Published in final edited form as:

J Sch Leadersh. 2017 September ; 27(5): 755–766. doi:10.1177/105268461702700507.

Policy Brief: Using ESSA to Improve Secondary English Learners' Opportunities to Learn through Course Taking

Rebecca M. Callahan,

Department of Curriculum & Instruction, Population Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, 305 W. 23rd Street, Austin, TX 78712-G1800, 512-471-8347

Megan Hopkins

Department of Education Studies, University of California at San Diego, 9500 Gilman Dr. #0070, La Jolla, CA 92093-0070, (858) 246-2593

Abstract

While the 2015 federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allows states to adopt new measures to assess school accountability, state and district leaders must now use evidence-based interventions that address student inequities. For English learners (ELs) at the secondary level, one important measure of opportunity to learn is access to and completion of rigorous, college preparatory coursework. Drawing from ESSA's definition of "evidence-based," aligned with the Castañeda guidelines, we propose course taking as a valid and reliable statewide indicator of student success, and offer recommendations for local evidence-based interventions that would support ELs' opportunity to learn.

Keywords

ESSA; English Learners; Secondary; Evidence-Based; Course Taking; Opportunity to Learn

Legal requirements that guide English learner (EL¹) program design and instructional practice historically have not corresponded well with federal policy provisions. Most recently, the court's emphasis on developing, implementing, and evaluating EL programs over the long term conflicted with *No Child Left Behind*'s accountability provisions, which focused on finite, cross-sectional achievement outcomes on tests administered in English. The recently passed *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), however, includes key points of overlap that help to align legal and policy frameworks guiding EL education. Moreover, by shifting responsibility for the development of accountability systems to states, ESSA affords local leaders the opportunity to adopt indicators that measure opportunities to learn for all students, including ELs.

An important yet often overlooked indicator of ELs' opportunity to learn at the secondary level is access to and completion of rigorous, college preparatory coursework. Secondary

Callahan@prc.utexas.edu.

¹English learners are those bilingual speakers of languages other than English who are identified by the school system as in need of supplemental linguistic support services in order to adequately access and master grade-level academic content.

ELs represent a growing but often underserved population plagued by high dropout rates and limited college engagement (Callahan, 2013; Nuñez, et al., 2016), and it is essential that state, district, and school leaders use appropriate measures to assess inequities in these students' opportunities to learn and to develop programs and practices that address them. Below, we highlight research showing that course taking is an essential measure of secondary ELs' opportunities to learn. We offer a framework that leverages the intersections between legal requirements for ELs and the language of ESSA to guide local leaders as they develop, implement, and evaluate programs that attend to ELs' course placement at the secondary level.

Why Use Course Taking as a Measure of Opportunity to Learn?

Prior research suggests that providing equitable access to secondary math and science courses can help to strengthen students' opportunities to learn (Gamoran & Hannigan, 2000). Nationally, only 20% of ELs complete Algebra II or higher (Callahan, et al., 2010), a gate-keeper to advanced math and science coursework (Adelman, 2006; Spielhagen, 2006); instead, most ELs complete remedial and basic math courses. ELs are also less likely than their English proficient peers to complete two of three required science courses by graduation (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016). Because many ELs are not afforded opportunities to complete necessary prerequisites, they are often placed in office support or aide positions rather than in the academic coursework necessary for graduation or postsecondary enrollment (Callahan & Gándara, 2004). Although English language proficiency—often inappropriately conflated with academic competence (MacSwan & Rolstad, 2006)—frequently drives placement decisions, opportunity and achievement disparities persist even when taking English proficiency, social class, and other factors into account (Callahan & Humphries, 2016).

To accurately assess ELs' access to coursework, we must also consider the substance and form of their educational experiences as tempered by teacher capacity and school context (Adamson, et al., 2013; López, et al., 2015; Umansky & Reardon, 2014). For example, teachers' perceptions and expectations may shape ELs' educational experiences and affect their performance in school. Research has found that teachers' perceptions of students' abilities influence both students' learning and self-perceptions (Jussim & Eccles, 1992), and that teachers' expectations are positively associated with course level (Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012). Given that ELs are particularly sensitive to teachers' expectations (Jussim & Harber, 2005) and are disproportionately placed in low-level courses at the secondary level, these factors all but ensure negative academic outcomes.

School context is also important to ELs' course access. Secondary ELs who attend schools that serve large populations of EL and immigrant students tend to have greater access to college preparatory coursework and higher achievement than their peers in schools with sparser EL and immigrant populations (Callahan et al., 2009). This difference may be related to variations in the linguistic and academic resources available in schools, where schools with denser EL populations are able to offer courses in students' primary language(s) or with other modifications, or to appropriately place ELs into college preparatory coursework based

on courses completed in their countries of origin (Hopkins, et al., 2013). The ability to ensure appropriate course placement for the local EL population is critical to success.

To summarize, research evidence supports the use of course taking as an indicator of opportunity to learn for secondary ELs. At the state level, the proportion of a high school student's coursework that meets college preparatory requirements can serve as a measure of equity in access, particularly for English learners (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2016). In fact, successful reform efforts (Haxton & O'Day, 2015) have sought to improve equity and access by monitoring course placement to improve college oriented outcomes and indicators. At the local level, leaders can map course-taking patterns onto high school graduation and four-year college admissions requirements to reduce disparities in opportunities to learn for their EL populations.

How Can Course Taking Guide Program Development?

For local education agencies to take advantage of federal education funding, they must demonstrate their use of "evidence-based" programs. Whereas previously NCLB defined evidence-based programs solely as those validated through experimental or quasi-experimental research studies, ESSA expands this definition to include programs that: "demonstrate a rationale based on high-quality research findings or positive evaluation that [shows they are] likely to improve student outcomes...; and...includes ongoing efforts to examine...effects" (Section 1177(21), pp. 781–3, emphasis added). This definition of "evidence based" aligns closely with requirements that emerged from the *Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981) decision, which sought to ensure academically robust programs for ELs (Faltis & Arias, 2012). After the Supreme Court's decision in *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) that required school systems to address linguistic barriers to equitable access, *Castañeda* sought to ensure that appropriate action was taken to address ELs' needs. More specifically, the *Castañeda* decision mandated that EL programs be: 1) based on sound educational research and theory, 2) well-implemented with sufficient resources and personnel, and 3) evaluated regularly to ensure progress toward linguistic and academic goals. Notably, *Castañeda*'s first and third prongs align closely with ESSA's definition of "evidence based" programs.

Drawing on these important intersections between legal and policy requirements, we outline a three-phase school redesign process (see Figure 1) for local educational agencies seeking to improve secondary ELs' opportunities to learn and to more closely align linguistic and educational programs to the needs of their local student populations.

Phase 1: Selecting Programs Based on Sound Theory and/or High-Quality Research

When selecting programs that address secondary ELs' opportunities to learn, leaders must first consider their schools' demographic profiles. Stand-alone English-as-a-second-language (ESL) placement tends to be most effective for newly-arrived ELs in schools serving small immigrant populations; however, it appears to preclude academic progress among more English proficient ELs in schools enrolling large immigrant populations (Callahan, et al., 2009). Thus, whereas leaders in low incidence locales, such as new immigrant destinations, might focus on developing separate course sequences for cohorts of ELs that include ESL and sheltered content courses, those in higher incidence locales might

focus on supporting ELs' social and academic integration into college preparatory coursework.

Language is another critical consideration in program selection. In schools where ELs share a primary language and have prior schooling in that language, bilingual programming can be highly beneficial (Bartlett & García, 2011; Hopkins, et al., 2013; Michael, et al., 2007). By offering college preparatory courses in students' primary language, secondary schools can help ELs stay on track for graduation while learning English. In contexts serving ELs from many language backgrounds, however, primary language instruction is often not feasible; such schools can require rigorous academic programs that systematically support both language development and content learning in integrated classrooms (Castellón, et al., 2015). Supported by an additive framework that views ELs' primary language as a tool in the learning process (García & Wei, 2014), teachers can leverage ELs' linguistic resources to support engagement in rigorous content instruction as they gain English proficiency (Celic & Seltzer, 2011; Martínez, 2010).

International Baccalaureate (IB) programs represent a promising option for promoting ELs' access to and success in college preparatory coursework through individualized instruction and the development of intercultural understandings (Aldana & Mayer, 2014). More broadly, programs that use flexible scheduling to allow adequate time for students to develop language, literacy, and college readiness (Castellón, et al., 2015) can improve ELs' access to content. Ultimately, selecting programs to improve course taking via opportunities to learn depends on the extent to which leaders carefully consider and address their ELs' unique needs.

Phase 2: Implementing Programs Well with Sufficient Resources and Personnel

To ensure robust program implementation, district and school leaders must pay close attention to organizational structures, teacher capacity, and curricular resources. Organizationally, leaders must ensure scheduling that provides ELs equitable access to necessary courses and services. Structures that give counselors time and develop their capacity to attend to ELs' needs are necessary to ensure appropriate placement and identify adequate support services. Many counselors will require transcript translation training to ensure that ELs' previous educational experiences, both within and outside the U.S., are considered during the course placement process. The master schedule should also be reviewed and modified so that college readiness or preparatory courses do not conflict with ESL services. Finally, strategic community partnerships can augment counseling supports by improving access to college application and admission information (Castellón, et al., 2015; Haxton & O'Day, 2015), and engaging students in experiences that prepare them for a wide array of postsecondary options. Such efforts support development of a college going culture (Jarsky, McDonough, & Nuñez, 2009), providing a range of academic and social experiences that prepare students for college and young adulthood.

To ensure high-quality coursework that attends to ELs' linguistic and academic needs, leaders must also attend to teacher capacity. ELs are more likely than their English proficient peers to be taught by under-qualified teachers (Gándara, et al., 2003), and the majority of content-area teachers who work with them have received very little, if any, EL-focused

professional development (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). Moreover, math and science teacher turnover in recent years has meant that the supply of new teachers cannot always keep up with demand (Ingersoll & Perda, 2009). As such, leaders might consider strategic staffing initiatives that work to recruit and retain content-area teachers who are also certified in bilingual and/or ESL education (Castellón, et al., 2015). While bilingual teachers are necessary in schools implementing primary language programs, they are also important elsewhere, as they are more likely to use instructional practices that attend to ELs' linguistic needs, develop relationships with parents of ELs, and provide instructional advice to their colleagues (Hopkins, 2013; Hopkins & Schutz, 2016) than other teachers. Several recent university-led initiatives funded by the federal Office of English Language Acquisition have offered content area teachers opportunities to pursue ESL or bilingual certification (US Department of Education, 2017); district or school leaders could foster university partnerships to support teachers' involvement.

To support teacher retention and professional development, leaders should also provide teachers with ongoing, content-focused PD. For teachers of ELs, a content focus is key, given the need to integrate language development into content instruction (Bunch, 2013; Lee, Quinn, & Valdés, 2013). Rather than focusing narrowly on discrete strategies to support language development, effective and engaging PD develops teachers' capacity to foster disciplinary uses of language in the content areas (Adamson, et al., 2013; Lee & Buxton, 2013). Indeed, PD that helps teachers understand the content they teach, as well as how students learn in particular content areas, has been associated with gains in achievement (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). Importantly, efforts to ensure high-quality, rigorous course-taking among EL students must also address not only content area curriculum and resources (Hopkins, et al., 2013), but also teachers' use of instructional strategies that support bilingual EL students' discipline specific literacy development (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). As we move forward in our work to improve EL students' access to academically rich contexts, it is critical to consider their needs *within*, rather than *in addition to*, current improvement efforts, especially as we face the many unknowns of the current political climate.

Phase 3: Engaging in Ongoing Evaluation to Examine Effects and Ensure Student Progress

As programs are selected and implemented to provide EL students with equitable access to secondary coursework, evidence must be gathered to monitor their effectiveness. In order for course taking to serve as a measure of ELs' opportunity to learn in local and state accountability systems, local leaders need to: 1) collect data to determine the number and percentage of students who have access to and successfully complete coursework required for high school graduation and college admission, and 2) disaggregate these data for their EL populations by proficiency level. By analyzing these data over time, leaders can identify changes in the proportion of ELs at each proficiency level who have access to and complete courses relative to their English proficient peers, allowing them to assess schools' progress toward particular proportional or growth goals. Such data collection and analysis can serve as a diagnostic tool to identify schools in need of additional support, as well as model schools that support and enhance secondary ELs' opportunities to learn. This information

can then be used to inform ongoing program selection and implementation efforts (see Figure 1).

Conclusions

Leveraging the intersections between legal requirements guiding EL education and ESSA's focus on evidence-based programs, we have described how course taking can be used to guide school redesign efforts focused on support ELs' opportunities to learn. Positioning course taking as a central feature of school redesign efforts allows educational leaders to use evidence-based solutions to select, implement, and evaluate programs that have the potential to improve opportunities to learn for their specific EL populations. By choosing secondary EL programs *based on research findings* associated with improved achievement among particular EL populations (e.g., IB, primary language, and content-based ESL), and implementing them with adequate human resources and structural supports, local leaders will be able to gather the data (e.g., course enrollment, completion rates by language proficiency level) necessary to *examine ongoing program effects*. Such an approach would ensure that ELs not only graduate from high school, but also experience it in such a way as to prepare them for the future. While the EL population continues to grow nationally, secondary ELs remain behind their peers academically, suggesting potential social and economic effects if left untended. Ongoing disparities in achievement make it imperative that leaders engage in robust efforts to improve EL students' opportunities to learn.

REFERENCES

- Adamson K, Santau A, & Lee O (2013). The impact of professional development on elementary teachers' strategies for teaching science with diverse student groups in urban elementary schools. *Journal of Science Teacher Education*, 24(3), 553–571.
- Adelman C (2006). The toolbox revisited – paths to degree completion from high school through college Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.
- Aldana U, & Mayer A (2014). The international baccalaureate: A college preparatory pathway for heritage language speakers and immigrant youth. In Callahan RM & Gándara PC (Eds.), *The bilingual advantage: Language, literacy and the us labor market* (Vol. 99, pp. 261-). Avedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Bartlett L, & García O (2011). *Additive schooling in subtractive times: Bilingual education and dominican immigrant youth in the heights* Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Bunch GC (2013). Pedagogical language knowledge: Preparing mainstream teachers for English learners in the new standards era. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 298–341.
- Callahan RM (2013). *The English learner dropout dilemma: Multiple risks and multiple resources* (pp. 60). Santa Barbara, CA: California Dropout Research Project Report (CDRP).
- Callahan RM, & Gándara PC (2004). On nobody's agenda: Improving english language learners' access to higher education. In Sadowski M (Ed.), *Immigrant and second language students: Lessons from research and best practice* (pp. 107–127). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Callahan RM, & Humphries M (2016). Undermatched? School-based linguistic status, college going, and the immigrant advantage. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(2), 263–295. [PubMed: 27057009]
- Callahan RM, & Shifrer D (2016). Equitable access for secondary English learner students: Course taking as evidence of el program effectiveness. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 52(3), 463–496. [PubMed: 27429476]
- Callahan RM, Wilkinson L, Muller C, & Frisco ML (2009). ESL placement and schools: Effects on immigrant achievement. *Educational Policy*, 23(2), 355–384. [PubMed: 20617111]

- Castañeda v. Pickard (1981).
- Castellón M, Cheuk T, Greene R, Mercado-Garcia D, Santos M, Skarin R, et al. (2015). Schools to learn from: How six high schools graduate English language learners college and career ready: Stanford Graduate School of Education, for Carnegie Corporation of New York.
- Celic C, & Seltzer K (2011). Translanguaging: A CUNY-NYSIEB guide for educators New York, NY: The Graduate Center, The City University of New York: CUNY-NYSIEB.
- Darling-Hammond L, Bae S, Cook-Harvey C, Lam L, Mercer C, Podolskly A, et al. (2016). Pathways to new accountability through the Every Student Succeeds Act Stanford, CA: Learning Policy Institute and Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Pub.L. 114–95 C.F.R. (2015).
- Faltis C, & Arias MB (2012). Research-based reform in arizona: Whose evidence counts for applying the castañeda test to structured English immersion models? In Faltis C & Arias MB (Eds.), Implementing educational language policy in arizona: Legal, historical and current practices in sei (Vol. 86, pp. 21–38). Tonawanda, NY: Multilingual Matters.
- Gamoran A, & Hannigan EC (2000). Algebra for everyone? Benefits of college-preparatory mathematics for students with diverse abilities in early secondary school. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 22, 241–254.
- Gándara PC, Rumberger RW, Maxwell-Jolly J, & Callahan RM (2003). English learners in california schools: Unequal resources, unequal outcomes. Education Policy Analysis Archives, 11(36).
- García O, & Wei L (2014). Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Guskey TR, & Yoon KS (2009). What works in professional development. Phi Delta Kappan, 90(7), 495–500.
- Haxton C, & O'Day J (2015). Improving equity and access in fresno: Lessons from a k12–higher education partnership Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research.
- Hopkins M (2013). Building on our teaching assets: The unique pedagogical contributions of bilingual educators. Bilingual Research Journal, 36(3), 350–370.
- Hopkins M, Martinez-Wenzl M, Aldana US, & Gándara PC (2013). Cultivating capital: Latino newcomer young men in a u.S. Urban high school. Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 44(3), 286–303.
- Hopkins M, & Schutz K (2016). Bilingual teacher leadership: Expanding notions of instructional leadership for English learners. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C.
- Ingersoll RM, & Perda D (2009). The mathematics and science teacher shortage: Fact and myth University of Pennsylvania: The Consortium for Policy Research in Education
- Jarsky KM, McDonough PM, & Nuñez A-M (2009). Establishing a college culture in secondary schools through p-20 collaboration: A case study. Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 8(4), 357–373.
- Jussim L, & Eccles JS (1992). Teacher expectations: II. Construction and reflection of student achievement. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 63(6), 947–961.
- Jussim L, & Harber KD (2005). Teacher expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies: Knowns and unknowns, resolved and unresolved controversies. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 9(2), 131–155. [PubMed: 15869379]
- Kelly S, & Carbonaro W (2012). Curriculum tracking and teacher expectations: Evidence from discrepant course taking models. Social Psychology of Education, 15(3), 271–294.
- Lau v. Nichols (1974).
- Lee O, & Buxton CA (2013). Integrating science and English proficiency for English language learners. Theory Into Practice, 52(1), 36–42.
- Lee O, Quinn H, & Valdés G (2013). Science and language for English language learners in relation to next generation science standards and with implications for common core state standards for English language arts and mathematics. Educational Researcher, 42(4), 223–233.

- López F, McEneaney E, & Nieswandt M (2015). Language instruction educational programs and academic achievement of Latino English learners: Considerations for states with changing demographics. *American Journal of Education*, 121(3), 417–450.
- MacSwan J, & Rolstad K (2006). How language proficiency tests mislead us about ability: Implications for English language learner placement in special education. *The Teachers College Record*, 108(11), 2304–2328.
- Martínez RA (2010). “Spanglish” as literacy tool: Toward an understanding of the potential role of Spanish- English code-switching in the development of academic literacy. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 45(2), 124–149.
- Meltzer J, & Hamann ET (2005). Meeting the literacy development needs of adolescent English language learners through content-area learning: Part two-focus on classroom teaching and learning strategies Providence, RI: Education Alliance at Brown University.
- Michael A, Andrade N, & Bartlett L (2007). Figuring “success” in a bilingual high school. *The Urban Review*, 39(2), 167–189.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2002). Schools and staffing survey, 1999–2000: Overview of the data for public, private, public charter, and bureau of indian affairs elementary and secondary schools Washington D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics.
- Núñez A-M, Rios-Aguilar C, Kanno Y, & Flores SM (2016). English learners and their transition to postsecondary education. In Paulsen BM (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 41–90). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Spielhagen FR (2006). Closing the achievement gap in math: The long-term effects of eighth-grade algebra. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 18(1), 34–59.
- Umansky IM, & Reardon SF (2014). Reclassification patterns among Latino English learner students in bilingual, dual immersion, and English immersion classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(5), 879–912.
- US Department of Education. (2017). 2016 national professional development grantee applications, from <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/nfdp/2016awards/npdapps.pdf>

Figure 1.
School Reform Process Integrating ESSA's Definition of Evidence Based and Castañeda's Requirements