

# Professional Development for General Education Teachers of English Language Learners

*We have to give teachers strong, consistent support in the best strategies and methods to reach, inspire, and teach English language learner students.*

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

## Introduction

English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing group of students in American public schools. From 1995 to 2005, the ELL population doubled in 23 states,



according to one recent study.<sup>1</sup> Seventy-six percent of ELLs speak Spanish and are considered Latino/Hispanic.<sup>2</sup> A 2008 report by the Pew Hispanic Center says

the number of Hispanic students in the nation's public schools nearly doubled from 1990 to 2006. The report also cites a U.S. Census Bureau estimate that by 2050, the Hispanic school-age population will outnumber the non-Hispanic white school-age public school population.<sup>3</sup>

NEA is committed to ensuring that all students, including ELLs, have equal access to great public schools. NEA advocates for a quality education for all students. While it is important to establish comprehensive education systems that are well-aligned from prekindergarten through grade 16, that alone would not ensure opportunity for academic success among all ELL students. There must also be an explicit effort to make sure that general education teachers and other school professionals who teach ELLs are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge. Sound, research-based professional

General education teachers must meet both the **instructional** needs and the **linguistic** needs of ELLs. However, the rapid growth of the ELL population presents major challenges involving the preparation of pre-service teachers and professional development for in-service general education teachers.

This policy brief reviews the challenges and identifies essential, research-based components of a comprehensive professional development program for general education teachers of ELLs. It focuses on principles, policies, and strategies to facilitate local professional development and offers recommendations for national, state, and local policymakers.

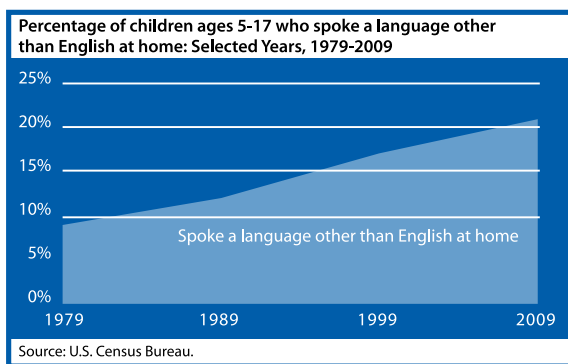
## Who is Responsible for Teaching ELLs?

Traditionally, English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual teachers have had primary responsibility for instructing ELLs. In many states, ELLs have had access to language and content instruction, but the instruction has not always occurred in core academic classes, such as language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) prohibits ELLs from being pulled out of core academic content instruction. Therefore, general education teachers responsible for core content are also responsible for providing effective, comprehensible instruction to ELLs. Although this requirement has been in place since 2001, appropriate in-service professional development continues to lag behind the needs of educators.<sup>4</sup>

## Who are English Language Learners? What are the demographics?

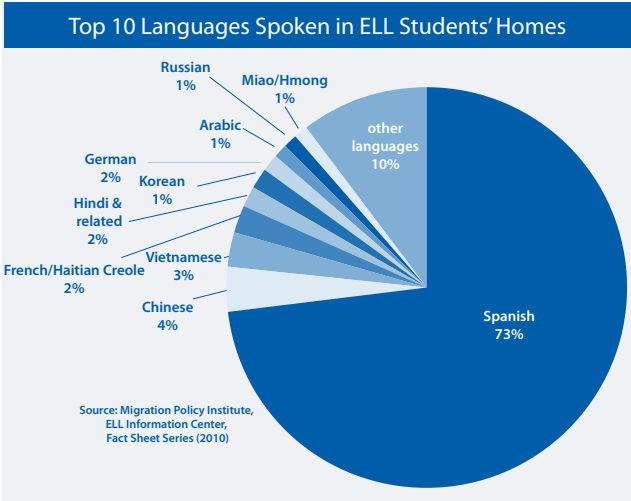
Title IX of the ESEA defines an ELL or "limited English proficient" (LEP) student as a student between the ages of 3 and 21 who has difficulty "speaking, listening, reading, writing or understanding English sufficient to deny the individual the 'opportunity to participate in society' and



development for ELLs may also serve as a tool for improving teacher quality and reforming schools.

ability to successfully achieve in classrooms taught in English.” It also says the student demonstrates the “ability to meet the proficiency level of achievement on state approved assessments in academic content in English.”<sup>5</sup>

Most ELL students are not immigrants. In fact, 84 percent were born in the United States<sup>6</sup> ESEA, Title III defines immigrant students and youth as those between the ages of 3 and 21 who were not born in the U.S. and have not been attending one school in the U.S. for more than three years. In some states such as Arizona, Idaho, Montana, Oklahoma, Utah, and Wyoming, languages spoken by American Indian/Alaska Natives constitute the second largest share spoken by ELLs.<sup>7</sup>



ELLs and immigrant students and youth have been the fastest growing student subgroup in the United States for the past ten years, and their enrollment continues to increase by 10 percent annually, according to a 2008 report published by the Pew Hispanic Center.<sup>8</sup> The report says the number of immigrant students and ELLs in U.S. classrooms increased dramatically from 1 in 10 students in 1990 to 1 in 8 in 2005 and projects a rise to 1 in 4 students by 2020. About 76 percent of immigrant and ELL students speak Spanish at home. However, there are more than 460 languages represented in U.S. classrooms.<sup>9</sup>

Most ELLs attend public schools and begin school in kindergarten and first grade. However, about 43 percent of students with immigrant parents enter U.S. schools in middle school or high school. Five states—Arizona, California, Florida, New York, and Texas—educate approximately 70 percent of the country’s ELLs. Other states, including North and South Carolina, Tennessee,

Arkansas, and Georgia, have experienced rapid growth in ELL and immigrant student enrollment.<sup>10</sup>

**How well are general education teachers prepared to teach ELLs?**

Quality instruction to English language learners requires a teacher who is skilled in a variety of curricular and instructional strategies. Research on teacher preparation suggests that general education teachers who do not hold bilingual or ESL certification are not well prepared to meet the needs of ELL students.<sup>11</sup>

Most general education teachers have at least one ELL in their classroom, but only 29.5 percent of those teachers have opportunities for professional development in working with ELLs, according to a 2008 study.<sup>12</sup> Only 20 states require that new teachers receive preparation for working with ELLs.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in a 2000 NCES survey, only 27 percent of teachers said they were “very well prepared” to meet the needs of ELLs, and 12 percent reported that they were “not at all prepared.”<sup>14</sup>

**Teaching English Language Learners: Preparation of General Education Teachers**

- Most general education teachers have at least one ELL in their classroom, but only 29.5 percent of those teachers have opportunities for professional development in working with ELLs.
- Only 20 states require all general education teachers to complete coursework on working with ELLs.
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**Why do general education teachers of ELLs need additional professional development?**

Teachers themselves have reported that they feel unprepared to work with ELLs and lack the necessary knowledge. For example, in a 2006 survey of more than 1,200 teachers, 57% said they needed more information to work effectively with ELLs.<sup>15</sup> General education teachers face the following challenges in working with ELLs:

- A lack of skills to teach ELL students
- A lack of appropriate assessments to determine student linguistic and academic needs and measure student learning,
- A wide range of English language skills among ELLs, and a wide range of academic skills

- Problems involving poor communication among students, teachers, parents, and the community
- A lack of professional development opportunities.<sup>16</sup>

An increasingly large body of research has established the importance of professional development for student learning.<sup>17</sup> Ongoing professional development allows teachers to share their ideas and concerns and support one another in finding ways to work effectively with ELLs.<sup>18</sup>

General education teachers need to become familiar with the areas in which ELL students may encounter challenges in a school's curriculum. Unfortunately, school and district policies do not always provide teachers with specific guidance and support for meeting common ELL learning needs. As the number of ELLs continues to increase, more and more general education teachers will face the challenge of providing effective second language literacy and academic content instruction.<sup>19</sup>

There is a pressing need to close the achievement gap between ELL students and their native English speaking peers. Providing professional development opportunities for general education teachers at every stage in their career is a key step toward ensuring great teachers in great public schools for all students.

### What are the essential components of effective professional development?

Schools serving English language learners need access to qualified ELL instructors, appropriate materials and learning tools, and a thoughtful assessment system that measures not only student progress, but also the impact of programs and approaches on students. It is clear that schools are faced with shortcomings in all three of those categories.

General education teachers need practical, research-based information, resources, and strategies to teach, evaluate, and nurture ELL students. NEA supports system-wide reform in professional development for general education teachers of ELLs. System-wide reform will require ongoing, appropriate, and effective professional development for all teachers. It will also require strong and knowledgeable leadership among classroom, school, and district administrators.

NEA has a long-standing commitment to improving the education of English Language Learners. The

association is working with its members individually and collectively to help address the learning needs of ELLs. NEA recommends focusing on the following essential components of a comprehensive professional development program for general education teachers of ELLs:

- A process for establishing high standards for English language acquisition, English language development, and academic content in lesson planning and instruction.
- A process for integrating teachers' understanding of academic content and English-language proficiency standards with instruction in teaching methods and assessments.
- Knowledge and use of effective pedagogy.
- Methods for implementing instructional strategies that ensure that academic instruction in English is meaningful and comprehensible.
- Exposure to a demonstration showing how to implement strategies that simultaneously integrate language acquisition, language development, and academic achievement.
- Exposure to a demonstration showing why increasing academic achievement of ELLs is dependent upon multiple instructional approaches or methodologies.
- Providing a "strategies toolkit" for teachers, which offers ways to enhance and improve instruction for struggling students, based on assessment results.

Cultural awareness is also an important component of a professional development program. To maximize achievement opportunities for ELLs, educators must understand and appreciate students' different cultural backgrounds.

### Recommendations for policymakers

Adopting new forms of professional development requires a fresh mindset and bold action. To improve professional development opportunities for general education ELL teachers, policymakers need to take the following steps at the national, state, and local levels:<sup>20</sup>

- Increase awareness among educational leaders and the public about the need for high quality ELL staff development.
- Review policies and incentives that shape ELL staff development and determine what changes may be needed to support improvements.
- Set standards and priorities for the design, implementation, and content of ELL professional development.
- Increase the time available for ELL staff development.
- Support the adoption of promising approaches to ELL professional development.

- Support the increased use of outstanding ELL teachers in leading staff development activities.
- Support efforts to ensure that all professional development activities include a significant, separate module for teaching English learners.<sup>21</sup>
- Support efforts to address the needs of English Language Learners in all types of professional development activities for teachers.

Policymakers need to remain aware of the risks associated with focusing on short-term needs of school reform agendas. They should avoid investing in a single approach to professional development. They should also avoid expanding resources without attending to quality. In the context of educational reform, ensuring appropriate professional development needs to be a long-term process.

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# Principles, Policies, and Strategies to Facilitate Local Professional Development

NEA sees a pressing need for far-reaching solutions to tackle the academic challenges that ELLs and teachers encounter in a variety of education settings. After thoroughly examining the research on the education needs of ELL students and the professional development needs of ELL teachers, NEA has concluded that its members, as educators, can drive the necessary changes in every district, school, and classroom to raise the academic achievement of ELLs. NEA recommends the following principles, policies, and strategies to facilitate change, support local professional development, and close the achievement gaps for ELLs:

- Use of reliable data—by states, local school districts, and individual schools-- to assess working conditions for teachers and the resulting impact on student learning. Input from teachers themselves is crucial.
- Use of data to improve teaching and learning programs and to guide professional development policies and strategies.
- A teaching and learning initiative that reflects the needs of individual school districts and states.
- Engagement of a broad coalition of state education officials, policymakers, union officials, teachers, community and advocacy groups, and administrators to reflect the needs of students and teachers in professional development and school reform.
- Funding to provide professional development for teachers, principals, specialized instructional support professionals, and paraprofessionals who work with ELLs.
- Teacher diversity workforce initiatives that recruit males and minority students into educator preparation programs, including candidates with diverse language skills.
- Annual assessments of the professional development needs of general and specialized teachers, professional support personnel, and paraprofessionals.