

## *Building Capacity to Promote College- and Career-Readiness for Secondary-Level English Language Learners: Policy Brief Featuring Austin, Texas*

This issue brief explores opportunities for educational systems to develop strategic policies and programs to enhance the success of adolescent second-language learners. The brief is based on an AYPF fact-finding trip to Austin, Texas in May, 2010 for state-level policy leaders. A previous AYPF trip to Texas' Rio Grande Valley region in May, 2009, gave federal policymakers a chance to observe various educational models aimed at building biliteracy and increasing college- and career-readiness for ELLs; a separate brief on that trip is also available on the AYPF website (<http://www.aypf.org>).

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*Demographic changes are demanding that we look differently at public education.... Language shouldn't be a barrier to a quality education. –Texas State Senator Leticia Van de Putte*

Policy leaders across the country are recognizing that local, state, and national economic growth increasingly depends on the public schools' success in raising the academic performance and language proficiency of English Language Learners (ELLs). ELLs are the fastest-growing subgroup of students in the country.<sup>1</sup> The growing cultural and linguistic diversity of both urban and rural school systems demands that educators consider new approaches to providing high-quality instruction for all students.

In addition to demographic and economic imperatives to improve ELL student outcomes, states and districts face increased pressure from the federal government since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001. NCLB's Title III requires states to measure and report on ELL students' progress toward the dual goals of attaining English proficiency and meeting academic performance standards and holds education systems accountable for meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) with the ELL subgroup. These new accountability provisions have ushered in broad changes in states' approaches to serving ELLs, including the creation of English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards and assessments. Title III also provides funding to states and districts to assist with the instruction of ELLs.

Despite increased attention to the education of ELLs, states still struggle to demonstrate progress with these students, and persistent achievement gaps remain between ELLs and their English-speaking peers. For example, 72% of 8<sup>th</sup>-grade ELLs scored "below basic" in mathematics on the 2009 National Assessment of Student Progress (NAEP), compared with 26% of non-ELL students.<sup>2</sup> The greatest challenges for school systems often involve effective instruction for ELLs in the secondary grades, when more complex academic language is required to access the core curriculum, and ELL students drop out at alarmingly high rates.

As policymakers focus their attention on preparing all students to meet the goals of college- and career-readiness, they have the opportunity to systematically consider the support needed by ELLs to achieve these ambitions. States and districts can choose to address their changing demographic

and economic conditions reactively, through stand-alone support programs, or proactively, by building the capacity to enhance ELL education.

### ***AYPF Study Mission: Spotlight on Austin, Texas***

The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) convened a group of policymakers from five states for a visit to Austin in May, 2010 to focus on strategies for moving ELLs to postsecondary success. Participants in this learning exchange included senior state education agency staff, state board of education members, and governors' policy advisors from the states of Illinois, Kentucky, Nebraska, New Hampshire, and Virginia. The agenda highlighted the strategies of the Austin Independent School District (AISD) and Texas Education Agency (TEA) in building system-wide frameworks for rigorous instruction; prioritizing ELLs at district, regional, and state levels; building human capital; and meeting the needs of both urban and rural districts. The study mission included visits to two high schools that offer examples of innovative approaches to ELL instruction, Lanier High School and International High School.

Texas provided a fitting backdrop for this study mission, as a state that has responded to its demographic reality by creating comprehensive state policies regarding the instruction and assessment of ELLs. Texas boasts the second-largest ELL population in the nation, with over 800,000 ELLs enrolled, or 17% of students in the state. The ELL population 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 by 2014. As Lizzette Reynolds, Deputy Commissioner of Statewide Policy and Programs, states, "ELLs' success is critical to TEA's success." The demographics show this population to be majority Hispanic (92%) and economically disadvantaged (87%).

AISD counts nearly one in three students as an ELL, and this population has been steadily increasing over the last two decades. AISD has focused on improving the performance of the growing secondary-level ELL population as an integral part of its overall strategy to prepare all students for college and careers. Raising ELL achievement has been a target of the district's school reform strategies since 2004, and this emphasis continues under the leadership of Superintendent Meria Carstarphen, who took office in July 2009. ELL achievement has improved in AISD in recent years, with increased passing rates on state assessment tests for all subjects and grade levels, with the exception of 11<sup>th</sup>-grade mathematics. Substantial graduation rate gaps remain, however, with only 37% of ELLs graduating in four years, compared for 74% of all students. Austin's administrators acknowledge that they do not have a "silver bullet" for closing achievement gaps for ELLs, but their approach offers relevant policy considerations.

### ***Key Issues Affecting the Education of ELLs at the Secondary Level***

A number of key policy issues emerged during the panel discussions and site visits, as well as through conversations among members of the participating states. While these issues are situated in the context of Austin, Texas, many of the same challenges apply elsewhere, and Austin's solutions

hold implications and promise for other districts and states, and for federal education policy reform.

### **1. *Building Human Capital: Providing Educators with Tools to Support ELLs***

The most pervasive theme of the study mission related to empowering mainstream, content-area teachers with specific instructional strategies to make the core curriculum accessible for second-language learners. This approach recognizes that all educators need to be part of the solution to ELLs' dual burden of learning a new language and mastering grade-level academics. It is not enough to focus exclusively on the training of specialized English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers, particularly at the secondary level, as these teachers typically only interact with each student during a small portion of the school day. Districts and states need to consider ways to provide content-area teachers with effective tools for scaffolding instruction for ELLs through in-service professional development, while also emphasizing such strategies in pre-service teacher training.

Texas state policy establishes the responsibility of all teachers to understand and incorporate the English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) for the ELLs in their classrooms, in addition to state's content standards, in order to simultaneously build academic language skills and content knowledge. TEA has created professional development modules on the ELPS, which are delivered to content-area teachers throughout the state in collaboration with Texas' system of regional Education Service Centers (ESCs).

Austin takes the principle of building human capital for all teachers to another level, as it has focused on redesigning ELL instruction at several high schools. In 2007-08, AISD initiated a partnership with technical assistance provider WestEd to participate in the Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL) reform model led by Dr. Aída Walqui. QTEL is based on the premise that, given the number of ELLs in the system, their projected growth, and their current underperformance,

- All teachers need to learn to support academic rigor for ELLs;
- Whole-school reform, focused on a coherent, long-term plan, is needed; and
- Principals and other leaders need to be at the forefront of this capacity-building.

Each of these ideas has been incorporated into AISD's work with QTEL. The project, funded by a high school redesign grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, initially focused on the two Austin high schools that serve the highest proportions of ELLs, International High School and Lanier High School, as demonstration sites; the district is now scaling up some of the QTEL practices to additional campuses. Through QTEL's teacher apprenticeship model, each teacher in these two schools has received extensive professional development in common QTEL pedagogy, as well as subject-specific strategies for developing academic language in their content area. A select cadre of teachers has received additional training to become teacher coaches and professional developers. Since QTEL's implementation at International and Lanier High Schools, test scores have risen for all students at these campuses, with the greatest gains for ELLs.

In order to impact instruction system-wide, leaders need to make a long-term commitment to supporting teacher learning. The QTEL model has been implemented with strong, top-down leadership from the principals of Lanier and International High Schools, as well as the district's Office of Bilingual Education/ESL. According to QTEL's theory of change, the first targets of reform efforts should be changes in teachers' knowledge, collaboration and practice, which precede changes in classroom

interactions, followed by increases in student engagement and motivation, and finally gains in student achievement. This emphasis on expected changes at the teacher-level offers an alternative perspective for policymakers, as education reform strategies are typically expected to produce an immediate impact on student outcomes.

AISD teachers report that QTEL has given them a common instructional language and effective strategies that they did not receive in pre-serving training. Principals and teachers suggested that teacher preparation programs have become increasingly focused on the specific academic content areas, particularly at the high school level, but that they lack an adequate emphasis on pedagogy and professional development. Many new teachers are not receiving enough training in strategies to facilitate students' deep understanding of the content or differentiate instruction. State policymakers may wish to examine the role of the teacher training and certification systems in preparing educators to meet the needs of diverse students.

## ***2. Meeting the Demand for ESL Specialists***

While it is important to involve all teachers who work with ELLs in raising the achievement of this subgroup, it is also crucial that states and districts build the ranks of their ESL teachers who specialize in second-language acquisition. Nearly all states report that they will need to increase their certified teachers who work in language instruction programs for ELLs over the next five years, and Texas will have to increase this cadre by 58 percent.<sup>3</sup> Texas requires ESL teachers to hold an ESL credential. Licensed teachers can obtain a supplemental credential by taking an online examination but without taking any required coursework in ELL education. TEA, local districts, regional Educational Service Centers, and institutions of higher education have developed several initiatives to prepare more teachers to become ESL-certified and learn to design effective instruction for ELLs.

TEA has partnered with Texas A&M University to support a 10-week, online ESL Certification Prep Course. As an incentive for teacher participation, state and federal funds support full scholarships for current teachers to complete this course. The regional ESCs, which serve as brokers of technical assistance between the state and local education agencies, also play a role in providing training for teachers from the districts in their purview to become ESL-certified. Region XIII, the ESC that serves Austin, hosts a four-day ELL Academy for teachers from AISD and other districts.

Another innovative program that aims to build the pipeline of ESL teachers is the Proyecto Maestría Collaborative, a partnership between the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin and AISD that strives to increase the quality and quantity of skilled bilingual education and ESL teachers in the Austin area. This program was developed through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition, and provides a Summer Institute for current teachers who wish to gain ESL certification and receive graduate-level preparation in effective pedagogy for teaching ELLs. This intensive program includes four full-credit graduate courses, and aims to go beyond certifying teachers by also building their capacity to raise student achievement. Proyecto Maestría also offers a Special Master's program for veteran bilingual education teachers, with the goal of preparing them to serve as mentors, coaches, and professional developers at their schools or in their districts.

To round out Austin's home-grown approach to developing careers ladders for educators that can meet the needs of its ELL population, AISD has a partnership with Austin Community College (ACC) to train bilingual teacher's aides to become certified, bilingual teachers. Tuition for this program is supported through local district bilingual education funds. AISD's pro-active efforts to build the district's system-

wide capacity demonstrate the importance of devoting substantial human and financial resources to professionalizing ELL instruction.

### **3. The Role of Partnerships and Cross-Systems Collaboration**

*“AISD’s Office of Bilingual Education/ESL simply could not meet its needs for professional development without partnerships.” – Mollie Avelino, Director of Secondary ESL, AISD*

The previous sections demonstrate the critical role of partnerships in building human capital to improve instruction for ELLs. AISD counts on support from TEA, Region XIII, and various institutions of higher education. Partnerships are also particularly important to enhancing the capacity of rural and smaller districts with growing ELL populations. Across the US, some of the most dramatic growth in ELL populations has been in rural areas that have not traditionally had large immigrant populations, particularly in several Southeastern and Midwestern states. These districts face particular challenges in recruiting bilingual educators and preparing their teaching force to think strategically about their use of complex language in instruction and make content more accessible for ELLs.

Texas offers districts with smaller ELL populations the opportunity to participate in shared service agreements to receive Title III support services and funding. These districts, which are eligible to receive less than \$10,000 in Title III funds, can authorize a regional ESC to act as their fiscal agent and share professional development services, regardless of the amount of revenue that they generate. 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 proactively with Region XIII to develop a comprehensive plan to improve the achievement of their growing ELL population, increase their pool of certified ESL teachers, and develop initiatives to engage immigrant parents.

At the state level, TEA has recognized the need to enhance collaboration between the various programs, accountability mechanisms, and funding streams that affect ELL education, in order to develop a better picture of how effectively the state is serving these students and target interventions where they are needed. With the leadership of Deputy Commissioner Lizzette Reynolds, TEA has formed an Intra-Agency ELL Workgroup, comprised of all of the departments that work on issues impacting ELLs, which meets regularly. The Workgroup aims to elevate the priority of ELL education within TEA, and to better align funding streams to leverage resources.

### **4. Recognizing the Diversity of the ELL Population and Differentiating Support**

*“We need to get more comfortable with the notion of diversity in our ELL students.”  
– Superintendent Meria Carstarphen, Austin Independent School District*

Policymakers from all of the states participating in the fact-finding trip overwhelmingly spoke to the need for policies and programs that are responsive to the diversity within the ELL population. Second-language learners are treated as a homogenous group in the education system, but this practice masks their great diversity in native languages, cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, and prior educational experience. While Texas’ language learners are predominately Hispanic, the state’s ELL students

represent over 125 different native languages. Within Austin, along with many parts of the country, the Southeast Asian and African refugee populations have grown rapidly in recent years. These students are likely to arrive in the U.S. with limited or interrupted formal schooling and may be many years behind their peers. At the other end of the spectrum, the vast majority of ELLs are second- or third-generation Americans; 90% of Austin's ELLs were born in the United States. Many are long-term ELLs, who have been classified as language-learners for many years without reaching proficiency, and these students have vastly different needs.

Many of the state teams mentioned particular challenges with serving recent immigrant students at the secondary level and particularly those who enter the education system with very low English proficiency and limited formal education. AISD approached the unique academic and social needs of these students by opening a new, small high school in 2004 which was designed to serve as a model program for newcomer students entering at the high school level. International High School (IHS) serves students in grades 9-10 who have been in the U.S. for two years or less and who entered AISD at the "Beginner" level of English proficiency. All of the teachers are ESL-certified and have participated in the QTEL professional development process. While English is the primary language of instruction, students also receive support in their native languages when possible. IHS aims to move all students to the "Advanced" or "Advanced High" levels of English proficiency by the time they leave the school in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and are integrated into their neighborhoods' comprehensive high schools. AISD funds this school through local district funds and federal Title III support for ESL education, but does not receive Title I funds for the school, even though 97% of students are considered economically disadvantaged. Because all students at IHS are classified as "recent immigrants" under federal law, the school faces fewer accountability requirements than traditional public schools.

IHS strives to provide a personalized environment that offers rigorous academic classes along with a high level of support for all of the non-academic factors that are likely to affect newcomer students' success. The school social worker plays an integral role in counseling students and their families, and referring them to outside partner organizations to help meet their basic needs. Although the majority of the students speak Spanish, IHS has refined its program to ensure that the needs of speakers of other languages are not ignored. The school offers a special support group for these youth, and clusters them together for the first intensive English class in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Under the leadership of Principal Leticia Vega, staff promote an asset-based approach to their students' linguistic and cultural diversity, and hold high expectations for all students. For example, the 10<sup>th</sup>-grade students take an Advanced Placement art history course, and they hold debates on current events in their world history class.

While IHS has proven successful in raising the English proficiency of recent immigrant students, the majority of AISD's ELL students are not immigrants, and they require different types of support. In addition to enhancing the ESL programs offered at each secondary school, the district's Office of Bilingual Education/ESL has placed a priority on developing "ESL Intervention" programs, which will offer extra academic support for struggling language learners, many of whom may be long-term ELLs. Nationally, greater attention needs to focus on addressing the specific challenges of long-term ELLs.

TEA's Deputy Commissioner Reynolds spoke to the importance of disaggregating data on the ELL population to achieve a better picture of areas that need improvement. TEA is undergoing an extensive process of analyzing data on current and former ELL students and disaggregating outcomes based on immigrant status, years in an ELL program, demographics, native language, geographic region, and other characteristics. Recent state legislation requires school districts to report which type of ESL or bilingual

education program model is serving each ELL student, which will allow researchers to examine which models are most effective with different types of ELL students.<sup>4</sup>

## 5. *College Access for ELL Students*

Beyond the challenges of gaining both linguistic and academic proficiency, many secondary-level ELLs face particular barriers to college- and career-readiness. They are more likely to be first-generation college-going students, as only 22% of ELLs have at least one parent with a postsecondary degree, compared with 44% of non-ELL youth.<sup>5</sup> As such, they are less likely to have role models in their communities who have attended college, and even families who had higher levels of education in their native countries may lack important information about postsecondary options and the college application process in the U.S. Any program or policy that takes a long-term approach to ELL success must ensure that youth receive extra assistance in learning about the college application, selection, and goal-setting processes, in order to build their “college knowledge.”

Furthermore, immigrant students often face added challenges in attending college, financing their education, and entering the workforce, due to concerns about their immigration status. In Texas alone, there were an estimated 135,000 undocumented students in the public schools in 2004-05.<sup>6</sup> Due to the economic and social impact of having such a large population of youth with limited access to higher education, Texas became the first state to pass legislation allowing immigrant students, including certain undocumented youth, to pay in-state tuition to state college and universities with the passage of HB 1403 in 2001.<sup>7</sup> To qualify, youth had to graduate from a high school in the state, reside in Texas for at least three years prior to graduation, and file an affidavit stating that they would file an application to become a U.S. permanent resident as soon as they were eligible to do so. In 2005, the Texas Senate approved new legislation, SB 1528, that revised the provisions of this law so that they allow all individuals who have lived in Texas a significant proportion of their lives to establish a claim to state residency. As state residents, they are also eligible to receive certain state-funded financial aid, even if they are ineligible to receive federal financial assistance.

According to State Senator Leticia Van de Putte, the sponsor of HB 1403, the economic imperative of preparing youth for college and careers drove legislative action on this issue. The Texas Association of Business and local Chambers of Commerce supported the legislation and testified on its behalf, arguing for their need for a more highly educated workforce. Van de Putte acknowledged that the measure faces opposition each legislative session. She spoke to the importance of demonstrating the return on investment of expanding access to higher education, and cited the importance of the growing Latino population to Texas’ economic future.

Even with SB 1528, AISD acknowledges that immigrant students have unique needs for information and assistance with access to higher education, and they have created an Immigrant College Access Program. The Coordinator, Evangelina Orozco, works with students in 16 high schools to provide presentations of opportunities for higher education, college advising, scholarship applications, parent outreach, and college campus visits. She explains that many immigrant students and their families are unaware of the benefits of SB 1528, and the belief that postsecondary education is not an option for them leads students to disengage from school and drop out. Regardless of a state’s higher education tuition policies, policymakers should support initiatives to provide early outreach to immigrant students and educate families about scholarship opportunities and other affordable means of accessing postsecondary education.

## ***Policy Guidelines***

As Congress approaches the reauthorization of ESEA, the instruction and assessment of ELL students is generating significant interest and debate among educators, advocates, researchers, and policymakers. Under the reauthorized legislation, states will likely face new imperatives to improve their ability to collect and analyze data on their ELL students, evaluate programs, and build the capacity of struggling districts and schools. Based on the key issues that emerged from the study mission to Austin, AYPF offers the following general guidelines for policy at the federal, state, and local levels:

### **Build the capacity of all educators, including content-area teachers, to provide effective instruction for ELLs.**

ELLs should have access to the core academic curriculum and be taught by educators who have received training in developing the academic language skills that these students will need to succeed. Policymakers should designate funding to support professional development in strategies for supporting academic rigor for secondary-level ELLs, particularly in regions experiencing rapid growth in this population. Policymakers can also examine teacher pre-service programs and credential requirements, and require that all teachers receive a foundation in strategies to work with ELLs and differentiate instruction within the content areas.

### **Support programs that develop a pipeline of educators who are trained and certified to specialize in ESL instruction.**

Policymakers should respond to the shortage of teachers that are certified to work with ELLs by supporting initiatives to recruit educators who are interested in this field and creating career ladders for their professional development and retention, with a focus on high-need areas. They should also invest in providing current teachers with opportunities to gain ESL credentials and receive high-quality training and apprenticeship opportunities. States and districts should be encouraged to build their internal capacity to provide professional development in this field, and leaders must be invested in the development of professional learning communities that prioritize the needs of ELL students.

### **Promote institutional partnerships and cross-systems collaboration.**

ELLs, along with all students, benefit from well-coordinated partnerships between various agencies and institutions providing youth services. Policies should encourage the use of partnerships to address the multiple academic and social factors affecting ELL students. School districts should be provided with opportunities and incentives to partner with institutions of higher education, employers, technical assistance providers, and social service systems. Within state and federal departments of education, there should be greater coordination and alignment of the multiple programs and requirements that target ELLs.

### **Ensure that policies are responsive to the diversity of the ELL population.**

The needs of recent immigrant students differ greatly from those of second-generation, long-term ELLs. States should enhance their ability to collect and analyze data on a variety of characteristics for students in the ELL subgroup, as well as students who have been reclassified as English proficient. Factors such as students' language proficiency levels, amount of prior education, and length of time that students have been



receiving ELL services should be taken into consideration when assigning students to different programs and supports. Accountability systems can also use these indicators to differentiate performance targets.

### **Support opportunities for postsecondary education and careers for immigrant students.**

As policymakers strive to increase the number of students earning postsecondary degrees, they should remove barriers to higher education for immigrant students wherever possible. Providing pathways to an affordable education and ensuring students receive information about their options for college and careers can increase student motivation, raise graduation rates, promote college enrollment and degree completion, and bolster income levels and economic development.

### **Conclusion**

Across the nation, policymakers are taking note of the impact that sweeping demographic changes will have on their school systems and labor market, and they are recognizing that the success of their education reform efforts will increasingly depend on their success in serving ELL students. States face similar challenges in recruiting and developing educators with expertise in teaching language learners, addressing the diverse needs of secondary-level ELLs, and raising high school completion and postsecondary success rates for this group. The examples of AISD and TEA illustrate proactive approaches to building the capacity of education systems to address the unique needs of ELLs. Decision-makers at the local, state, and federal levels can use these examples to consider opportunities for system-wide commitments to raising the college- and career-readiness of ELLs.

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<sup>1</sup> Wolf, M. K., J. L. Herman, and R. Dietel, 2010, Spring. Improving the Validity of English Language Learner Assessment Systems. Los Angeles: National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards & Student Testing, University of California Los Angeles.

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, 2009. In Wolf, M.K. . Herman, and R. Dietel (2010, Spring).

<sup>3</sup> Consolidated State Performance Reports, U.S. Department of Education, 2006-07. In Education Week (2009, January 8). Vol. 28, No. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Texas' statewide data warehouse records information on the type of ELL instruction provided to each identified ELL students, from a list of six approved models. State law allows districts to choose from the following four instructional models in the elementary grades: Transitional Bilingual Education, Early Exit; Transitional Bilingual Education, Late Exit; Dual Immersion, Two-Way; and Dual Immersion, One-Way. At the middle and high school levels, districts may also chose from the following two ESL program models: ESL Content-Based and ESL Pullout.

<sup>5</sup> EPE Research Center, 2009. Analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (2005-2007).

<sup>6</sup> Special Report of the Texas Comptroller, 2006. Cited in "Undocumented Immigrant Students and Access to Higher Education," fact sheet, Immigrant College Access Program, Austin Independent School District.

<sup>7</sup> There are currently ten states that offer such policies: Texas, California, Utah, Washington, New York, Oklahoma, Illinois, Kansas, New Mexico, and Nebraska.