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Fostering Success for English Learners in Turnaround Schools: What State Education Agencies Need to Know and Be Able to Do

Robert Linquanti

English learners (ELs) constitute one of the fastest growing K–12 public school student populations in the United States. Over the past 12 years, the EL population has grown by two-thirds to over 5 million students, and in several states, particularly in the southeast and midwest, it has grown by several hundred percent (NCELA, 2010). The broader category of language minority students (ages 5–17)—those from homes where a language other than or in addition to English is spoken—now totals nearly 12 million (Migration Policy Institute [MPI], 2011). This population is expected to grow to almost half the total U.S. K–12 public school population by the middle of this century.

ELs also constitute a sizable subpopulation of many low-performing and turnaround schools (Taylor et al., 2010). For reasons explained below, this is not surprising: ELs are most often *by definition* low-performing on academic assessments given in English, and current definitions of the EL cohort as well as the structure and rules of most states' test-based accountability systems effectively over represent ELs' underperformance (Ho, 2008; Hopkins et al., 2013; Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013).

Beyond these definitional and reporting dilemmas, there is substantial evidence that the preparation and ongoing professional development of educators (teachers and administrators) regarding ELs is insufficient and that the capacity of current school systems to meet ELs' instructional needs is often weak (Gándara et al., 2003; Koelsch et al., 2010). This is particularly the case with schools under corrective action or restructuring: Two-thirds of educators in these schools nationally reported needing help addressing EL instructional

needs, and half indicated those needs were insufficiently met (Taylor et al., 2010). ELs' "opportunity gap" is further exacerbated by poverty, as they are almost twice as likely to be from low-income households as compared to their native English-speaking counterparts and to attend schools with higher concentrations of poverty, which also have fewer educational resources and qualified teachers (Gándara et al., 2008; MPI, 2011). The advent of next-generation standards and assessments—in academic content areas and English language proficiency (ELP)—offer both promise and peril for ELs (Linquanti, 2011) and heighten the urgency of addressing these issues, particularly in turnaround schools.

This chapter lays out a framework of fundamental considerations with respect to ELs in order to foster greater understanding of their strengths and needs; examines the opportunities and risks for improving EL instruction and learning in the current context of next-generation standards and assessments, as well as of ESEA flexibility and Race to the Top Program requirements; and provides examples of innovative SEA practices for supporting local district and school improvement. The chapter concludes by providing key principles for SEA action with respect to this population in turnaround schools.

Defining English Learners and the EL Subgroup: Fundamental Considerations

In federal law, ELs are defined as students from an environment where a language other than or in addition to English is spoken and whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or comprehending English may be sufficient to deny them the ability to effectively perform in classrooms where English is the medium of instruction; to achieve on state academic content assessments, or to participate fully in society (ESEA, Sec. 9101 (25)). Often referred to monolithically, ELs are in reality very diverse and exhibit a wide range of language and academic competencies, both in English and their primary language. Importantly, most ELs are U.S.-born, and vary in their initial English proficiency on entry and time in the school system.

A Dynamic Subgroup

Unlike other designated student subgroups which are based on fairly stable student characteristics, EL subgroup status is by design *temporary*: ELs are *expected* to leave the category as a result of effective, specialized language instruction and academic support services they are legally entitled to receive. Moreover, EL status is operationalized typically using *both* linguistic *and* academic performance standards, so the most linguistically and academically accomplished students exit the EL category over time, while those not making sufficient progress remain and are joined by newly entering ELs, who are by definition at low ELP levels (National Research Council, 2011; Wolf et al., 2008;

Working Group on ELL Policy, 2011). Under federal accountability rules, states, districts, and schools are allowed to count former "exited" ELs in the EL subgroup for up to two years after they exit but not beyond. This inherent "revolving door" phenomenon systematically skews EL subgroup membership toward lower-performing students and under represents academic performance and growth as reported by subgroup statistics, thereby undermining meaningful accountability. In particular, educators are not credited—or held accountable— for the long-term outcomes of all initial EL students, particularly at the secondary level.

Language Proficiency, Academic Performance, and Time

An English learner's ELP level clearly affects her ability to learn academic content in English and to demonstrate academic knowledge and skills on assessment events carried out in English—two of the defining characteristics of an EL in federal law. While EL students at every ELP level can access and engage with rigorous, grade-level content if appropriately supported to do so, ELs at higher levels of English proficiency are better able and more likely to learn and demonstrate knowledge and skills using English (Cook, Linquanti, Chinen, & Jung, 2012; Walqui & Heritage, 2012). Most English learners will take *four to seven years* on average to develop the academic English capacities they need to fully handle grade-level content demands. The actual time required depends on such factors as initial English language proficiency, age/grade on entry to U.S. schools, and prior educational experiences (Cook et al., 2012; Cook & Zhao, 2011; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; Thompson, 2012).

Moreover, language proficiency becomes increasingly complex as students move through school. The kind of proficiency required for academic work in Grade 2, for example, is very different from that required in Grade 9, as the language demands of academic subject matter increase substantially each grade level. Typically, students at lower grade levels and lower ELP levels progress faster than students at higher grade levels and higher ELP levels (Cook et al., 2008). This suggests that the characteristics and needs of ELs will change between lower and upper grades. In particular, it is important to distinguish ELs that are relative newcomers (first one or two years in the system) from current ELs that are "normatively" progressing and from longer-term ELs whose progress has stalled. The proportion of longer-term ELs in secondary grades can vary considerably across districts and states, depending upon student characteristics, monitoring practices, quality of instruction, and the number and kind of exit criteria used (see NYC Department of Education, 2009; Thompson, 2013). Their stalled progress requires careful analysis to determine the underlying causes. Doing so typically uncovers weaknesses in progress expectations, curricular focus, instructional delivery, and assessment practices and can afford opportunities to improve each.

Finally, though perennially controversial for its association with such lightning-rod issues in the U.S. as immigration policy, national identity, and multiculturalism, the use of ELs' primary language in instruction in addition to English has a strong evidence base. When well-implemented, bilingual instructional methods facilitate access to early literacy development and academic content instruction while EL students develop English language proficiency (Francis, Lesaux, & August, 2006). Substantial research evidence also highlights equivalent or modestly greater long-term academic achievement results in *English* using well-implemented bilingual instructional methods (Slavin & Cheung, 2005; Slavin et al., 2011). There is also solid evidence that bilingualism confers cognitive benefits regarding executive function, as well as metalinguistic and metacognitive benefits (Bialystock & Peets, 2010). Often overlooked, bilingualism and biliteracy also yield tangible crosscultural and economic value in a globalized world (Saiz & Zoido, 2005). Indeed, several states have recently instituted "seal of biliteracy" recognition programs[1] to signal their valuing of graduating students' ability to perform academically in more than one language. Viewing ELs' home language and culture as resources to be cultivated and leveraged, rather than as problems to be solved or eradicated, is a distinguishing feature of an assets orientation to EL students' education and development (Ruiz, 1984; Understanding Language, 2012a; Valenzuela, 1999).

Clearly, then, ELs are a diverse group, and important relationships exist among EL students' English- and primary-language proficiency, time in the school system, and academic progress and performance. Before exploring the implications of these, it is important to briefly consider the current policy context and the significant changes underway in SEA expectations of educators and students.

Next-Generation Standards, Assessment, and Accountability

Turnaround schools and the SEAs charged with supporting them must enact their strategies to improve instructional practices in a policy environment of increasing performance expectations. These expectations have enormous implications for ELs, their educators, and their families, and so merit a brief discussion.

First, the *new college- and career-ready academic standards greatly increase disciplinary language demands and deeply intertwine language use with the acquisition and demonstration of content knowledge, skills, and abilities*. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts, for example, expect students to comprehend and evaluate complex texts, construct effective arguments using textual evidence, discern a speaker's key points, request clarification, ask relevant questions, articulate and build on ideas, and confirm that they have been understood (CCSS ELA standards, p. 7). Similarly, the new Math standards

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[1]See http://sealofbiliteracy.org/

require sophisticated language uses to enact mathematical practices, such as constructing arguments, building a logical progression of statements to explore conjectures, justifying conclusions, communicating them to others, and responding to others' arguments (CCSS Math standards, p. 6). Also, the recently-released Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) delineate practices that expect students to ask questions and define problems, construct explanations, engage in argument from evidence, and communicate information effectively. Obviously, competence in a subject area will necessarily include mastering the language-related practices of that subject, and teachers will be expected to foster all students' opportunities to engage in these practices and develop these language-intensive competencies.

Second, *next generation English-language proficiency (ELP) standards that have recently or are currently being developed reflect these increased academic language demands*. Federal law (ESEA Titles I and III) requires states to establish ELP standards that correspond to the academic language demands expressed in the new content standards. Therefore, many states—alone or in consortia—are carefully delineating the language functions associated with disciplinary practices in the content standards and increasing the rigor and relevance of their ELP standards to focus instructional practice on these more complex language uses, both during designated English language development (ELD) time and during content instruction (see CCSSO, 2012 for further explanation).

Third, *next generation academic content and ELP assessments will incorporate and assess these more rigorous language and content demands*. As test development blueprints, pilot testing, and publicly available related resources are revealing, the new assessments aligned to these new content standards will significantly increase the receptive and productive language uses required to enact the assessed disciplinary practices (ETS, 2012; Linquanti & Hakuta, 2012). In fact, at least one of the academic assessment consortia has been tagging its test items and performance tasks for level of linguistic complexity as part of an effort to understand how ELs at different ELP levels interact with items and tasks of different linguistic complexity (see Cook & McDonald, 2012).

Fourth, *state agreements regarding ESEA flexibility, Race to the Top Program requirements, and academic content and ELP assessment consortia participation will all affect school and district accountability policy and practices toward ELs and their teachers in varying ways*. Two examples illustrate the potential implications of this dynamic and evolving policy environment: Teacher evaluation practices need to reflect the special knowledge and skills required to effectively educate ELs and build capacity for providing formative feedback and professional development support to improve instructional practice (August et al., 2012); and states participating in any of the federally funded consortia (PARCC, Smarter Balanced, ELPA21, or WIDA ASSETS) need to move toward a common definition of EL, which will very likely require changes in EL identification, classification,

and reclassification policies and procedures (Linquanti & Cook, 2013). These substantial policy shifts will need to be very carefully managed in order to support and not undermine effective instructional practices with ELs.

Recommendations

The foregoing discussion provides context and briefly highlights some of the key issues and substantial challenges facing school and district educators attempting to improve practice and outcomes for ELs. Systemic challenges require systemic responses. While instructional improvements must ultimately be enacted by teachers and students in classrooms, states should consider policies, practices, and strategies that support district and school policies and practices to strengthen the performance of administrators, teachers, and EL students in turnaround schools. Some specific recommendations for state action that follow from the above discussion are provided next.

1. *State actors—through policy development and resource investment—can promote evidence-based district and school practices that help all students, particularly ELs.*

There is evidence about what districts and schools that are effective with ELs do compared to their less effective peers (e.g., Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010; Horvitz et al., 2009; Parrish et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2007). They know who their ELs are, can clearly articulate expected linguistic and academic goals for these students, and design instructional programs and services around their particular ELs' strengths and needs. They implement standards-based instructional programs that are coherent and aligned within and across grade levels within schools and across schools within districts. There is shared responsibility and distributed leadership around improving the quality of instruction, addressing both ELD and appropriately scaffolded content instruction to ensure that students are developing academic language and literacy while engaging meaningfully with grade-level content. Educators engage in timely and actionable assessment practices during the school year to focus instruction and regularly monitor and discuss student work, progress, and problems of practice. Students' home language and culture are valued as resources and assets, and there is strategic use of the home language either to develop bilingualism and biliteracy or to build background knowledge, facilitate comprehension, and increase the meaning and relevance of grade-level content.

States can incentivize and look for evidence of these practices in turnaround school plans and district support efforts and ensure that resources are dedicated to their development and implementation. How the latter is done is discussed next.

2. *State policymakers and leaders can leverage the technical assistance and professional development infrastructure to build teacher instructional capacity related to ELs.*

New college- and career-ready content standards necessitate a transformation in teacher and administrator professional learning (Learning Forward, 2013). Nowhere is this more important than for educators of ELs, as these students must master both content and corresponding English language development standards. States must work to ensure that their infrastructure of technical assistance and professional development helps build teacher instructional capacity for ELs and other language minority students. Particular focus should be directed to unpacking and understanding the new state standards, recognizing and fostering opportunities to develop sophisticated language uses through academic content instruction, and ensuring that ELD instruction focuses on communicative competencies and strengthening language functions found within the content area practices. Several states are engaged in innovative efforts in these areas. While these initiatives are in early or experimental stages, they exemplify thoughtful, technology-enhanced practice that is responsive to the challenges at hand. Three examples follow.

- **California** (the nation's largest EL-enrolling state) is developing a first-of-its-kind, English Language Arts/English Language Development (ELA/ELD) Curriculum Framework that will guide instructional practice and curricular materials development. This combined framework articulates guiding principles and provides instructional vignettes to show how teachers use the two sets of standards in tandem during content instruction and how designated ELD instruction can foster collaborative, interpretive, and productive language uses to engage in subject matter practices. Aligned with this effort, California is also funding and overseeing intermediate agencies' development of a series of online professional learning modules (PLMs) designed to help educators implement common core standards. Two of these PLMs focus on implementing the state ELD standards in conjunction with its content standards. These PLMs are designed to be used by teachers and administrators in facilitated professional learning communities focusing on key problems of instructional practice. The state is also funding, via federal Title III monies, a network of professional development and technical assistance providers in intermediary agencies (county offices of education), who are also trained and supported by the state's federally funded comprehensive center, to help underperforming districts and schools—including turnaround schools—identified under state and federal accountability systems to utilize these tools in districtwide improvement efforts.
- **North Carolina**, one of the southeastern states with the fastest-growing EL population, is partnering with Stanford University's Understanding Language initiative to develop and support a statewide, networked community of practitioners focused on strengthening teacher capacity to develop EL students' disciplinary uses of language during content instruction. Regional groups of district and school teams from across the state will

be trained in implementing common core-aligned model units of study in English-language arts and mathematics. For example, the ELA exemplar five-week unit—already piloted in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the state's largest EL-enrolling district—features a multimedia, multimodal curriculum that focuses students on analyzing and producing persuasive oral and written texts (Understanding Language, 2012b). Teachers will be further trained as trainers and supported to develop additional units of study through a massive online open course (MOOC) and will receive ongoing support via the state's Race to The Top regional support network.

• **Minnesota** is partnering with the Academic Language Development (ALD) Network[2]—a research and professional development collaborative of universities, SEAs, educators, and service providers—to build instructional capacity statewide to develop the academic language, literacy, and cognitive skills called for under new content and ELP standards. Network technical assistance providers are training Minnesota Department of Education design teams in ALD instructional practice frames and corresponding rubrics that articulate best practices for academic language and literacy development for ELs. In addition, Minnesota is working with the Network both to deliver webinars for educators and administrators statewide that explain and illustrate the practices, and to build capacity of regional professional development centers to train and support teachers and leaders to enact these instructional practices with ELs at their school sites.

3. *State policymakers can refine accountability frameworks to be more meaningful, useful, and responsive to ELs and their educators.*

As described above, substantial empirical evidence demonstrates the connection between students' English language proficiency and their ability to learn in English-medium classrooms and demonstrate knowledge on assessments using English. Since EL students enter at different levels of initial English proficiency, and it takes time to learn the more rigorous, academic uses of English signaled in new standards, new models of accountability are warranted to take these realities into account. NCLB helped shine a spotlight on the EL subgroup, but the law's shortcomings—proficient status-bar progress standards, an unstable EL cohort definition, incoherence between expectations for ELP progress under Title III and academic achievement of all students (100%) under Title I—are now readily apparent. While ESEA reauthorization continues to stall, states have, through their ESEA waivers, proposed and are beginning to implement new accountability models that provide more meaningful expectations and send clearer signals to educators, students, and other stakeholders. Texas, for example, is proposing to define rigorous progress expectations for ELs' English language development by initial language proficiency level and time in the state system

[2]See www.aldnetwork.org

and to also benchmark ELs' expected academic progress by time and initial ELP level. In this way, meaningful markers of linguistic and academic progress that are sensitive to ELs' starting points can be defined and measured. Several other states are considering similar approaches. Many EL researchers and policy experts (e.g., Hopkins et al., 2013; Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013; Working Group on ELL Policy, 2011) have also proposed ways to stabilize the EL cohort in order to examine and report more accurately the long-term outcomes of all initial EL students, including current normatively-progressing ELs, longer-term ELs whose progress has stalled, and ELs who have met exit criteria. These more coherent frameworks increase the fairness and precision of the accountability system and allow it to send clearer signals to educators on which students are and are not progressing in rigorous and reasonable time frames. More refined accountability systems can also more accurately identify which underperforming schools and districts are improving at accelerating their students' progress.

   4. *State and local leaders can ensure teacher evaluation policies recognize the special knowledge and skills required to effectively educate ELs and build capacity to provide formative feedback and professional development support to improve instructional practice.*

As implied by the instructional capacity building and accountability framework above, teacher evaluation policies need to recognize the interrelationship of ELP progress, time, and academic progress when considering the performance of ELs. Also, particularly at the secondary level, evaluation policies need to recognize that ESL/ELD teachers contribute to an EL student's ability to perform on academic content assessments in English. Recent rigorous research from the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project has demonstrated that teacher evaluation systems yield more valid and reliable results when they reach beyond student test scores and incorporate a more balanced set of multiple measures (MET, 2013). These include multiple observations of teacher practice over time by trained peers with opportunities for actionable formative feedback and self-reflection and student perception surveys that both "reflect the theory of instruction defining expectations for teachers in the system" and that elicit student responses to their experience of teacher expectations, support, and feedback (MET, 2012, pp. 4–6). This approach to teacher evaluation also strengthens reciprocal accountability for instructional capacity-building and expected performance needed between educational policy makers and teachers (Elmore, 2002).

Such large EL-enrolling districts as Denver and Los Angeles are currently implementing teacher evaluation systems that include these kinds of multiple measures, phased in over multiple years, and that reflect their districts' focus on effective instructional strategies for ELs in all classrooms. Denver's *Framework for Effective Teaching*, for example, provides the foundation for the district's teacher evaluation system and targets pedagogical practices that are particularly

important for ELs, such as scaffolding students' interpretive, productive, and collaborative academic language uses, while also providing professional development to support teachers in using the new CCSS and ELP standards within the framework (see August et al., 2012, for more information). States can easily learn from these local efforts to apply the lessons from research evidence and adjust their state policies and frameworks accordingly.

5. *State policymakers can support dual-language instructional approaches where there are sufficient primary-language students, teacher expertise and materials, and community support.*

As noted earlier, there is substantial research evidence that use of dual-language instructional methods is beneficial to the development of EL students' literacy and content performance in English. While the positive effects of these methods have been small to moderate, there are additional (typically unmeasured) benefits of increased metacognitive and metalinguistic ability, as well as bilingualism and biliteracy. In schools without a sufficient primary language EL group, teacher expertise and materials, and community support to implement full dual-language programs, teachers with sufficient second language competence can utilize instructional supports in the student's primary language. For example, drawing attention to cognates, providing brief explanations in the home language, providing lesson preview and review, and teaching learning strategies in the home language all help to build background knowledge, facilitate comprehension in ELs with beginning levels of English proficiency, and build stronger home–school connections (Goldenberg, 2013).

Several states, including California, New York, and Illinois, have established "Seal of Biliteracy" programs to recognize those EL and native English-speaking students that are progressing toward and attaining communicative competence, literacy, and academic attainment in two languages. Some of these states are also framing college- and career-ready standards implementation for ELs using a bilingual/biliteracy development perspective. For example, New York has launched a *Bilingual Common Core Initiative* to provide resources and build the capacity of bilingual, ESL, and other language teachers to provide instruction that makes the Common Core state standards accessible to students at various language proficiency and literacy levels. The initiative explicitly values bilingualism both as a point of departure for language instruction and as goal for all language learners, including ELs and monolingual English speakers developing second language competence and biliteracy (NYS Bilingual Common Core Initiative, 2013). As such, New York has produced both New and Home Language Arts Progressions, parallel sets of developmental language progressions that help students access grade level language arts content found in New York's Common Core Learning Standards. Embedded within the progressions are clear articulations of the linguistic and academic content demands, as well as curricular examples to help teachers address the related linguistic demands in English and

other languages. Innovative approaches such as these recognize and build on the assets of ELs and the inherent value of their home languages and cultures, which in turn help to strengthen home–school connections.

Action Principles

Supporting schools engaged in turnaround is a challenge requiring coherent, sustained, and focused effort. As many of these schools serve ELs and other linguistic minority students, state education agencies must align policies and resources to systematically build the capacity of educators in these schools to strengthen instructional practice with these students. Fortunately, what has been shown to be effective practice with all students generally is applicable to ELs as well, but additional instructional supports are also needed (Goldenberg, 2013). The foregoing discussion has laid out the fundamental considerations regarding the EL subgroup and briefly explored some critical factors in the current policy context, including most obviously the implementation of new college- and career-ready standards and assessments and aligned ELP standards and assessments, as well as emerging differentiated accountability and evaluation systems. As states move forward, they should consider the following principles for action, distilled from recommendations elaborated above:

Promote evidence-based district and school practices that help all students, particularly ELs

- Consider key practices evident in districts and schools that are more effective with ELs, which include articulating clear linguistic and academic progress and achievement goals; implementing coherent and aligned instructional programs; distributing leadership and building internal accountability for developing students' daily academic uses of language via carefully scaffolded content instruction, as well as rigorous and aligned ELD instruction; strengthening instructional practice through timely and actionable assessment practices and regular discussions of student work; and tapping students' home languages and cultures as resources and assets.
- Incentivize and look for evidence of these practices in turnaround school plans and district support efforts, and ensure that resources are dedicated to their development and implementation.

Leverage the state's technical assistance and professional development infrastructure to build teacher instructional capacity related to ELs

- Ensure the technical assistance/professional development infrastructure supports teachers to unpack and understand the new state standards, recognize and foster opportunities to develop sophisticated language uses through academic content instruction, and ensure that ELD instruction builds communicative competencies and strengthens language functions found within content area practices.

Refine accountability frameworks to be more meaningful, useful, and responsive to ELs and their educators

- Recognize the relationship between EL students' academic language development and their ability to learn in English-medium classrooms and demonstrate knowledge on assessments using English.
- Set reasonable and rigorous, empirically informed expectations for ELD progress by initial ELP level and time and for academic progress and proficiency by time and expected ELP level (or actual if higher than expected).
- Stabilize the EL cohort to examine and report more accurately the long-term outcomes of all initial EL students, including current normatively-progressing ELs, longer-term ELs whose progress has stalled, and ELs who have met exit criteria.

Ensure teacher evaluation policies recognize the special knowledge and skills required to effectively educate ELs, and build capacity to provide formative feedback and professional development support to improve instructional practice

- Conduct multiple observations of teacher practice over time using trained peers, with opportunities for actionable formative feedback and self-reflection.
- Use student perception surveys that reflect the theory of instruction defining expectations for teachers and that elicit student responses to their experience of teacher expectations, support, and feedback.

Support dual-language instructional approaches where there are sufficient primary-language students, teacher expertise and materials, and community support to implement them effectively

- Recognize that dual language instruction can enhance early literacy development and academic content instruction while EL students develop English-language proficiency, improve literacy and content performance in English, increase metacognitive and metalinguistic abilities, and foster bilingualism and biliteracy.
- If dual language programs are not feasible, encourage primary-language support strategies (e.g., drawing attention to cognates, providing brief explanations or lesson preview/review, teaching learning strategies in the home language), which can build background knowledge, facilitate comprehension in ELs with beginning levels of English proficiency, and strengthen home–school connections.
- Consider supporting local or statewide "Seal of Biliteracy" recognition programs to signal that EL students' home languages and cultures are assets and resources to be developed.

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