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## English Language Learners: A Growing Population

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English language learners represent the fastest growing segment of the school-age population (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2002). Between 1979 and 2003, the overall number of school-age children aged 5–17 increased by 19 percent. During this same time period, the number of children who spoke a language other than English at home and who spoke English with difficulty (i.e., those who spoke English less than “very well,” and who are thus considered “English language learners”) grew by 124 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005a). Projections suggest that “language minority students” (those who speak a language other than English at home and who have varying levels of proficiency in English) will comprise over 40 percent of elementary and secondary students by 2030 (Thomas & Collier, 2001).

Five states — California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois — currently account for 68 percent of ELL elementary school students (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwanto, 2005). Recently, however, many ELL students and their families have begun to move to regions of the country that have not traditionally seen immigrant populations, principally in the heartland of the United States.

This policy brief discusses the challenges and opportunities posed by this growth in this region and examines whether teachers are adequately equipped to instruct this emerging group of students. The brief also offers practical guidance for districts that are experiencing growth in the number of English language learners in their schools.

### **The Rapid Increase of ELL Students in the Heartland**

Among the seven states in McREL’s Central Region service area, three (Colorado, Nebraska, and South Dakota) have seen triple digit growth in the number of elementary school level students they serve, and the others, with the exception of North Dakota, have seen double digit growth (see table).

Although the number of ELL students in these states is still relatively small when compared to more populous states, the impact of this increasing population can still be quite significant. In Nebraska, for example, the number of ELL students grew 350 percent between 1990 and 2000. Although Nebraska’s student population included just 5,000 ELL students as of 2000, (Capps et al., 2005) this exponential growth is indeed significant for a state that, until recently, has served a fairly homogenous white student population. Few teachers in Central Region states were trained to teach ELL students, and there are few bilingual teachers.

In addition, even if bilingual teachers were available, these predominantly rural schools frequently lack the financial resources to hire English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. Often the poorest districts in the region enroll the highest numbers of ELL students. Among Colorado school districts where 75 percent or more of students receive free or reduced-price lunch, 37 percent of students are ELL students. In South Dakota, the poorest districts have ELL enrollment rates of 54 percent, and in poor Wyoming districts, ELL enrollment is 68 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005b).

Percent change in number of pre-K–5th grade ELL students: 1990–2000	
Colorado	163%
Kansas	87%
Missouri	43%
Nebraska	350%
North Dakota	-22%
South Dakota	264%
Wyoming	59%

### **A New Challenge for Teachers: Thinking About Language**

Language serves a critical function in education — it is, after all, the medium of instruction. Teachers’ fluent use of English allows them to create stories, produce explanations, construct meaning, and help students make meaningful connections — all just by opening their mouths. Although teachers may have to concentrate deliberately on classroom management, for example, they do not have to think about how to order the words in their next sentence.

But teachers of English language learners must think about language much more carefully, and change their instructional practices accordingly, to accommodate their ELL students. They must do so not only out of their desire to teach all their students, but also because districts and schools face a federal mandate to properly meet the educational needs of English language learners. Under Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), English language learners are a designated subgroup. Therefore, schools must consider their academic progress when determining whether they have met their annual yearly progress goals. In addition, Title III of NCLB requires schools to use

language instruction curricula that are research-based, and states must establish annual achievement objectives for English language learners.

### Are Teachers Equipped for This New Challenge?

How well are teachers prepared to meet the needs of this special population? There is growing evidence that teachers are not prepared for the changing demographics of their classrooms: the majority of teachers from urban fringe/large towns (67 percent), central cities (58 percent), and rural locales (82 percent) report that they have *never* participated in professional development for addressing the needs of ELL students (Lewis, Parsad, Carey, Bartfai, Smerdon, & Green, 1999). The 1999–2000 Schools and Staffing Survey indicated that of the 41 percent of teachers who taught English language learners, less than 13 percent had received eight or more hours of training in the last three years in how to teach ELL students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002a).

In the most recent Schools and Staffing Survey, more than 38 percent of public schools reported vacancies in ESL or bilingual education teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002b). In the absence of qualified ESL or bilingual education teachers, teaching English language skills and academic content to ELL students has become the responsibility of all school staff. However, mainstream teachers with English language learners in their classrooms are not receiving sufficient training in how to foster English language acquisition while also teaching the content knowledge and skills these students need to learn, although this varies depending on the size of a school's ELL population. Mainstream teachers in urban areas with large numbers of ELL students are far more likely to have received some in-service training on teaching English language learners than their counterparts in schools with smaller numbers of ELL students (63 percent versus 25 percent) (Cosentino de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005). In addition, schools with large ELL populations are more likely to offer native language instruction and to reach out to parents of ELL students (Cosentino de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005).

There is growing consensus that mainstream teachers of ELL students require additional skills, including an understanding of “basic constructs of bilingualism and second language development, the nature of language proficiency, the role of the first language and culture in learning, and the demands that mainstream education places on culturally diverse students” (Clair & Adger, 1999). In addition, teachers must develop the ability to (1) make content comprehensible; (2) integrate language with content instruction; (3) respect and incorporate first languages; (4) recognize how culture and language intersect with classroom participation; and (5) understand the needs of students with different levels of formal schooling (Antunez, 2002).

The last three factors point to a significant challenge teachers face with their English language learners, even when teachers have received appropriate training: that no two ELL students are the same. Each student's exposure to English, his or her educational history, and the socio-economic level of his or her family are among the factors that influence their academic success. A teacher may have ELL students who have been born in the United States but who have grown up in a non-English speaking household. Students whose parents are migrant workers may move from school to school, state to state, and in and out of ESL or bilingual programs, all in the course of one school year. Some ELL students may arrive in the classroom without having received any formal education in their country of birth. Because of these and other variables, ELL students can languish in the early stages of English language acquisition. Thus, working knowledge of differentiated instruction is essential for teachers working with ELL populations.

Given that few mainstream teachers are receiving training in instructional strategies for English language learners, it is not surprising that many teachers, particularly those in rural areas, feel inadequate and ill-prepared to meet the needs of their ELL students. As one ELL expert who has trained teachers in some heartland states noted recently: "The first stage is shock — we don't know what we should be doing" (Education Week, 2005). School administrators feel the frustration voiced by teachers; they also see the standardized tests results that show that ELL students are not performing at proficient levels. In response to this need for training, McREL has developed a number of resources for teachers related to differentiated instruction and research-based strategies that are effective in the classroom with mainstream and ELL students.

## Practical Guidance

When ELL students do arrive in rural areas, they often do so initially in small numbers — which poses a challenge in and of itself. First, schools with a relatively small number of ELL students have no choice but to place them for most of the day in mainstream classrooms with teachers who typically do not have experience working with diverse populations and have not been trained in how best to instruct ELL students. Second, needed resources, human (such as bilingual teachers) as well as financial, are often limited or absent.

To help rural educators address these challenges, McREL developed a structured strategy for assisting rural schools with a low incidence of ELL students based on its work in a small rural district in Wyoming that wanted to help "kids who weren't from around here feel at home." The following recommendations are a synthesized version of *The English Language Learner Resource Guide: A Guide for Rural Districts with a Low Incidence of ELLs*, which McREL produced through its regional educational laboratory contract. (The entire version can be found at [www.mcrel.org](http://www.mcrel.org).)

## *Recommendations for Schools and Leaders*

Creating a positive learning environment for ELL students starts with administrators. Following are some recommendations for what district and school leaders can do to create schools that address the needs of ELL students.

- ***Strong leadership is crucial.*** Before a district or school can be successful in implementing programs and practices for ELL students, leadership team members need a positive “can-do” attitude. When a community encounters diversity for the first time, those in leadership roles must be able to model the response needed. A welcoming attitude and meaningful communication with parents are the foundations upon which programs will be built. Finding ways to translate important documents is another way to demonstrate meaningful efforts at communication.
- ***Make all staff aware of the legal requirements for serving ELL students.*** Schools must teach English as well as the content specified in state standards. Although NCLB does not prescribe any specific program models or “how to’s,” the Office of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education outlines three fundamental principles for compliance:
  - an ELL program should be based on sound education theory;
  - in implementing an ELL program, resources, personnel, and time must be reasonable and adequate to ensure success; and
  - the ELL program needs to be evaluated and revised if necessary.
- ***Support teachers in their instructional efforts.*** School and district leadership can help teachers review their instructional practices by providing opportunities for collaborative dialogue and planning. Teachers must have time to engage in structured conversations to examine their educational practices.
- ***Make professional development a priority.*** Leadership must make staff development a priority. The best strategies for teachers are the ones that can be most effectively used in a class that includes both ELL students and English dominant students and are based on scientific research.
- ***Create an environment that accepts diversity.*** It is the leadership team’s responsibility to cultivate an adequate understanding of diversity and validate ethnic groups that are new to the community. This means finding successful ethnic representation in the community and making them a part of the school in order to gain diverse perspectives.

- ***Allocate resources equitably.*** Leaders need to determine what resources are needed in order to provide adequate instruction for ELL students. In a rural setting, the entire staff, not just ELL instructors, if they exist, should be considered as instructional resources. The most experienced teachers should be matched with the children who need them the most.
- ***Integrate your ELL program.*** Districts and schools should guard against developing a new and separate program that is peripheral to the functioning of the school. A program to assist students in acquiring English must be well integrated in the mainstream school operations.
- ***Expect student achievement in the content areas.*** Exemplary leadership results in the expectation that ELL students can participate in challenging academic course work while they are learning English.
- ***Monitor and evaluate the ELL program.*** As soon as the program is in place, the monitoring and evaluation process should begin. In short, districts and schools must determine if their ELL students are showing adequate progress in English language acquisition, reading, and mathematics.

### ***Recommendations Concerning Professional Development***

Following are several recommendations for how to create classroom environments that support the success of ELL students.

- ***Use the primary language when possible.*** Types of languages spoken, numbers of students in those groups, availability of bilingual staff, and financial resources are some of the factors that will determine how the primary language will be used, for what amount of time, and for what purposes. However, whenever possible, schools should actively pursue ways to support a child's continued development of their primary language.
- ***Use content-based ESL instruction.*** Content-based ESL (English as a Second Language) instruction provides models for making the content of a particular academic class comprehensible and encourages language learning by highlighting key features of the English language. Input can be made comprehensible by planning ways to integrate instructional talk with visuals (photos, pictures, drawings), real objects, body language, slower rate of speech, and high frequency vocabulary.
- ***Know your students' history and culture.*** In order to help students draw on their prior knowledge, it is important to appreciate and understand their culture and background. Peregoy and Boyle (2001) recommend three initial steps.

First, find out the country of birth, the length of time in the United States, the language spoken at home, and the events associated with immigration, particularly any traumatic situations. Second, learn about students' cultural background, including customs, religion, traditions, family life, holidays, celebrations, clothing, and food. Finally, explore their academic history to learn about their time in school and literacy level.

- ***Make connections between students' experiences and the content they are expected to learn.*** Effective teachers draw upon the language, culture, and background experiences a student brings to the learning environment and builds new concepts upon their experiential foundation.
- ***Determine each student's level of English language acquisition.*** Knowing the level of language acquisition allows for verbal scaffolding, a method by which a teacher supports a student's current level while "nudging" them toward the next through modeling, questioning, and instruction. When the level of language acquisition is known, appropriate questions can be asked so content, not language acquisition, is being tested.
- ***Help students transfer existing native language skills to English language acquisition.*** When determining what to expect from English language learners and in assessing the level of literacy in their primary language, it is valuable to understand the concept of transferability. For example, an early emergent student in Spanish will transfer certain consonant sounds from Spanish to English without direct instruction; such as, p, f, m, t, s. However, many English vowel sounds will need explicit teaching.
- ***Provide explicit instruction within the context of literacy.*** Letter and sound recognition should be embedded in an authentic piece of literature rather than teaching these skills discretely. Reading to students on a daily basis will provide the opportunities to build vocabulary, make predictions, and teach missing skills.
- ***Develop academic language.*** English language learners acquire conversational English within approximately two years. However, it takes five to seven years for a student to acquire academic language — the language of "isosceles triangle," "compound sentence," and "periodic table." Providing high interest reading materials on different topics is one way to provide opportunities to increase academic language.
- ***Allow students to talk more than the teacher.*** Spontaneous expressive language does not just happen for ELL students; there must be deliberate, planned oral events. When ELL students do not have to compete with the English-dominant students for speaking time and when they feel they can take verbal risks,

productive talk will occur. This can be accomplished when teachers cluster students into homogeneous as well as heterogeneous groups.

### ***Recommendations Concerning Parent Involvement***

Immigrant parents often feel intimidated by school staff or uncertain of the extent to which they should be involved in their children's education. Following are several recommendations for encouraging positive involvement of the parents of ELL students.

- ***Begin with the school itself.*** Make it evident through visuals that another language or languages are represented in the school. Visuals can include signs that say "Welcome" in another language as well as signage for "Visitors Must Check in at the Office" and art work representing different cultures.
- ***Use bilingual staff to the extent possible.*** Bilingual paraprofessionals are exempt from NCLB's "highly qualified" requirements if they work solely as translators or on parental involvement issues.
- ***Involve the community.*** Besides inviting the parents, it is important to seek out other community members who share the same native language as the newcomers. Building a family-community-school network can prove even more fruitful than a family-school partnership.
- ***Hold regular meetings.*** Hold monthly or bi-monthly meetings that provide parents with opportunities to learn about how they can actively participate in decision-making at their schools and how they can contribute to the success of their children's education. Make sure to extend the invitation several times and in several ways. During meetings, actively engage parents by having the facilitator check for understanding, ask for personal stories, and ask them for what else they would like to learn about.
- ***Offer ESL classes for parents.*** Districts can form partnerships with community colleges to offer ESL classes to the parents of ELL students.



## Conclusion

The increasing number of English language learners entering our education systems poses unique challenges for school districts in predominantly rural regions. District and school administrators must lead the way, particularly in communities that have only recently experienced growth in cultural diversity. By acting on the recommendations contained in this brief, leaders can demonstrate their commitment to meeting the needs of their newest students, provide needed professional development to teachers, and reach out to these students' parents.

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