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Focus: *English Language Learners*

This edition of the WSSDA Research Blast covers English Language Learners (ELLs). The overview below looks at the effect of Common Core on ELL standards and testing, the growing crisis in ELL dropout rates, and equity in ELL instruction. Four articles follow the summary.

English Language Learners in the U.S.

Creating a common standard of what it means to be ELL

Nearly every state, and many school districts within each state, has a different definition of what it means to be an English Language Learner. Most also have different standards for when an ELL no longer requires special instruction or what that instruction should be. A student flagged for English language acquisition in Washington may not be flagged in Colorado. And when an English learning student transfers to another school district within a state, there is no guarantee that either school district maintains common standards or instruction to ease the transition.

To resolve these issues, a consortium of states and testing entities are developing a common definition for ELL. Getting states to agree on such a complex and often politicized issue however will take unprecedented levels of patience and cooperation. The plan is to use a deliberate, multi-year process to develop a final framework, and incentives are already in place to keep the process moving forward. For example states must agree to a uniform definition of English-learner as a condition for receiving federal Race to the Top money.

The uniform standard would lead to more comparability among states concerning how well they are serving ELLs. It would also help schools know what services ELLs need as they make their way through the K-12 system. Lack of a common definition often leads to a mismatch in the distribution of federal Title III funding and the actual number of ELLs being served in any one school district. Because of the lack of uniformity between districts and states, the U.S. Department of Education uses census data, instead of the number of ELLs reported by states, when distributing aid.

To move towards a common definition, states will have to settle four key issues. These involve:

- Identifying those who need ELL instruction
- Setting common criteria for special services and support
- Agreeing on what it means to be English-proficient; and
- Determining when a student no longer needs, or needs fewer, special ELL services

Effect of Common Core on ELL Instruction

Forging a common definition of what it means to be an ELL and standardizing curriculum across states might have been virtually impossible before Common Core. Because of the inter-state movement for shared alignment on testing generally, the path has been cleared for greater cooperation with regard to ELLs.

The Common Core, and calls for greater teacher accountability, provides school districts and states with many additional incentives to accurately identify ELLs. The cost of poor student test results has ratcheted up as state and federal funding is increasingly tied to student achievement. It is now a financial imperative to identify the causes of low student achievement, especially with ELLs. For example, when ELL students do poorly on an important state test, is it because they were not prepared by their schools for the math, or because they lacked the English proficiency to understand the directions?

The ultimate goal is to give ELLs full access to new tests without compromising the quality of the material being tested. This means finding the right balance between instructions, test accommodations and rigor. As rigor and academic expectations continue to rise across the country, some teachers see a growing need for a common standard to identify ELLs in their classrooms. They want explicit guidance to help them meet their student's needs.

With the rise of common core, English-learners will not just be expected to gain basic proficiency in English. They also face increased academic expectations to meet the rising standards. Some states with high numbers of ELLs are feeling another type of pressure from the federal government. They must adopt English-language-proficiency standards that correspond to the Common Core in order to ease provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act.

ELL Instruction Equity

Finding the right balance for testing is intimately linked to equity in instruction. A rift continues between two major camps in terms of ELL education. One believes that ELLs should not be presented with complex or advanced material until they have become proficient in English. Supporters of this model say that to be successful in learning academic content, ELLs must first focus on learning English. The other camp suggests that learning advanced material while learning English greatly improves student outcomes in both.

The focus of federal education policy for K-12 English-learners for years has been on English-language acquisition. Under this system, critics say, ELLs are essentially segregated from other students and denied access to core academic content, making it difficult or impossible to catch

up. Language development is often taught in isolation. Students are removed from class, putting them in a “double disadvantage” for understanding core curriculum. Many critics of the traditional policy, as well as many language-acquisition experts, argue that instruction in language and academic content should be done simultaneously.

ELLs are currently twice as likely to drop out as native students or those with English-language proficiency. When ELLs fall behind, or see that they will be unlikely to meet expected standards, they face a much greater risk of dropping out. Another factor behind academic trouble is a lack of effective communication with parents. Even schools with a long history of ELL enrollment struggle with the issue, though many school districts are finding solutions in teacher training. Many are also providing notices and important documents in multiple languages.

Dual Language course/emersion

Dual language emersion is one proposed way to meet the needs of young ELLs. According to the Center for Early Care and Education Research (CECER), Dual Language Learners (DLLs) are “children 0-5 years of age who are exposed to and learning through two distinct languages during a critical period of development.” While it may seem counterintuitive, research shows that building literacy and language skills in a student’s first language helps build proficiency in English. The CECER and others argue that the best thing for young dual-language learners is to support their home language along with English.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan seems to agree with the dual language approach. In a recent interview he said that ELL students who are “still developing oral and literacy skills in their home languages benefit most from early-childhood programs that expose them to both languages.”

English Language Learners

In the spirit of this discussion, we have gathered four recent pieces of research.

- “Educating English Language Learners in Washington” is an OSPI report that presents core data for ELL students in the state as a whole, along with proficiency test and academic assessment results.
- “Towards a Common Definition of English Learner” is a report documenting the attempt by states and other partners across the country to create consensus on what it means to be an English language learner in the U.S., and how best to meet their needs. The framework in the report is a first step by Council of Chief State School Officers to create a common and uniform policy to ease the transition of ELL students between schools, school districts and states.
- “Dual Language Learners: Research Informing Policy” is a research brief informed by over 200 studies that analyze how dual-language environments and bilingualism affect language and cognitive development in young children. The study’s main goal is to inform policy using a diverse collection of up-to-date research.

- Finally, a report from the California Dropout Research Project examines the consequences, causes, and solutions to the dropout crisis among ELL students. It identifies the extent to which issues experienced by ELLs are similar or different compared to the general population.

Educating English Language Learners in Washington 2011-2012

Bilingual Education, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction

This OSPI report provides a status update on ELL's in the State of Washington. The report covers ELL program funding and expenditures, staffing and instruction, students served, languages spoken, as well as program participation and language proficiency outcomes.

The report shares many interesting facts and figures from the 2011-2012 school year, where:

- 8.5 percent of Washington's students were English language learners
- 65 percent of the state's school districts reported English language learners
- 96,101 ELLs were enrolled in Washington schools
- A total of 202 languages were represented
- Washington was among nine states with the highest ELL enrollment

Useful maps and tables can be found throughout the report, and the appendices provide links to sources geared towards ELL instruction and school success.

<http://www.k12.wa.us/migrantbilingual/pubdocs/TBIPLegislativeReport2011-12.pdf>

Towards a "Common Definition of English Learner":

Guidance for States and State Assessment Consortia in Defining and Addressing Policy and Technical Issues and Options

By the Council of Chief State School Officers

This report is an effort by several states and other partners to form a common definition of what it means to be an English language learner in America. One primary purpose is to ease the transition that many schools and students face when ELLs move between different states and school districts. It is also an attempt to meet federal criteria for various types of financial aid. It is meant to help states comply with federal law that requires ELLs to be assessed annually in reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

The authors highlight the difficulties and complexities faced by students and schools as ELLs move through K-12. The consortium approaches the issue with a four-part framework highlighting distinct aspects of the ELL experience:

- 1) Identifying Potential English Learners
- 2) Establishing Initial English Learner Classification

- 3) Defining the “English proficient” performance standard
- 4) Reclassifying English Learners

The report concludes that creating a common definition of an English learner should be approached as a multi-staged, multiyear, deliberative process. The current version of the report is a work in progress, with the ultimate goal of creating a well-defined roadmap for all consortia members to enact over time.

http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2013/Toward_a_Common_Definition_2013.pdf

Dual Language Learners: Research Informing Policy

Center for Early Care and Education Research

The authors of this report define Dual Language Learners (DLLs) as “children 0-5 years of age who are exposed to and learning through two distinct languages during a critical period of development.” The report outlines a foundational understanding of DLLs and provides a substantive framework with practices to help inform state and district policies. In the section on coordination of policies and practices across pre-k-12th grades, the paper explores three key areas:

- Early and accurate identification of DLLs
- Strengthened human capital in early childhood education programs; and
- Enhanced coherence of program components

The paper draws on results and research from over 200 studies. The authors seek to understand how dual-language environments and bilingualism affect language and cognitive development in young children, and how early-childhood practices can hinder or help dual-language learners.

An excellent summary of the report and its significance can be found in the May 22nd Ed Week article by Lesli A. Maxwell. A free digital copy is online at:

http://ew.edweek.org/nxtbooks/epe/ew_05222013/index.php?startid=9

The full CECER report is available at:

http://cecerdll.fpg.unc.edu/sites/cecerdll.fpg.unc.edu/files/imce/documents/%232961_ResearchInformPolicyPaper.pdf

The English Learner Dropout Dilemma: Multiple Risks and Multiple Resources

California Dropout Research Project, By Rebecca M. Callahan

This report from the California Dropout Research Project examines the causes and consequences of ELL students quitting school. It looks for solutions and compares the issues these students face with those of the overall drop-out population. The study provides five important highlights:

- ELL students are about two times more likely to drop out than native and fluent English speakers.
- The social, economic and health consequences of dropping out threatens both the general population and ELL students.
- There is no conclusive answer to whether ELL students' well-documented academic struggles are due to or result from their placement in less challenging classes.
- The social and academic isolation of ELL students educated in separate and unequal environments results in their social, academic and physical disengagement.
- ELL students enter the U.S. educational system with numerous linguistic and cultural resources that remain largely untouched; capitalizing on these resources will not only improve ELL achievement but also stem the flow of dropouts.

The complete research project report is accompanied by a three-page policy brief that summarizes the research results. Both the policy brief and the full report can be found at:

http://www.cdrp.ucsb.edu/pubs_reports.htm