

COMMENTS ON ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ENGLISH LEARNER PERFORMANCE*

*From: Kristin McGraner, Founder and Executive Director, STEM Preparatory Academy,
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Background

We are senior-level leaders of high-performing public charter schools with significant concentrations of Latino students. We represent high-poverty communities in California and Tennessee.

Dr. Kristin L. McGraner is Founder and Executive Director of STEM Preparatory Academy, Middle Tennessee's first public charter school specializing in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and widely recognized as the state's highest-performing school serving English language learners, which constitute over 80% of its population. STEM Prep aims to bolster the number of underrepresented students entering the most competitive college and career pathways of the 21st century. STEM Prep will launch its second school, STEM Prep High, in fall 2015 and is currently working in partnership with Metropolitan Nashville public schools to launch the Nashville Newcomer Academy in 2016. Since its inception, STEM Prep has been recognized as a Tennessee Department of Education Reward School for achieving significant academic gains, performing in the top 5% of public schools in the state, as well as Excelling School by Metro Nashville public schools. STEM Prep has been awarded Innovative School of the Year, Middle School Teacher of the Year, and Advocate of the Year and ranks among the highest-performing schools in Tennessee according to Stanford University's Center for Research and Education Outcomes.

Heather McManus is the Senior Principal of the Harvard Campus at Camino Nuevo Charter Academy (CNCA). CNCA is network of seven charter schools serving a primarily English language learner (ELL) population in the greater MacArthur Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. Since opening its doors in 2001, CNCA has proven what is possible in serving ELLs. In 2015, CNCA was named the Hart Vision Charter School of the Year award in the state of California for our efforts to close the achievement gap. Eighty-two percent of our alumni, who would have otherwise attended their neighborhood district public school where the college-going rate is under 30%, have been admitted to and attended some of the most prestigious and well-known universities in the country. CNCA is a proof point for what is possible when the needs of all students, but particularly ELLs, are put first and supported.

With this background and experience, we are pleased to submit comments on the pending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the usage of Title III funds.

Summary of Proposed Recommendations

- Strengthen the state accountability system to support the growth of English language learners by:

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- o Requiring states to develop growth goals for language development performance targets, including both language proficiency achievement and growth over time as a part of Title I
- o Requiring the measurement and public reporting of English language learner performance by subgroup, by achievement, and by language development assessments
- Increase appropriation levels to account for the growth of the English language learners.

Rationale

Recent United States demographic data clearly demonstrates that Latino students represent an increasing share of the total population of U.S. students. Over 94% of ELLs attend publicly funded schools. Because of this, the use of federal dollars as a lever to improved educational outcomes for students is an important consideration.¹ The U.S. Department of Education projects that by 2021, Latino students will account for nearly 30% of all public school students. Unlike previous growth patterns concentrated within particular states, this current growth is spreading across the United States. For example, in the Midwest and South, the percent of Latino students has at least doubled and furthermore continues to grow in all states.²

In 2011, 17.2 million Latino students were enrolled in school. Of this total population, over 90% are native-born citizens.³ More broadly, English language learners are the fastest-growing major student population in the United States; the U.S. Department of Education predicts that ELLs will represent 25% of the overall K–12 enrollment by 2025.⁴

While there have been significant gains in educational attainment for Latino students, particularly in graduation rates and dropout rates, disparities persist between Latino students and other subgroups. For example, in math and reading, White students achieved at rates more than double that of Latino students. Twenty-six percent of Latino students scored

proficient in fourth-grade math, compared to 54% of White students. In reading, 20% of Latino fourth graders scored proficient while 46% of White students reached those targets.⁵ These data points, coupled with increasing population of Latino students, necessitates that the federal government continue to prioritize accountability as a means of promoting high standards for all students as an issue of civil rights.

In January 2015, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and the U.S. Department of Education released a letter reminding states and schools of their legal obligation under federal law to ensure English learner students have equal access to a high-quality education and the opportunity to achieve their full academic potential. The need for this guidance as well as the findings from studying formal complaints necessitates the continued progress of federal policy.

Recommendations

The present accountability measures as written in the 2001 ESEA provide a foundational framework for federal accountability of English language learners. Discussions related to the most current framework of ESEA show recognition of the need to continue to measure subgroup performance but reverse the trend toward federal accountability. We believe the current policy can be improved by ensuring the federal government maintains a level of involvement in the accountability system for English language learners, specifically. We believe this is needed to ensure the adherence to ensuring a free and appropriate education for all students.

Require states to develop growth goals for language development performance targets, including both absolute language proficiency achievement and growth over time that are ambitious, realistic, and related to achievement on standards-based assessments. As written, the current ESEA law or proposal does little to compare the performance of student's academic proficiency under Title I and the development of their English language proficiency under Title III. "It is important to note that English language acquisition is developmental in nature, occurs

over time, and is influenced by students' initial proficiency in English and primary language(s), time in the school system, and the type and quality of schooling, as well as other conditions."⁶ Proficiency on Title I accountability measures cannot occur without appropriate and significant language acquisition. It is our recommendation that Title I set performance targets for both absolute language proficiency targets as well as targets for language proficiency over time, including the monitoring of reclassification rates. Because of the amount of money Title I provides to schools, it can be a key lever in creating change and equitable opportunities for all students.

Require the public reporting of English language learner performance by subgroup on achievement and language development assessments to ensure all students' civil rights are upheld. Currently, the recommendations reached in bipartisan cooperation require states to establish a system of using the assessments but there are limited guidelines and recommendations on reporting the assessments and data to the public. In a recent study of the five states with the highest population of ELLs, there was significant variation in reporting related to both subgroup achievement on standardized assessments as well as language development exams. For example, in California, there is a robust data reporting tool that is easily navigated and available to the public. Data are reported on a state, district, and school level. In New Mexico, however, links to data pages takes the public to a memo on family and student privacy and does not indicate the necessary procedures for requesting this information in an efficient or timely manner. When left up to the state to determine reporting and collection, issues of transparency and accountability arise. It is necessary for the federal government to provide guidelines and markers for the states to use in ensuring this data is available for the public.

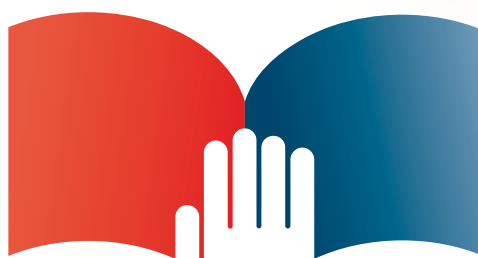
Increase appropriation levels to account for the growth of the English language learners. While the number of ELLs has continued to rise in the country, the increase

in the appropriation levels in the federal government has not kept pace. Beyond the inequitable pace of growth in the funding, the discrepancy between the amounts of funds delegated to Title III and Title I show a disregard for the clearly researched connections between students who live in poverty and students who are ELLs. For many students who are failing to make progress on Title I accountability requirements, the development of strong academic language is at the root of the issue. By dedicating more funding to supporting the acquisition of English, the federal government will prioritize the access to a quality education for nearly 30% of all U.S. students.

We strongly urge you to give these ESEA recommendations your highest consideration to make a dramatic impact on student success and program effectiveness. We would welcome the opportunity to work with Congress to ensure that a reauthorized ESEA accomplishes our shared goals. Please contact Kristin McGraner at kmcgraner@stempleacademy.org or call (615) 752-0002, or Heather McManus at hmcmanus@caminonuevo.org or call (323) 868-6674, if you would like further information or to set up a meeting to continue the conversation.

Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Education, *Title III Accountability and District Improvement Efforts: A Closer Look*. Washington, DC, 2010.
- 2 Brenda Calderon, *Latinos in New Spaces: Emerging Trends & Implications For Federal Education Policy*, (Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, 2015).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 U.S. Department of Education, *Building Partnerships to HElp English Language Learners*. Washington, DC: 2006.
- 5 National Center for Educational Statistics, "The Nation's Report Card," http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2013/#/student-groups (accessed March 2015).
- 6 Megan Hopkins, PhD., et al., "Fully Accounting for English Learner Performance: A Key Issue in ESEA Reauthorization," *Educational Researcher* 42, no. 2 (2013): 101–108.



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