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Listening to Teachers of English Language Learners

Their Challenges, Experiences, and Needs

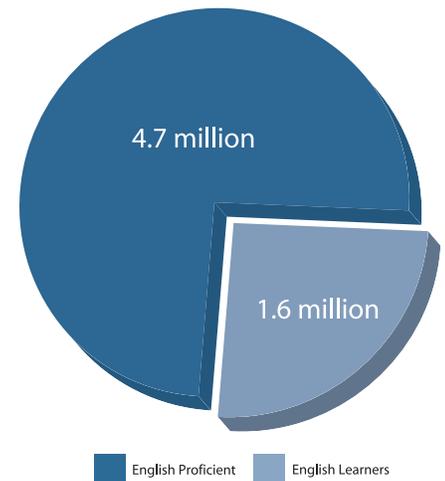
California's classrooms are changing. Will teachers be up to the task of ensuring all students, including English language learners, meet the state's high academic standards?

A new survey of more than 5,000 teachers finds few professional development opportunities targeted on working effectively with second language learners. A lack of time and instructional resources also hamper teachers' ability to reach the nearly 1.6 million students designated as English learners in California's public schools. The teachers surveyed also said their efforts to teach English learners are complicated by their struggle to effectively communicate with the parents and families of English learning students.

California's English Learner Population

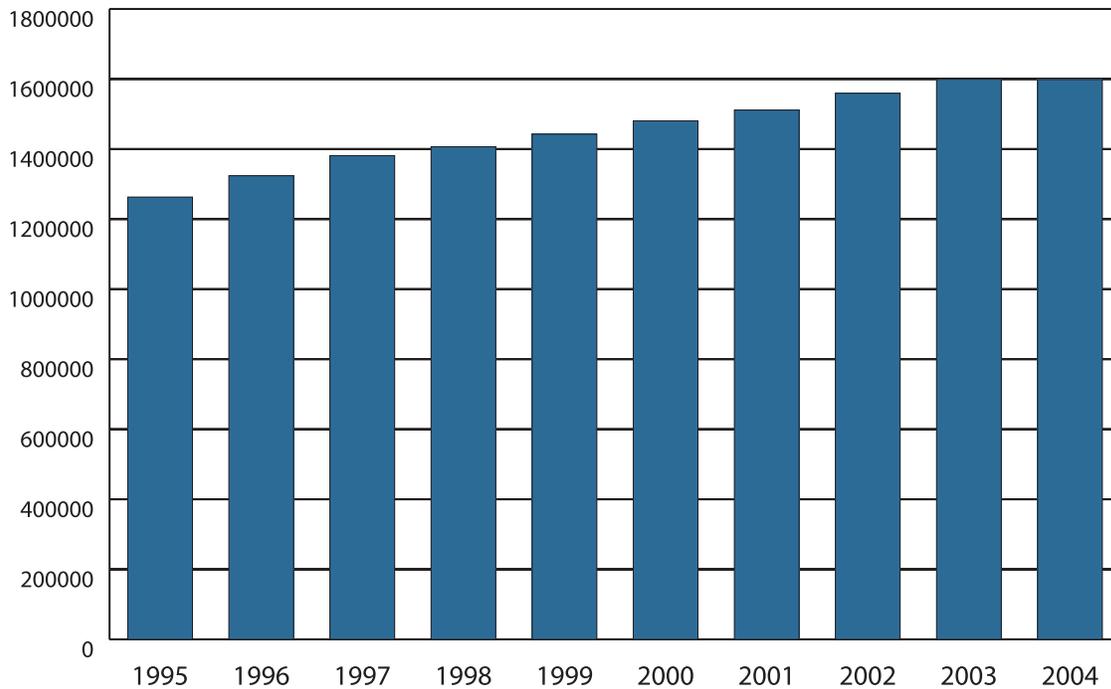
Students in California's public schools come from a wide variety of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Almost 1.6 million, approximately 25%, are classified as English learners or "EL" and require special assistance from their teachers and schools to meet the state's rigorous academic content standards while also learning English. The vast majority of teachers, over 80%, have one or more EL students in their classroom. California, with 32% of all EL students in the country, has a higher concentration of English learners than anywhere else in the U.S. California's growth in EL student enrollment is also greater than the rest of the nation. The most recent language

California Student Population



census data lists 57 different primary languages spoken by students in the state's schools. Most of the state's English learners, 85%, are Spanish speakers, with only five other language groups (Vietnamese, Filipino, Cantonese, Hmong, and Korean) even reaching the level of 1%-2% of the EL student population. An additional one million students come from homes where a language other than English is spoken, making students who speak a language other than English at home account for 40% of California's K-12 school population.

English Learners in California Public Schools



With regards to student learning, only 10% of those identified as English learners passed the California English Language Arts Standards Test in 2004. Moreover, only 39% were able to pass the English Language Arts portion of the California High School Exit Exam in 2004, compared with 81% of English speakers. Only 49% of EL students passed the math portion of the exam compared with 78% of their English-only peers.

Surveying Teachers of English Learners

Because of the escalating numbers of English learning students in California's classrooms, the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning partnered with Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) and the University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute (UC LMRI) to conduct a large-scale survey of teachers from across the state. We set out to learn what challenges these teachers face with regard to educating English learners, and to analyze how these challenges vary according to factors such as teacher experience, training, and student need. The report, *Listening to Teachers of English Language Learners*, documents the responses of over 5,000 California teachers regarding their challenges, experiences and professional development needs.

Survey Findings

- *Over the last five years, many EL teachers had little or no professional development designed to help them teach these students, and the quality of training was uneven.*
- *Greater preparation for teaching English learners equaled greater self-rated ability to teach these students successfully.*
- *The majority of teachers expressed the desire and need to gain greater expertise for teaching English language learners.*
- *Communication with students and their families was of utmost importance to teachers.*
- *Finding the time to teach EL students all of the required subject matter, including English language development, presented the second greatest teaching challenge for elementary teachers.*
- *Teachers expressed frustration with the wide range of English language and academic levels often found in their classrooms.*
- *Teachers were challenged by the lack of tools to teach, including appropriate assessment materials and instruments.*
- *The more teachers knew about working effectively with English learning students, the more likely they were to cite shortcomings in instructional programs for their students.*

Top 5 Challenges Faced by Elementary and/or Secondary Classroom Teachers		
	% Elementary	% Secondary
Teacher-parent/community communication	26.7	16.1
Lack of time to teach ELs	22.3	9.4
Variability in student academic needs/levels	18.9	19.5
Lack of appropriate tools and materials	15.9	13.8
Teacher-EL communication	15.6	22.6
Encouraging/motivating ELs	6.4	20.4

Frequently Cited Problems With EL Teacher Professional Development

	% Elementary	% Secondary
Poorly planned and executed presentation by uninformed presenter with little or no EL experience	28.4	31.1
Not appropriate to teachers' needs for skills and knowledge; provided information that was not new	27.2	31.4
Not applicable or appropriate for teaching EL students	16.8	13.6
Not practical for use in the classroom and did not provide follow-up showing teachers' how to implement what they learned	14.8	12.1

The Center View

Until the release of the important information taken from *Listening to Teachers of English Language Learners*, teachers of English language learning students who are on the front lines of California's education system were seldom, if ever, asked about the challenges they faced in their classrooms or what they needed to ensure that every child meets the state's rigorous academic standards. Using the best advice from the classroom, education policy-makers at the local, regional and state levels can strengthen teaching that affects the learning outcomes of a major portion of the state's student population. As first steps we recommend that:

- *The governor and the leadership of the Legislature convene a summit of policy-makers, educational experts, and most of all, classroom EL teachers on "Teaching for California's English Learners."* The purpose of this summit would be to carefully review and analyze the results of this survey and to chart a course of action that ensures high quality preparation and professional development for all teachers of English learners.
- *The California Department of Education should develop and make available to local school districts a package of evaluation tools and instruments to assess the quality of local programs for English learners and identify areas in need of improvement.* We further recommend that as part of this process CDE identify state, federal, and other resources that local school districts can use to assist them in making program improvements.
- *Local school districts give high priority to the professional development needs of teachers of English learners as they implement the Teacher Credentialing or Professional Development Block Grant, recognizing the differing needs of teachers at the elementary and secondary levels identified in this research.*

Increased attention to the needs of teachers of English language learners is warranted given the findings from this study: professional development is not targeted to meet the needs of English language learners; teachers are facing barriers to communication with their students and their students' parents; and they are constantly accommodating for a lack of appropriate materials and resources to reach their students. Policy-makers and professional development providers across the state would be well advised to consider this fresh voice from the classroom when planning improvements for California's teacher development system.

Excerpted from:

Gándara, P, Maxwell-Jolly, J, & Driscoll, A. (2005). *Listening to teachers of English language learners: A survey of California teachers' challenges, experiences, and professional development needs*. Santa Cruz, CA: The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning.

The full text of this report is available for download from www.cftl.org