Claiming Opportunities:

A Handbook for Improving Education for English Language Learners Through Comprehensive School Reform





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THE EDUCATION ALLIANCE
BROWN UNIVERSITY





The Education Alliance at Brown University

Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (LAB)

The Education Alliance at Brown University is home to the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (LAB), one of ten educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. Our goals are to improve teaching and learning, advance school improvement, build capacity for reform, and develop strategic alliances with key members of the region's education and policymaking community.

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Members of the LAB's National Leadership Advisory Panel contributed to the review of this document. Their recommendations help assure that the LAB's work concerning equity and diversity is appropriate, effective, and useful in the field, particularly in improving educational outcomes for students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

At the February 27-28, 2003 research symposium, "Improving High School Learning Opportunities for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students: Learning from Evidence-Based Practices," sponsored by The Education Alliance and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, researchers offered comments and observations about English language learners in comprehensive school reform. To capture highlights of their conversation, we present participants' comments in gray-shaded dialogue boxes located throughout the text. We are grateful to the symposium participants for their discussion of the complexity and challenges of claiming opportunties for English language learners. Comments by the following participants are reproduced in the text: Adeline Becker, The Education Alliance at Brown University; Anthony Colon, National Council of La Raza; Kris Gutierréz, University of California, Los Angeles; Julia Lara, Council of Chief State School Officers; Tamara Lucas, Montclair State University; Nydia Mendez, Boston Public Schools; Pedro Pedraza, Hunter College; Ariana Quiñones, National Council of La Raza; Sharon Saez, Educational Testing Service; Deborah Wei, School District of Philadelphia; and Jerri Willet, University of Massachusetts.

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Executive Summary

CLAIMING OPPORTUNITIES: A HANDBOOK FOR IMPROVING EDUCATION FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS THROUGH COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

For the last decade, the national comprehensive school reform movement has been a focus of efforts to make public education accessible and effective for all students. Comprehensive reform strives to improve schooling for *all* children through integrated, well-aligned, school-wide changes in instruction, assessment, curriculum, classroom management, school governance, professional development, technical assistance, and community participation. As a sign of its continuing support for comprehensive school reform, Congress formally incorporated the Comprehensive School Reform program (CSR) into the Elementary and Secondary Act (No Child Left Behind, or NCLB) of 2001.

The last decade has also seen a dramatic increase in the numbers of students not fully proficient in English who are enrolled in U.S. elementary and secondary schools. These students are alternatively referred to as limited English proficient (LEP) or, more recently, English language learners (ELLs). While the general school-age population in the U.S. is only 12% greater than it was in 1991, there has been an increase of 105% in the number of students who are classified as limited English proficient (Kindler, 2002). It is estimated that during the 2000-2001 school year almost 10% of the total public school population was classified as LEP (Kindler, 2002). This figure does not include students who have not been formally identified as English language learners or students who may have met minimal English proficiency criteria and been reclassified but still require language support to meet grade-level academic standards.

Comprehensive reform strives to improve schooling for all children through integrated, well-aligned, school-wide changes in instruction, assessment, curriculum, classroom management, school governance, professional development, technical assistance and community participation.

Despite the concurrent growth of ELL populations and the CSR movement, research shows that strategies designed to improve education for all students through CSR have not adequately considered or responded to the needs of ELLs. The two reform efforts —comprehensive school reform and ELL educational reform—have been disconnected, with different educational approaches, knowledge bases, and accountability systems as well as separate staffs at the state, district, and school levels. Moreover, those in positions to choose and promote school reform measures may not always have been informed about or attentive to ELL issues. They may have been unaware of how ELLs were affected (or in some cases, not affected) by restructuring and other "improvements."

This document seeks to address the problem by presenting the existing research on both CSR and ELL educational reform and suggesting how the two educational improvement efforts can be integrated. *Claiming Opportunities* provides information, strategies, and tools for using NCLB's Comprehensive School Reform program as an opportunity to make schools more responsive to and responsible for ELLs by:

- **Raising consciousness about ELL issues in comprehensive school reform among policymakers, school improvement team members, and administrators**
- **Helping educators and advocates of ELLs extend their influence from the classroom and the categorical program to the whole school and beyond**
- **Influencing schools to reform and restructure in ways that are beneficial to their populations of ELLs**

Equity doesn't imply that the instructional strategies that work best for one individual or group work for all. Students come to us with different backgrounds and different language proficiencies and with different educational histories. We need to differentiate instruction based upon students'prior knowledge of language, literacy, and content. The specific needs and strengths of the ELLs in a particular school need to be taken into account in designing that school's reforms.

--Adeline Becker, Executive Director,
The Education Alliance at Brown University

Chapter one of *Claiming Opportunities* provides a brief overview of the issues: the growing school-aged population of ELLs, the comprehensive school reform movement, and the scarcity of school reform research that examines implementation and outcomes for ELLs.

Chapter two offers a brief history of legal and fiscal issues relevant to ELLs and school reform. It traces the separate and unequal histories of Title I funding for poorly performing students in schools with high concentrations of poverty, and Title VII funding for programs to help limited English proficient students achieve success in school. Chapter two also contends that the mere presence of ELLs in a reforming school does not in itself constitute access or equity for those students. In the words of the Lau decision:

> There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum: for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education. (Douglas, 1974)

Chapter three discusses various conceptualizations of school success, proposing that some prevalent definitions of school success ignore and discourage high levels of bilingualism and cross-cultural knowledge. In chapter three, we present nine research-based principles for educating ELLs. These principles are intended to guide educators in creating "ELL-responsive" school environments that support ELL success by explicitly considering the needs, strengths, and backgrounds of ELLs, their families, and communities.

Chapter four reviews the small body of existing research on CSR and ELLs. In an effort to maintain the focus of this document, there is no review of research on other types of reforms promoting ELL success (such as standsrds-based reform, newcomer centers, or changes in classroom practice) unless they take place within the context of school-wide, comprehensive reform. Moreover, given the scarcity of studies showing how ELLs fare across various nationally available reform models, this document does not attempt to review, compare, or evaluate research on particular school reform models.

Chapter five contains recommendations, strategies, and tools for ELL-responsive CSR efforts. These include school self-assessments, planning tools, and criteria for examining the ELL responsiveness of proposed reforms.

The final sections of *Claiming Opportunities* contain annotated resources, references, and information from The Education Alliance Web Site. It is our hope that this publication will provide information that, in turn, promotes action and support for ELL-responsive decisions about assessment, curriculum, teacher preparation and recruitment, staff development, and school restructuring in general.



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I. Introduction to English Language Learners, School Reform, and School Success

Guiding Questions

- Why is there national concern about the education of English language learners (ELLs)?
- What is the aim of comprehensive school reform?
- Are English language learners included in comprehensive school reform?
- In what ways has comprehensive school reform overlooked English language learners?
- What were Dentler and Hafner's findings about personnel in districts where student scores improved amidst increasing diversity?

While the general school-age population in the U.S. has grown only 12% since 1990-91, the population of students classified as limited English proficient (LEP) has increased by 105% (Kindler, 2002).

In recent years there have been many changes in the educational landscape of the United States. This document addresses two of those changes. The first of these is the tremendous rise in English language learner (ELL) school enrollments, accompanied by a national concern that schools are not well prepared to foster ELLs' school achievement (August & Hakuta, 1997). The term English language learner, as used here, indicates a person who has a first language other than English and who is in the process of acquiring proficiency in oral, written, social, and academic English. While the general school-age population in the U.S. has grown only 12% since 1990-91, the population of students classified as limited English proficient (LEP) has increased by 105% (Kindler, 2002). Latinos, the nation's largest minority group with 15% of the total population (US Census Bureau, 2000), had a high school completion rate of only 64% in 2000, compared to 91% for whites (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Additionally troubling is the 39% poverty rate among foreign-born children (Ruíz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). Of the 14.9 million students in the schools and districts that received Title I assistance last year, 31% are Hispanic, 3% are Asian or Pacific Islanders, 2% are American Indians or Alaskan natives, 29% are African Americans, and 35% are non-Hispanic whites. It is estimated that 2.5 of these 14.9 million students are classified as English language learners, though it is likely that the number of ELLs exceeds this figure. The Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) reported that, in the 2000-01 school year, over 3.9 million ELLs were enrolled in U.S. schools (data does not include Puerto Rico). Unfortunately, resources for and knowledge about ELL education have not kept pace with this rise in enrollment.

The other recent change in the education landscape, Comprehensive School Reform (CSR), is a strategy for improving schooling for all children through integrated, well-aligned, school-wide changes in instruction, assessment, curriculum, classroom management, school governance, professional development, community participation, external technical assistance, and budgeting. CSR calls for all staff members to be involved and all students to be included. It also requires all programs and practices to be research based. To this end, many schools adopt

externally developed school reform models that have been effective in other places. Other schools develop local reform programs of their own.



Despite the apparent congruence between efforts to redesign schools for all children and efforts to improve schooling for ELLs, Miramontes et al. (1997) pointed out that the educational policies and practices supporting these two efforts developed as separate streams.

As Stringfield et al. (1998) found, the research base for most school reform models does not include ELLs. In other words, in cases where an externally developed school reform model is to be implemented, those choosing the model may not know whether it is appropriate for ELLs. One cannot assume that whatever helps one population will automatically help another. LaCelle-Peterson and Rivera (1994) argued that "It is erroneous to assume that changes that affect monolingual English students favorably will automatically do the same for English language learners" (p. 55). Similarly, Foster (1999) cites Cazden's (1998) warning about the limited applicability of educational research findings across groups and contexts.

> Mainstream [education] research consistently investigates topics without regard to issues of race, class, and gender, and the results of this research are often used to argue the efficacy of particular approaches for all groups of students, irrespective of race, class, or gender. For instance…studies of learning in classrooms often gloss over student characteristics, making it difficult to ascertain what effect these changed classroom practices have on the achievement of students from different backgrounds.

Although little of the research on comprehensive school reform has focused on ELLs, there is now a small but growing body of promising case studies that describe school reform efforts

Systemic responsiveness to ELLs occurred only in locations where administrators, teachers, and non-teaching staff shared an understanding of the assets and needs that ELLs bring to school.

benefiting ELLs (e.g., Minicucci, 1996; Nelson, 1996; Wilde et al., 1999; Walqui, 2000; and Datnow et al., 2002). These include schools that created their own restructuring strategies as well as those that adopted (and sometimes substantially adapted and supplemented) externally developed models. Dentler and Hafner (1997) conducted a comparative study of 11 demographically changing districts. They found that in the three districts where student scores improved amidst increasing diversity, teachers and non-teaching personnel were knowledgeable about the learning needs and characteristics of English language learners. That is to say, systematic responsiveness to ELLs occurred only in locations where administrators, teachers, and non-teaching staff shared an understanding of the assets and needs ELLs bring to school.

This document seeks to help concerned administrators, policymakers, teachers, and other stakeholders understand the types of changes that can help their states, districts, and schools do a better job educating ELLs. Similarly, the document seeks to help ELL educators extend their influence from the classroom and the categorical program to the whole school and beyond. School, district, and state policies on assessment, curriculum, teacher recruitment, staff development, and community involvement are all areas that affect the success of English language learners.

This document will also suggest areas for research on how comprehensive school reform might keep ELLs from being left behind, in the hope that Gándara's complaint (below), voiced back in 1994, will no longer pertain.

> As American schools continue to diversify, the nation can no longer ignore the enormous unmet needs of LEP students, nor can it ignore the innovative responses being developed locally to meet those needs, not as a part of the reform movement, but in spite of it. (p. 64)