

ISSUE BRIEF

Moving English Language Learners to College- and Career-Readiness

This issue brief explores effective educational models for serving English Language Learners (ELLs)ⁱ in ways that build upon these students' assets and prepare them for college and careers. The brief derives from an AYPF field trip to Texas's Rio Grande Valley region. On May 6-8, 2009 AYPF led a group of national policy leaders on a fact-finding tour of the area to learn about programs and models that have increased ELL student performance, high school graduation rates, and college attendance. The following discussion provides background information on the importance of improving the educational outcomes of ELL students, a description of the limitations of current federal legislation addressing ELLs, an overview of the models being implemented in the Rio Grande Valley region, and recommendations for future federal legislation.

In May, 2010, AYPF conducted a subsequent study mission to Austin, Texas for state-level policymakers focused on building educational systems' capacity to enhance the success of adolescent ELLs. A separate brief on that trip is also available on the AYPF website (<http://www.aypf.org>).

Background

Public school systems across the U.S. are grappling with how to provide a high-quality education to the increasing number of students who do not speak English as their primary language. English language learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing student population in the country. The number of ELLs within our public schools increased by over 50% between 1995 and 2005, reaching 5.1 million in the 2005-2006 school year.ⁱⁱ In 2007, 20% of school age children spoke a language other than English at home, and a quarter of these youth spoke English with difficulty.ⁱⁱⁱ The sizable presence of this population warrants the attention of education policy leaders. However, because serving so many ELL students is a relatively new phenomenon, not much is known about how to create policies that meet ELL students' needs and draw upon the assets that they bring to the classroom. In addition, the variation between how states define ELLs limits national policymakers' ability to identify and encourage best practices for this population.

Creating policy regarding ELLs is also a challenge because ELLs are a diverse group. ELLs in the United States speak hundreds of different languages and come from all over the world. ELLs differ in ethnicity, language, culture, educational background, and socioeconomic strata. In addition, some ELLs were born in the United States and grew up here, while others have just arrived in the country. The diversity within the ELL population challenges educators and policymakers to conceive of models and best practices to address the various needs of this group.

Despite the diversity of this population, ELLs as a whole remain economically and educationally disadvantaged compared to their English-speaking counterparts. ELL students are more likely to live in a low-income household: in 2007, 66% of ELLs had a family income below 200% of the federal poverty level, compared to 37% of non-ELL youths.^{iv} At the same time, ELLs are less likely to have a parent with a two-year or four-year college degree: 22% of ELLs had a parent with a postsecondary degree,