

# Resource Needs for California's English Learners

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## Getting Down to Facts

A research project designed to provide California's policy-makers and other education stakeholders with comprehensive information about the state's school finance and governance systems, and lay the groundwork for a conversation about needed reforms. The project was made possible by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, and the Stuart Foundation.

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For the full text of the author's research report and the other studies in this project, see: [www.irepp.net](http://www.irepp.net)

For background on California's school finance system, see: [www.californiaschoolfinance.org](http://www.californiaschoolfinance.org)

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This paper focuses on linguistic minority (LM) students who come from households where a language other than English is spoken. In particular, it examines the amount and type of resources English learners (ELs)—those LM students who are not yet proficient in English—need in order to have the opportunity to meet the same achievement standards as other students. This report addresses the following specific questions:

1. What are the demographic characteristics and academic performance outcomes of language minority and English learner students in California public schools?
2. What conceptual framework is appropriate for analyzing the resource needs of linguistic minority students?
3. What resources are needed to provide an adequate education for California English learners?
4. How have past studies estimated the cost of these resource needs?
5. What approach do the authors recommend for estimating the cost of educating English learners and linguistic minority students in California?

## Summary of Key Findings

The term “linguistic minority” refers to students who come from households where a language other than English is spoken. Although some of these students arrive at school proficient in English, most do not. Most English learners continue to lag behind their English-speaking peers academically for many years after entering school. They require additional resources and support in order to be successful in school, even after they are classified as fluent in English in many cases.

### In California public schools, 42% of students fit the “linguistic minority” definition, and most speak Spanish

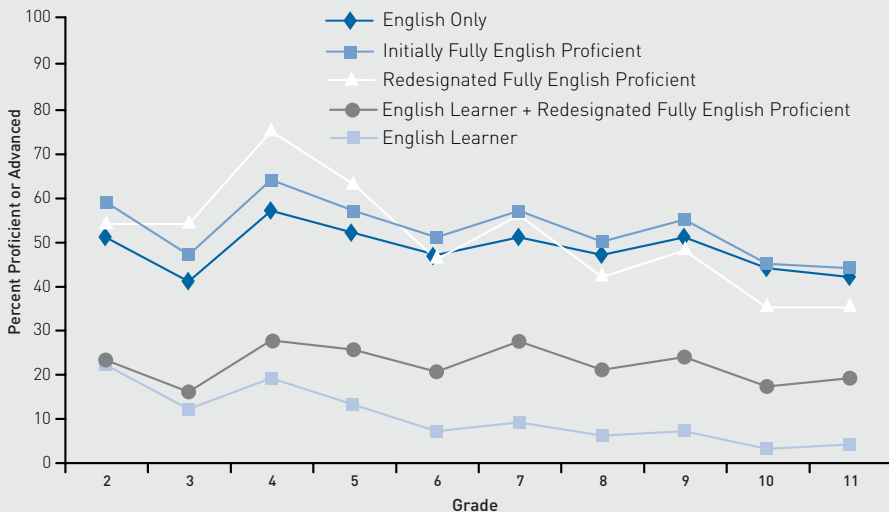
In 2004–05 in California, 42% of public school students fit the broad definition of linguistic minority and 25% were classified as English learners. Further, 78% of LM students and 85% of English learners in California speak Spanish. Of California's 2.6 million linguistic minority public school students,

## Study Methods

The authors review past research, current state data, and data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of the Kindergarten Class of 1998–99. In addition, they conduct a literature review, including a 2006 report by the National Literacy Panel and other recent research syntheses. They also examine multiple adequacy studies that attempt to estimate the resource needs of English learners, including the professional judgment panel results compiled by the American Institutes of Research (AIR) in California as part of the *Getting Down to Facts* project.

The authors also conduct case studies to further explore the amount and type of additional resources needed to adequately educate English learners. They select five schools for close examination based on the relatively high scores of their EL students on state tests, with an eye to the school's geographic and curricular diversity.

**Figure 1 • Performance on California Standards Test, English Language Arts, by English Proficiency Status, 2004–05**



1.6 million are designated as English learners and another 1 million are designated as fully English proficient (FEP). The proportion of FEP students increases as students go through school. Of the 2.9 million students in kindergarten to grade 5, 45% are linguistic minorities and one-fourth of those students are FEP. In grades 6 to 12, 40% of students are linguistic minorities and more than half are FEP.

*English learners lag behind English speakers in academic achievement*

An examination of the academic achievement of linguistic minority students reveals that English learners, including older students reclassified as fully English proficient, lag far behind children from English-only backgrounds. In addition, Figure 1 shows that:

- 51% of English-only students score at the proficient level in grade 2, compared to 42% in grade 11.
- Linguistic minority students who enter school proficient in English (I-FEP or initially fully English proficient) score higher than English-only students at all levels.
- In the lower grades, English learners

reclassified as fully English proficient (RFEP) perform higher than English-only students, but in grades 8 and above they score at a lower level.

- For RFEP students and English learners combined, 23% score proficient in grade 2, performance is highest in grade 4, and among 11th graders just 19% score proficient or above.

One reason for the underachievement of English learners is that they come from homes with fewer resources, including family income, socioeconomic status, and parent literacy. As a result, they begin school at a significant disadvantage. Further, the authors find that English learners are more likely to face poorer conditions for learning in school. They cite seven conditions of concern: access to appropriately trained teachers; professional development opportunities for teachers; access to appropriate assessments given that the state uses standards-based tests developed for English speakers; lack of sufficient instructional time necessary to accomplish learning goals; access to instructional materials and curricula; access to adequate facilities; and intense segregation that places them at particularly high risk for educational failure.

**Determining the resource needs of linguistic minority students depends on the outcome standard targeted**

Four possible outcome standards for English learners have different implications for the types and levels of school resources required.

1) **Reclassification to fully English proficient.** This is a minimal standard, which the authors conclude is tacitly in place today. The primary goal is for students to pass an English proficiency test (the California English Language Development Test or CELDT). This goal does not speak to the students’ overall academic proficiency. Once a student is classified as FEP, all additional supportive services and resources end.

2) **Reclassification and maintenance of academic proficiency.** This goal implies the provision of resources sufficient for students to become reclassified as FEP and both attain and sustain basic proficiency in English language arts and other tested areas of the curriculum. Given that English learners, by definition, come to school with greater needs than their peers who already have a command of English, the implication is that ongoing resources are needed for schools to bring them to this level and to maintain them there. This is akin to current policy for low-income students—resources are continuous no matter what level of achievement they attain.

3) **Closing the achievement gap between linguistic minority students and native English speakers.** This goal implies a focus on achievement across the performance continuum, raising the achievement of high performers as well as lower performers so that the end result is something like parity with native English-speaking peers. This standard deserves particular attention because many school reform efforts purport to be dedicated to this goal without specifying exactly how it would be achieved.

4) **Reclassification to English proficiency, proficiency in academic subjects, and biliteracy.** The authors cite reports of the National Literacy Panel and other studies, which indicate that closing achievement gaps is most likely to occur in the context of a biliteracy curriculum. This approach provides a compensating advantage for English learner students, who have the potential to become fully bilingual and biliterate, with all the attendant economic and occupational advantages. This goal of attaining biliteracy would need to be optional or voluntary because it would entail not only more resources, but also additional student effort. It could be extended to all students in California, not just English learners.

#### **An adequate education for California English learners would require different resources**

The question of resource needs for linguistic minority and English learner students fits within a larger adequacy context. All students need sufficient fiscal, material, personal, and institutional resources to receive an adequate education. In addition, all educationally disadvantaged students—including poor and linguistic minority students—will require more and specific types of those resources to meet the same academic standards as their more advantaged peers. Further, achievement data suggest that students who are *both* poor and linguistic minorities may need still more resources because they have the furthest to catch up, though it is not clear how much more they need than students who are *either* poor or linguistic minority. Finally, linguistic minorities may require different types of resources instead of additional amounts. For example, teachers who work with English learners need specific skills and knowledge to teach oral English.

In considering the specific resources needed for English learners, a separate

calculation of costs is considered for English-only and bilingual strategies. The authors find that, all things being equal, using bilingual teachers is a more cost-effective strategy than using monolingual teachers and having to supplement classroom instruction by bringing in aides and other support personnel. Absent those supplemental staff, a goal of academic proficiency may require that teachers have smaller classes.

The goal of sustaining the long-term academic achievement of reclassified English learners is another important consideration. The authors analyze data for a group of California students over time and find that even linguistic minority students from nonpoor backgrounds have lower achievement than their English-only counterparts.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the disparities are not simply due to socioeconomic status. Providing specific additional support to help reclassified students acquire academic English skills is consistent with research showing that attaining such proficiency takes at least four to seven years (and often longer). A formula for predicting time to proficiency could be developed taking a student's age, background, and school experience into consideration.

#### **Existing studies reflect little consensus regarding resource needs for English learner students**

The authors examine a selected set of studies to compare estimates for the cost of educating English learners. These previous studies recommend resource increases that range from 18% to more than double when poverty was also considered. From their full review, the authors conclude that little consensus exists on either the amount or type of additional resources needed to educate English learners above and beyond those needed for low-income students generally.

To gain more insight into this question, they conducted case studies at

California schools with relatively high levels of performance among EL students. This effort included two elementary, one middle, and two high schools. From these case studies, they identified several themes:

- Even schools doing well overall are not as successful with their EL students and point to resource needs that could help them do better.
- Larger schools are able to access more resources because of their size.
- Additional time (e.g., a longer school day/year) is critical.
- Noncognitive goals, such as learning to navigate U.S. culture, are very important but receive relatively scant attention because of lack of funding.
- Computers are critical resources, especially for EL pupils, because they allow students to move at their own pace and provide the opportunity to help them catch up outside of class or school; but funding to update and maintain computers is a drain on a school's core budget.
- Schools serving EL students need libraries and materials that span more than one language and often many grades.
- Communication with parents is critically important, and almost all strategies require extra resources.
- Professional development needs to be focused on collaboration, but there is not enough time available because of the cost of providing substitutes for teachers.
- Safety is a critical issue for schools in low-income areas, particularly at middle and high schools.
- Independent of the instructional strategies offered, every school needs bilingual personnel because students and families need to be communicated with and understood in order to support student learning.
- Close collaboration and positive feelings among faculty, both related to staff stability, are important factors in the relative success of these schools.

### Estimating costs requires identifying necessary elements for these students' success

The authors make no recommendation regarding a particular definition of an adequate education for linguistic minorities. For purposes of defining the necessary elements of an adequate educational program, however, they focus on the second outcome standard noted above—English proficiency and grade-level proficiency in all subject areas. They build from that to identify resources based on adding biliteracy as a goal. Further, they caution that the specific elements of such a program would depend on the characteristics of the linguistic minority population, including family background, number of years in the United States, student age and grade level, native language proficiency, and initial English proficiency. They note that all programs would contain many of the same elements.

**A high-quality preschool program.** The authors say that \$5,500 (in 2005 dollars) per preschool student (3- to 4-year olds) represents a mid-range cost for a part-day, high-quality, linguistically appropriate program housed in existing space.

**A comprehensive instructional program that addresses both English language development and the core curriculum.** For EL students, that will require additional instructional time whether through changing the school calendar, extending the day, grouping students to increase time devoted to literacy, adding Saturday classes, or extending the school year. Reduced class sizes can also increase the instructional time teachers can devote to individual students.

**Sufficient and appropriate student and family support.** These factors help build families' knowledge of appropriate academic behavior, student and family responsibilities, and school expectations. Newcomer programs that provide orientation for immigrant EL students, additional school staff such as tutors and counselors, and native-language support for parents

(including both staff and tools) are all important. For families with serious financial limitations or other specialized needs, community liaison personnel, health care workers, and social workers can help students focus on learning.

**Ongoing professional support for teachers with a significant focus on the teaching of EL students.** School staffs' ability to share their expertise is reported by both practitioners and researchers as a key ingredient. Teachers and administrators need time to engage in this activity on a weekly basis. Resource teachers and mentor teachers can also provide ongoing professional support.

**A safe, welcoming school climate.** This requires hiring sufficient security personnel and parents to monitor the campus. It can also include environmental enhancements, such as landscaping, paint, and extra janitorial help.

The authors elaborate further on several critical resources needed to provide an instructional program responsive to EL students' needs:

- A sufficient number of teachers who have specific knowledge about the structure of language, know how to use assessments to measure language proficiency, and are bilingual;
- Extra support personnel;
- Appropriate instructional materials;
- Valid and comprehensive assessments;
- Effective school organization that provides EL students with a safe, controlled space in which to use English;
- Effective school leadership; and
- Appropriate district and state support.

### Authors' Conclusions

The evidence suggests that some needs of English learners are *different* from those of other students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds, and these needs cannot all be met with the same set of resources. However, it is not clear to what extent, if at all, they require *more* resources.

Further, the authors could not determine whether the resources needed to

teach a second language are similar to those required to close achievement gaps associated with poverty. The fact that most EL students attain proficiency on the CELDT long before they attain proficiency in academic English suggests that the achievement gaps created by language difference are much more amenable to intervention and therefore require fewer additional resources than the gaps created by poverty.

What resource additions would particularly help English learners achieve English and academic proficiency? The authors find that materials that use the students' primary language and are created with language difference in mind, assessments in the student's primary language, English language development materials designed for non-English speakers, and teachers and staff who speak the languages of the students are obvious additions. They note that these resource needs could be met without a substantial increase in the amount of investment.

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*Gándara and Rumberger are associate director and director, respectively, of the University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute. This study was completed in December 2006.*

### Endnotes

1 Analysis of data from the *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of the Kindergarten Class of 1998–99* (n=1,412).