

Report Finds Long-Term ELLs Languishing in Calif. Schools

By Mary Ann Zehr

A portrait of long-term English-language learners in 40 California school districts shows that the specific needs of such students are largely being ignored, a statewide coalition of education and civil rights groups contends in a new report.

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Based on survey data, [the study](#) by Californians Together found that 59 percent of English-language learners in secondary schools in the districts had been in U.S. schools for more than six years without reaching a sufficient level of English proficiency to be reclassified as fluent. It also found that few school districts had programs or formal approaches designed especially for the long-term English-language learners.

So many English-learners have retained that classification for so long in California in part, the report argues, because many haven't been placed in an English-language-development program at all or haven't been given school curricula and materials designed for ELLs. When they've received special help to learn English, it says, it's often been through inconsistent programming.

The report charges that California, the state with the largest number of ELLs in the nation, is "silent in policy" on the existence of long-term English-language learners and doesn't have a plan for them.

California Department of Education officials dispute that charge.

"We do have structures in place to address long-term English-learners," Carlos Rivera, the manager of the language-policy and leadership office for the state education department, said in an interview this week. He explained that California has regional centers that provide technical assistance to school districts where English-language learners aren't making sufficient academic progress. Through that process, which is part of the state's compliance system, educators are told to analyze data for students who have been ELLs for six or more years to figure out what may not be working for them and fix the problem, he said.

Raising Awareness

Mr. Rivera said that the longer that students are in the school system, the harder it can be for them to show proficiency in English. The reason, he said, is that academic standards become more rigorous as the students move up through the grades.

"Demonstrating proficiency at grade 10 or 11 is much more difficult than for grade 6," Mr. Rivera said.

Phil Lafontaine, the director of the English-learner and curriculum-support division for the state, acknowledged that California does not break out data for long-term ELLs on a statewide level.

Some of the few researchers in the country who focus on the subgroup of long-term English-language learners said they hope the report will not only raise awareness about how many students are long-term ELLs, but also spur policymakers and administrators to address the issue systemically.

"While the report is about California, it could very easily be about the whole country," said Yvonne S. Freeman, a professor of bilingual education at the University of Texas at Brownsville, who has co-written a book on strategies for teaching long-term ELLs.

"These students are constantly overlooked because they do speak English without an accent," she said. "In the long run, they are lacking academic literacy. They don't always understand what the teacher says because the teacher is speaking the academic language that they lack."

"The onus is on the elementary schools in particular," wrote Margarita Calderón, a professor emerita of education and educational research at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, in an e-mail message. "They are the long-term-ELL factories. Middle and high schools simply fold their hands."

Ms. Calderón has written a book, *Preventing Long-Term English Learners: Transforming Schools to Meet Core Standards*, scheduled to be released by Corwin Press in the fall.

While the Californians Together study found that few districts had formal programs to address the particular needs of long-term ELLs, the report highlights information from some that do.

One of those districts, the Ventura Unified School District, where about 2,600 of 17,300 students are English-language learners, improved support for long-term ELLs through the state's compliance process.

Ventura's Approach

Jennifer W. Robles, the director of bilingual education programs, in an interview said the district was found to be out of compliance under the state's accountability system for how it serves ELLs. The district had to prepare a master plan for the education of ELLs, she explained, and it is now in its second year of having stepped-up offerings to benefit English-language learners.

Two years ago, the district offered only two levels of English-language-development, or ELD, classes. The ELLs who were no longer at the beginning or intermediate level of English proficiency primarily attended mainstream classes with teachers who had some training in how to work with them.

With the revision of the program, the district expanded two levels of ELD classes to four, changed the curriculum, and made the ELD



classes self-contained. In addition, Ms. Robles said, the district created a brochure to explain the changes to students, assuring the more advanced ELLs that the new classes weren't remedial but rather met college-entrance requirements. She said that each student receives a profile of where he or she stands in achieving English proficiency and meeting state academic standards.

She said that last year the reclassification rate for ELLs at the high school increased to 19.5 percent from 13.8 percent the year before, an increase that Ms. Robles attributes to the program changes.

The Californians Together report also gives recommendations for a model secondary education program for long-term ELLs. They include having classes designed for such students that focus on the language of school, what researchers call "academic English." Such students also need to explicitly be taught language and literacy across all the content areas, the report says.

The report also suggests that long-term ELLs should be enrolled in a course to develop language skills in their native languages.

In support of those recommendations, the report cites one of the few research studies that have articulated common characteristics of long-term ELLs. That study, which also examined [a pilot program](#) targeting such students, was commissioned by the New York City Department of Education and conducted by Kate Menken, an assistant professor of linguistics for the City University of New York, and Tatyana Kleyn, an assistant professor of bilingual education and teaching English to speakers of other languages, or TESOL, at CUNY.

New York state does break out data for long-term English-language learners. During the 2008-09 school year, 26,300 of the state's 215,500 ELLs had been identified as ELL for more than six years, according to a spokeswoman for the state education department.

'Invisible Population'

Ms. Menken and Ms. Kleyn found promising results with the pilot program that they implemented with long-term ELLs at two high schools in New York City. Results from 28 ELLs in the special program were compared with outcomes for 14 ELLs at a control school. In the intervention, long-term ELLs were taught English as a second language separate from new arrivals, learned literacy across all subjects, and took a class in Spanish literacy.

On average, students at both treatment schools scored higher in reading comprehension in English and Spanish at the end of the school year than their peers in the control school. They also made more gains in English over the course of the school year than those in the control school.

In an interview, Ms. Menken called long-term ELLs an "invisible population."

"Long-term English-language learners can literally talk circles around new arrivals and can perform well in an English-as-a-second-language class simply by showing up," she said. "It's when it comes to the more rigorous academic language and literacy that students really struggle, and there aren't programs that target that need in a way that is different from the instruction provided to all ELLs."

The report says that even long-term English-learners themselves often aren't aware that they still are identified as ELLs.

"The majority of long-term English-learners wants to go to college, and are unaware that their academic skills, record, and courses are not preparing them to reach that goal," it says. "Neither students, their parents, nor their community realizes that they are in academic jeopardy."

Said Laurie Olsen, the author of the Californians Together report and one of the first researchers in the country to draw attention to this group of students, "Even though people know they are there, there hasn't been a response."

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