Equitable Course, College, and Career Access for English Learner Students in California

Overview

Equitable course, college, and career access for English Learner (EL) students is an important issue that has been identified as a priority by the Consortium for English Learner Success for state and local advocacy because of a widespread lack of access of English Learner students to core content classes like math and science, and college preparatory classes like A-G requirements.

Federal law allows English Learner students to be provided with core content instruction in two ways: through simultaneous instruction in which English language development and content instruction occur at the same time among grade-level peers, or through sequential instruction in which EL students can be withheld from a core content area during an initial period of intensive English instruction so long as compensatory supplemental content instruction that recoups academic deficits is offered.¹

Research on a sequential approach has shown this approach to have a negative effect on EL students because once EL students are tracked into less rigorous courses with little access to core curriculum, it is nearly impossible for them to catch up.² Newcomer EL students, however, have been shown to benefit from intensive English language development prior to moving into core content areas, particularly in math.³

California has identified a clear preference for simultaneous instruction where EL students are provided with content instruction alongside their grade-level peers using modifications to make that content accessible to them. The EL Roadmap states, “English language proficiency development … can take place as an integrated process simultaneous with academic content learning...”⁴ District Local Control Accountability plans must also describe how programs and services will enable English Learner students to access ELA and Math standards. However, the state has not established specific guidance or resources that support the commitment to simultaneous access to core content for EL students.

This memo provides a description of three key issues and related policy recommendations related to equitable course, college, and career access: 1) access to grade-level core content instruction; 2) access to, preparation for, and success in college and career; and 3) access to enrichment courses.

ISSUE 1: EL students across California do not have equitable access to grade-level core content instruction.

Despite federal protections and California’s preference for simultaneous instruction (where English language development and core content instruction occur simultaneously), multiple studies have found a pattern of the exclusion of EL students from grade-level core content instruction including

English language arts, math and science. Indeed, lack of access to core content instruction is the most frequent compliance violation found by the CDE during EL compliance monitoring.

Numerous studies over the past decade have revealed the exclusion of EL students from core instructional programs. A 2015 study found (see table left) “in a large California school district, nearly one in three middle-school ELs is not enrolled in an English language arts (ELA) course, and more than a third of EL students are not enrolled in a full course load (math, science, and ELA) in any given semester of middle school.” Furthermore, a nationally representative sample study found, “[d]espite considerable linguistic, sociodemographic, and academic controls, marked disparities in high school course taking patterns remain, with EL students experiencing significantly less academic exposure.”

Another study found, “fewer than one-fourth of the schools surveyed were able to offer a full menu of core content courses to Limited English Proficient students” across 27 California secondary schools.

The denial of access to core curriculum is detrimental to EL students. Studies show that when students do not have access to core curriculum, instruction often lacks linguistic and academic rigor, opportunity to learn diminishes, and students often fall further behind. Furthermore, lack of access to core curriculum damages the self-efficacy of English Learner students, as several studies show that separate courses for EL students convey low expectations, are low in rigor and are socially, linguistically and physically isolating.

Denial of access to grade-level core content instruction occurs for different reasons. First, English language development (ELD) courses are sometimes used as substitutes for English language arts (ELA) courses. Different forms of ELD instruction have different implications for course access. In California, ELD instruction is framed by the 2012 state ELD standards and outlined by the recently adopted English language arts/English language development framework for California public schools.

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6 Lieberman, Assembly Education Analysis AB 2735, 2018 https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billAnalysisClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180AB2735#
Framework), which states that high quality designated and integrated English language development instruction should be provided to all EL students in California. Integrated ELD refers to instructional support for EL students in academic language development in core content courses throughout the day. Designated ELD refers to focused English instruction for a protected time during the day.

While more schools and districts are moving towards integrated ELD, both present challenges in ensuring EL students have access to grade-level core content and rich curriculum across disciplines. Research on Arizona’s 4-hour ELD state mandate block found that those in designated ELD settings lost significant content instruction and did worse than ELs in mainstream classrooms, resulting in more segregation and inequity. What’s more, the larger amount of time devoted to ELD, the larger amount of content instruction that is displaced. Several studies suggest that designated ELD can crowd-out core content and can displace content instruction. Integrated ELD, comparatively, requires specific skills and training which teachers feel underprepared to effectively execute and often resort to using traditional, deficit-based, sheltered methods that separate EL students from core content instruction.

Another reason EL students do not have equitable access to grade-level core content is that many EL students are disproportionately placed into lower track and remedial classes or experience exclusionary tracking because of their English proficiency level and/or EL status. For example, one study found that “ELL courses fed into non-ELL, remedial-level courses of the same subject matter… This course sequence would partially explain why even reclassified ELLs rarely reached high-track courses: they were ELLs at the beginning of high school and therefore started in ELL classes and proceeded on to remedial classes”. In some districts, EL students are prohibited from taking English language arts courses until they reclassify but are unable to reclassify because of their proficiency level in English language arts. Other EL students are placed into intervention courses, such as sheltered courses, which do not provide access to the full curriculum and can be low in rigor.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ISSUE 1:

A. Provide EL students across all grade levels with immediate and full access to grade-level core content with appropriate language supports, and include EL course enrollment as a statewide indicator of student success. Core content courses can be made immediately accessible for EL students through instruction in a student’s native language which has shown to be promising for EL student achievement, especially for newcomer students and students with beginning levels of English proficiency. An indicator in the state’s accountability system related to EL course enrollment would allow for the state, schools and districts to monitor equitable course access for EL students and

20 Lieberman, Assembly Education Analysis AB 2735, 2018 https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billAnalysisClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180AB2735#
intervene when access issues arise. Schools should consider the level a student is in core content during course placement, so EL students have access to not only grade-level core content, but honors and AP classes as well.

**B. Develop Individualized Learning Plans for all English Learner students that is agreed upon by the parent, teacher, and school.** Individualized plans for every English Learner student should be centered around the concurrent learning rights of English Learner students: accessing English language instructional services, as well as accessing core content instruction. These plans should have specific goals that would help ensure that English Learner students are both making progress towards reclassification, as well as accessing and making progress in core content instruction. These plans should begin as early in a student’s educational experience as possible. This plan would help monitor whether EL students are accessing core content, from the very beginning of their school experience. An individualized learning plan for all EL students would help address achievement gaps early, ensure EL students access core content classes and foster parent engagement around the appropriate language instructional program for their child and potentially how to request a bilingual/dual immersion program at the school-site, as allowed by Proposition 58.

**C. Issue regulations and accompanying support and resources related to how schools might provide designated, leveled English language development, without displacing core content.** For schools that provide designated ELD, parameters should be provided that detail what content can and cannot be displaced by ELD as well as suggested strategies to minimize displaced core content overall. For example, designated ELD could be provided during a zero period or during an extended-day. Districts and schools would require additional resources to provide EL students with additional instructional time beyond the school day.

**D. Provide the support, guidance, and professional development necessary to build teacher capacity around integrated ELD.** More is needed to ensure high-quality integrated ELD is provided across the state so that teachers are not left to resort to deficit-based sheltered practices that may lead to a lack of access to core content. Teachers need the specialized support to provide integrated language and content instruction to the various typologies of EL students.

**E. Ensure the content and rigor of separate, sheltered classes is high as the state moves away from these deficit-based instructional language programs.** While bilingual and dual immersion programs are becoming more common, many schools and districts still provide Sheltered English Immersion classes and programs. Placement in sheltered courses may lead to enrollment in a course sequence with low academic rigor. In order to prevent this from occurring, sheltered courses must provide appropriate supports that enable EL students to immediately access core content. This would help address the disproportionate placement of EL students in low-track courses.

**ISSUE 2: EL students have extremely limited access to college preparatory courses and meet college admission requirements at significantly lower rates than their non-EL peers.**

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22 Some districts are beginning to implement individualized language plans for EL students. However, in these districts, the use of individualized language plans for English Learner students is only triggered when an EL student has been an EL between 4-5 years, or when the student becomes a potential long-term English learner, and are targeted toward English language acquisition, and not core content acquisition.
The offering of college preparatory courses has increased across California. However, English Learner student enrollment in these courses is low. A 2005 study found that less than 2% of EL students in a high school in California were taking a sufficient number of college preparatory courses to be able to apply to a 4-year university. In a 2019 study, less than 5% of EL students in all California school districts were college ready in English language arts and math. Furthermore, in the 2017-18 school year, EL cohort high school graduates were two times less likely to meet California State University and University of California admission requirements compared to all cohort high school graduates, 22% and 49% respectively.

In California’s College/Career Indicator (CCI), 69% of English Learner students were “Not Prepared” and 15% of EL students were “Prepared” compared to 42% of all students. Of the approximately 7,000 (or 14%) of EL students who were “prepared”, the vast majority (71%) of them completed A-G requirements plus an additional indicator of select criteria determined by the California Department of Education that qualifies a student as “prepared”. In addition, EL students are 14% of students who complete a career and technical education (CTE) pathway. Little research has been done on EL student-specific college and career pathways aligned with CTE and more research is needed on CTE overall to better understand its benefits towards college enrollment and attainment.

Inequitable access to college preparatory coursework among EL students impacts their ability to enroll and thrive in college and career opportunities. They lag behind their non-EL peers in postsecondary attainment and attainment. College and career pathways, including career and technical education, for EL students should be further examined. Programs that promote academic achievement and college preparation for EL students, such as ELD, work-based learning experiences integrated with college and career preparation, and project-based learning, show promise.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ISSUE 2:

A. Make A-G the default course sequence in order to increase access to, preparation for, and success in college and career and provide immediate and appropriate language supports for

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23 Murillo, M., & Lavadenz, M. (in press) Increasing English learners’ college and career access, preparation, and success across the PK-20 educational pipeline. Center for Equity for English Learners: Loyola Marymount University
24 Ibid.
27 Murillo, M., & Lavadenz, M. (in press) Increasing English learners’ college and career access, preparation, and success across the PK-20 educational pipeline. Center for Equity for English Learners: Loyola Marymount University
28 The College/Career Indicator measures how well local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools are preparing students for likely success after graduation. Only graduates can be classified as Prepared or Approaching Prepared. For schools and LEAs to demonstrate success on this state indicator, high school graduates must meet at least one of the measures in the prepared level. Murillo, M., & Lavadenz, M. (in press) Increasing English learners’ college and career access, preparation, and success across the PK-20 educational pipeline. Center for Equity for English Learners: Loyola Marymount University
29 Ibid.
31 Murillo, M., & Lavadenz, M. (in press) Increasing English learners’ college and career access, preparation, and success across the PK-20 educational pipeline. Center for Equity for English Learners: Loyola Marymount University
32 Ibid.
English Learner students of all levels.\textsuperscript{35} California does not currently mandate A-G course curriculum completion for high school graduation.\textsuperscript{36} Of the 14\% of EL students in California who were “prepared” on California’s college and career indicator, the completion of A-G requirements was the most frequent method by which they became prepared. For example, Sanger High School in Fresno County has shifted high school graduation requirements from 2 to 3 years of science, mainstreamed EL students into the A-G sequence, and ensured that all courses (including CTE) are A-G approved. As another example, Washington state is improving college preparedness by providing high school world language credits to EL students who can demonstrate proficiency in their home language.

B. Include course-access and course-taking data in California’s college and career ready indicator for California’s statewide accountability plan. The state of Massachusetts has incorporated course-taking data by student subgroup in their state accountability plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act. Massachusetts is held accountable to enrollment of its English Learner students in broad and rigorous high school courses.

C. Allow English learners more time to complete high school graduation requirements if needed, until age 21. EL students are not a monolithic group and are not served well by one-size-fits-all policies. Some groups of English Learner students may need more time to complete high school graduation requirements. Long term EL students often require more time to finish their high school requirements whether due to a learning disability or lack of appropriate structures in elementary and secondary schools. Long term EL students may also be disproportionately identified as students with special needs and enrolled in lower-level classes.\textsuperscript{37} Newcomer students who arrive in high school may also need more time to graduate high school. English learner students who require more time to graduate should be allowed to finish in a traditional high school setting, and not be pushed into taking adult school or community college classes.

D. Account for EL students who may need more time to graduate in the state accountability system. There is a need to better understand how other accountability measure may impact access to college and career courses in order to ensure EL students have access to a full and rich curriculum. California uses a four-year high school graduation rate to measure high school completion, but EL students may need more time to graduate.

ISSUE 3: English Learner students may not have equal opportunities to access enrichment courses.

There has been little research that directly examines whether English Learner students have equitable access to enrichment classes and programs like art, dance, music, robotics, etc. However, this is a concern that has been voiced by Los Angeles Unified parents and students.\textsuperscript{38} Furthermore, the Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education has found that ensuring EL students have equal

\textsuperscript{35}Note: This policy recommendation comes from an advanced report by the Education Trust-West that highlights promising practices related to college and career readiness in California.

\textsuperscript{36}California Department of Education, Graduation Requirements, \url{https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/hs/hsgrtable.asp}


opportunities to meaningfully participate in all extracurricular activities, including specialized and advanced courses, and programs, sports and clubs, is a common non compliance issue.  

POLICY RECOMMENDATION FOR ISSUE 3:

A. Ensure EL students have immediate access to enrichment classes, and monitor and collect data on EL student enrollment in these classes and programs. EL students have to both learn academic English and core content. This may limit their ability to access enrichment courses outside of language development and core content. However, enrichment classes could be provided to English Learner students during a zero period or during an extended-day. Regardless, more information, research, and data is needed to more deeply understand this issue.