

A Call for Equity and Excellence for English Language Learners in Washington State

This position paper is the work of the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's (OSPI) Bilingual Education Advisory Committee (BEAC), representing a diverse group of educators and parents from across the state of Washington. The role of BEAC is to advise the Superintendent on issues related to bilingual students to 'help facilitate the provisions of bilingual education and related services in order to meet the unique needs of students whose primary language is other than English'¹ and to support the Bilingual Education Program at OSPI. This paper has been prepared with this role and responsibility in mind.

With this paper, we examine some of the factors leading to the current underperformance of English language learners (ELLs), including limited exposure to research-based ELL program implementation practices, need for effective assessment and student monitoring systems, and increased teacher training and professional development in ELL best practices. This paper will examine current data, instructional practices, ELL research, and BEAC recommendations on how to address improved performance for ELL in the state of Washington.

Current Data and Overview

ELL Demographics

In 2009–10, there were 1,035,804 students enrolled in Washington public schools. 83,988 of them, or 8.1 percent, were ELLs as measured by the Washington Language Proficiency Test. Demographers predict that within 15 years, up to 25 percent of students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools in the United States will have limited proficiency in English (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2003). These projections are seen in Washington, where an increasing number of school districts have growing ELL populations. For example, in the Kent School District, home to the fourth largest industrial center in the United States and the fourth largest school district in the State, there are over 120 languages spoken. Given the projected increases in ELL students in Washington State, the sense of urgency to effectively educate all students, including the high number of underachieving ELL students could not be greater.

ELL Services

Washington State's Transitional Bilingual Instructional Program (STBIP) is defined as one that 'uses two languages, one of which is English, as a means of instruction to build upon and expand language skills to engage a student to achieve competency in English' (WAC 392-160-005). Despite the State requirement that districts provide bilingual instruction to ELLs if at all possible, in 2009–10 only 11 percent of Washington's students enrolled in the STBIP received bilingual instruction. The large majority of ELLs in the State (89 percent) received instruction only in English.

ELL Performance

Statewide data from 2009–2010 shows that ELLs did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in reading or mathematics in any of the grade level bands: third through fifth grade, sixth through eighth grade, or tenth grade. A review of 2010 data from OSPI indicates that of the 295 school districts in Washington State, 206 or 69 percent did not meet AYP. The majority of school

1: OSPI (2007). *Bylaws of the Washington State Bilingual Education Advisory Committee*, Olympia, WA: OSPI.

districts in Washington State did not make AYP due to ELL, special education, and/or low-income students. The total number of districts with a qualifying ELL subgroup was 63, almost one quarter of all school districts in the State, and, of those, 100 percent did not make AYP without safe harbor (which requires a 10 percent reduction in students not making AYP). Over two-thirds of the districts with all ELL subgroups did not make AYP, even when including students who had exited ELL services. This data is compelling and the sense of urgency apparent. Response to this data on disproportional student achievement, high drop out rates, and access to rigor in Washington schools for ELL students requires bold leadership at both a state and district level. This paper proposes action in order to effectively address the needs of ELL students if Washington State's future is to be secured.

Current Teacher Preparation

Some researchers have found teacher preparation and certification to strongly correlate with student achievement, even stronger than student poverty and language status (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Last year in the state of Washington, fewer than 200 teachers graduated from a Washington State university teacher-credentialing program with an ELL endorsement. A testimony to the insufficiency of this number is that this supply of ELL endorsed teachers would not even meet the open teacher positions in a single school district like the Kent School District, with over 200 new teacher assignments for 2010-11, much less the total demand for endorsed teachers statewide.

State and Federal Mandates

Washington's Mission Statement for the education of bilingual students states that: 'English language learners will meet State standards and develop English language proficiency in an environment where language and cultural assets are recognized as valuable resources to learning.' In order to meet this objective, districts are required to provide students who have no or limited English proficiency with a transitional bilingual instructional program or, if this is not practicable, an alternative instructional program that supports these students through English only (WAC 392-160-005). At the federal level, in *Lau v. Nichols*, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the Department of Education memorandum of May 25, 1970, directing school districts to help ELL students overcome language barriers and to ensure that they can participate meaningfully in the district's educational programs. We as a BEAC argue that ELL student performance on State assessments, as measured by AYP above, indicates that we as a state are not doing nearly enough to provide our ELLs meaningful participation within our educational system.

Research

English Language Learner Program Models

Factors that contribute to effective teaching of ELLs include teacher quality and program model of ELL instruction. Researchers have found that the model of instructional program has a significant impact on achievement for English learners (Collier & Thomas, 2004). These studies have found that bilingual programs are more effective than English-only programs in both helping students develop English proficiency and in increasing student achievement. By definition, a bilingual program uses both English and a student's native language in instruction.

Washington's program guidelines for the STBIP program list three different **bilingual** program models each with varying histories of efficacy when implemented properly: dual language or two-way immersion; developmental or late-exit; and transitional or early-exit. Two **alternative** models that use only English as the language of instruction, sheltered instruction (content-based ESL) and newcomer programs, are also noted. In addition, there are many variations to these programs currently practiced. In Washington, 89 percent of ELL students receive instruction in some form of alternative program providing instruction only in English. Descriptions of these five program models (three bilingual and two English-only) follow below.

1. Dual Language Program (Two-Way Immersion or Two-Way Bilingual Education)
Dual Language Programs (also known as two-way bilingual education and two-way immersion) provide integrated language and academic instruction for native English speakers and native speakers of another language with the goals of high academic achievement and first and second language proficiency. When implemented with fidelity, this model has proven most effective in narrowing the achievement gap and propelling learners beyond monolingual English-speaking students academically. Research in this model has found students averaging in the 50-60th percentile by grade 11, often outperforming their monolingual peers (Collier & Thomas, 2004). In addition students develop biliteracy, an important asset when competing in our rapidly changing global society.
2. Developmental Bilingual Education (Late-Exit):
Developmental Bilingual Education (DBE) (also referred to as Late-Exit bilingual education) is an enrichment program that educates ELL students using both English and their first language for academic instruction normally for a period of four to six years (Ramirez, 1992). DBE programs aim to promote high levels of academic achievement in all curricular areas and full academic language proficiency in the students' first and second languages. Well-designed and implemented DBE or Late-Exit programs have proven to nearly close the achievement gap and to promote bilingualism. Research in this model has found students averaging in the 45th percentile by grade 11, (Collier & Thomas, 2004).
3. Transitional Bilingual Education (Early-Exit):
Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) (also known as Early-Exit bilingual education) is the most common form of bilingual education for ELLs in the United States (Ramirez, 1992). TBE provides academic instruction in the ELLs primary language as they learn English and then removes the primary language support. Early-Exit or TBE programs have been successful in narrowing the achievement gap during the period before students are exited from ELL services, yet students score in the 24th-32nd percentile by the 11th grade level. Students are often educated in this model for an average of two to three years and, most often, do not develop academic biliteracy (Collier & Thomas, 2004).
4. Sheltered Instruction or Content-Based ESL:
Sheltered Instruction (SI) is an approach used widely for teaching language and content to ELLs, particularly as schools prepare students to achieve high academic standards. In SI, academic subjects (e.g., science, social studies) are taught using English as the medium of instruction. SI is most often used in classes comprised solely of ELLs, although it may be used in classes with both native English speakers and ELLs when necessitated by scheduling

considerations or by small numbers of ELLs. When well implemented, students taught through this model for two to three years reach the 22nd percentile by the end of grade 11 and most often do not develop academic biliteracy (Collier & Thomas, 2004).

5. Newcomer Program:

The goals of newcomer programs are to help students acquire beginning English language skills along with core academic skills and knowledge, and to acculturate them to the United States school system. Some programs have additional goals, such as developing students' primary language skills and preparing students for their new communities. After reaching some level of acclimation and English language proficiency, students typically transfer from Newcomer programs into one of the other instructional programs listed above.

Bilingualism as an Asset

Research in the field of education for English language learners clearly indicates that bilingualism is an asset to students, both cognitively and academically.

- “Longitudinal research findings from one-way and two-way dual language enrichment models of schooling demonstrate the substantial power of this program for enhancing student outcomes and fully closing the achievement gap in second language,” (Collier & Thomas, 2004, abstract).
- “Bilingualism is a cognitive, social, and economic asset for all people, and schools can play a significant role in helping students from English and non-English backgrounds develop full academic bilingualism,” (Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 1997, pp 21).
- “Bilingualism, far from impeding the child’s overall cognitive or linguistic development, leads to positive growth in these areas.” (August & Hakuta, 1998, pp 19).

Call to Action

- As BEAC members, we believe that to ensure meaningful and effective participation of ELLs, it is imperative that districts and schools live up to the State’s vision for culturally and linguistically diverse learners by providing ELL students an instructional environment that achieves both state and national standards and builds upon the linguistic and cultural resources they bring to the classroom.
- We believe that school districts have the obligation to achieve proficiency for all students, including ELLs, and to provide each and every English language learner access to rigorous content.
- Districts should also provide ELLs with the opportunity to maintain and/or develop literacy in their native language as well as in English. We believe that this added literacy in a second language better prepares our learners for the world in which they compete.
- Ultimately, teachers need to know their students’ needs and engage in careful analysis of the language demands of the content they are teaching to each English language learner.

- In addition, teachers must be prepared with the skills, curriculum and systems for implementing appropriate instructional strategies to address the unique needs of each student.

Understanding the Needs of ELLs

In order to determine the appropriate instructional practice for students, educators must first identify the relevant learning needs of ELL students. Currently, the state of Washington groups all ELL students together into one single category. This is equivalent to placing all special education students into one single category, obscuring individual students' learning needs and, as such, their personalized instructional needs.

A more coherent and relevant framework for diagnostic need would enable districts to better evaluate where English learners are making gains and where they have gaps. We, the BEAC, believe that more descriptive typology of ELLs is an essential first step to designing and implementing more effective instructional programs. In order to do so, we must research and administer diagnostic assessments to help us understand what students know in both English and their native language.

For example, a five level ELL typology used by other states allows for the differentiation of instruction for students who are: a) newcomers with fluency in their native language and commensurate educational background experiences as their native English-speaking peers; b) newcomers who are not fluent in their native language and without commensurate educational experiences as their native English-speaking peers; c) ELL students who are progressing linguistically and academically according to relative expectations; d) ELL students who have exited the program and have high performing social language but who lack academic language and are several grade levels behind; and e) long term ELLs who have never exited their ELL category, are struggling learners, and who continue to fail or drop out at disproportionately high levels. Exploring a more multi-faceted typology for ELLs such as this would help educators in Washington better understand the strengths and needs of their ELLs and to design instruction accordingly.

Effective Teachers of ELLs

- As a state, we need to make teacher preparation for English language learners a top priority. We must re-conceptualize teacher training to mandate that a basic teacher credential include comprehensive ELL elements if teachers are to be qualified to teach Washington's rapidly changing school populations.
- Universities and the state of Washington must address the significant shortage of teachers qualified to teach the growing number of ELL students.
- Districts need to commit to retraining our existing teachers to meet the needs of our diverse learners and to recruit and facilitate bilingual capacity in our educational ranks.

State Leadership

In order to successfully address the call for equity and excellence for all students, close our achievement gap, and provide an equitable and rigorous education for all of Washington's students, we, as a BEAC, recommend that districts with a dominant language other than English be compelled to develop bilingual instructional programs that value and build upon the linguistic

and cultural assets of their ELL students. We recommend that the State bolster support services by assisting school districts to:

1. Utilize improved systems to more accurately assess and determine student needs.
2. Closely examine ELL performance by district and school to determine the scope of need.
3. Research proven bilingual models, as measured by AYP proficiency targets and other achievement data.
4. Implement, refine and maintain instructional models supported by valid research for ELLs.
5. Provide curriculum that facilitates differentiation for varying levels of language and developmental need.
6. Publish expectations for growth and achievement of ELLs by time in program and language proficiency.
7. Develop and maintain systems of observation and mechanisms for monitoring student progress.
8. Emphasize articulation between levels.
9. Increase access to preschool programs designed for English Learners.
10. Provide professional development (including coaching and collaborative time) for teachers and administrators to more clearly understand and address the needs of ELLs.
11. Communicate clear expectations to all shareholders about what quality instruction looks like.
12. Assist districts in examining and adopting instructional characteristics of strong ELL programs and integrate these into the ESEA, SB6696 and State CPR compliance processes.

Summary

This BEAC position paper identifies the significant challenges facing Washington State school districts in seeking to address the specific needs of English language learners. These challenges include: implementation of research-based bilingual ELL program models, effective assessments and student monitoring systems, and training and professional development for both pre-service and in-service educators in ELL best practices. These challenges are fundamentally policy issues, and, ultimately *leadership* issues. We write this paper as a wake-up call to OSPI and Washington school districts to hold ourselves responsible and accountable to provide the education for **all** students, particularly our English language learners, to be prepared for success in a global 21st century economy.

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