

COMMENTS ON TITLE III FUNDING TO BETTER PREPARE ENGLISH LEARNERS*

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The purpose of this memorandum is to provide recommendations to federal policymakers on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and more specifically on the increase in Title III funding to better prepare English learners.

Background

As a principal of a public charter school in Texas that currently serves approximately 850 students in grades second through eleventh and an English learner population of approximately 20% and an economically disadvantaged student population of approximately 88%, I am pleased to submit comments on the pending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as it relates to an increase in funding for Title III. The East Austin College Prep is a fairly new charter in that their first class to graduate will be in the spring of 2016. A majority of the eleventh grade students are on track for graduation and on track to enroll in a post secondary institution of their choice.

Summary of Proposed Recommendations

1. As our nation's English learner population increases, funding needs to increase to be able to meet the needs of all English learners in settings that are conducive to learning via smaller student-to-teacher ratios for English learners and to establish language proficiency standards with student expectations that can be measured.



2. Enhance Title II-A by specifically providing professional development funds to ensure that teacher training during teacher induction as well as teachers who are currently serving English learners includes cultural proficiency competencies.
3. Schools need to continue to be held accountable for the performance of English learners. However, they also need to be provided with the federal resources needed to assist with providing supplemental services that enhance language acquisition programs across the nation that enhance language acquisition programs which support academic performance.

Rationale

A majority (87%) of English learners (ELs) are from the Latino community with

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their home language primarily Spanish and approximately 39% of Latino students have limited proficiency in English.¹ It is important to note that the majority of Latino youth are U.S.-born (over 90%).² The number of students who have limited proficiency in English continues to increase and the funding levels are not increasing at a proportionate level for schools to be able to implement comprehensive and intensive language development programs for English learners.¹ This is evident through the decrease in funding in Texas as per the Academic Excellence Indicator System reports that show a decrease in funding specifically for Bilingual/ESL programs from 2008 to the present.

On the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), fourth-grade students identified as English learners had an average scale score 25 points lower than non-English learners. On the fourth-grade NAEP reading assessment there is a greater disparity (39 points) in the scale score when ELLs are compared to non-ELLs. Thus, ELLs are still not performing at the levels of non-ELLs and thus there is a need for robust language development programs. The need for targeted language development programs is also important because data show that students who are provided such programs within three years of being served by a language acquisition program have better results in math and reading proficiency.¹

I have had the opportunity to see many students succeed when provided a language acquisition program that is targeted and comprehensive to meet the student's needs. However, with the recent cuts in state funding, such supports for struggling learners (i.e. small group instructional practices and one-on-one support) were sacrificed to meet the minimum requirements and the quality of such programs suffered as a result. For example, in 2008, 7.5% (24,508) of Texas teachers provided 757,146 English learners program services. In 2013, only 5.8% (19,469) of Texas teachers provided 878,569 English learners program services. In six years, the number of teachers providing the language acquisition support to our English learners has decreased while our students needing such services has increased by over 100,000.

If we break down the data on a student-to-teacher ratio, in 2008, the student/teacher ratio by student enrollment and teacher by program was approximately 1 to 31. In 2013, the data show a 1 to 45 student-to-teacher ratio.

A review of recent data in Texas shows that student achievement gaps continue to persist in reading and math among English learners when compared to all learners and that such gaps are not closing at rates that are favorable to English learners.

Overall, I applaud the Senate committee proposal on the reauthorization of the ESEA for several reasons. I am glad to see English language proficiency standards are aligned with challenging state academic standards. I am also pleased to see it recognizes the importance of accountability in that Section 3121 a(5) includes the reporting on the number of English learners who exit the language instruction educational programs based on their attainment of English language proficiency and transition into classrooms not tailored for English learners. Additionally, Section 3121 a(6) includes the reporting on the number and percentage of English learners who have not attained English language proficiency within five years of initial classification as an English learner and first enrollment in the local education agency. Although I am pleased with the Senate committee proposal, I would like to see the following recommendations embedded.

Recommendations

- 1. Increase funding for the instructional support of English learners so that states can establish English language proficiency standards that are implemented with fidelity to meet the needs of all English learners in settings that are conducive to learning through a Title I set aside provision.**

Such funds would be utilized to:

- Develop and provide quality instructional materials and resources centered around the English language proficiency standards.

- Provide for professional development opportunities for teachers to be able to implement such standards with fidelity.
- Recruit and retain additional teachers that solely focus on English language acquisition through a structured language development program based on the English language proficiency standards.
- Develop dual language instructional environments.
- Provide opportunities for English learners to have more time on task through the establishment of after-school and summer school programs and early college high school models.

An increase in funding would impact the English learner-to-teacher ratios in a positive manner in which teachers could provide the language development interventions English learners need to be successful. The current services required of campuses to provide do not provide for intensive intervention in language development and are mainly centered around core academic instruction. It is important that Latino and English learners have equitable access to educational opportunities and supports to meet college and career readiness standards.

With the nation's current economic situation, it is recommended that funding be increased for the aforementioned activities via a Title I set aside provision. This would ensure program coordination between Title I and Title III and provide additional funding for the instructional support of English learners.

2. Enhance Title II-A by specifically providing professional development funds to ensure that teacher training during teacher induction as well as teachers who are currently serving English learners includes cultural proficiency competencies.

Cultural competence entails recognizing the differences among students and families from various cultural groups, responding to those differences positively,

and being able to interact effectively in a range of cultural environments (Lindsey, Robins & Terrell 2003). English learner educators need to be equipped with the tools necessary to be able to propel English learners to the next level of English language acquisition. Culturally responsive teaching needs to occur in every classroom. More specifically, it is a non-negotiable for classrooms that include English learners. With the expected increases in the Latino communities across the nation in the coming years and the data that show that a majority of school teachers are from a non-ethnic minority group, it is important for us to think about how this will affect the performance of English learners across the country. In Texas the most recent data (Texas Academic Performance Report 2014) show that the student body in Texas schools is broken up by the following ethnic distribution: 12.7% Black, 51.8% Hispanic, 29.4% White, 0.4% American Indian, 3.7% Asian, 0.1% Pacific Islander, and 1.9% two or more races, yet the teacher ethnic distribution is as follows: 9.6% Black, 25.2% Hispanic, 62.3% White, 0.4% American Indian, 1.4% Asian, 0.1 % Pacific Islander, and 1.1% two or more races.

It is important for policymakers to recognize that the demographics of our nation are shifting and to prepare for the shift, we must ensure that the learning environments for our all students are culturally appropriate. Revamping Title II-A with a focus on educator cultural competence would be a step forward to ensure that our nation's educators are prepared to meet the cultural needs of every student in America.

3. Hold schools accountable for the performance of English learners.

As the ESEA reauthorization is on the horizon, it is important to note that accountability should not be reduced as a result of funding because the families of our nation's children deserve to know whether the schools their children attend are preparing them for success, more specifically the English learners. We must continue to put in place an accountability

system for the performance of English learners and further provide funding increases to ensure states and schools have the resources necessary to adequately prepare students for success. States must add a provision in their state plans that will ensure that long-term English learners will reach proficiency by the end of the fifth year and require that states assess for growth in English language proficiency, while maintaining accountability for their academic performance.

- 1) Increase funding for the instructional support of English learners through a Title I set aside provision to specifically provide instructional support to English learners.
- 2) Enhance Title II-A by specifically providing professional development funds to ensure that teacher training during teacher induction as well as teachers who are currently serving English learners includes cultural proficiency competencies.
- 3) Hold schools accountable for the performance of English learners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, on behalf of the English learners in my school and the community my school serves, I strongly urge you to give these ESEA recommendations your highest consideration to make a dramatic impact on student success and program effectiveness for our English learners. I strongly urge you to:

Our school system must succeed for Latinos so that it can succeed for our nation. I would welcome the opportunity to work with Congress to ensure that a reauthorized ESEA accomplishes our shared goals. Please contact me at jhuerta@eaprep.org or call (512) 287-5000, if you would like further information or to set up a meeting to continue the conversation.

Endnotes

- 1 Stella Flores, Jeanne Batalova, and Michael Fix, *The Educational Trajectories of English Language Learners in Texas* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2012).
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau, "Sex by Age by Citizenship Status (Hispanic or Latino)," American Community Survey, 2010, 5 year estimates. Washington, DC, 2010.

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