Supporting English Learners with Disabilities

Equitable education means overcoming challenges in identification, staff training, and funding.

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While total U.S. public school enrollment has hovered around 50 million since 2000, the percentage of students identified as English learners has grown, from 8.1 percent in 2000 to 10.1 percent in 2017.[1] A subgroup of these students, English learners with disabilities, continues to be one of the most underserved.[2]

English learners with disabilities accounted for 9.5 percent of all students with individualized education programs (IEPs) in 2013–14 and 11.28 percent in 2019–20 (about 830,000 students). Of those, 93 percent received services for high-incidence disabilities (such as a specific learning disability, speech/language impairment, or intellectual disability) while the remaining 7 percent received services for low-incidence disabilities (such as hearing or visual impairment or traumatic brain injury).[3] Despite the growth in this population, teachers and administrators frequently do not understand the unique experiences, needs, and strengths of these students.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) defines English learners as individuals

> not born in the United States *or* whose native language is a language other than English...whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English may...deny [them] the ability to meet the challenging State academic standards, the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English, or the opportunity to participate fully in society.

Beyond this general definition, English learners bring varied backgrounds to the classroom. They may have extensive to minimal prior formal schooling, for example. They have varied knowledge of the language that is spoken at home or in countries where they were born and varied exposure to English. The time spent in the United States also varies, with many having been born here.[4]

ESSA emphasizes that state and local education agencies (SEAs/LEAs) must provide sufficiently trained staff so that English learners have equal opportunities for attaining English language proficiency and academic achievement across content areas without being *unnecessarily* segregated from non-ELs, thus leading to a well-rounded education. To monitor and evaluate these students' progress toward language proficiency and mastery of grade-level content, all staff—not just specialists in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)—should have a working knowledge of these culturally and linguistically diverse students' needs.[5]

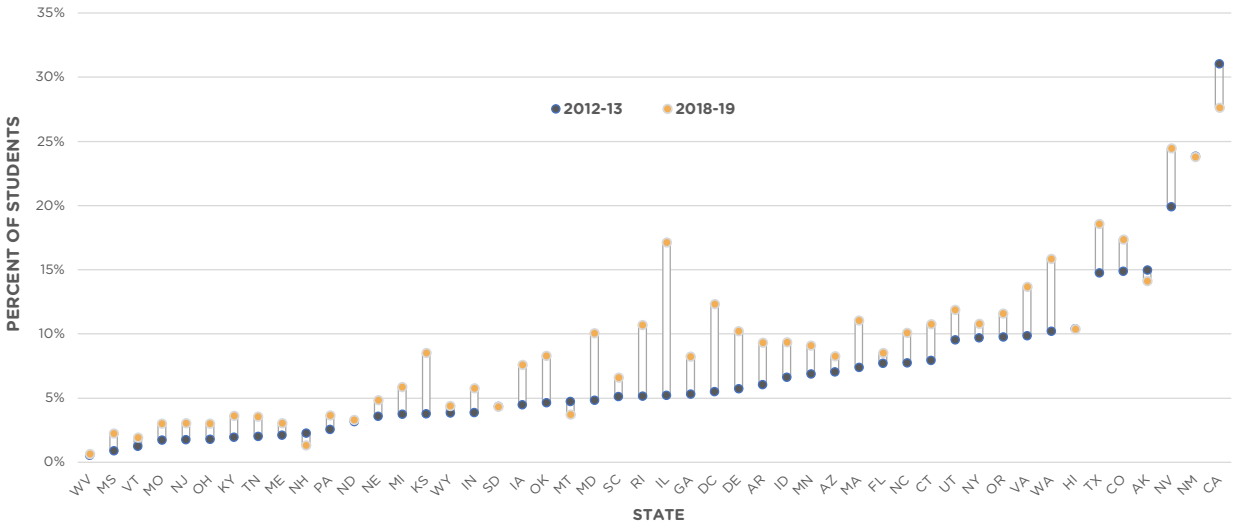
Identifying Students for Services

English learners with disabilities are a unique population. To properly identify these students for appropriate services and address their academic needs, educators must understand a trifecta of factors: disabilities, the language acquisition process for students learning English as an additional language, and cross-cultural differences, including knowing how U.S. expectations and norms for students compare with those of other countries.

Without being steeped in all three, educators can misconstrue the factors, leading to a disproportionate representation of English learners in special education. For example, students' behaviors may be viewed as connected to a disability when in fact, they are a normal part of the language acquisition process or stem from differing cultural understandings, expectations, or norms.

Conversely, decision makers may discount disability as a possibility for

Figure 1. Students with Disabilities Who Were English Learners by State, 2012–13 and 2018–19 (percent)



Source: Yi-Chen Wu, Martha L. Thurlow, and Kristin Liu, "Understanding the Characteristics of English Learners with Disabilities to Meet Their Needs during State and Districtwide Assessments," NCEO Brief 24 (Minneapolis: National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2021), using data from U.S. Department of Education, Child Count and Educational Environments, in 2012 and 2018. Used with permission.

an English learner, particularly if the student is young or has only recently arrived in the United States.[6] Educators may be reluctant to assess these students early in their U.S. educational experience, at least in part because of an exclusionary clause in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which states that limited English proficiency "is not a determinant factor for the determination of special education."[7] Consequently, some English learners who do indeed have disabilities may not be receiving the services they need.

Researchers Vicki Adelson and colleagues illustrate the difficulty an English learner's observable behavior may pose for teachers and other decision makers who are not knowledgeable of these students' backgrounds and needs.[8] For example, aggressive or withdrawn behaviors could be connected to issues with self-regulation, social communication, language processing, anxiety, or depression, all of which are often connected to special education needs. But these behaviors might also be connected to a learner's lack of educational experience or different cultural and behavioral norms. Or it might reflect where the learner is in the English language acquisition process—a silent period in which language comprehension precedes language production. School staff must take all these factors into account to address these students' needs appropriately.

This work requires collaboration between specialists in special education and ESOL. Ideally, special education specialists will possess a working knowledge of the ESOL field, including language acquisition and cross-cultural communication, and ESOL specialists will have working knowledge of special education. Classroom teachers and administrators should have foundational knowledge of both as well.

How this collaboration translates into practice varies. Bearing in mind the parameters of the SEA or LEA, learners should be allowed to receive ESOL and special education services

simultaneously, with specialists in each being deeply aware of what occurs with the other service. Dual certification in ESOL and special education might be a useful option, though stringent certification requirements may make this infeasible in some states. At the very least, educators can collaborate when creating IEPs and lesson plans for these learners.

Funding Challenges

Under federal law, English learners and students with disabilities are protected groups, meaning that U.S. schools must accurately identify and provide language accommodations (in the case of English learners) and special education services (in the case of students with disabilities). Federal policies protecting English learners are outlined in Titles I and III of ESSA; IDEA is the federal law granting protections to students with disabilities. Independently, these federal policies provide funding and hold schools accountable for providing appropriate support and services to students who need these services.

Yet funding remains a major challenge for states and school districts providing services to English learners with disabilities. In fiscal year 1982, Congress agreed to authorize grants to states that would cover up to 40 percent of the extra costs associated with special education services per student—known as full funding. However, IDEA state grants have never met the authorized full-funding level.[9] Available data from 1988–2021 show that, on average, the national average per pupil expenditure covered by the federal government has oscillated between 7 and 18 percent. The only exception occurred in 2009, when stimulus money during the Great Recession temporarily boosted the figure to 33 percent.[10]

Underfunding for English learners under Title III is not as dire, but there has nonetheless been a concerning downward trend in Title III.[11] A recent report shows that Title III funding has not kept up with the steady English learner growth. From 2009 to 2016—the latest available data—the Title III average per pupil expenditure decreased by 9.4 percent.[12] Further, the latest Title III state biennial report shows that, in comparison to school year 2014–15, Title III funding for 2015–16 decreased for 26 SEAs, increased for 24, and in Vermont and Wyoming remained the same.[13]

Thus, programs granting protections for both English learners and students with disabilities are underfunded, which presents real challenges to states and school districts. When states and districts fail to receive funding to support their students with disabilities, they cut costs in any way possible to stay afloat. For some, the only feasible option is to offer only one service to English learners with disabilities—ESOL or special education. By not fully addressing these students' needs and expecting them to be academically successful with only half the support they need, they are shortchanged.[14] At the same time, special education and ESOL specialists, who are often not trained to provide support beyond their area of expertise, will also struggle.[15]

Professional Development Challenges

A lack of educator knowledge is the other pressing barrier to supporting English learners with disabilities. For English learners, teachers must have received training in the basic tenets of second language acquisition, the process of acculturation, effective instructional and assessment methods, and linguistically responsive pedagogy.[16] To support students with disabilities, teachers must understand the developmental characteristics of exceptional learners, assessment and evaluation in special education, and adapted instructional methods. However, of the five states with the highest percentage of ELs—California, Texas, New Mexico, Nevada, and Illinois—only California and Illinois have specific certification requirements for support of English learners with disabilities.[17] In California, special education teachers must take courses that include "content for teaching English learners," and ESOL teachers are required to take courses that equip them to identify when English learners require special education services.[18] For Illinois's qualified bilingual specialist certification, teachers are required to take courses in special education, bilingual education, and second language acquisition.[19]

The gap presents challenges for ESOL teachers whose students need but are not receiving special education services and, conversely, for special education teachers whose English learners' needs are not being met. This knowledge gap widens in classes where content-area teachers may have received limited or no preparation to

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support either language acquisition for English learners or the individual needs of students with special needs.[20]

There are four options for bridging the gap between the services English learners with disabilities need and the preparation for teachers—content-area, ESOL, and special education alike: co-teaching, professional development, certification requirement changes, and dual certification options. Co-teaching, or working in synergy, to support English learners with disabilities is a promising practice, but it is more work for teachers and intensifies the funding challenges.[21] Professional development for educators working with this student population is another option that school districts can offer, though a potential risk is that professional development alone may be a Band-Aid that equips teachers with only limited knowledge.

The third option consists of altering the requirements for all teacher certification areas. To be certified in general content areas, teacher candidates must have specific credit hours dedicated to English learners, disabilities, and, specifically, English learners with disabilities. ESOL teacher candidates must have credit hours in special education, and conversely, special education teacher candidates must have credit hours in ESOL.

The fourth option expands on the third to promote more pathways for dual certification. In our view, dual certification in ESOL and special education is the best choice for bridging the gap between the services these students need and the education teachers receive. Some school districts are already partnering with local universities to do so. In this model, special education teachers pursue ESOL certification, and ESOL teachers pursue a special education certification. These dually certified candidates would then work in tandem with content-area teachers, whose coursework in their own teacher certification programs ideally addressed this student population. Such work would lead to more robust collaborative lesson planning and co-teaching options.

Teachers do not work in a bubble; school and district leaders also need to understand the needs of English learners with disabilities in order to promote, support, and further develop the work of their schools' and districts' teaching force. As such, school leader/administrator certifications must move beyond general cultural diversity knowledge as it relates to educational leadership and delve into the specific cultural, second-language acquisition, academic, and disability needs of this student population.

Moving Forward

The growing population of English learners with disabilities will need the support of teachers, teaching assistants and paraprofessionals, administrators, and district and state leaders who understand their dual needs. Educators need foundational knowledge of the English language acquisition process, cross-cultural differences, and disabilities. States need to account for ways in which their educators can acquire this knowledge base so they can apply it in the classroom.

While knowledge of language acquisition, cross-cultural differences, and disabilities represent the foundation needed to support the learning of English learners with disabilities, they do not encompass everything these students need. Great change has occurred in our country in just a recent handful of years. The country has witnessed social unrest sparked by long-standing inequities and a pandemic that magnified those issues of access and inequality in the U.S. education system. Moving forward, school districts and leaders ought to shift their attention to the mental and emotional effects that global, social, and community events are having in their schools and take a special interest in groups that are vulnerable and in individuals in more than one such group.

As we mentioned before, the population of English learners was already increasing; the recent influx of asylum seekers at the southern border and of refugees from Afghanistan has led to an even larger increase in English learners. Given the continuing trajectory of growth in this population of students, we propose three overarching courses of action that state boards of education can take to promote excellence, equity, and meaningful access for English learners with disabilities across educational contexts: management of disparate funding streams, ensuring equitable access to services, and revamping licensure.

Delineating and managing funding. Because funding for these students comes from different federal entities, state boards should set aside a proportional amount of funding from these in

relation to the population of English learners with disabilities in their states that is to be overseen by all three corresponding state and local entities: Title I, Title III, and special education offices. In doing so, state boards will ensure that these offices at the SEA and LEA levels must confer in order to decide how to best allocate funding to address students' needs. Further, state boards should look at short- and long-term data. The short-term data should include the current numbers of this population at local school districts. The long-term data should examine where this population might relocate, given their transitory nature in many districts around the country.

Ensuring equitable access to all services that benefit these students. These students must have full access to all services required to address their academic, language, cultural, and disability needs—ESOL and special education services, as well as mainstream classrooms. Too often, these students only receive half the services they need due to shortages of funding or personnel. State boards must ensure that districts can satisfactorily provide both.

Revamping education personnel qualifications, including the creation of funded programs and cohorts. We propose that state boards evaluate current educator qualifications and modify the licensure requirements to support English learners with disabilities by including coursework that properly trains all education personnel—content-area teachers, ESOL teachers, special education teachers, administrators, and others. It is important that all personnel within the school district take responsibility for their part in addressing these students' needs. Further, we encourage state boards to partner with local institutions of higher education to offer funded programs and cohorts that allow in-service education personnel to receive appropriate licensure to support this student population without taking on a financial burden themselves. ■

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