EDITORS NOTE
Schools and educators are working tirelessly to support ELLs amid changing immigration patterns and learning environments. In this Spotlight, learn how teachers can identify struggling English-learners, what research says could benefit ELLs, and how to help ELLs through co-teaching.

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How Schools Are Responding to Migrant Children

Tens of thousands of child migrants from Central America are in public schools. Many educators are working to support them, but the intensity of their needs can be a strain.

By Kavitha Cardoza

As I have spent the last several weeks talking to educators about working with migrant children, some have cried.

Their tears, they say, come from a mix of worry, empathy, and frustration with the negative, sometimes hateful, rhetoric surrounding the unprecedented flow of immigrant families across the southern border.

Reporting on migrant children—tens of thousands have come from Central America in recent years—and how they are faring in public schools across the United States as they await their final fates in immigration proceedings is difficult. Lawyers and advocates assisting children and teens are fiercely protective. The kids themselves are often terrified of talking, and not just because they worry about being deported. And the educators teaching and supporting them do not track their numbers formally because federal law requires public schools to enroll and educate children regardless of their immigration status.

I started in February, when I went to Tornillo, a small border town in West Texas, which for months had been home to the largest shelter for migrant children in the U.S. I was there to cover a protest of educators organized by Mandy Manning, the 2018 National Teacher of the Year. While the Tornillo shelter is now closed, Manning and other educators used it as a backdrop to call attention to the practice of migrant child detention and the nearly 12,000 children in over 100 shelters spread across 17 states. “We need these children to be in our classrooms,” Manning told me. “We will not stop until the detention centers close.”

When Migrant Students First Arrive

“So even though it was not my nature, I was quiet and didn’t make friends with any of the other boys.”

—Fernando, 12

While the shelters remain full, many thousands more children who’ve crossed the border in recent years are now living with parents, relatives, or guardians and are attending schools. But it can often take weeks or months for migrant children to feel comfortable. Opening up to teachers and school staff about the experiences that have brought them to the U.S. can take even longer, if it happens at all, said Jinni Forcucci, the 2018 Teacher of the Year from Delaware. “Some of my immigrant students, they’re taught not to tell their white teachers what they’re going through,” she said.

Mandy Bucceroni, an immigration lawyer in Philadelphia, said even though her clients know she is trying to help, they are guarded. “They don’t trust people because they’ve been hurt in the past. Family members have turned on them back in their home countries, they befriend someone who becomes a gang member, who now wants to take their life if they don’t want to join. It takes a very long time and lots of meetings to gain their trust, because their stories are supposed to be buried.”

Educators I interviewed said most of the migrant children they enroll have large gaps in their schooling, meaning that many are well behind their grade levels in reading, even in Spanish. Often, migrant students who are teenagers are more motivated to find work to help support their families, rather than attend classes.

Because best practice is to place students in classes with peers and at a grade level that’s appropriate for their age, schools may have to juggle schedules to accommodate the need for migrant students to get one-on-one support from specialists. “It’s our job to catch them up,” said Scott Eastman, the principal of a dual-language school in Jackson, Wyo. “That’s a lot of work, it’s a real challenge teachers face every day. And they already work incredibly hard.”

Challenges for Schools

While many migrant students have profound social, emotional, and academic needs, most school administrators I in-
Interviewed welcome these children. John King, the former U.S. Secretary of Education, said communities have a “constitutional and moral obligation” to educate migrant students. And the educators I spoke to really believed this.

But I also encountered a lot of reluctance to talk about migrant students, including in districts such as Dallas, Miami-Dade, and Florida’s Palm Beach County, where many migrant children are enrolled.

One of the most open superintendents was Cade Brumley in Jefferson Parish, La., a politically conservative community just west of New Orleans. In this school year alone, Brumley said approximately 800 undocumented students have enrolled in his district of 50,000 children. He says he tuned out the rhetoric about immigration and what’s been happening at the border.

“And I will do whatever it takes to make every single student get the education they deserve when they walk through our doors,” he said. “Now, if that’s part of a greater political or philosophical debate, then that needs to be had outside the doors of our schools.”

Like any child coming to a new school, migrant students are encountering new peers and new teachers. But the fraught nature of being the new kid is compounded by a different language, a completely foreign culture, and, often, a fractured family life. For most of them, it’s total upheaval. Teacher Karine Welsh tries to imagine the dissonance for children who’ve gone from tending chickens with their grandparents in rural El Salvador to a giant high school in Arlington, Va., an affluent suburban district outside Washington where she teaches.

Schools are making small, but important gestures to communicate to migrant students that they are welcome. Some have hung flags of different countries in hallways, some are stocking school libraries with Spanish titles, and others are making visits to migrant students’ homes to show they care and build trust.

In some communities, the enrollment of undocumented students has been constant this school year. That’s what Nicole Mitchell, the coordinator for a center that assists families with enrollment, health needs, and legal services in Los Angeles Unified, has seen. “We’re enrolling kids every day,” she said.

But steady numbers of arrivals aren’t just happening in large districts where you’d expect them. In the small, upscale resort town of Jackson, Wyo., Eastman said his dual-language school went from two migrant students to 14 in just five months. With that growth, and the state’s class-size rules, he had to add the equivalent of a new classroom midyear and the district reassigned staff from other schools to help.

“It’s definitely been a pretty significant strain on our system, one that we welcome, but it’s definitely been a strain,” Eastman said.

As migrant students flow into schools throughout the academic year, there are no funds that follow to help pay for their education. Schools must adjust with the budgets they have.

Brumley, the Jefferson Parish superintendent, said his team has made spending choices to help support this new population. They are working to hire bilingual staff for schools’ front offices and bilingual teachers to expand dual-language options.

“Your budget is simply an expression of your values and what you believe in,” he said.

Even still, recruiting teachers who are certified to teach English-as-a-second-language has been nearly impossible. Last school year, he had 15 vacancies for ESL teachers in the district’s high schools. Not a single person applied.

Suffering From Severe Trauma

“We were all together and we lived very happy until my uncles were killed.”

—Alberto, 17

Justin Mixon is an immigration lawyer in Philadelphia who represents about 200 migrant children. He said most have experienced something deeply traumatic in their home country and are forced to leave. “There’s always some other kind of plus factor—murder, rape, violence, domestic abuse. They wouldn’t normally leave their community, their friends, their language, their food, their grandparents, their culture. For many, it’s the only place they’ve ever known.”

The terrifying power of gangs—who wield more authority than police—is what drove many of the older children he represents to leave. “When these teenagers get told they either have to join or pay a lot of money or be killed, they all know the threat is real because they’ve seen dead bodies in the street.”

And during their journeys to the U.S., many are exposed to additional trauma. Students have reported seeing women being raped and fellow migrants left behind on the journey when they couldn’t keep up.

Many migrant students are frightened by school because in their home countries schools were recruiting grounds for gangs, said Erika Johnson, an ESL teacher at Wakefield High School in Arlington, Va. Showing empathy and patience is essential, she said, especially because the students express their stress in such different ways. “Some children have their head down, others act out, and others need hugs every single time you see them.”

Eastman agrees. Some students are so resilient and show no signs of what they’ve endured, he said. Others are “very, very fearful of everything,” including a 6-year-old who didn’t talk for months.

Teachers in the Prince George’s County school district in Maryland have been receiving specialized training for working with traumatized children and how to handle students’ emotions and behavior that may escalate quickly, according to Jennifer Love, a supervisor of interpreting and translation in the district. “Things can go from 0 to 100 very fast. We don’t want teachers to take that behavior personally,” Love said.

In teacher Karine Welsh’s school in Arlington, Va., students are given “flash passes” by the school psychologist, which allows them to leave the classroom without asking permission. Mitchell said Los Angeles Unified has placed psychiatric social workers in some schools, wellness centers at different sites, and different kinds of assessments and counseling for children.
How to Prepare All Educators to Teach English Learners

By Dr. John Nelson

According to the Brookings Institute, the number of English learners (ELs) in U.S. public schools has grown by roughly 60 percent over the last decade. While the level of diversity they have brought us holds plenty of potential value for all students, we are not yet able to capitalize on that, as many English learners are not enrolled in schools with teachers that have been given the sufficient preparation and training to teach them. In 2001, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that only a third of teachers with English learners in their classrooms had nearly sufficient training to support them. In total, my former district, Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD) in southern California, educates over 30,000 students in 47 K-6 schools. More than 70 percent of our students identify as Latino or Hispanic, 50 percent receive free and reduced lunch, and more than a third of students are classified as English learners. When I look back at how we have been addressing the challenge of preparing educators for meeting the needs of ELs and non-ELs all at once, I feel that our efforts to implement a district-wide approach to professional development and support structures for school-level leaders and educators has been the key to our success. The district provides dual immersion instruction in half of the schools, and all remaining classrooms are taught by teachers with certification for cross-cultural language and academic development.

Collaborative Academic Planning

CVESD facilitates a collaborative approach to lesson planning, so teachers have enough time to connect around weekly goals, student needs, and recent performance outcomes. Grade level colleagues attend two-and-a-half hour academic planning sessions every two weeks. During these meetings, teacher teams analyze student work from the previous lessons to identify areas to focus on in the new lessons. They review the upcoming texts assigned via Achieve3000’s PRO literacy platform for differentiated instruction by reading the texts at various Lexile levels, reviewing key concepts that are communicated explicitly and implicitly in the texts, and identifying key vocabulary words and idioms for native English-speaking students as well as English learners. Each meeting is concluded by making plans for student assessment and determining student evaluation criteria.

Ongoing Professional Development with English Learner Emphasis

District leaders and site principals are engaged in a professional learning cycle model that supports sustained change in practice by all teachers. This is accomplished through repeated cycles of high-quality learning, opportunities for teachers to safely practice new strategies in a supportive environment, observations by and feedback from principals and colleagues, and ongoing professional reading and discussions about effective strategies for English learners designed to deepen teachers’ understanding. Teachers then examine the impact of these strategies by analyzing student work and reviewing student performance data on an ongoing basis. Data collected from students, classroom observations, reports in Achieve3000 PRO’s Leadership and Teacher editions, and input from our instructional leadership team guides our plans for future professional development.

Principal Support and Understanding of English Learners’ Language Development Needs

It’s essential for school-level leadership to be engaged in a continual learning cycle as well, so they can effectively provide guidance for their teachers while maintaining an eye on student performance. As a result of CVESD’s commitment to professional learning for administrators, our principals have become leaders capable of creating systemic change within their schools. Principals attend monthly learning sessions that focus on various student profiles, including English learners. In addition, principals are assigned a senior cabinet member who meets with them during one-on-one monthly coaching sessions. During these coaching visits the cabinet member reviews the site’s professional development focus, the strategies that have been identified for implementation across all grade levels, and performance data as evidenced by assessments, including student work samples. Additionally, the coach and principal conduct learning walks to validate implementation of strategies in support of English learners. Clear next steps are defined for the principal to implement during the next month.

Building this support and professional learning into the educational ecosystem has been a primary contributor to CVESD’s continually improved outcomes for English learners with a nine percent increase in the number of ELs meeting or exceeding standards on the ELA California Assessment of Student Progress and Performance between the 2014-15 and 2016-17 school years. We are one of the higher performing districts in the state with 63 percent of all students meeting or exceeding standards for ELA, versus 46 percent of students across the state and 51 percent doing so for math, versus 39 percent statewide. With the continual increase in the number of English learners nationwide, schools and districts will be well-served by implementing their own systemic approach to giving educators and leaders the necessary support to provide effective instruction to all students.

Dr. John Nelson is the former Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services for Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD). Under his leadership, students made significant strides in increasing achievement, including English learners.
There are cultural gaps and assumptions about migrant children that can lead to misunderstandings and upsetting encounters. In one case an advocate told me about, a migrant student came to school wearing an El Salvador soccer jersey. The school’s police officer saw the shirt and questioned the boy about possible gang connections. Upset, the student insisted he was wearing the jersey because he likes soccer and is from El Salvador.

Sarahi Monterrey, the Wisconsin 2019 Teacher of the Year, said she often sees migrant children come to class with headaches or looking sad. “I tell students all the time, ‘let me know if I need to get you water, if you need a break.’ And it’s very hard to find the right words to say because sometimes I do feel helpless.”

Need for Professional Development

To better understand their needs, she attended a workshop on immigration policies and later presented what she learned to staff at her school. “I started off my presentation by saying, ‘this isn’t about our personal beliefs on immigration. We know that it’s a hot topic and anyone can have personal opinions. But this is for us as educators to understand the impact that these policies have on our students. Then we’re able to build relationships.’”

Eastman from Wyoming agrees. He’s spent time learning about schooling in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to better understand the expectations and experiences migrant children have. And it’s often in small moments he sees and hears that remind him of their starkly different experiences. Two 6-year-old students were recently discussing spring break. One said he was going to Denver. The other student, a migrant child, asked how far Denver is from Jackson. “About two hours by plane,” answered the first student. The migrant child responded, “no, I mean how long does it take to walk there?”

In the Prince George’s County district, where more than 5,000 migrant children have enrolled since 2014, officials are making investments in training for all staff. There are English-learner coaches for mainstream teachers, cultural sensitivity training for bus drivers, and basic Spanish-language training is offered for all school employees. And the district’s roughly 100 interpreters have undergone specialty training in vocabulary associated with emotional and sexual abuse.

Given the scale of the district’s migrant student population, professional development has been across the system.

Building Trust With Families

Educators told me that when it comes to building trust and links to the families of migrant students, there are some big challenges and they must try different strategies to connect. Of course, many families are poor, and parents are working jobs that don’t allow time off to come to school events. Many come from traditions in their home countries where teachers and principals are authority figures who are not to be questioned.

Then, there are the very real fears some families have about sending their children to school when their immigration status is so precarious.

Eastman said when there are rumors of raids by immigration authorities, it creates an “atmosphere of fear,” and parents keep their children home from school. “Attendance is critical, and when students are not in school, they’re falling behind. Most kids can bounce back from missing a day or two, but the ability to do so decreases the more trauma in your home lives.”

To put families at ease, Eastman holds events for parents at a public park over a barbeque. “That’s easy for folks to access and our turnout rates are incredibly high, 90 percent.” He’s also changed how he thinks about parental engagement. Their 5th grade families sell apps to fundraise. “One parent said, ‘I can’t write a big check and I can’t come in to volunteer, but I can sell apps.’ And it’s a good example of how families find ways to participate in their child’s education. But it might not look like what you’d expect from an Anglo lens.”

Mitchell, in Los Angeles Unified, said being a reliable source of help and accurate information is how her district builds trust. Last year, it launched a campaign called “We Are One,” a website and workshops where the district partners with a legal organization to educate immigrant parents about their rights regarding housing, health, and education.

“We take care of their children, so schools have always been that place families trust,”
she said. “There’s a lot of misinformation out there and we want our families to know information that’s available, so they can make clear and accurate decisions.”

**Reuniting With Long-Separated Relatives**

“When I came, [my mother] wanted to take care of me, tell me what to do. But I grew up by myself and I took care of myself. I don’t need anyone to tell me what to do.”

—Natalia, 17

In many families, migrant children are reuniting with a parent or parents they may not have seen in years. Some have American-born siblings they had never met. The dynamics of rebuilding—or building—these parent-child relationships are complex.

And educators see the effects of this when migrant students come to school. Chiacone said parents of migrant students have told her they are dealing with deep feelings of guilt for leaving a child behind. Some tell her they are angry that their children don’t express gratitude for the sacrifices they’ve made to support them—whether through years of sending money home or saving up enough money to bring them to the U.S. At the same time, Chiacone says some students are angry and resentful of being torn away from family and friends in their home country—the same people who looked after them after their parents left.

In an after-school club for students who’ve recently reunited with a parent in the U.S., Chiacone said students were asked to mark the level of conflict in their recently reunified households on a scale of 1 to 10. One girl, without hesitation, wrote “11.” Another educator told me about a 14-year-old boy who kept pulling the fire alarm in school. When counselors talked to him about the behavior, he told them he didn’t want to be in the U.S., that he missed the family and friends he’d grown up with. He was angry at his mother, who’d left him behind in El Salvador when he was 7.

**Shouldering Adult Responsibilities**

“In the evenings, after school, I work as a server in a restaurant. I send the money home.”

—Paty, 18

Many migrant youths had adult responsibilities in their home countries, including taking care of younger siblings, and if they could, working. The pull of earning money is strong for many, especially older unaccompanied youth who don’t want to be a burden. Paty, a high school student in Virginia, works at least 50 hours a week as a server in a restaurant to cover rent, food, and fees for her immigration lawyer.

Another student in Paty’s school, who is 16, lives alone since her parents were deported. She cleans buildings at night to pay her rent.

All migrant children are in legal limbo. They may have to attend hearings and talk to lawyers. The immigration system is overwhelmed with cases and currently, it can take up to five years before a child gets a final determination on whether they will be allowed to stay in the U.S. or be deported.

One lawyer described the situation for migrant children in ominous terms, saying the U.S. is in danger of creating a “permanent underclass with children ripe for exploitation.”

**Resiliency and Contributions of Migrant Students**

All the educators talked to me about the many positive attributes migrant children bring to the classroom. Karina Castillo, the executive director of English-language equity and acquisition in Jefferson Parish, said meeting them, getting to know them, and understanding their stories gives her deep insight and a personal connection to what’s bringing thousands of children to the border.

“When you see the face of a child, you will have a different perspective,” Castillo said.

Ivonne Orozco understands this better than most. Now the 2018 Teacher of the Year from New Mexico, Orozco was 12 when her family illegally crossed the border into the U.S. If schools don’t serve migrant children like her, “we’re taking away that potential.”

Others list the different perspectives migrant children bring, how they expose U.S. children to different languages and cultures and the idea that there is a much bigger world out there than just their community.

“Every child has a story and every family has a story,” said Eastman, the Wyoming principal. “It just makes our community richer when we can all share those stories.”

Editor’s note: At the request of their lawyers, parents, or guardians, Education Week did not identify migrant students by their full names.

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**Third Grade Retention of ELLs: New Research Sparks Furor**

By Corey Mitchell

New research that suggests struggling English-learners could benefit from repeating 3rd grade has drawn a strong rebuke from leading scholars—and rekindled the national debate over so-called “literacy laws” that require retaining students if they fail to achieve a target score on reading tests.

While studies have questioned the effectiveness of holding back students to reach that goal, a pair of researchers have concluded that English-learners in Florida benefited from the extra year of and exposure to the language.

Led by David Figlio, an education economist and the dean of the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University, and Umut Ozek, a senior researcher at the American Institutes for Research, a study of 40,000 English-learners in Florida found that students who repeated 3rd grade learned English faster and took more advanced classes in middle and high school than their peers, who also struggled to learn the language, but moved on to 4th grade. Figlio and Ozek published the research in January in a working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Their study, however, has attracted a group of high-profile critics, who are con-
cerned that their work could have ramifications well beyond academia.

In a scathing critique, members of the Working Group on ELL Policy, a collection of nationally known scholars on English-language learning, challenge the “assumptions, approach, and findings” of the research, making the case that it could harm students who are already often marginalized and misunderstood.

The group also questions what actually benefited the students—the retention, the targeted reading instruction and related academic support students received, the teachers leading the instruction, or some combination of those factors.

Two former bilingual education teachers, Megan Hopkins, an assistant professor at the University of California, San Diego, and Francesca López, of the University of Arizona, were the letter’s main authors.

“What whether grade retention is a good idea for all struggling [English-learners] is not a finding this study can support,” they wrote in the letter posted online.

Dating to 2002, the year that Florida’s law that requires 3rd graders to pass a reading test took effect, Figlio and Ozek reviewed records of English-learners in a dozen districts. Those who didn’t pass the test repeated 3rd grade with extra support, including extended blocks of daily reading instruction and summer school classes.

The researchers compared the academic trajectories of English-learners who fell just below the score threshold to pass, and were retained, with those of English-learners who scored just high enough to pass and move on to 4th grade.

When Figlio and Ozek compared test scores of the students when they reached the same grade level, they found ELLs who were held back in 3rd grade consistently outperformed their peers on state tests and were less likely to take remedial English courses in middle school.

The students who repeated 3rd grade were also more likely to enroll in middle school honors courses and high school classes that could earn them college credit, they found.

‘A Year Left Behind’

In the state’s Miami-Dade school system—home to more than 70,000 ELLs—teachers and administrators have sought on students who need additional help before they reach 3rd grade, said Ana Gutierrez, the director of the district’s bilingual education programs.

“It can be misleading to assume that an English-language learner just needs a year left behind, that that’s going to sort of miraculously be the end-all to everything, because that’s not the case,” Gutierrez said.

“You’re looking at it from the perspective of ‘Wow. Well you don’t know enough English. We’re going to retain you and that’s going to help you in the following year.’ It becomes punitive then.”

Under Florida’s law that requires students to be retained, the district typically identifies less than 10 percent of the district’s roughly 8,000 3rd grade English-learners for possible retention, Gutierrez estimated.

Even students who don’t earn a qualifying score on the Florida Standards Assessment can be promoted to 4th grade if they pass a test at the end of a mandatory summer reading camp.

Education Week reached out to seven Florida districts—all with more than 10,000 ELLs—about how they handle retention. In Polk County, a 100,000-student district, ELLs were statistically overrepresented among the 3rd graders retained last year. The students made up 16 percent of the overall population, but 32 percent of those held back, said Michael Ackes, the district’s chief academic officer.

Ackes, who calls himself a staunch opponent of the state law, said, “We have students, like ESOL students, who are put at a disadvantage, and we need to be real cognizant of how we provide support on the front end, not retention on the back end.”

Officials at the Florida education department did not respond to an interview request.

Beyond the retention debate, there’s the issue of whether students, ELL or not, are still developing reading skills as 8- and 9-year-olds.

In Michigan, New Mexico, and North Carolina, students who fell short of the requirements to advance to 4th grade are not always held back. Even in Florida, lawmakers have weighed scrapping it.

While retaining students could be expensive for districts and stigmatizing for students, researchers Figlio and Ozek argue those potential risks are worth it if schools boost the graduation prospects of more ELLs and spend less on remedial education classes down the line.

Helping more ELLs earn diplomas could help narrow a yawning gap between them and their non-ELL peers. Nationally, the graduation rate for ELLs is 67 percent; that’s 18 percentage points less than the overall graduation rate.

In an interview, Ozek said he and Figlio plan to revise their working paper, based on feedback from colleagues and other researchers, before submitting the final version, but don’t expect the results to change much.

“We understand the sensitivity around the issue because English-learners are a vulnerable population,” Ozek said. “This is a highly contentious topic and [retention is not] the most popular intervention.”

In their letter challenging the research, The Working ELL Group urged policymakers in other states to tread carefully before trying to pitch a similar approach.

“Without situating Figlio and Ozek’s study in the broader scholarship on EL education, and fully considering its limitations and implications, policymakers risk applying this study’s findings in ways that could exacerbate inequalities for [English-learners],” the letter reads.

The research group also questioned why the authors didn’t do more to explore the social-emotional impact of grade retention, which can be stigmatizing.

Like members of The Working Group on ELL Policy, Ozek also expressed concern about lawmakers or state education officials potentially developing new policy based on their research findings in Florida.

And Gutierrez, a former ESOL teacher and principal, noted: “I know that within our state, they require... us to take a look at the number of students that are being retained, and to ask some deeper questions.”
Itinerant English-Learners Pose Challenges for School Systems

By Corey Mitchell

A new 15-state analysis found that 1 in 5 English-learners move so frequently or so far that schools and state education agencies are unable to track them over the course of their academic careers, placing the students at greater risk of struggling in school.

The revelation is one of the key findings of new research from the WIDA Consortium, a group of nearly 40 state education agencies that share English-language-proficiency standards and assessment for ELLs.

The study sought to examine learning conditions across the country for long-term English-learners, those students who are not considered proficient in English after being educated in U.S. schools for five to seven years.

Between the 2009-10 and 2014-15 school years, 20 percent of English-learners in the study cohort either moved to another state, left the country, or dropped out of school altogether, making them almost impossible to track, the researchers found.

Overall, research has linked high student mobility to lower school engagement, reading struggles, and increased risk of high school dropout.

Those students who cross state lines often face inconsistent state reclassification criteria and district implementation strategies that could leave them labeled as a long-term English-learner in one state and English-proficient in another. That also means they may not have had the opportunity to benefit from consistent language support.

Overall, research has linked high mobility among all students, not just English-learners, to lower school engagement, reading struggles, and increased risk of high school dropout.

Across the nation, long-term English-learners are a group with a growing significance and presence for school systems: Research suggests that more than 1 in 4 English-learners will remain classified as ELs for six years or more.

“They are the most vulnerable population of the most marginalized population,” said Narek Sahakyan, the study co-author and an associate researcher in the WIDA research, policy, and evaluation department. “These are usually the kids who are swept under the rug. They need our attention the most.”

The students often can communicate in English, but have yet to master academic language—the sort of subject-area-specific vocabulary that can help them solve story problems in math class or grasp science concepts.

In some districts, including Los Angeles Unified, long-term English-learners are a majority of the English-learner population.

The WIDA study also found that native Spanish-speaking children and students identified as potential long-term English-learners, making them twice as likely to be tagged with the designation as their white and Asian English-learner peers.

The study also found significant overlap between students’ disability status and long-term English-learner potential: Among students with IEPs, 45 percent were identified as potential long-term English-learners. The same was only true of 10 percent of English-learners who never had IEPs.

Being identified as a long-term English-learner or even a potential long-term EL can have implications for what and how students are taught. English-learners are often denied full access to STEM education, take fewer advanced and college-preparatory classes, and are most often immersed in coursework that focuses on basic skills instead of lessons centered on problem-solving or critical thinking.
The Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD) includes 143 schools with more than 86,000 students. Approximately 77 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 30 percent are English learners.

FWISD began using Achieve3000’s PRO literacy solutions in the fall of 2016 with grades K-12 in 130 schools as part of the city-wide “100x25” initiative. The initiative aims to support schools in making sure that 100 percent of third grade students will be reading on grade-level by 2025.

Achieve3000’s PRO is an online literacy platform that offers a differentiated approach to instruction proven to accelerate literacy growth. Engaging content is available across the content areas in 12 Lexile® levels in English and 8 in Spanish. Additional scaffolding is available for struggling readers and English learners.

The district set the expectation for all schools to include one Achieve3000 PRO lesson in students’ English language arts and science or social studies classrooms, for a total of two lessons completed each week. A majority of elementary schools in FWISD use a dual-language instructional model for English learners. These students use PRO to read articles and complete lessons in English and/or Spanish. Students in middle and high schools do not follow a dual-language program, but English learners still have the option to access language scaffolds, such as vocabulary keys and text-to-speech tools, to receive support.

**STAAR Reading Performance**

On average, students who used Achieve3000’s PRO literacy solutions improved by 67 scale score points on the STAAR reading assessment from spring 2017 to spring 2018. Notably, students who completed 80 or more lessons* and maintained an average first-try score of 75 percent or above on the embedded assessment demonstrated the largest increase of 90 scale score points.

*PRO lessons include an article and an embedded assessment.

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**IMPACT STUDY:** How the Fort Worth Independent School District, with Large EL Population, Improved Student STAAR Reading Performance with Achieve3000

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FWISD began using Achieve3000’s PRO literacy solutions in the fall of 2016 with grades K-12 in 130 schools as part of the city-wide “100x25” initiative. The initiative aims to support schools in making sure that 100 percent of third grade students will be reading on grade-level by 2025.

Achieve3000’s PRO is an online literacy platform that offers a differentiated approach to instruction proven to accelerate literacy growth. Engaging content is available across the content areas in 12 Lexile® levels in English and 8 in Spanish. Additional scaffolding is available for struggling readers and English learners.

The district set the expectation for all schools to include one Achieve3000 PRO lesson in students’ English language arts and science or social studies classrooms, for a total of two lessons completed each week. A majority of elementary schools in FWISD use a dual-language instructional model for English learners. These students use PRO to read articles and complete lessons in English and/or Spanish. Students in middle and high schools do not follow a dual-language program, but English learners still have the option to access language scaffolds, such as vocabulary keys and text-to-speech tools, to receive support.
With Achieve3000, English learners can accelerate their literacy growth through reading, writing, speaking, and listening scaffolds. Content can be read at multiple Lexile® levels in Spanish and English so all students can participate in whole class instruction and meet the same grade-level expectations.
CLOSING THE GAP FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

We support effective instruction for ELs with a flexible and proven approach powered by the ability to:

- Assess students’ reading proficiency in English and Spanish
- Measure every student’s growth with embedded assessments that drive automatic adjustment of leveled content
- Set language scaffolds to provide students with vocabulary keys, text-to-speech and speech-to-text tools, and sentence and paragraph frames
- Deliver differentiated grade-level content at up to 12 levels in English and 8 in Spanish

3X EXPECTED LEXILE GAINS

Achieve3000’s 2017–18 National Lexile Study analyzed results for more than 287,000 English learners from across the nation. Overall, and on average, students using our solutions between one and two times each week, with high engagement, exceeded their expected Lexile growth of 74L by 2.5X to nearly 3.5X!

*This study focuses its examination of students’ Lexile growth on results for students who completed at least 40 lesson activities with an average first-try score of greater than or equal to 75%.
search associate Elizabeth Burr, interviewed several of the manual’s writers, culling tips on how to develop and promote the manuals, train teachers and avoid roadblocks that can slow down the implementation process.

In their interviews, the manual writers shared stories of educators confused, and sometimes clueless, about the educational rights of both English-learners and students with disabilities. In Michigan, officials found educators in several districts who said they were not aware that schools must identify and evaluate children that they suspect may have a disability. In Minnesota, special education consultant Elizabeth Watkins came across educators who mistakenly assumed there was a mandatory three-year waiting period before English-learners could be referred to special education services.

That confusion among educators could be problematic for English-learners’ families, especially those who may not know that their children can qualify for special education services or even understand how schools define learning disabilities. “The concept of [a] learning disability does not exist in many cultures,” Watkins told Burr. “I think that’s a helpful perspective for licensed staff—English-speaking staff—to think about.”

Another government research lab, the Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands, produced a guide that could help bridge that gap of understanding. The two-page document offers a series of recommendations on how to determine whether a student’s struggles stem from their limited English-language proficiency or a learning disability. The suggestions include:

• Establishing relationships with parents, bilingual education and special education teachers, speech pathologists, trained interpreters and others to help identify a student’s needs.

• Using data from sources such as attendance records, classroom observations—and standardized test and school assessment results that focus on knowledge and skills, not just English proficiency.

• Consider students’ skills in English and their native languages and create classrooms that value their cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Federal data indicates that about 15 percent of English-learners are identified as having learning disabilities.

**COMMENTARY**

*Published on February 28, 2019, in Education Week*

Don’t Be Too Quick to Retain English-Language Learners

**Authors of a splashy ELL retention study urge “great caution”**

By Rebecca Callahan, David Figlio, Madeline Mavrogordato, & Umut Özek

Good news is often hard to come by in education research. So it’s not surprising that recent media coverage trumpeting positive impacts of retention for English-language learners caught the eye of many policymakers and educators. Stories in Education Week and The Hechinger Report highlighted that if retained in 3rd grade, English-learners learned English in half the time and took more advanced classes in middle and high school. The recent National Bureau of Economic Research working paper has made quite a splash. However, does this study really suggest retaining English-learners is a good idea?

The results are compelling. English proficiency is necessary to fully participate in everything American schools have to offer, and advanced course-taking, often beyond English-learners’ reach, can unlock future job prospects. But we—the two authors of this study (David Figlio and Umut Özek) as well as two experts in English-language-learning policy (Rebecca Callahan and Madeline Mavrogordato)—strongly urge policymakers and practitioners not to race ahead and retain English-learners on the basis of this study.

The research uses a state-of-the-art method called regression discontinuity, which allows us to disentangle causation from correlation by comparing English-learners who are identical in many ways, except that some scored just below the cutoff for retention while some scored just above. This is the most credible way to estimate the effects of Florida’s policy absent a randomized trial. However, the price we pay for credibility is that the findings do not apply to all English-learners. With this method, researchers can only estimate the effects for students just on the cusp...
of retention, and even then findings apply only to English-learners who have been in American schools two years or more. So the study tells us little about how the policy would affect English-learners with higher or lower reading scores, or those who arrived more recently.

Policymakers and practitioners shouldn’t pick and choose their facts, and a raft of evidence exists documenting negative consequences of retention. Many previous studies have shown a negative relationship between retention and student outcomes, including short-term disciplinary issues, psychosocial trauma, and higher risk for high school dropout. Some of the studies of long-term achievement are negative as well. In fact, retention may even exacerbate inequity, as African-American, Latino, and English-learner students are retained more frequently than their white or native English-speaking peers. Even in the case of “objective” retention policies like Florida’s, children from poor families are more likely to be retained than their more advantaged peers, even when they have similar scores.

Moreover, while grade retention gets most of the airtime—something inadvertently perpetuated in the recent study—in the case of Florida, it is only part of the story. When a 3rd grader scores below a certain score on Florida’s reading test, state policy requires that the student not only repeat 3rd grade, but also receive four important interventions: (1) summer school, (2) 90 minutes of daily reading instruction, (3) placement with an effective teacher, and (4) an academic improvement plan. In fact, this combination might explain why other prior studies suggest positive effects of Florida’s policy.

Independently, each of these interventions could have produced some of the educational benefits found in the recent study. Extra instructional time, both in summer school and during the school day, can improve students’ math and reading achievement. For English-learners in particular, summer school may boost both academic achievement and college aspirations.

Likewise, literacy instruction, particularly when it emphasizes comprehension and is integrated across content areas such as math and science, holds promise for improving English-learners’ academic outcomes. The most effective reading interventions for English-learners appear to be those that incorporate high-quality instruction. And since Florida’s policy ensures that retained students are placed with an effective teacher, improved teacher quality could also contribute to better outcomes. Teacher effectiveness is particularly salient for English-learners as they are more likely to be placed with under-certified and novice teachers than other student groups.

This marginalization of English-learners dates back to the start of compulsory schooling, when it was common for educators to apply labels such as “unteachable,” “imbeciles,” and “dunces” to students learning English, and retain them in a misguided attempt to solve the problem. In fact, until the Supreme Court intervened in 1974 with Lau v. Nichols, which essentially extended Brown v. Board to protect the rights of students learning English, inappropriate retention was the rule, rather than the exception for English-learners. Even today, in a context where educators constantly strive to improve ELL education, the challenge is to do so without further segregating and isolating English-learners students remains. While grade retention coupled with other interventions might improve some outcomes for some English-learners, we urge policymakers and practitioners to exercise great caution before introducing “brute force” instruments for educating a population with such a history of educational marginalization and mistreatment.

Currently, 16 states have 3rd grade test-based retention requirements, two more are pending, and an additional eight allow educators to recommend test score-based retention. Many policymakers see retention as a “silver bullet,” and this new study might convince more people to support early-grade retention for English-learners. To be certain, ELL students require time to learn English. However, we suggest that retention be used sparingly and with a clear-headed understanding of its risks, not just its potential benefits.

Rebecca Callahan is an associate professor of educational leadership and policy at the University of Texas, Austin, where she is a public voices fellow of the OpEd Project. A former bilingual teacher, she co-authored Coming of Political Age (Russell Sage Foundation, 2013). David Figlio is the Orrington Lunt Professor and dean of the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. An elected member of the National Academy of Education, he is editor-in-chief of the Journal of Human Resources. Madeline Mavrogordato is an associate professor of K-12 educational administration at Michigan State University. Previously, she was a bilingual elementary school teacher in Texas and California. Umut Özek is a principal researcher at the American Institutes for Research.

**COMMENTARY**

**Collaborative Teaching Benefits Multilingual, Immigrant, and Refugee Students**

By Jane Charlotte Weiss

How do we design classrooms and education systems that truly reflect the brilliance of our most underrepresented children? How do we create learning communities for the greatest thinkers and most thoughtful people for the world? As an elementary school teacher focused on multilingual, immigrant, and refugee students, I’ve been asking myself these questions for years and am convinced that there is now more potential than ever to answer these questions in tangible ways.

I see immigration as a collective story, a foundation of our country. And yet with each new wave of immigration to the U.S., a backlash of intolerance and misunderstanding has come with it, often followed by political and education policies that mirror these sentiments in both overt and subtle ways.

**A Broken System**

The landscape for students in the U.S. categorized as English-learners has been largely dictated by court rulings and federal and state regulations which mandate classification and specialized services for students speaking multiple languages with the goal of ensuring that they have equal access to education. While programs are intended to help students,
a growing body of work has also identified numerous ways in which the classification of and services for students labeled as ELs creates a hierarchically tiered education system that parallels many of the social inequalities that exist in our society as a whole.

I saw this firsthand during the earliest years of my career as an elementary multilingual specialist in Portland, Ore. My days were spent pulling children out of their classrooms to receive English-language-developing (ELD) instruction in small groups. Both their classroom teachers and I found ourselves working hard in isolation. Our students, who spent significant time outside of the classroom, were often the most disengaged and did not seem to be making significant academic or linguistic growth. EL classification is not intended to impact the social status of students, but there is widespread recognition that pullout programs and remedial courses often result in social stigmatization and barriers to opportunities within schools. In a recent study, Ilana Umansky at the University of Oregon found that EL classification alone can have a long-lasting negative impact on students’ academic achievement starting as young as 2nd grade.

Rewriting the Future

In 2013, the Oregon education department adopted an innovative set of English-language-proficiency standards that align with the Common Core, presenting us with the opportunity to write a new chapter. Across the state, EL specialists like myself were emboldened to work directly alongside classroom teachers and support language development throughout the day using an innovative practice called collaborative teaching or co-teaching.

I changed schools that year and my new principal thoughtfully allowed me to take a grassroots approach to building a schoolwide collaborative-teaching model, which we based on the work of researcher Michael Fullan and his Six Secrets of Change. These principles were essential in guiding me toward a collective, open-minded, and grassroots approach to co-teaching. In the spring of that first year, I started dropping by teachers’ classrooms after school to see if they would be interested to try co-teaching with me. Eight elementary teachers were equally passionate about improving access and opportunities for multilingual students and interested in co-teaching. Together, we looked at ourselves as teacher-researchers and approached the work from an inquiry perspective, asking, “How can we work together so that students grow in their language development and learn rigorous academic content?” We used research from Stanford University’s Understanding Language initiative to cultivate excitement and build a shared vision for our collaborative-teaching model.

Leveraging Collective Wisdom

One crucial yet difficult element of co-teaching is planning together. Without time to collaborate on lessons, effective co-teaching is nearly impossible. Thankfully, our principal allowed me to dedicate one day a week entirely to meeting with classroom teachers during their prep times and after school. We found that this time to reflect upon, prepare for, and refine our lessons often had just as significant an impact on our work with students as the actual co-teaching. It also allowed me to organize several lesson studies so teachers across grade levels could collectively refine our co-teaching approach. Lesson study is an inquiry process in which teachers set a goal for improving their practice, generate a lesson based on research and pedagogical innovation, teach the lesson while being observed by colleagues, and then reflect upon student engagement and learning. A foundational goal of our collaborative-teaching model has always been to recognize and build upon the unique talents and expertise of each individual teacher. By keeping our gaze sharply focused on each student’s engagement and progress throughout the day, we have been able to determine which research-based instructional practices are having the greatest impact. The cross-pollination of these instructional approaches among teachers has had a profound impact on students throughout the school; what we have been able to create collectively has become much greater than anything we could have accomplished individually.

Co-teaching students categorized as ELs is an emerging practice in Oregon, but its potential to improve student outcomes is momentous. Working alongside teachers to analyze student progress and discuss the best ways to teach them has been some of the most profound work I’ve ever done. In our school district, we often talk about “creating conditions for miracles to occur,” when disenfranchised students transcend the opportunity gaps that have traditionally written their story. As we see it, if we want this to happen for our most marginalized learners, we are going to need to work together to leverage our collective wisdom—and this is exactly what teaching and planning collaboratively has accomplished.

Jane Charlotte Weiss is an elementary teacher in Portland, Ore., and a Fulbright Distinguished Teaching Fellow in Finland.
COMMENTARY
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Author Interview: ‘Teaching Science to English Learners’

By Larry Ferlazzo

Stephen Fleenor agreed to answer a few questions about his new book, Teaching Science to English Learners, written with Tina Beene.

Dr. Stephen Fleenor is an educational consultant with Seidlitz Education, specializing in language-rich content-area instruction and growth mindset.

LF: You write: “For science classes, questions should drive the lessons.” Why do you say that, and what are some things teachers can do to encourage and scaffold question-asking by English-language learners?

Dr. Stephen Fleenor:

Generally speaking, questioning is a cornerstone of effective teaching of any content because it stimulates student thinking about that content. That questioning often comes directly from the teacher. Teacher-led questioning is important, and strategies for scaffolding teacher-led questioning are embedded throughout the book (for example, the provision of think time and sentence stems such as what is provided by the QSSSA process). However, it is important to recognize that the ultimate goal we should be driving toward in science lessons is student-led questioning.

After all, the fundamental purpose of K-12 education is to create contributing citizens of the global society. This is no truer than in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields, where the daily job description is to innovate and discover. For STEM professionals to find new answers in the pursuit of technological and intellectual progress, they must be trained in the art of asking new questions. That’s where we come in by encouraging student-led questioning in our STEM K-12 classes.

Teacher-led questioning, therefore, is an essential structure for student thinking about the content and a modeling of the thinking process that leads to new questions being asked. But teacher-led questioning is only half of the equation. Just as low-stress opportunities for output is equally as important as comprehensible input for second-language acquisition, having students practice asking great questions is equally as important as teachers asking great questions for science process acquisition.

To get English-learners asking great questions, I first implore teachers to create a safe culture of total participation and I next encourage teachers to embrace the axiom that there are no bad questions. Start by having students to simply express confusion or uncertainty about something, with sentence stems such as “I’m confused about ____ because ...” or “I do not understand ____ because ...” and build students toward “I wonder why ...” or “What would happen if ...” as they grow in English-language proficiency, science-content knowledge, and confidence.

LF: Most, if not all, of the instructional strategies that you write about to support ELLs seem to me could be very beneficial for all students—regardless of their English proficiency. What are some of the key strategies you discuss in the book that you think could be particularly helpful with non-ELLs, too?

Dr. Stephen Fleenor:

I talk a lot about the “science language” as though it is distinct from the English language. Indeed, science is so vocabulary-laden and so unique in its formal and objective voice that it is nearly indecipherable to even fluent English speakers who lack science training (which is why shows like The Big Bang Theory are so funny!). In 7 Steps to a Language-Rich Foreign Language Classroom, Anna Matis talks about the roles of motivation, access to language, and quality of instruction as key factors within teachers’ control that profoundly impact new language development.

That is exactly what the strategies in Teaching Science to ELs address and exactly what ELLs and non-ELs alike need to master science content. A major component of motivation is a student’s fundamental self-belief that he or she can productively participate—be it a structured conversation, a lab, or any other activity. Strategies such as Complete the Picture and Visual Pre-Read break content into manageable chunks and provide visual scaffolds to give students confidence to engage in the activity.

Part and parcel with confidence is open-endedness in building motivation as well as access to language. Open-ended activities are really important because they convey that there is no one “right” answer. A classroom with open-ended activities allows each student to share their voice safely, which encourages them to participate. It also requires students to think more deeply about the content and vocabulary. Teachers have often told me they struggle with creating open-ended questions, so I was sure to include a section in the book that explains how to turn a closed-ended question into an open-ended question.

Above all else, what ELLs and non-ELs alike struggle with the most is science writing, so it’s important to provide lots of opportunities for structured science writing. This structure looks like unambiguous expectations for high-quality writing: the inclusion of key vocabulary...
words and/or examples; models for well-written and poorly written responses; and structured conversations prior to writing that help students brainstorm. I strongly encourage science teachers to make writing, anywhere from two sentences to two paragraphs (depending on grade level), a daily goal for all science lessons.

**LF:** Some of the strategies you discuss seem like they might take a fair amount of prep time, while others seem pretty simple. What are some simple first steps a teacher who is just beginning to teach ELLs might take that wouldn't be too overwhelming?

**Dr. Stephen Fleenor:**
I believe any great science lesson includes a strong emphasis on vocabulary that includes all language processes (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). For a teacher who is new to teaching ELs, or new to teaching, or simply exhausted in the middle of February, I recommend making the first steps of lesson planning to identify two to four vocabulary words to emphasize and two or three open-ended questions to ask.

Often science resources list upwards of 10-20 vocabulary words for any given learning standard, which is far too much for a student (especially an English-learner) to internalize within a single lesson. That’s why I say make a focus on two to four words. Have students pronounce the words chorally by breaking up the syllables with the class (such as “de-, de-for-, de-for-est-, de-for-est-ation”) at the start of the lesson, then emphasize the words and have the students use the words as often as possible throughout the lesson.

The two to three questions identified can serve as opportunities for structured conversations as well as for structured writing. A teacher can even instruct students to use the vocabulary words in their responses. Together this will help students process the content and create a clear goal for mastery. If students are listening and reading with a focus on key vocabulary and using that vocabulary in their writing and speaking, that alone is the stuff of great science learning.

Lastly, I recommend following any information input (via direct teaching, a video, or a reading passage) with general discussion prompts such as, “I think ___ means…” or “___ is related to ___ because …” There are lots of these generalized sentence stems throughout the book, and they can be used at lots of different times in any lesson.

**LF:** Are there any specific suggestions that you might have for a science teacher who might just have one or two ELLs in his/her class, while the vast majority of the students are English proficient?

**Dr. Stephen Fleenor:**
If a teacher has one or two beginner-level ELs, I recommend providing adapted texts (such as texts with components translated into a student’s home language via Google Translate or texts written in simplified English via Rewordify.com) and the opportunity to observe English-proficient speakers in structured conversations. The students’ ESL teacher can be enormously helpful in helping to prepare these texts and giving the students a preview of the lesson content ahead of time.

If a teacher has a more mixed range of English proficiency among his/her ELs, tiered sentence stems can be enormously beneficial to make the lesson accessible and challenging. To answer the same question, one sentence stem can simply require insertion of a vocabulary word (i.e., a fill-in-the-blank stem); one sentence stem can be open-ended; and one sentence stem can be open-ended and require justification (such as one ending in “because...”). In my experience, students almost always choose the stem that is appropriately within their own zones of proximal development.

**LF:** Is there anything I haven’t asked you about that you’d like to share?

**Dr. Stephen Fleenor:**
Providing language-rich learning opportunities for science students is not just beneficial for English-language development of ELs. It is also best practice for learning science content, because as human beings we learn through using language. It’s no coincidence that we are the most intelligent species in the animal kingdom as well as the most capable of language. When we are exposed to comprehensible content and are able to discuss and write about that content, our neurons actively make connections to cement the learning in the brain. Whether we serve one EL or 100 ELs or zero ELs, we are all serving science-language learners, and focusing our pedagogy on teaching the language of science is how our students are all going to best learn science.

**LF:** Thanks, Stephen!
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