



Building Capacity to Promote College- and Career-Readiness for English Language Learners—A Fact-Finding Trip to Austin, Texas

Briefing Memo

Background

Nearly every state has seen rapid increases in the enrollment of students speaking languages other than English, and policymakers at all levels struggle to address the persistent achievement gaps between ELLs and other public school students. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 dramatically increased the accountability of state and local agencies for the education of their ELLs. The accountability mechanism required states to define annual measurable achievement objectives (AMAOs) to measure and report on progress toward the attainment of English proficiency and academic achievement standards. To measure progress toward language proficiency, states had to develop English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards for ELLs, implement a valid annual assessment, and establish AMAOs to serve as benchmarks for students' progress in learning English.

NCLB also brought the academic performance of ELLs into the spotlight for the first time by requiring that student data be disaggregated by ELL status, and that all subgroups of students meet adequate yearly progress (AYP). The performance of the ELL subgroup on state assessments in math and English language arts (ELA) also constitutes an AMAO. State content assessments are administered to ELLs annually, with an exception for the ELA test for students in their first year of U.S. matriculation. Tests may be administered with a variety of accommodations, including modifications made to the testing environment or even to the test itself. Accommodations are one of the primary strategies for ensuring that ELLs are tested on their knowledge of academic content rather than their understanding of the test's language.

As states grapple with how to meet the dual goals of developing ELLs' English abilities and ensuring their progress in academic content areas, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act authorized additional funds to assist states in their compliance with NCLB requirements. The law supports states as they develop data and assessment processes to accurately measure the achievement of all students, including ELLs. Looking forward, the Department of Education's proposal for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) intends to revise assessment and accountability systems, human capital policies, and the capacity-building role of Title III. According to this proposal, states will be required to establish criteria for consistent, statewide identification of students as ELLs and determine the type of services they will receive, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of language instruction programs on raising the achievement of subgroups of ELLs.

Texas' Initiatives for College- and Career-Readiness

Texas has a long history as a leader in standards-based educational reform, and has continuously raised the level of rigor of its curriculum and assessments through a series of reform bills over the last 25 years. Texas was the first state to require schools to disaggregate student achievement data based on race/ethnicity and income level, and it was among the first states to develop a longitudinal data system capable of tracking individual-level data from pre-K through college graduation. In 2003, Texas adopted the Recommended High School Program—a college- and career-ready courseload—as the default graduation plan for all students in the state, and college- and career-readiness standards have been established over the past five years. In March 2010, Achieve's American Diploma Project recognized Texas as the only state that meets all five criteria of its policy agenda: Texas has aligned high school standards and graduation requirements with college expectations, created college- and career-ready assessment and accountability systems, and utilizes a P-20 longitudinal data system.

In 2005, Governor Rick Perry issued Executive Order RP-53 requiring the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to collaboratively develop college-readiness standards. The following year, the Governor signed House Bill (HB) 1, an education finance bill that took on the issue of college- and career-readiness for all students. HB 1 supported the state's goals of closing achievement gaps by incorporating college-readiness standards into curricula, emphasizing a college-going culture in all schools, calling for joint K-12 and higher education cooperation, increasing funding for additional dropout prevention and college-readiness programs, and creating a P-16 College Readiness and Success Action Plan. Both the THECB and TEA approved the college and career standards for incorporation into the curriculum by the State Board of Education. Next, Commissioner of Education Dr. Shirley Neeley created vertical teams to analyze the existing secondary curriculum against the new readiness standards; this analysis serves as the basis for the ongoing refinements to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the existing K-12 standards. In 2007, Texas legislators voted to gradually replace the current statewide assessment system, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) with twelve end-of-course examinations in high school. The rigorous new assessment system, called the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STARR), will measure students' academic growth as well as performance beginning in the 2011-12 academic year. Finally, a 2009 accountability bill (HB 3) defined the requirements and alignment for these new exams, from the elementary through secondary levels.

Although the Governor and state legislators have played vital leadership roles, TEA has also devoted substantial resources toward a transparent accountability process. Information pertaining to campus, district, and state outcomes is readily accessible to the public on the education agency's web site. This data includes listings of schools in need of improvement, AYP information for every school and district, analysis of the number of Title I schools and districts that did not make AYP, an overview of appeals results, and a broad look at state results.

ELL Education in Texas

Texas has the second largest ELL population in the nation with over 800,000 ELLs enrolled, or 17% of students in the state, in 2008. The number of ELLs is growing three times faster than non-ELLs, and at

the current rate of growth, Texas will educate over one million ELLs in its public schools each year by 2014. The demographics show this population to be majority Hispanic (92%), economically disadvantaged (87%), and with an uneven distribution of students across districts and regions. Since the 1990s, TEA and school districts have provided academic assistance to ELLs to allow them to gain competency in English and academic content. Specifically, school districts are required to identify ELLs with a home language survey and one of several state-approved assessment instruments, provide bilingual and ESL instruction, employ certified teachers, assess achievement in accordance with the public school accountability system, and follow standard procedures for exiting proficient students out of ELL programs.

State statute requires school districts with 20 or more ELLs in the same grade level who speak the same non-English language to offer a bilingual education or special language program in grades K-5. School districts with at least one ELL, but not enough to warrant a bilingual program, must provide an English as a Second Language (ESL) program. School districts must also offer bilingual, ESL, or transitional bilingual-ESL in Grades 6-8, and ESL in Grades 9-12. Spanish bilingual programs are provided in 360 districts, making it the primary language for bilingual instruction, and Vietnamese is the second most prevalent language, with concentrations of students requiring bilingual programs in 36 districts. ELLs can either exit or leave the Bilingual/ESL program; students exit the program when they meet the criteria for English proficiency, which accounted for 63% of program attrition in 2008. The mechanism by which districts identify, annually review, monitor, and exit ELLs is the Language Proficiency Assessment Committee (LPAC). Any district that has students with a primary language other than English is required by law to establish and operate an LPAC.

Assessing The Academic Progress of ELLs

ELLs' performance on the state's academic content standards is annually measured with the TAKS. TAKS includes an accommodated form called TAKS (Accommodated) for ELLs or other students who meet the eligibility requirements for certain specific accommodations, including a Spanish version for Grades 3-5. State Exemptions from taking TAKS are granted by the LPAC if it is the student's first school year in the U.S.; students in grades six or higher may also be exempted if it is the student's second or third year but their previous schooling was deemed inadequate. However, students exempted for either of these reasons are still administered the assessment with linguistic accommodations in certain grade levels and subjects because these results are used to calculate a school's federally required AYP rating. For these assessments, ELLs are provided direct or indirect linguistic accommodations to assist students with language barriers and ensure a more meaningful assessment of their academic knowledge.

Assessing Second Language Acquisition

The TEKS content standards are aligned with English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards to address the second language acquisition needs of ELLs. The ELP standards provide guidance as to how language can be taught and reinforced through the core curriculum, and language proficiency is measured annually with the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS). English proficiency ratings are determined by testing the four domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The TELPAS reading

assessment was revised in 2008 to reflect a stronger cross-curricular focus on academic English skills, particularly in the language used for math and science.

Funding for ELL Programs

TEA has implemented numerous programs, professional development trainings, and materials designed to help districts enable their ELL populations to meet state performance standards. Overall, Texas receives \$93 million in federal Title III money for district bilingual/ESL programs, and the state spends an additional \$13.5 million on ELL education. Texas uses a weighted funding formula, and districts receive extra funding for students with special needs, such as ELLs. Additionally, discretionary grant programs for ELL education include the Limited English Proficient Student Success Initiative for intensive ELL instruction and teacher training resources (\$9.7 million), summer school programs (\$3.8 million), professional development for math teachers (\$1 million), science programs (\$3 million), and dual-language activities (\$1.5 million).

Austin

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) counts nearly one in three students as an ELL, and their number has been steadily increasing over the last two decades. AISD has focused on improving the performance of the growing ELL population as an integral part of their overall strategy to prepare all students for college and careers. In 2004, AISD launched a comprehensive initiative to redesign Austin's high schools. The redesign process, which included parent and community voices, sought to improve the way classes are taught, the number of students in classes, how teachers interact with parents and students, and the overall climate of schools. Building on a previous grant to develop a redesign strategy for the district's eleven high schools, AISD received a \$15.6 million investment from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation to support the process.

In response to the previously low achievement and inconsistent instructional methods for high school ELLs in AISD, the district opened a new school, International High School, which was designed to serve as a model program for recent immigrant students entering at the secondary level. The district's Office of Bilingual Education/ ESL (OBE/ ESL) instituted a new electronic data system, the Language Proficiency Assessment System (LPAS), to allow schools to better monitor student data and ensure continuity of services. OBE/ ESL also funds an Immigrant College Coordinator, who works with students at 17 high schools and has instituted a public education campaign to engage families.

In the 2007-08 academic year, AISD initiated a partnership with the WestEd program Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL) to focus on redesigning ELL instruction at the high school level. This project, funded by the high school redesign grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, initially focused on two Austin high schools, International High School and Lanier High School, and involved professional development for all staff in these schools, as well as focused support for teacher leaders in each of the academic disciplines. Teachers and leaders from these schools were also trained through an apprenticeship model to provide ongoing professional development to other schools. In 2009-10 an additional school, Reagan High School, began the QTEL reform process with support from federal stimulus funding. Superintendent Dr. Meria Carstarphen, who took office in July 2009, supports the continuation of these initiatives. Under her leadership, AISD's Strategic Plan 2010-15 aims to enhance

the quality of professional development in using data and feedback to inform research-based, responsive instruction.

Our first site visit will be to Lanier, a comprehensive high school of 1,525 students. Their student body is 79% Hispanic, 12% Asian American, 84% economically disadvantaged, and 33% ELL. Lanier has the largest ELL enrollment of any high school in the district, with approximately 475 ELLs. From 2007-09, Lanier's ELL students have shown vast improvements in their rates of passing high school exit exams in all subjects, and these gains have outpaced school and state averages for all students. Our second visit will be to International High School (IHS), which serves recent immigrant students in grades 9-10, aged 14-16. IHS's 217 students speak 16 different native languages and are 79% Hispanic, 15% Asian/Pacific Islander, 95% economically disadvantaged, and 94% ELL.

Texas' school districts benefit from a number of institutional partnerships to help each one meet its capacity-building needs with regard to serving ELL students. AISD is served by the Region XIII Education Service Center (ESC), which is one of twenty regional centers in the state that provides districts with general support, technical assistance, capacity-building, and professional development. For ELL programs specifically, Region XIII's services include teacher training and technical assistance in the areas of effective language programs, Title III program administration, and curriculum modifications for bilingual/ESL/Title III programs. In partnership with AISD, Region XIII provides an ESL Academy that offers training for AISD teachers to achieve their ESL Certification. Districts with smaller ELL populations can enter into Shared Service Agreements with Region XIII to receive Title III support services and funding. The Llano Independent School District (LISD), for example, has a total enrollment of fewer than two thousand students, 3% of whom are ELL students. As a small, rural district located approximately 65 miles from Austin, LISD has worked with Region XIII to develop a comprehensive plan to improve the achievement of their growing ELL population, build the capacity of educators to support these students, and develop initiatives to engage immigrant parents.

A partnership with the Proyecto Maestría Collaborative, a program of the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin, also helps AISD to meet its need for highly skilled ESL teachers. This program, which was developed through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition, provides a Summer Institute to prepare certified teachers to receive their ESL credentials and learn effective practices. The Proyecto Maestría Special Master's program equips current bilingual education teachers to provide professional development and coaching to other teachers in the district.

The Austin area provides a strong context to examine the integral roles of local districts, regional services, state education agencies, technical assistance providers, institutions of higher education, and other community partners in building the infrastructure to raise the achievement of ELLs.

For more information on the programs mentioned in this brief, please visit our [website](#).