

Increasing Academic Achievement and Enhancing Capacity for English Language Learners

Principles and Recommendations for the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

As statistics and census figures have consistently shown, English language learners (ELLs) continue to be the fastest growing segment of the school-age population in the United States. When it was signed into law, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)—the latest iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—went further than any preceding version in holding schools accountable for the academic performance of all students—especially ELLs. As a result of holding schools and districts accountable for both the content-area achievement and English language proficiency development of their ELLs, there has been much greater national attention on the unique needs and academic performance of this student population. This heightened attention, and the resulting positive actions to support academic achievement for ELLs, have been very positive and laudable outcomes.

However, this represents only one side of a very complex picture, as other elements of the current version of ESEA have not yielded positive outcomes for ELLs. Challenges in the law's implementation, and an overarching emphasis on academic performance at the risk of sanctions, have often had negative consequences for ELLs. More importantly, the accountability system at the heart of the current version of ESEA is flawed as it relates to ELLs, as it is not built upon what research has shown about these students and the way academic language proficiency in English is achieved. Lastly—and perhaps most critically—the law has done little to build and expand the capacity to effectively support the education of the ever-growing population of ELLs.

As the Congress and the Administration look toward the reauthorization of ESEA, TESOL advocates that the following principles and recommendations be used to guide the reauthorization process to help ensure the academic success of ELLs.

Developing Valid Assessments and Sound Accountability Systems for ELLs

Any effective accountability system for ELLs must be built on a framework of appropriate, valid, and reliable measures in order to accurately assess student performance. More importantly, effective accountability systems must not only take into consideration the unique needs and characteristics of ELLs, but must incorporate the research-based principles of second language acquisition into its foundation. Systems built on inappropriate assessment tools or that do not sufficiently incorporate research-based principles of second language acquisition will undermine, rather than promote, the academic success of English language learners.

Moreover, the achievement goals in an accountability system should be both ambitious and based on real-world evidence, not on arbitrarily defined timelines. The goals for any accountability system must be focused on improving student outcomes through capacity building by identifying and providing resources for areas of need, not solely through punitive measures.

Accountability

Under Title I

- Include accountability for the development of academic English language proficiency as part of the accountability provisions under Title I.
- Incorporate English language proficiency level as a weighted factor into ESEA accountability provisions for content-area achievement for ELLs. For accountability purposes, both the language proficiency assessment and academic assessments should be taken into consideration and weighed according to each student's level of language proficiency. For English language learners at the beginning levels of language proficiency, more weight should be given to language proficiency assessment results. As a learner becomes more proficient in English, gradually more weight can be given to the academic-content assessment results.
- For monitoring student achievement under Title I, distinguish among students within the ELL subgroup by language proficiency level, and aggregate English language learners by language proficiency level within age groups for reporting purposes.
- Incorporate individual students' growth over time towards proficiency on state content assessments as a factor in accountability provisions (e.g., a growth model).
- Provide flexibility in graduation accountability measures so that late-entry ELLs have additional time to meet graduation requirements, as needed (e.g., a fifth or sixth year in high school).
- Require disaggregation of graduation rates based on subgroup, including English language learners, for both accountability determinations and reporting purposes at the state, district, and local levels.

Under Title III

- Require states to establish uniform statewide criteria for identification and classification of ELLs, and to determine eligibility, placement, exit criteria, and a rationale for exit from or continuation of ESL/bilingual services.
- Require states to standardize and implement statewide a home language survey to effectively and efficiently identify ELLs so that they can be assessed to determine their level of English language proficiency (ELP) with valid and reliable ELP assessments.
- Require states to clearly define their levels of English language proficiency, noting the criteria for each level.
- Require states—either individually or within consortia—to develop and implement a system to evaluate the effectiveness of language instruction educational programs for their English language learners.

Assessments and Accommodations

- Require states and districts to use psychometrically valid and reliable assessments to measure the continuous progress and content understanding of ELLs, and require states to submit psychometric evidence of the validity and reliability of these assessments for ELLs.
- Require states to report on the use of accommodations for ELLs on academic assessments, including evidence of the effectiveness of these assessments in yielding valid and reliable results for ELLs.
- Require states to report on how they will provide specific guidance to districts and schools regarding appropriate assessment accommodation practices.
- Allow the use of multiple measures to assess and report on the progress of ELLs for accountability purposes, such as curriculum-based, performance-based, and holistic assessments using scoring guides, checklists, or rubrics.
- Codify the Department of Education’s regulation allowing a one-year exemption from the reading/English language arts assessment for recently arrived ELLs, and allow a similar one-year exemption for students at the lowest English language proficiency level.

Advancing Expertise and Expanding Professional Capacity

The population of ELLs has continued to grow over the past decade; however, the capacity to effectively serve this population has not kept pace. ELLs must be taught by highly trained educators who are qualified to serve their specific needs in order to achieve high standards. Initiatives to promote teacher quality must recognize and promote the specialized professional development that English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual specialists receive to effectively serve English language learners. In addition, support and incentives to increase the number of these highly trained and qualified professionals are needed, as well as professional development for content-area teachers and administrators on meeting the needs of ELLs.

Continued professional development for all educators is essential, as well as the flexibility for local programs to determine how best to serve their students. The body of research in the field of ESL and bilingual education documenting effective practices for serving English language learners should be both acknowledged and widely disseminated. Most important, additional resources are needed to ensure that schools and programs can effectively serve the growing population of English language learners.

Under Title I

- Define English as a second language (ESL) as a core academic subject under ESEA, and apply the same requirements to ESL educators as to other teachers of core academic content areas.

Under Title II

- Require states to demonstrate that their credential system provides unique licensure credentials both for ESL/bilingual educators, as well as other educators who work with ELLs, and identify such as an area where teachers would meet criteria for being highly effective.
- Require states to demonstrate that credential requirements for teachers of core academic content include components in preparing teachers to meet the academic content and language needs of ELLs.
- Require states to monitor the use of nonclassified personnel for ESL services by districts and schools.
- Limit emergency certification for ESL/bilingual educators to a maximum of three years, nonrenewable.
- Provide incentives to states to give funding priority to professional development programs that focus on developing ESL and bilingual educators, and that prepare content-area teachers to work effectively with ELLs in K–12 multilingual classroom settings.

Under Title III

- Reinstate the fellowship program formerly under Title VII of the Improving America’s Schools Act to support the development of a new generation of highly trained educators, researchers, and leaders prepared to teach ELLs, prepare future teachers to work with ELLs, and provide schools and districts with support in working with ELLs.
- Provide incentives and resources to districts to develop career ladder programs targeted at developing the skills and qualifications of bilingual and ESL educators.
- Develop a discretionary grant program similar to the former Emergency Immigrant Education Program to provide resources to districts that experience a sudden, high percentage growth of their ELL population.
- Provide funding to support further research on second language acquisition and effective practices for ELLs.
- Establish funding to support states and consortia to develop the next generation of English language proficiency/development standards linked and aligned to the Common Core English Language Arts standards.

Promoting Innovation, Building Community, and Supporting Multilingualism

As the population of ELLs continues to grow in every school and community in the United States, resources and incentives to support research and innovation are needed to help develop and disseminate best practices and innovative ideas. Schools serve critical roles in a community, so they must have the tools and resources to help support parents so that they play an active role in their children’s education. Articulation must occur between schools and community programs serving ELLs in order to effectively meet their specialized needs, especially those students who are late-entry or have limited formal schooling.

In addition, with the world becoming more and more interconnected, multilingualism and respect for diversity are critical values that should be incorporated in all aspects of education. Proficiency in two or more languages should be promoted for all students. Developing students' language skills should be viewed holistically: not only should foreign languages be taught to native English speakers, but the native language skills of English language learners should be developed as well. For the United States to remain globally competitive, the ability to speak more than one language and understand different cultures is essential, and tapping into existing linguistic resources is an opportunity the country can ill-afford to miss.

Under Title I

- Allow states that provide bilingual education to make appropriate modifications to their accountability systems to allow for measures and reporting on linguistic and academic progress in more than one language.
- Provide more resources to support family literacy programs so that families of ELLs have access to effective early childhood and adult education programs.

Under Title III

- Allow districts and schools to use Title III funds to support the development of the native language literacy as well as the academic English proficiency for their ELLs (e.g., dual-immersion and other bilingual education programs).
- Create a competitive grant for innovative, research-based programs that serve ELLs, such as new instructional configurations, dual-language programs, secondary programs effective at serving late-entrant ELL and immigrant students, and bridging and/or mentoring programs to ensure that ELLs who graduate from high school are successful in higher education programs.
- Provide grant moneys to higher education to develop new and innovative, research-based professional development and assistance to schools for the enhancement of ESL and bilingual education programs.
- Establish a discretionary grant program that specifically targets high-need areas to support programs that maintain and develop learners' native languages, such as bilingual education and dual-immersion programs.
- Provide funding to states and consortia to develop content-area assessments in native and heritage languages.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the United States will greatly gain from its investment in the education of our ELLs, as the innovative solutions found for them will benefit all students, our next generation, and our economic vitality.

*Approved by the Board of Director
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