

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.

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, compared to 44% of students from English-speaking households.^v ELL and immigrant populations also have lower high school graduation rates and higher dropout rates. In 2007, the nationwide dropout rate for foreign-born students was 21%, compared to 8% for native-born students.^{vi} Clearly, there is a need

for developing new approaches to educating ELLs within the U.S and addressing existing barriers to college and careers.

This policy brief provides examples of local programs and educational models that have effectively supported ELL students. The models highlighted have been implemented in Texas' Rio Grande Valley, a region that has transformed its schools to promote the educational attainment and career success of ELLs. Nearly 17% of Texas students are ELLs, a rate much higher than is found nationwide (9%).^{vii} In the Rio Grande Valley, ELLs constitute over 39% of the student population, which is also 85% economically disadvantaged and 94% Hispanic.^{viii} Therefore, the Rio Grande Valley region has a long history of educating non-English speakers. Innovative strategies developed in this area can help to inform policy across the country.

Federal Legislation Affecting ELLs

When ELLs enter US schools, they face the dual challenges of learning a new language while keeping up with the academic content of their grade level. At the same time, educators struggle to balance the goals of increasing English proficiency and building content knowledge. These tasks can be daunting for both teachers and students. Too often, ELLs fall behind their peers and fail to learn the skills necessary for college and future careers.

Federal legislation has increasingly recognized the need to support both English language proficiency and academic achievement. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) originally supported English language acquisition and held states and districts accountable for improving English proficiency through Title VII, Bilingual Education. When the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was enacted in 2002, Title III, Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students, continued this approach through funding programs such as bilingual education and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL). However, NCLB also introduced a new provision for ELLs' overall academic achievement. NCLB's Title I requirement of reporting ELL state assessment results mandates districts to ensure that ELLs learn the same academic content as their English-speaking peers.

While NCLB has increased support for ELLs, the law has also brought to light the low academic achievement levels of these students across the country. Although many districts find NCLB's testing requirements helpful in demonstrating the needs of their ELL students, test outcomes show that a significant gap in achievement persists between ELLs and non-ELLs. In 2007, eighth-grade ELLs scored an average of 37 points lower on the math section of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) and an average of 42 points lower on NAEP's reading section.^{ix} This gap shows that many schools need to find new educational models and strategies to better serve their ELL population.

Although communities across the country recognize the need to improve the lagging achievement of ELL students, there is little consensus on how to address this issue. Federal legislation, for its part, has continued to provide minimal guidance. For instance, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) supports states in developing data and assessment processes to accurately measure the achievement of all students, including ELLs. In this way, the law authorizes additional funds for states to further comply with NCLB requirements for assessing ELL students. However, ARRA and other legislation do not mention best practices or strategies for improving ELL student performance. This lack

of federal guidance limits educators' awareness of the most effective models for integrating ELLs into school improvement goals and addressing their academic needs.

Despite the limited direction federal legislation provides, some states and districts have designed successful program models that emphasize the rich resources ELL students contribute to the classroom. Hidalgo Independent School District (HISD) and Pharr San-Juan Alamo (PSJA) Independent School District, both located within Texas' Rio Grande Valley, provide strong examples of school systems that have implemented effective, asset-based models. These models have not only raised ELL performance levels, but have also moved students along a pathway toward greater college- and career-readiness.

AYPF Trip: Focus on Rio Grande Valley, Texas

On May 6-8, 2009, AYPF convened a group of approximately 20 federal policy leaders for a fact-finding trip focused on Moving English Language Learners to College- and Career-Readiness. The trip was designed for Congressional staff members who work on education issues, policymakers within the U.S. Department of Education, and leaders of national nonprofits. Within this context, the goals of the trip were for policy leaders to observe strong models for improving the performance and career- and college readiness of ELLs, to understand the challenges of implementing high-quality programs and practices, to see how federal policy affects instruction and support for ELLs, and to draw implications for education reform measures. The Rio Grande Valley region was selected because of the progress it has made toward building a college-going culture and increasing the academic performance of its ELL students. Trip participants had the opportunity to meet with a variety of stakeholders, including education policy leaders from the state, regional, and district levels, school administrators, teachers, students, parents, and partners from local postsecondary institutions.



AYPF ELL Field Trip Participants to Rio Grande Valley, TX

Representatives from the Rio Grande Valley's state and regional administrations discussed the support they provide districts in designing and implementing effective ELL programs. Texas school districts are organized into regions and served by regional Educational Service Centers (ESCs), governing bodies that provide a layer of institutional support between the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and local education agencies (LEAs). HISD and PSJA are both housed within Region One, which consists of a seven-county area located along the U.S.-Mexico border. To understand the context of ELL programs in HISD and PSJA, trip participants heard from Lizette Reynolds, Deputy Commissioner of Statewide Policy and Programs at TEA. In addition, Jack Damron, Region One Executive Director, Claudia Rodriguez, Region One Director of Secondary School Initiatives, and Connie Guerra, Director of Region One's Bilingual/ESL/Title III program, discussed the ESC's active role in providing technical assistance to districts and schools as they design and implement programs for ELL students.

Visits to high schools and colleges within HISD and PSJA allowed participants to observe the specific strategies and models these districts have developed. Eduardo Cancino, HISD's Superintendent, spoke alongside local principals and educators about the district's successful Early College High School and how that model has helped ELL students succeed. HISD has higher graduation rates than the state average and has received statewide performance honors for many years.^x Local educational leaders credit the Early College High School (ECHS) as a key component of the district's success.

In PSJA, trip participants learned about the district's rigorous dual language program from district leaders, including Superintendent Dr. Daniel King, and visited PSJA North High School to observe the program in action. In addition, participants visited PSJA's College, Career and Technology Academy (CCTA), an alternative, dual enrollment program for high school dropouts who are missing a limited number of high school credits. Trip participants learned how this model has decreased PSJA's high school dropout rate.



South Texas College Panel

To understand the role of community partners in these districts' efforts to address the educational needs of ELLs, a panel at South Texas College (STC) discussed involvement by local stakeholders, such as parents, the business community, and institutions of higher education (IHEs). STC is a community college in the Rio Grande Valley region that has been nationally recognized as one of the top colleges and universities in enrolling and graduating Latino students.^{xi} Dr. Shirley Reed, president of STC, spoke alongside other STC administrators, business

organizations, and district leaders from PSJA and the Mission Consolidated Independent School District (MCISD) about their programs and strategies to improve high school completion and college access for the students in the area.

Texas ELL policy

Region One's approach to serving ELLs is based on a foundation of strong state laws supporting this population. The state of Texas allows districts flexibility in designing programs for ELLs, while also holding them accountable for meeting these students' needs. Unlike many other states which do not provide academic instruction in ELLs' native languages, Texas mandates that districts with at least 20 ELL students who speak the same native language must provide bilingual education through elementary school.¹ TEA requires all districts to identify the English language proficiency levels of their students by administering the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS). After English language skills are determined, schools must modify instruction so that ELL students improve their English proficiency and learn the academic skills assessed on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).

¹ Bilingual education refers to academic content instruction in English and ELLs' primary language, as opposed to ESL programs that prioritize English language acquisition and do not necessarily instruct students in their native language.

Districts can choose from the following instructional models to satisfy the needs of their particular ELL students in the elementary grades:

- **Transitional Bilingual Education, early exit (1-2+ years):** Establishes an academic foundation in both languages but does not aim for full bilingualism.
- **Transitional Bilingual Education: Late Exit (6+ years):** Aims for full academic proficiency in both languages, developing bilingualism and biliteracy.²
- **Dual Language Immersion: 2-way:** Classes consist of both native English speakers and ELLs. Aims to establish academic competence, bilingualism, and biliteracy in two languages.
- **Dual Language Immersion: 1-way:** Classes consist solely of ELLs, with the same goals as 2-way immersion.

At the middle and high school levels, districts may choose from any of the above program models, as well as two ESL program models:

- **ESL Content-Based: Full Time with Supplemental Teachers:** Students spend the majority of the day with an ESL-certified teacher. Classes can be homogenous (all ELLs) or heterogeneous (ELLs and non-ELLs).
- **ESL Pullout:** ELLs take a class taught by an ESL-certified teacher outside of the regular classroom. Classes are usually stratified by level of proficiency in English.

Hidalgo ISD's and PSJA's ELL models are based on the types of programs that the TEA authorizes. From this state foundation, ESCs often assist LEAs in developing specific instructional programs that would best serve their ELL population. For instance, Region One administrators advised HISD and PSJA to design ELL programs that foster biliteracy, such as dual language immersion. Region One speakers emphasized the importance of fostering biliteracy to satisfy the needs of local industries.

Imperatives for Change

The school districts in Region One created new approaches for improving ELL student achievement and preparing all students for college in response to poor student academic performance, low levels of ELL participation in postsecondary education, and the local business community's concern about the skills of the area's workforce. In the late 1980s, HISD ranked among the lowest performing 5% of all Texas districts, while PSJA had seen many years of steadily increasing high school dropout rates.^{xii} The low levels of academic achievement were alarming to local leaders because of their implications for the area's economic future. Educators recognized that there was a need for a bilingual and biliterate population to satisfy local labor demands, such as those of the multinational corporations stationed along Texas' border with Mexico. Policymakers decided to capitalize upon students' dual language capabilities to develop college- and career-readiness through biliteracy.

² Biliteracy refers to the ability to read and write in two languages, not just speak (bilingualism). Programs fostering biliteracy aim for full academic language and content skills in two languages.

Lessons Learned and Challenges Faced

While the models implemented by PSJA and HISD are quite different, they both derive from a similar perspective on ELL instruction. First, the two districts regard ELLs as an asset because of their language abilities. ELLs are uniquely prepared to develop biliteracy, a skill that is increasingly useful in today's global economy. The specific educational approaches adopted by PSJA and HISD capitalize upon the language foundation ELLs bring to the classroom to increase fluency in both English and Spanish. Second, PSJA and HISD both incorporate language proficiency supports into all academic areas so that ELLs can continue to advance academically. Consequently, both districts work to ensure dual language proficiency and academic achievement.

Lessons Learned

Building Biliteracy Through Local Resources (PSJA)

The cornerstone of PSJA's ELL educational model is its dual language program, which helps students attain bilingualism and biliteracy in English and Spanish through a rigorous, college-preparatory curriculum. Fourteen years ago, the district received a federal grant through Title VII of ESEA (which provided funding for bilingual programs before NCLB's Title III) to implement a dual language program that starts in kindergarten and continues through high school. The first cohort of students who began the program in kindergarten graduated from high school in spring 2009. Trip participants were able to hear from these students, as well as their teachers and administrators, about the importance of this experience. While many districts with ELLs offer dual language instruction in elementary school, PSJA is unique because of its advanced content high school courses in both English and Spanish. This model not only allows students who are native to the area to master academic vocabulary in two languages, but it also helps to integrate recent Spanish-speaking immigrants of all grade levels. Instruction through elementary school is split 50-50 between English and Spanish and then transitions into 80% English and 20% Spanish in middle and high school.

The breakdown of content courses taught in English and Spanish differs between middle and high school. Middle school social studies and art classes are taught in Spanish. In high school, however, PSJA departs from most dual language programs by offering math and science courses in Spanish. PSJA's decision to teach these high school subjects in Spanish reflects the district's commitment to using existing resources to implement its dual language program: PSJA happened to employ more teachers of these subjects with the Spanish language ability to become certified to teach dual language courses. Although PSJA's participating math and science teachers already spoke Spanish, the transition to dual language classes required a substantial time commitment. Not only did these teachers become newly certified to teach in a dual language program, they also created their own teaching materials. Many teachers translated English teaching materials into Spanish, as few Spanish resources are available for advanced math and science courses.

PSJA's dual language program has supported all participating students to make large gains in language proficiency and academic achievement. By the end of middle school, students master enough Spanish to take the Spanish Language Advanced Placement (AP) exam, followed by the Spanish Literature AP exam in 9th grade. Through these tests, students can begin to accumulate college-level credits at an

early age; in 2008-09, 74% of the cohort of 8th grade dual language students achieved a score of 3 or above, earning college credit. The students' scores are automatically sent to the local university, which awards up to 12 credit hours for a score of 5 on an AP exam. At the same time, the dual language middle school participants have a higher average TAKS score than the rest of their school, demonstrating their general proficiency with academic content. By high school, dual language students attain biliteracy to the extent that they can take all TAKS assessments in English, despite learning math and science in Spanish.

Ensuring High School Completion and College Credits for All Students (HISD, PSJA, and Postsecondary Partners)

Both HISD and PSJA have implemented programs to build a college-going culture for all students. Hidalgo ISD converted its only high school to an Early College High School (ECHS) with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The ECHS provides academic and social support to build college-readiness, giving all students the opportunity to earn both a high school diploma and 1-2 years worth of college credit. Unlike other ECHS programs, Hidalgo ECHS has a policy of open enrollment and serves all students in the district. As Superintendent Eduardo Cancino explained, HISD expects high school students of all levels to participate in a college-ready curriculum and earn college credits. To achieve this goal, Hidalgo ECHS partners with many local postsecondary institutions, including South Texas College (STC), Texas State Technical College (TSTC), and University of Texas Pan American (UTPA). In addition, the high school provides tutoring for all college-level courses after school and on Saturdays.

The Hidalgo ECHS was originally geared toward enrollment in a four-year college through its early partnership with UTPA. However, recognizing that not all students want a four-year college track and that youth with different interests and talents need multiple options, the district decided to include more career-focused tracks. Partnering with various postsecondary institutions, Hidalgo ECHS offers programs in health sciences, automotive technology, aviation maintenance, and other careers, as well as classes geared toward four-year college programs. To staff the early college classes, HISD offers financial incentives for high school teachers to become certified to teach the college-level courses as adjunct faculty at the local IHEs. This arrangement is beneficial to the districts, as it is more cost effective to provide college-level classes using their own teachers.

Phar-San Juan-Alamo ISD offers an alternative, dual enrollment program for high school dropouts up to the age of 25. The College, Career, and Technology Academy (CCTA) opened in fall 2007 as a small school that works with students to complete their high school diploma while also earning college credit. The school targets students with most or all of the credits necessary for graduation, but who could not pass the high school exit exam, often because of a language barrier. The teachers use sheltered language instruction³ to build the academic and English abilities necessary for passing the state's high school assessment. To assist older students in participating in the program, CCTA offers half-day sessions for those who work and provides childcare funding for participants with children. CCTA has successfully allowed more students to finish high school and move ahead to college. After CCTA's first

³ Sheltered language instruction focuses on developing academic knowledge and English language skills by teaching in English and using a variety of visual aids to facilitate understanding. Sheltered language instruction provides ELLs with academic content while enhancing their English proficiency.

semester, half of their graduates continued at STC. Since CCTA began, the district-wide dropout rate has decreased by 75%.^{xiii}

Engaging Communities and Parents in College- and Career-Readiness (HISD)

Hidalgo ISD has worked hard to involve parents and other local stakeholders in the process of moving ELLs along college and career pathways. The district offers continuing educational services to students' parents through its Parental Academy Program. The Parental Academy offers courses ranging from beginning English language skills to entrance into two- and four-year postsecondary programs. Depending upon their English proficiency and educational background, parents can start anywhere along the continuum and participate in courses that include preparation for obtaining a GED and occupational skills training.

The Parental Academy has been credited not only with helping parents to further their education, but also with instilling a college-going focus within students' home lives. Through this program, parents and students are able to experience the educational process together. Families strive for higher educational attainment, creating a culture of academic achievement within the home.

Local businesses have participated in the region's increased emphasis on college and career preparation in numerous ways. Most notably, business leaders have helped design occupational certificate programs that are relevant to local industry needs and have worked with IHEs and school districts to offer these career pathways to high school students. For instance, the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certificate program offered to students at Hidalgo ECHS developed out of a demand for workers in this field. With the assistance of local industry, Hidalgo ECHS has been able to target program offerings to promising careers in the area.

Challenges

Despite the success of these models, both districts face ongoing challenges. First, although students have attained higher levels of college- and career-readiness, their future in college is not guaranteed. Many ELLs face financial and legal roadblocks on their way to college that prevent them from receiving resources available to other college attendees. Second, many ELLs who do attend college need continued academic and social support to successfully complete their programs. Unfortunately, the postsecondary educational system is seldom held accountable for helping all students reach graduation. Third, HISD and PSJA have limited resources, especially with regard to human capital. Both districts have struggled to attract and train sufficient certified bilingual teachers to meet the demands of the student population. Along with a need for highly qualified teachers, implementing an advanced academic dual language program necessitates curriculum materials that are appropriate for course content. A lack of appropriate course material has challenged teachers to create their own resources.

Recommendations

As mentioned earlier, not all ELL populations are like those found in the Rio Grande Valley and not all communities have the same employment and industry needs. Nevertheless, the strategies implemented by HISD and PSJA hold some broad implications for developing policies in support of ELLs:

- **Asset-based approach:** Reframe ELL instructional approaches to be asset-based rather than deficit-based. Instead of considering ELLs' English language barriers as a shortcoming, encourage educators to capitalize upon the unique language skills and cultural perspectives that ELLs bring to the classroom. This will entail disassociating the ELL population from the population of students with disabilities in all legislation, as language needs should not be viewed as permanent conditions affecting students' long-term potential.
- **Foster biliteracy:** Encourage ELL instructional approaches that develop biliteracy to prepare students for the global economy. Provide support for further research and development of effective programs aimed to achieve biliteracy. Build the capacity of states and districts to design and implement these best practices.
- **High expectations and standards for all:** Hold states, districts, and schools accountable for the college- and career-readiness of all students, including ELLs. Engage leaders and teachers in professional development to foster a culture of high expectations.
- **Community partners:** Support and incentivize collaboration between school districts and local stakeholders. Expand resources for parental involvement, including parents who do not speak English, and promote collaboration between secondary and postsecondary institutions.
- **College access:** Help all youth, including immigrant students, overcome financial and legal barriers to higher education. This is necessary for raising the educational attainment, career prospects, and prosperity of future generations.

Conclusion

Federal education policy has made great strides toward supporting the college- and career-readiness of ELLs within the U.S. At this time, however, states and districts need more guidance on how to design and implement educational models that can capitalize upon the unique assets and perspectives ELLs bring to the classroom. HISD and PSJA, two Region One districts in Texas's Rio Grande Valley, provide examples of successful models that foster bilingualism and biliteracy while improving student performance. As policymakers increasingly become aware of the needs of ELL students, key features of these programs should be considered in future legislation regarding ELLs.

ⁱ In this brief, we use the term ELL to refer to individuals whose primary language is not English. Other common terms include Limited English Proficient (LEP), English as a second language (ESL), language minority students, and culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD).

ⁱⁱ Zehr, M. A. (2009). English-Learners Pose Policy Puzzle. *Education Week*, 28(17).

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *The Condition of Education*. Retrieved August 18, 2009 from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2009/section1/indicator08.asp>

^{iv} EPE Research Center. (2009). Analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (2005-2007).

^v Ibid

^{vi} U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *The Condition of Education*. Retrieved August 18, 2009 from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2009/section3/indicator20.asp>

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} Texas Education Agency, Retrieved July 15, 2009 from <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/>

^{ix} US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved July 7, 2009 from <http://nces.ed.gov/>

^x Jobs for the Future. (2009, March 16). "College and Career Readiness for All Texas High School Graduates." Retrieved July 20, 2009 from <http://www.jff.org/Documents/Hidalgo.pdf>

^{xi} Santiago, D.A. (2008). *Accelerating Latino Student Success at Texas Border Institutions: Possibilities and Challenges*. Washington, DC: Excelencia in Education. Retrieved July 23, 2009 from <http://www.edexcelencia.org/pdf/aclass/2008/ALASReportFnl.pdf>

ⁱ Brand, B. "Supporting High Quality Career and Technical Education through Federal and State Policy," (American Youth Policy Forum, Washington, DC: 2008)

^{xii} Gewertz, C. (2006, March 29). "Upward Journey: In a Poor Texas Border Town, Educators are Achieving Notable Results with a Single-Minded Focus on Students." *Education Week*. Retrieved July 24, 2009 from <http://www.edweek.org>

^{xiii} Vazquez, A. (2008, March 8). "In Texas, a Second Chance at a Bright Future." Retrieved July 24, 2009 from <http://www.publicschoolinsights.org/node/2035>