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Educating English Learners During the Pandemic

Insights from Experts, Advocates, and
Practitioners

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Laura Berger, Director of Data and Assessment, Center City Public Charter Schools (November 1, 2021)

Renaë Bryant, Director of Plurilingual Services, Anaheim Union High School District (November 18, 2021)

Kristin Percy Calaff, Director of Multilingual Education, Washington Office of the Superintendent for Public Instruction (November 15, 2021)

Laura Feichtinger McGrath, Director of EL Services and Title III, Harrisonburg City Public Schools (November 30, 2021)

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Crystal Gonzales, Executive Director, English Learners Success Forum (November 1, 2021)

David Holbrook, Executive Director, National Association of English Learner Program Administrators (NAELPA) (November 23, 2021)

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Anya Hurwitz, Executive Director, Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) (October 25, 2021)

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Joe Luft, former Executive Director, Internationals Network for Public Schools (November 5, 2021)

Jorge Macias, Chief of Language and Cultural Education, Chicago Public Schools (November 12, 2021)

Robert Measel, ESL Bilingual Education Advisor II/ Title III Director, Pennsylvania Dept of Education (October 27, 2021)

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Contents

Executive Summary	5
Introduction	8
EL Identification, Enrollment, Attendance, and Assessment	9
Erring on the Side of Caution on Identification	9
Atypical Language Development and Assessment	12
Assessment Data Gaps	14
Remote Learning: Access, Infrastructure, and Instruction	17
Addressing the Digital Divide	17
Designing Remote Learning for ELs	20
Programmatic Barriers to Equitable Learning Conditions	22
Teachers and Financial Resources to Support EL Success	25
New Responsibilities for Teachers	25
COVID-relief Funding Decisions and Priorities	27
Conclusion	29

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic upended the education of students across the United States. While early reports bordered on catastrophic, school systems gradually adapted and innovated to close gaps in access to technology, strengthen instruction, and enhance family communication and engagement. Nevertheless, disruptions to in-person learning had a disproportionate impact on English learners (ELs) due to challenges in accessing and engaging with remote learning and limitations in delivering language services online.

To date, state and local assessment data for ELs has been lacking, which has made it difficult to truly understand how the pandemic affected their opportunity to learn. We interviewed 20 EL advocates, experts, and researchers across the country to understand how screening, identification and reclassification, assessment, instruction, engagement and digital access, and funding for EL students was affected.

EL Screening and Assessment

The processes used to screen and identify ELs were adapted to overcome barriers to in-person screening. Virtual alternative procedures offered schools and districts a lot of flexibility but there was a lot of room for error due to limited and imperfect information. In response, many of our interviewees erred on the side of caution to ensure that no student fell through the cracks. Provisional identification procedures led to an inflation of the number of currently identified ELs going into the 2021-22 school year.

Unlike screening, the majority of school districts were not able to offer a remote option for the English language proficiency (ELP) exam that all ELs are required to take each year. In 2021, the federal government granted significant flexibility in this area, which resulted in uneven test administration within and across states.

Of students who were tested, exam outcomes show that language development was mixed. Interviewees said that the pandemic did not impact all grades or language domains evenly. Productive skills, such as speaking and writing, were negatively impacted the most, with some speaking scores actually going negative. Receptive skills, such as listening and reading, remained relatively steady, with reading growth actually increasing for some students.

Remote Learning

Research has identified a divide in internet access and technology among low-income and immigrant-origin students, groups that have significant overlap with the EL population. These gaps disrupted student attendance and learning and school districts around the country worked diligently to provide devices and hotspots to students.

EL experience with remote instruction varied considerably. Younger students appeared to be the most negatively affected by remote learning due to their limited experiences with formal education and shorter attention spans. Many school systems also did not feel it was developmentally appropriate to have younger students on screen for most of the day, so they had less English instruction because of reduced direct virtual instruction from teachers due to limitations in screen time. Older ELs on the other hand, were impacted most by lost opportunities to interact with and learn from their peers.

Remote learning made it challenging to provide ELs with the full spectrum of instructional tools to support their learning. For example, interviewees noted that teaching without the usual classroom visual scaffolds, such as charts, pictures, and diagrams, was difficult and that many English as a second language (ESL) educators were eager to teach in person. Others emphasized the fact that remote learning did not provide sufficient opportunities for students to receive targeted English language development (ELD) instruction, to engage in conversations with peers, and to practice and use academic language. School districts also had different policies about unsupervised breakout groups.

Teacher Support

Even prior to the pandemic, states and school systems faced challenges in employing a teacher workforce equipped with the specialized knowledge and skills to support ELs. Experts we spoke with highlighted a variety of issues that impacted teachers and described how they adapted and developed new student support approaches. ESL teachers took on more responsibilities and were sometimes called to fill in for general education teachers. In other cases, ESL teachers became responsible for multiple grade levels. The all-hands-on-deck approach also meant that school system staff was providing more direct support to teachers. For example, one district helped ease teachers' workloads by writing instruction units for them.

Teachers across the country extended themselves to meet students where they were, working with children on the sidewalk in front of their homes, meeting up with students in parks and parking lots, and setting up times for them to come to school for one-on-one support. As the pandemic dragged on, teachers became adept at using technological tools and embedding videos within their lessons, which could be revisited when needed. Some adapted resources to ensure digital accessibility.

COVID-relief funding for ELs

The federal government provided \$190 billion one-time funds to K-12 education through three rounds of COVID-relief stimulus packages. Each iteration of relief has identified ELs as a population that should be targeted with stimulus funds, yet information about how funding is being put to use at the school level to support EL students is still scarce. Most of the experts we interviewed were not meaningfully included in these discussions. Instead, products and services were most often retrofitted to include ELs, which is not a way to equitably meet their needs.

All of our interviewees placed a heavy emphasis on investing in human resource and programmatic needs over commodities. Many spoke to the need for wraparound services for students, including mental health support, and funding to hire new teachers, specialists, and social workers. Others mentioned summer school and tutoring programs, closing the digital divide, and providing basic necessities like personal protective equipment and free meals. Unfortunately, however, there were few tangible investments in new asset-oriented language programs, such as dual language, and inclusive curriculum for ELs.

Conclusion

The educational experiences of English learners during the pandemic were complicated, even conflicting at times, which can make it difficult to understand opportunity gaps. However, the barriers that ELs faced before and during the pandemic will persist unless there is a fundamental shift in how these students are viewed by policymakers and other local leaders across the country away from deficit oriented approaches and towards practices that acknowledge the assets they bring to the classroom.

Introduction

When schools abruptly shut down in the U.S. in March 2020, students and families were given little guidance and information about what would come next. For students learning English, the leap to remote learning exacerbated existing inequities in access to digital resources and technology, and resulted in limited opportunities for English language instruction and services. Early reports painted a bleak picture, with school systems reporting higher rates of course failure and disengagement from online learning among English learners (ELs).¹ States offered varying guidance about how to meet the needs of ELs and much of the guidance came late, forcing teachers and schools to seek resources and design solutions on their own.²

Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, the picture of ELs' learning experiences and academic outcomes is starting to emerge. States such as California and Tennessee reported declines in ELs' proficiency rates in mathematics and English language arts and lower rates of English proficiency overall.³ A national study by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research examining ELs' performance on the WIDA ACCESS, a standardized exam that assesses English language proficiency, found lower average rates of English proficiency compared to prior years.⁴ The study, which looked at the past three school years (2019–2021),⁵ also found declines in average growth, particularly in the area of speaking. These data come with caveats, most notably that large numbers of ELs did not take these exams in 2021 and that impacts were uneven across grade levels. Though these data offer a starting point for identifying the impact the pandemic had on language development, these numbers fail to capture ELs' learning conditions and experiences and the ways in which school systems adapted and responded to meet their needs throughout the pandemic.

To learn more about ELs' educational experiences with remote learning and with their return to school, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 EL advocates, experts, and researchers in the U.S. between October and December 2021. We sought to learn about how different aspects of education were impacted including screening, identification and reclassification, assessment, instruction, engagement and digital access, and funding. Our conversations reveal challenges and bright spots and help answer lingering questions about key aspects of ELs' education during the pandemic. They also underscore the continued need for states and school systems to integrate the needs of English learners in program design rather than as an add-on to ensure that they receive equitable access and opportunity.

EL Identification, Enrollment, Attendance, and Assessment

Erring on the Side of Caution on Identification

“We didn’t have an assessment tool that was designed to work in a remote environment...Students were provisionally qualified based on their home language survey information.”

-Kristin Percy Calaff

Remote Identification and Screening Procedures were Imperfect

Early on in the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) issued clarifying guidance to state and local education agencies on their responsibility to continue identifying students who might need additional language instructional services.⁶ State and local education agencies responded by developing provisional identification procedures to allow new English learners (ELs) to start receiving services without requiring them to be screened in person. Alternative procedures depended heavily on a few questions asked on home language surveys used during intake, which were sometimes supplemented with interviews with parents.

While schools and districts appreciated the flexibility offered by virtual screening processes, the people we spoke to said that there was a lot of room for error with these alternative procedures due to limited and imperfect information, which can ultimately affect service provision. And as Jorge Macias, chief of language and cultural education at Chicago Public Schools, stated, “although interviews are helpful, you really didn’t get to actually assess the child’s proficiency like you would traditionally.” In the end, many of our interviewees said that they chose to err on the side of caution to ensure no EL fell through the cracks.

Provisional identification procedures developed led to an inflation of the number of currently identified ELs going into the 2021–22 school year. This means that going into fall 2021, schools were cleaning up the data pool of students who had been provisionally screened and subsequently identified as English learners. Kristin Percy Calaff, director of multilingual education in Washington state, said, “numbers are probably overinflated right now and it’s going to take a year until the dust settles and see where we are.” Similarly, Macias said that going into the fall of 2021, Chicago Public Schools had to screen roughly 19,000 students between August and October in order to clean up these provisional identifications. Although overall student enrollment did decrease, he said, EL enrollment in CPS did not decrease.

This inflation may also be concentrated in earlier grades. Percy Calaff said that essentially all kindergarteners were provisionally qualified in 2020–21 if their home language survey showed that they had a language other than English at home. Additionally, it is expected that a small proportion of ELs in Washington state may continue to be provisionally identified because some families may still not feel comfortable returning to in-person schooling and schools cannot force them to bring the child in to be officially screened and tested. According to Percy Calaff, this is expected to affect about 5 to 10 percent of ELs in the state. Despite the fact that there was a lot of room for error, “the alternative to provisional screening is to not serve these kids and that is not okay, so they were erring on the side of caution and provisionally screening until they know otherwise,” she said.

Although many of our interviewees spoke of the important role parents played in the execution of remote education, this level of engagement also came with some unintended consequences. For example, Kelly Alvarez, Title III program consultant for the Michigan Department of Education, noted that giving parents a bird’s eye view of identification and screening procedures resulted in higher than usual screener denials as well as parents opting out of the English language proficiency assessment and language services altogether.

English Learner Enrollment and Attendance Slowed

This overidentification trend took place at the same time that national enrollment in K–12 schools dropped by roughly 3 percent—a decline of roughly 1.5 million students between 2020 and 2021.⁷ This decline has not been spread out evenly across grades, as the number of preschool and kindergarten students decreasing by a combined 13 percent.⁸

While provisional data is not disaggregated by student subgroups such as English learners, interviewees confirmed declines in their EL populations. Michigan, for example, observed a 6 percent reduction in 2021, according to Jennifer Paul, EL and accessibility assessment specialist for the Michigan Department of Education. She said that the state would normally see about 4 to 5,000 new ELs every year. Paul attributed the decline, anecdotally, to restrictive national immigration policies compounded by the pandemic.⁹ California saw a major decline in enrollment of dual language learners (DLLs) in early childhood settings on top of already low enrollment, since some families simply disappeared, according to Anya Hurwitz, executive director of the Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) model.

Beyond declines in enrollment, school systems also observed decreased attendance among ELs. Indeed, The 74 Million investigated attendance rates in multiple school districts across the country and found large increases in rates of chronic absence among EL students. Chronic absence is commonly defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days. Districts such as Houston observed a 158 percent increase in chronic absenteeism among ELs.¹⁰ Although reasons behind decreased attendance are difficult to define, Marguerite Lukes, director of research and innovation of the Internationals Network, said, “we’re seeing lower attendance, and it’s a range

across schools, but lower than we normally would. And I think some of this is an on-going demand on students' schedules due to work and the stress of the transition back." School systems also struggled with EL attendance due to communication challenges and increases in transience among families, according to Robert Measel, ESL/bilingual education advisor for the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

States, schools, and districts adopted more flexible attendance policies during the pandemic in an attempt to deal with attendance issues. In Michigan, "the legislature approved a flexible attendance policy that gave districts some real flexibility for how they could serve kids," Alvarez said, which allowed them to provide focused attention to certain groups that needed it. And Center City Public Charter Schools in Washington DC significantly altered the threshold for what constituted being "present," according to data and assessment director Laura Berger. She said, "before the pandemic, in-person learning students had had to be present for 80 percent of the day in order for them to be present that day," but for virtual learning, students were only required to log into at least one class and complete work for each class in order to get credit for the whole day. These accommodations, however, were eliminated once schools resumed in-person instruction.

→ NEWCOMER AND SLIFE STUDENTS

Despite the fact that immigration into the U.S. was curtailed by travel restrictions due to the global pandemic, newcomer students were still enrolling in American schools. Harrisonburg City Public Schools in Virginia, for example, saw an increase, in July 2021, in 16-to-18- year-old recently arrived students which surpassed the unaccompanied minor influx experienced in 2015.¹¹ Between August and October, 65 new high school arrivals were enrolled who had just been released from border/immigration custody. Typically, these students represent about 35 new students per semester. This number would have been even higher had the district not approved 20 requests to waive the requirement that these students attend school so they could take on full-time employment. About half of these newcomers were students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE)¹² originally from the Northern Triangle of Central America.

This particular school district happened to have a screening process to identify SLIFE embedded in its registration process, but there is no national definition or screening process to identify these students. As a result, data for SLIFE newcomers is often skewed because even when these processes are in place, they are the first to be abandoned in times of crisis. This means SLIFE have probably been under-identified throughout the pandemic, if they were identified at all.

Atypical Language Development and Assessment

“Students have experienced a slowdown in their normal rate of growth as a result of lack of access to education.”

—Robert Measel

Assessment was Disrupted Unevenly Across School Years

Interviewees said that they had either finished administering their ELP exam, or were close to finishing the test when schools shut down in March 2020. The ELP assessment is often administered between January and March, before students take academic assessments such as math, reading/language arts, and/or science closer to the end of the school year.¹³ Many districts were already towards the end of their normal ELP testing window when schools shut down, which means that few domains (see Box: Four Domains of Language) were left incomplete in 2020, if at all. For example, in Washington, DC writing was the only domain that was left unfinished.

→ FOUR DOMAINS OF LANGUAGE

English Language Proficiency (ELP) exams, such as WIDA ACCESS and ELPA 21, help educators monitor ELs’ progress in acquiring English. ELP exams assess a student’s ability in four domains: speaking, reading, writing, and listening. Students are given a composite score, as well as scores in the individual domains.

ED expected statewide standardized testing in spring 2021 to move forward and the Department granted significant flexibility for how states could carry that out. States could extend the testing window through the summer or fall; administer assessments remotely, where feasible; and/or shorten the state assessment.¹⁴ Despite this flexibility, or possibly because of it, test administration was uneven within and across states, which made for a more interrupted ELP assessment in 2021 compared to the first year of the pandemic.

In October 2021, WIDA released the most comprehensive report to date quantifying the impact remote learning has had on ELs’ testing, proficiency, and growth during the pandemic. The report, which compared WIDA ACCESS data for academic years

2018–19, 2019–20, and 2020–21, found that the number of ELs who were tested across WIDA states in 2021 was 30 percent lower than for previous years.¹⁵ Those we interviewed who administered the test in 2021 said that statewide participation on the ELP assessment ranged from below 50 percent (in Harrisonburg, VA and Chicago, IL) to 70–75 percent (in Michigan), to slightly less than usual, about 10 percent fewer (in Pennsylvania).

Because the WIDA Consortium decided not to allow for remote administration of the WIDA ACCESS,¹⁶ the 35 states and the District of Columbia which use this assessment did not have the option to remotely test for language progress. Interviewees said that their ability to test ELs was often hindered by the fact that many schools were still operating remotely and parents were not comfortable with bringing their kids in just to test them.¹⁷ On the other hand, California did allow for remote administration of its English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC), but as Renae Bryant, director of plurilingual services at Anaheim Union High School District told us, even with this flexibility her district was only able to assess about 60 percent of its ELs.

Several interviewees said that they took advantage of the flexibility offered by ED by extending the testing window through September and October of 2021. Some attributed higher participation rates as well as higher than expected scores to this decision, because students simply had more time to receive instruction and language support services before they were tested. This flexibility does not come without drawbacks, however, as interviewees expressed concerns over the implications that testing well into the fall of 2021 would have on spring 2022 assessments.

Linguistic Growth was Affected in Positive and Negative Ways

The October 2021 WIDA report found that though student proficiency and growth did go down overall in 2021, decreased performance varied by grade and domain. Elementary and middle school grades were hit the hardest, specifically first and sixth grades. Among the four domains tested, speaking was affected the most.¹⁸ However, because the report represents aggregated and averaged test scores across years for a fragment of the EL population (roughly 1.1 million of the over five million ELs students nationwide), the authors note that “to ensure a consistent and fair year-to-year comparison of average EL proficiency and growth, states and districts should examine the demographic makeup of students tested in their locale and consider the ELs who did not get the opportunity to take the assessment.”¹⁹

From local and state data, education leaders we consulted were able to observe and confirm that the pandemic did not impact all grades or linguistic domains evenly. Various interviewees said that ELs’ productive skills, such as speaking and writing, were most negatively impacted by remote instruction, with scores in the speaking domain actually going negative in some grades in Pennsylvania. At the same time, ELs’ receptive skills, such as listening and reading, remained relatively steady, with reading growth actually increasing for some students in Pennsylvania. Several of

our interviewees attributed this uneven impact to the nature of remote education, which relied heavily on certain skills while stifling the use of others.

Many of our interviewees noticed that what ELs might not have gained in English they gained in their home languages by virtue of spending more time at home. Both Alvarez and Alicia Passante, ESL program manager at Center City Public Charter Schools in Washington, DC, said that increased home time helped ELs develop closer ties to family, which is beneficial to their overall development and in shaping their identity. Crystal Gonzales, executive director at the English Learners Success Forum, said that her organization observed a shift in the narrative about ELs and the importance of their home languages. This led to a spike in the use of certain resources such as videos, newspapers, and activities in students' home languages that schools were able to share with families. Unfortunately, it is difficult to quantify this progress because, as several interviewees noted, schools do not typically assess ELs in their home language, which makes it difficult to capitalize on this asset.

Assessment Data Gaps

“In theory, data delays shouldn’t have an impact on instruction [because] on a day-to-day basis, their academic program should be whatever is required for that student.”

—Robert Measel

Uneven administration of the ELP assessment means that some schools and districts will have data gaps for many of their English learners, particularly those who disengaged from school altogether in 2021 and were harder to reach when the testing window came around. In Harrisonburg, for example, although district-wide about 50 percent of ELs were tested, this number went down to 15 percent among those in high school. This means that, though not widespread, there will be students who have incomplete or nonexistent ELP scores from both 2020 and 2021, particularly in the higher grades. These students should be prioritized in efforts to gather as much information as possible about where they currently stand in their language development.

The ELP assessment is particularly meaningful for ELs because “they are essentially gate-keeper assessments,” said Paul, for students required to take it. This is because, depending on the educational program that guides instruction at the local level, ELs may not have access to the full academic curriculum needed to prepare them for postsecondary prospects until they are deemed proficient in English and reclassified.²⁰ Data gaps due to delayed or missing ELP scores during the pandemic may have implications on various programmatic decisions that affect ELs, including when they are reclassified, their expected growth targets, and the maximum number of years these students will have to reach proficiency.

Various interviewees said that reclassification decisions were affected by the pandemic in 2021. Alvarez said the Michigan statewide reclassification rate went down to 4 percent from a usual 11 percent. Passante said that the EL “bubble” at Center City schools in DC expanded slightly between 2019–20 and 2020–21 because the district has not reclassified students for the last two academic years.

These data gaps may also require schools to make changes to EL timelines to proficiency and growth targets so as to not derail the accountability system. As Measel, at the Pennsylvania Department of Education, articulated, there is no differentiation in an accountability system where everyone fails.

Although these data gaps may affect policy decisions at a system level, all of the people we spoke to indicated that they may not necessarily affect what ELs are experiencing in the classroom. This is because “state assessments are not the things that drive instruction on an ongoing basis, they are only one piece of the puzzle,” as Joe Luft, former executive director of the Internationals Network, said. Others added that scores on statewide ELP assessments may not necessarily reflect the actual skills of kids in the classroom, as they often score their proficiency lower than what teachers are seeing. As a result, many of the people we consulted placed a heavy emphasis on the ability to measure outputs in real time through more authentic assessments like performance tasks, portfolios, capstone projects, and informal checks. In fact, Bryant said that even before the pandemic standardized tests were not necessarily the driving force in her school district, and that leadership had invested heavily in formative assessment tools and strategies, which educators were able to carry through the pandemic.

However, the impact of ELs’ declining English skills as measured by the ELP assessment should not be understated, as it can have downstream effects and compound challenges in every other academic area. As Measel told us, “there is no such thing as a gap in a development process” like language development, which means schools and districts must ensure they are accurately assessing ELs as they return to in-person learning, to determine where they are along the language development spectrum. Other interviewees said that they have observed increased interest in benchmarking and formative assessments that can be used to fill data holes for students that were not able to test in 2021 and/or 2020. However, these should be undertaken with caution, because according to Paul, there is no standard that establishes what these tools must have to ensure accessibility for ELs, which means they come with a range of quality in terms of the supports and accommodations that are provided.

Remote Learning: Access, Infrastructure, and Instruction

Addressing the Digital Divide

“Districts had to really scramble to provide devices, to provide internet service.”

—Kristin Percy Calaff

Schools Provided Hotspots and Opened Learning Hubs

When children across the country were sent home from school in mid-March 2020 and told that they would have to remain there for at least the next two weeks, some were sent home with a laptop and others were sent home with paper worksheets. Schools slowly built up online classes, but much learning happened asynchronously, with teachers posting video lessons and holding office hours to help answer student questions. Two weeks turned into the rest of the school year and more schools began handing out laptops and hotspots to help students get connected and get online.

As Elvira Armas, director of programs and partnerships at the Center for Equity for English Learners (CEEL) at Loyola Marymount University, told us, the digital divide quickly became a significant concern. “One of the things that we were primarily concerned about is the way in which the immediate response was structured and how that left many of our English learners and their families really outside of the reach of that structure,” she said.

Indeed, research has identified a digital divide in internet access and technology among low-income and immigrant-origin students, groups that have significant overlap with the English learner student population. A 2021 study by Vikki Katz and Victoria Rideout surveyed 1,000 parents to learn about their experiences learning from home during the pandemic, including their digital access. All of the parents in the survey had household incomes lower than the national median for families.²¹ Of those surveyed, 15 percent did not have access to broadband at home, and this was higher, 26 percent, for immigrant Latinx families. Instead, they relied on mobile devices or dial up, or in some cases had no internet access at all. In addition, 66 percent of Latinx parents reported that their children had experienced disruptions in their schooling (e.g., missing school, not finishing work, participating via a cell phone) as a result of being under-connected.

A February 2022 report by the Migration Policy Institute examined the experiences of immigrant-origin youth between the ages of 15 to 17 and found that lack of access to reliable internet was the biggest challenge these students faced during the

pandemic.²² It also found that many of the learning management systems used to structure remote learning had limited translation functions and were not optimized for use with mobile devices. These challenges had a direct impact on students' engagement and attendance during remote learning. The authors of the report gave the example of a high school in Salt Lake City, where only 3 percent of ELs were logging into class due to English and digital literacy barriers. These findings are consistent with what we heard from the individuals we interviewed, many of whom pointed to the digital divide as a central and ongoing issue for English learner students and their families.

School districts around the country worked to address gaps by providing devices and hotspots to students. Percy Calaff noted both that the pandemic forced school districts to work on closing the digital divide within a matter of months, and that the challenge of helping to close these gaps was felt differently by school districts, even within the same state, due to disparate resources. "Districts had to really scramble to provide devices, to provide internet service. In many areas of our state, there was tremendous work that took place to make that happen," she said. "Some of that was also impacted by the resources of the districts, you know, where they were located.... More urban areas, I think, were able to probably manage that more rapidly and deploy a lot of that support, but they also have stronger infrastructure." In "some of our more rural areas, that was more challenging, because in many of those areas, they already struggle with internet service."

In some school districts, it took time to address the connectivity challenge due to the high number of families that required access. Harrisonburg City Public Schools (HCPS), located in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, placed hotspots into neighborhoods using school buses and city cars. Part of that was because there was a huge demand for the individual hotspots and it was easier to secure big hotspots. But even providing internet access did not solve all of the challenges, since "sometimes the signal wouldn't be good enough or sometimes it would cut out," Laura Feichtinger McGrath, HCPS director of EL services and Title III, told us. As remote learning became more sophisticated in terms of the digital tools and innovation used to support student learning and engagement, these resources put a lot of pressure on the bandwidth of the internet hotspots.

Finally, some school systems prioritized English learners for in-person learning in order to promote attendance and reliable access to remote learning. One community in Los Angeles County opened up a school building in a neighborhood that had issues with connectivity and where many students were not logging on to remote learning. "They created a hub for kids where they were still doing distance learning throughout the pandemic, but they were able to come into the school to do it, so that they could have both support and also consistent internet that wasn't bumping them off all the time," Hurwitz, of SEAL, told us. In Harrisonburg, newcomer students and those with the lowest levels of English language proficiency were prioritized for in-person learning and were able to attend school in person for the majority of the 2020-21 school year. Feichtinger McGrath said that the newcomer programs provided substantial supports and resulted in students making progress on their language skills and academic learning.

Family Engagement was used to Close Communication Gaps

Beyond providing access, school systems also worked diligently to provide assistance to students and families in navigating remote learning systems and technology. This proved to be challenging, particularly early on in the pandemic. Teachers were not always able to reach families due to challenges in communication and limited availability of translation services in less dominant languages. Armas said that these communication gaps negatively impacted families' confidence in school systems' ability to meet their needs. Other interviewees shared this perspective, with Passante noting that promoting language access for families was crucial and that schools that had not prioritized this prior to the pandemic were left scrambling.

In Harrisonburg, bilingual home-school liaisons saw their responsibilities expand, from helping families enroll in school, facilitating school-parent communication, and sharing comprehensive resources, to helping families get connected to the internet and navigate different websites. "I think that we also learned a lot too, about how to do that and being able to show things on screens. So that was really nice for parents to switch into that, 'oh, I can actually see what you're talking about,' as opposed to having a conversation on the phone," said Feichtinger McGrath.

UnidosUS affiliates launched Padres Comprometidos Ed-Tech (PC Ed-Tech) to help orient families to remote learning, including how to use Zoom and Google Meet, and increase their confidence and skills in helping support their child during distance learning.²³ Maria Moser, former senior director of curriculum and data at UnidosUS, explained that parents came to PC Ed-Tech with a broad range of experiences, with some feeling overwhelmed and others who were eager to help teach other parents about the tools.

Teachers also provided direct support to students. For example, at the Internationals Network for Public Schools, which serves immigrant and refugee secondary students, teachers walked students through the process. Lukes described the experience of one ninth grade teacher who works with many students who have emergent literacy: "One of the things she realized is students had never used email. So they're trying to use Google Classroom and it's like, wait, email, what are we doing here? What is this? So she had to begin way before the beginning and walk students through that."

Interviewees said that in some school systems, the gains that were made in closing the digital divide have now been erased, with the return to in-person schooling. Moser described a return to the status quo, with school systems pulling back digital devices and hotspots once students returned to in-person instruction. "I think that the lack of seeing this as a long-term investment has a lot of trade-offs," she said. "Because...the things that we had to do for COVID overlap with things that might be good practices in terms of accessibility, or encouraging people to participate or be aware of what's going on. And rolling it back sends a pretty strong message that we were only doing this because we absolutely had to."

Designing Remote Learning for ELs

“Last year it was really hard for us to maintain the integrity of all of our programming.”

— Laura Feichtinger McGrath

ELs of Different Ages Experienced Remote Learning Differently

English learners are far from homogenous. Students range in age from three up to 21 and speak hundreds of different languages. Some were born in the U.S. and others immigrated here. Some have experienced interruptions to their formal education. As a result of these differences, school systems must be adaptive and avoid adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. During remote learning, many interviewees observed substantial differences in the opportunities afforded to ELs based on their age and developmental stage.

Younger students appeared to be the most negatively affected by remote learning due to their limited experiences with formal education and shorter attention spans, said Jennifer Paul of the Michigan Department of Education. Many school systems also did not feel it was developmentally appropriate to have younger students on screen for most of the day. As Berger explained, “we did create, for every grade level, an expectation of teacher-directed work, synchronous work, and asynchronous work. We were super intentional about taking into account the developmental needs of the kids,” she said, “and...students in the upper grades had more FaceTime, more kind of direct instruction via Zoom, than our younger students.” The result of this differentiated approach was that younger EL students, such as those in pre-K or kindergarten, had less English instruction because of limitations in screen time and direct virtual instruction from teachers.

Younger learners also lost learning because the platforms used for remote learning were not able to fully meet their needs, according to some interviewees. They said that older students did not experience a similar level of loss in terms of engagement and ability to use the technology. Macias of Chicago Public Schools described the particular challenges faced by pre-K and kindergarten students: “It just wasn’t the same virtually as it would have been in the classroom environment, because of the platforms that you’re using. And because you’re working with really small children, there’s not a lot of chance for them to interact with each other in that type of platform. It’s more teacher-directed instruction,” he said, “and so, you know, those natural conversations that come in small groups among children, thinking through whatever content they’re working in, and the use of the language in that content—you didn’t have that in that room in that virtual setting.”

Remote Learning Inhibited Language Development

The way that elementary classrooms are decorated—class rules, student artwork, the alphabet, number lines, charts outlining learning strategies, a daily schedule, a calendar, and a white board detailing the day’s objectives—does more than just fill the otherwise blank walls. These visuals provide students with scaffolds to support their learning.

Some approaches to supporting English language development (ELD) rely heavily on charts that show sentence patterns, processes, and KWL charts that ask students to list what they know and want to know about a topic, to name a few of these visuals. Feichtinger McGrath noted that teaching without visual scaffolds from the classroom was difficult and that many ESL educators were eager to teach in person, as “their level of comfort, being away from all of that tangible space to do language” was hard. “Most of them,” she said, “couldn’t wrap their heads around it. They really wanted to be with kids, and they wanted to be...touching their walls and making this all come alive.”

Several other interviewees emphasized the fact that remote learning did not provide sufficient opportunities for students to receive targeted ELD instruction, to engage in conversations with peers, and to practice and use academic language. Californians Together surveyed over 650 teachers and administrators in April and May of 2020 to learn more about how ELs were being served in the state. Only 55 percent of respondents reported that ELs were receiving ELD online and just 39 percent reported that students had weekly interactions with ELD teachers as part of their district’s distance learning plan.²⁴ According to Armas, who works with school systems throughout California, providing designated ELD was a challenge, in part due to gaps in policy and guidance from the state around how to ensure that it was happening and supports for teachers on how to design instruction to accommodate for it.²⁵

Armas also told us that school districts had different policies about allowing unsupervised break-out groups. “In some districts the answer was a hard no,” she said. “And so, if breakout groups aren’t allowed, how can you design peer-to-peer and individualized instruction for students? In other cases, there were additional paraprofessionals or policies...that were put forth to support students beyond whole group instruction, and there, it was more feasible to deliver designated ELD,” she said. Language learning does not happen in a vacuum; it requires multiple types of inputs and experiences. At school, peers provide an essential source of learning and interaction—an element that was lacking during remote learning. “Peer learning is a lot of the way students are actually getting engaged,” Chicago’s Macias told us. “A lot of the ways they apply new content, a lot of the ways they master things... interacting in groups, interacting with a partner, that’s what was really lacking... especially with the ELs, they need that peer interaction, especially with students who are maybe slightly higher proficiency,” he said.

In addition, many students chose to have their cameras turned off during remote learning and some had spotty internet connections, which interfered with their ability to fully participate in class. In one remote class that Luft dropped into, he was placed into a breakout group with three students.

Two of them were off camera, because they said there was just too much going on in their apartment and they didn't want to be on the camera. And it made the conversation harder. It made the work harder in the group; they couldn't see each other. It was harder for them to understand each other...there were some language barriers... I was only in the group for, like, five minutes and like everything on your bingo card happened, you know: stalled connection, kid got kicked out, something was going on at home, the kid got distracted, got pulled away from, you know, so it was a good microcosm of what happens with this.

Given these challenges, the drop in speaking proficiency among ELs seen in the WIDA national results is not surprising.²⁶

Programmatic Barriers to Equitable Learning Conditions

“If it was lousy instruction before, you are simply digitizing lousy instruction.”

—Joe Luft

At the beginning of the pandemic, all schools and teachers were scrambling to transform their non-digital instruction models into a fully remote setting. As Bryant explained, COVID caused a pedagogical crisis where teachers were trying to figure out their identity in this new virtual space. For many of our interviewees, the definitive factor that helped some schools get “through” the pandemic better than others came down to the school systems and structures that were in place pre-pandemic. As Gonzales of the English Learners Success Forum explained, “places that had a strong curricular plan pre-pandemic and committed to that plan are the places that fared better in terms of maintaining coherent and consistent learning.” The pandemic revealed that not many schools and districts had the necessary curricular and instructional infrastructure to provide ELs with integrated language and academic support in person, let alone in a remote setting.

According to Orly Klapholz, founder and CEO of Inlier Learning which focuses on improving instruction for SLIFE ELs across the country, it became obvious that “most of our educational technology tools were not built with our multilingual learners in mind.” She recognized how challenging it was for teachers to support

their EL students and in particular their SLIFE and newcomers, many of whom were in need of foundational skill work. Many of the academic tools used pre-, mid-, and post-pandemic are not accessible to them, especially not in languages beyond Spanish.

Moser said that few schools had any kind of plan for how EL services were going to be provided outside dual language classrooms, especially in places where the district did not take a leadership role in creating a coherent approach. In California, Armas and her colleagues at the Center for Equity for English Learners (CEEL) found that the first few months were particularly difficult because there were no clear guidelines for how many hours were required for EL synchronous and asynchronous models. They observed that although a minimum number of hours was eventually set by the state, implementation still varied and some teachers did not feel like they could adequately serve these students based on that minimum threshold. This placed the onus on individual teachers to ensure their students were prepared to make socio-emotional, linguistic, and academic progress.

Furthermore, it quickly became evident that simply taking what teachers were doing and squeezing it into a virtual platform does not work, especially when it was inadequate to begin with. As Luft asserted, “if it was lousy instruction before, you are simply digitizing lousy instruction.” Several interviewees said that while curricula were being translated a lot last year to allow ELs to access remote instruction, it was challenging to ensure accuracy, particularly when using automated services like Google Translate. As Gonzales stated, “there is a science to translation and there are unintended consequences when it is not done properly.” The meaning of a text can literally get lost in translation.

Additionally, as Armas told us, the pandemic proved just how critical solid pedagogical practices are in delivering integrated and designated English language development. Though the intent was there to deliver ELD in this virtual space, doing so required a huge scaffold and lift by teachers and administrators to make it happen. Teachers relied on existing strengths and research-based practices to cope with the challenges of delivering integrated instruction online. At the Internationals Network, schools leveraged collaboration between interdisciplinary teams, a key component of their model even prior to the pandemic. In addition, established practices of mastery based learning allowed students to demonstrate their learning in language and content thanks to the flexibility this approach offers. In Washington DC, Center City Public Schools had made deliberate investments in equipping all teachers with asset-oriented instructional practices for ELs, an approach that has been an integrated part of their model for years²⁷ which they were able to draw upon during the pandemic. And importantly, several interviewees said that it was important that schools’ vision of instruction was used to drive how technology was leveraged throughout the pandemic, not the other way around.

In Washington State, Percy Calaff said that a silver lining of the pandemic was that it pushed schools and districts to rethink services to be more inclusive, intentional, and systematic within the classroom, towards a more integrated model for ELs.

This is because many local education agencies (LEAs) in her state were still using a pull-out model and were overwhelmed by the prospect of having to set up all these additional pull-out groups to meet higher EL numbers. Percy Calaff and her team were able to remind people that this might not be the best model for ELs, particularly in younger grades.

Indeed, many of our interviewees agreed that COVID presented an opportunity for school systems to reflect and rethink their services for ELs from an equity and asset-based standpoint. Unfortunately, as Hurwitz said, “some things are equity driven but student agnostic” and “DLLs/ELs have historically been treated as an add-on, pull-out, or a text-box in the curriculum.” In rethinking how to operate, Hurwitz calls on schools to home in on who the children are and not talk about equity in the abstract. And as Measel of the Pennsylvania Department of Education said, “if districts have not been taking an asset-based approach to ELs and their academic program, they should definitely start now, but not because of the pandemic, but because they should have done that all along.”

Teachers and Financial Resources to Support EL Success

New Responsibilities for Teachers

“We went with an all-hands-on-deck kind of philosophy.”

—Laura Feichtinger McGrath

Teachers were Spread Thin

Even prior to the pandemic, states and school systems faced challenges in employing a teacher workforce equipped with the specialized knowledge and skills to support ELs. A majority of states face shortages of English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual teachers.²⁸ At the same time, a large number of general education teachers are not provided with preparation and professional development on effective practices for ELs.²⁹ These preparation gaps had implications for how teachers were able to respond during the shift to remote learning and the need for school systems and states to provide resources and training to support teachers in this transition.

Experts we spoke with highlighted a variety of issues that impacted teachers, along with how they adapted and developed new approaches to supporting EL students. A key observation was that ESL teachers took on more responsibilities and were sometimes pulled away from supporting ELs to fill in for general education teachers. Some school districts in Michigan, for example, reported having to reassign their specialized ESL teachers to general classrooms throughout the pandemic, which resulted in reduced language services for EL students. In Harrisonburg, ESL teachers in one school were reassigned to a first grade class and a second grade class, which meant they were not providing direct ESL support. “We went with an all-hands-on-deck kind of philosophy that took away from some targeted instruction for some students,” admitted Feichtinger McGrath. In other cases, ESL teachers saw their workloads increase during remote learning as they became responsible for multiple grade levels and had to figure out how to provide grade-level instruction to those English learners.

The all-hands-on-deck approach also meant the school system staff was providing more direct support to teachers in the classroom. Percy Calaff described the work she and her colleagues at Highline Public Schools engaged in to help ease teachers' workloads by writing units for them:

They were desperate for materials; they were like, "every lesson is taking me forever to plan." So we started taking our science units or social studies units, our literacy units, and building them on the virtual platform, giving them all the Google Slides and all the resources, and "you can just click here, and here's the read aloud for you and here's the electronic book for the kids, and here's the form you can have the kids use." You know, putting all the GLAD strategies and things right into it so that a teacher could literally just click and follow.

Some interviewees also noted that the school day "went out the window" during remote learning, as teachers and school system staff were having to work long hours to accommodate this new mode of teaching and learning. One described meeting with parents at 7 or 8 o'clock in the evening, a practice that was framed positively because it provided the opportunity for more direct engagement with parents at times that were convenient for them. Asynchronous learning opportunities gave students, particularly those in high school, greater flexibility around when to engage in and complete their schoolwork. But that flexibility had an impact on teachers' work schedules and made it challenging to fully disconnect from the workday.

Teachers Adapted to Using New Tools and Strategies

The shift to teaching online required new approaches to support student engagement and learning. Teachers across the country extended themselves to meet students where they were, working with children on the sidewalk in front of their homes, meeting up with students in parks and parking lots, and setting up times for them to come to school to receive one-on-one support. Others used text messaging and WhatsApp to maintain and increase communication with students and their families and develop community among students in a class. Klapholz said that teachers rallied together to provide the resources that EL students needed to support their learning, a sentiment shared by the majority of the experts we spoke with.

As the pandemic dragged on, some teachers became adept at navigating and using technological tools such as Zoom, Google Classroom, Nearpod, and Seesaw and embedding videos within their lessons. The use of video and digital tools proved useful for providing access to instruction that could be revisited when needed, said Anya Hurwitz of SEAL. "Using Google Classroom allowed teachers to share their slides [so] students could revisit them," she said. "Teachers were making little videos, and kids could go back and look at them. Students were also making videos of their language and learning, and sharing it with their teachers," she said. A lingering question for educators was how to maintain some of these approaches to

learning and providing resources post-pandemic.

At some schools within the Internationals Network, teachers adapted resources to ensure digital accessibility.³⁰ For example, one teacher shared a graphic organizer that she had used many times in her classroom. She put it up on the screen so that students could access it online. As she reflected on the lesson later, she realized that “a lot of the students were looking at the document on their phones. What looked great on an 8½ x 11 piece of paper,” Luft said, “condensed onto this little thing didn’t work anymore. So she had to totally redesign the graphic organizer into smaller chunks, so students could actually use it on the phone, if that’s what they were doing,” he said.

At the same time, teachers were working harder than ever and, in some cases, not seeing the same results with students, which made them feel ineffective. Some of the school system leaders and staff that we spoke with indicated that teacher retention and staff shortages were an issue they were following closely. A handful reported that schools were seeing teachers leaving mid-year; higher rates of turnover; difficulties with hiring; and a lack of bus drivers, custodians, and substitute teachers. Nationally, much has been written about a looming mass exodus of educators, but it remains unclear whether this threat will materialize.³¹ But what is clear is that teachers have faced an enormous amount of stress throughout the pandemic and have seen their jobs politicized in new ways. States across the country are working to increase teacher pay³² but more will need to be done in order to promote teacher retention in the long term.

COVID-relief Funding Decisions and Priorities

“Districts are tripping over money, but I don’t get the sense that there is a clear and compelling vision about how to use the money.”

—Joe Luft

State and District Decision-making Processes have been a Black Box

The federal government provided \$190 billion one-time funds to K-12 education through three rounds of COVID-relief stimulus packages.³³ Each iteration of relief has identified ELs as a population that should be targeted with stimulus funds.³⁴ As of the writing of this paper, all education stabilization funds have been disbursed.³⁵ However, information about how funding is being put to use at the school and student level is still scarce, particularly for English learners.³⁶

According to David Holbrook, executive director of the National Association of English Learner Program Administrators, there has been a “disconnect between who’s deciding how this money is spent and where the needs are, especially when it comes to ELs.” This disconnect is not at all surprising, considering that the majority of EL education leaders that we interviewed were not meaningfully included in determining how these funds would be spent in their own jurisdictions. Indeed, only a couple of our interviewees were consulted in initial stages and asked to compile a sort of EL wish list. These requests sometimes materialized, but usually only partially, and overall, the resounding message about the decisions that followed these initial consultations was that they were done in a “black box.”

Programs, Curriculum, and Staffing Need Investment

Whether consulted or not, all of our interviewees prioritized investing in human resource and programmatic needs over commodities. As Feichtinger McGrath of Harrisonburg, stated, “I don’t want to buy anything else; we need more space and more adults to spend more time with kids, and you can’t just buy those positions for a year.” Indeed, when consulted, she said she asked for wraparound services for students, including mental health support, and funding to hire 11 new teachers. The district also spent a lot of money on summer school which was not focused on academics but on students’ socio-emotional needs. Ultimately, only about \$250,000 was available to spend out of the millions allocated to the district after all other funding priorities were exhausted.

In Washington, DC, Passante and her team also made recommendations to get more adults into their buildings because they are understaffed and simply need more people to do a range of things. They also invested in specialists and social workers, as well as a tutoring program which, though not specific for ELs, could help meet their needs. The team tried to maximize federal COVID-relief funds by increasing overall academic and socio-emotional programs and making sure ELs are included, rather than buying something that will be used as a Band-Aid over a gaping hole for ELs.

In Washington State, Percy Calaff said that in addition to closing the digital divide and providing basic necessities like PPE and free meals at the district level, the SEA decided to use stimulus funds to maximize its long-term impact through a \$10 million injection into dual language programs. Over the next two years, COVID-relief funds would supplement about \$1.5 million that is already earmarked annually for such programs in the form of grants, up to \$200,000, to LEAs to use for new or existing programs. The state also spent \$3.5 million to design a curriculum on environmental education that can be used for migrants and bilingual students and done in partnership with the science department.

Unfortunately, though, as Holbrook stated, ELs are not usually considered until decisions are already made and then things are retrofitted to include them, which is not a way to equitably meet their needs. Instead, states and districts could develop a long-term vision for these funds, which could include developing dual language and

bilingual programs, hiring teachers and paraeducators to work with students in their home languages, and developing materials in students' home languages. According to Holbrook, "these are the types of programs that actually produce the kind of results we want to see in the long term."

Conclusions

Today, the majority of students are back to attending school in person and pandemic-related precautions are rapidly fading. While we welcome the easing of the pandemic, too many school systems are shifting “back to normal,” which may only harm ELs, given the ineffective ways our education system has historically viewed and served these students.

The educational experiences of English learners during the pandemic were complicated, even conflicting at times, which can make it difficult to understand opportunity gaps. ELs experienced gaps in access to education during the pandemic due to inadequate technological access. Remote learning impacted their language development in positive and negative ways. Processes used to identify and assess these students were interrupted, creating gaps in data that may affect these students down the line. Teachers used new technological tools and made adaptations to facilitate instruction and strengthen communication with families. And school systems sought to provide resources, including direct support to teachers, digital devices and internet hotspots, learning hubs, and more, to help minimize the impact of school closures.

Unfortunately, we are already seeing many of the advancements propelled by the pandemic being rolled back, including devices being recalled and flexibilities around attendance and coursework being taken away. At the same time, there is a lot of pressure for kids, and ELs in particular, to “catch up.” But as Alvarez asked, “what are we asking them to catch up to? Their pre-pandemic peers? Because those kids are totally different than the kids we see today.” Education leaders, advocates, practitioners, and researchers must take care not to lean too heavily into deficit-oriented narratives around “learning loss” because, as Measel said, building instruction from a deficit perspective does not work. And as Luft explained, the learning loss narrative places “the burden on the students to learn twice as fast” and does not “take stock of the innovative things they can do [and] learned to do and implies that they didn’t learn anything” during remote learning. This deficit framing can also impact how curricula and instruction are developed, and it does a disservice to the perseverance that both students and educators showed over the last two years.

The perspectives shared with us for this paper are not exhaustive, but they represent a well-rounded view of the challenges and positive developments prompted by the pandemic. However, the barriers that ELs faced before and during the pandemic will persist unless there is a fundamental shift in how these students are viewed by policymakers and other local leaders across the country. For English learners, this starts with “thinking about them in terms of what language they have,” as Measel told us, and “looking for opportunities

to develop students' language skills." Though this shift may seem small, it can help education leaders build more equitable systems for ELs that can be relied on in times of crisis.

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