co-authored by Russell Rumberger, professor of education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and director of the University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute.

“While the overwhelming majority of these students are born here in California, many begin school at a significant disadvantage,” Gándara said. “They tend to come from homes with

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fewer resources, including low socioeconomic status and parent education. Additionally, they are more likely to face poorer conditions for learning in school than other students.”

Gándara and Rumberger cite seven specific areas of concern for English learners in public schools: access to appropriately trained teachers, professional development opportunities, relevant assessments (the state currently uses standards-based tests developed for English speakers), sufficient instructional time to accomplish learning goals, appropriate instructional materials and valid curriculum, adequate facilities, and avoidance of the intense linguistic segregation that places students at a particularly high risk for educational failure.

The study confirms previous research on academic performance outcomes, including the finding that English learners, even after being classified as fluent in English, in many cases lag far behind children from English-only backgrounds. Additionally, the authors cite research indicating that closing the achievement gap is most likely to occur in the context of a biliteracy curriculum and that using bilingual teachers is a more cost-effective strategy than using monolingual teachers supplemented by bilingual aides or other staff.

According to the authors, determining the resources needed for linguistic minority students — those who live in households in which a language other than English is spoken — depends on the outcome sought by policymakers: a minimal level of proficiency that requires few additional resources; maintenance of proficiency, which requires ongoing resources as students continue their achievement; closing the academic gap between linguistic minorities and native English speakers, on open-ended goal that requires specification of how the gap is to be closed; or biliteracy for all students.

Existing studies of the costs and additional resources needed for English learners vary greatly, Gándara and Rumberger said. To help determine the amount and type of resources necessary, they conducted case studies at five public schools with relatively high levels of performance among English learner students. Based on these case studies, the authors identified several themes, including:

- Increasing the length of school days and/or years.
- Ensuring that school libraries make available materials in more than one language for a range of grade levels.
- Ensuring that schools have adequate counseling staffs.
- In addition to cognitive goals, focusing on non-cognitive goals, such as learning to navigate United States culture and institutions, an important objective that receives scant attention due to lack of funding.

Most of these needs are similar to those of other low-income and educationally disadvantaged students, though some interventions must be tailored to the unique needs of English learners, such as the development of specific curricula to help bridge the gap to academic English.

Additionally, the study found that accurately estimating the cost of educating English learners requires identifying necessary elements for student success. Gándara and Rumberger incorporate several recommendations to increase English proficiency and academic proficiency

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in all subject areas, including developing a high-quality preschool program, creating a comprehensive instructional program that addresses both English language development and a core curriculum, inviting sufficient and appropriate student and family support, utilizing valid and comprehensive assessments, hiring extra support personnel, and providing ongoing professional support for teachers with a focus on teaching English-language learners.

The “Getting Down to Facts” project was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation and the Stuart Foundation.

Patricia Gándara is a leading expert on minority language instruction and Latino education issues and is co-director of the Civil Rights Project/El Proyecto de CRP, housed at the UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies.

The University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute was established in 1984 in response to the California Legislature’s request that the University of California Office of the President pursue “knowledge applicable to educational policy and practice in the area of language minority students’ academic achievement and knowledge,” including their access to the University of California and other institutions of higher education. The institute was first established as a research project and became a multicampus research unit in 1992.