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ABSTRACT

The rapid increase in the number of limited-English-proficient (LEP) students in U.S. schools is due not only to immigration, but also to the inability of LEP students in existing bilingual and English-as-a-Second-Language programs to meet the criteria for entering the mainstream classroom. In the Dallas public schools, nearly half of all LEP students have been in such programs more than 7 years, due to an average annual exit rate of under 10%. The majority of these students were born in the United States. Data also indicate that staying in the LEP program does not help improve academic scores. This study concludes that the new policy of raising requirements for high school graduation and aligning ESL courses to English courses to encourage districts to integrate the ESL program with the mainstream education program is the most effective means for mainstreaming LEP students. There are four reasons for this including the following: (1) It is more directly linked to instruction and course offerings and therefore has a direct impact on teaching; (2) By breaking barriers between the LEP program and the rest of the school, it improves the educational opportunities for LEP students; (3) It increases opportunities by breaking the tracking system; and (4) Integrating LEP makes the education of LEP students a whole school issue. Seven implementation challenges and suggestions to overcome them are provided. (KFT)

Graduation Requirements and Course Taking Patterns of LEP Students

How State and Local Regulations Affect Secondary LEP Students' Transition to the Mainstream Program

Hua Yang and Wayne Murray
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Background and Context

The rapid increase of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students is a reality in the US public schools, especially in large urban areas. In the Dallas Public Schools (DPS), the total LEP population increased 35% over the last five years and accounted for 36% of the District's total enrollment in 1999-2000. The secondary LEP population increased even faster; high school LEP students increased 71% in the last 6 years (Table 1).

While the increase of LEP students is widely acknowledged, a hidden reason related to the growth has rarely been discussed. New immigrant students are not the only cause for the increase in LEP students. "Continuing LEP students," those who have been in a BE/ESL program for seven or even more years, unable to meet exit criteria, contribute to a large portion of the secondary LEP population (Figure 1). In the Dallas Public Schools nearly half of its secondary LEP population have been in the program for 7+ years due to an average annual exit rate of less than 10%. The majority of them are US-born.

If the BE/ESL program is aimed at providing equal educational opportunity to LEP students by helping them acquire English proficiency (August et. al. 1997), the transition of LEP students from an ESL program to a mainstream program is critical. However, for various reasons, LEP students tend to be retained in the lower level of the ESL program (beginning ESL courses). In 1999, 35% of DPS grade 7 LEP students were assigned into ESL 1-3 courses (set up for new immigrants), even though they have been in the program for multiple years.

Performance data indicate that staying in ESL programs for multiple years did not improve the general academic performance of LEP students (Figure 2-standardized tests, *ITBS* and *Stanford 9*; Figure 3-criterion referenced test, *TAAS*) and maximizes the likelihood they will dropout of school[1]. The lack of cognitive or higher-order-thinking skills is the main reason that hinders LEP students' academic progress (Table 2).

Facing this issue, state and local education agencies tried to improve the quality of ESL programs through staff development on teaching strategies and other efforts; but the result was limited. Annual exit rate for secondary LEP students in DPS has remained at below 10% for the last several years. Improving learning opportunity for LEP students is crucial to enhance their academic progress.

In recent years in the wave of school accountability and high standards for all students, the state of Texas adopted a number of more vigorous initiatives to improve the

[1] Further information can be found in a related paper by the author, *How Did Multi Years (7+) in BE/ESL Program Affect the English Acquisition and Academic Achievement of LEP Students* (to be presented in AERA 2001).

education of LEP students. Designed to raise the requirements for high school graduation and to align ESL courses to English courses, these initiatives encourage school districts to integrate the ESL program with the mainstream education program and grant districts authority to provide flexible learning arrangements for LEP students (19TAC, Chapter 74, Subchapter A, 1997). Compared to *TAAS*, these initiatives are less well known, but have more direct impact on providing equal educational opportunity to LEP students.

Table 1

Number of Secondary LEP Students in the DPS by Years LEP, 1995-96 to 1999-2000

School Year	Number of Years Being LEP							Total N
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7 or more	
1994-95	1,399	1,702	1,189	588	530	3,015	NA	8,423
1995-96	1,999	1,189	1,585	1,090	509	518	**3,489**	10,379
1996-97	1,391	1,767	1,110	1,449	992	462	**4,440**	11,611
1997-98	1,203	1,314	1,605	990	1,197	838	**5,058**	12,205
1998-99	1,351	1,113	1,254	1,513	931	1,048	**6,096**	13,306
1999-00	1,560	1,288	1,013	1,174	1,330	839	**7,185**	14,389

Figure 1. Number of Identified LEP Students in Grades 7-12 by Years Being LEP, 1994-95 to 1999-2000.

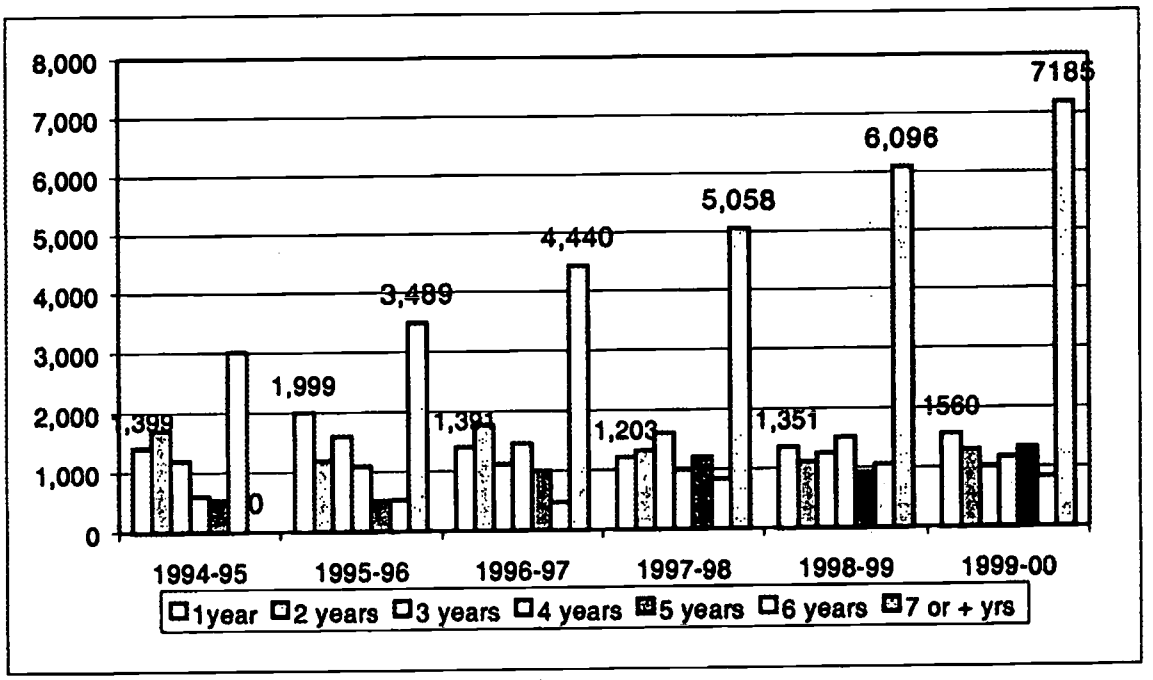


Figure 2. Median Percentile Scores for Secondary LEP Students by Years As LEP

Spring 2000 *Stanford 9* Reading

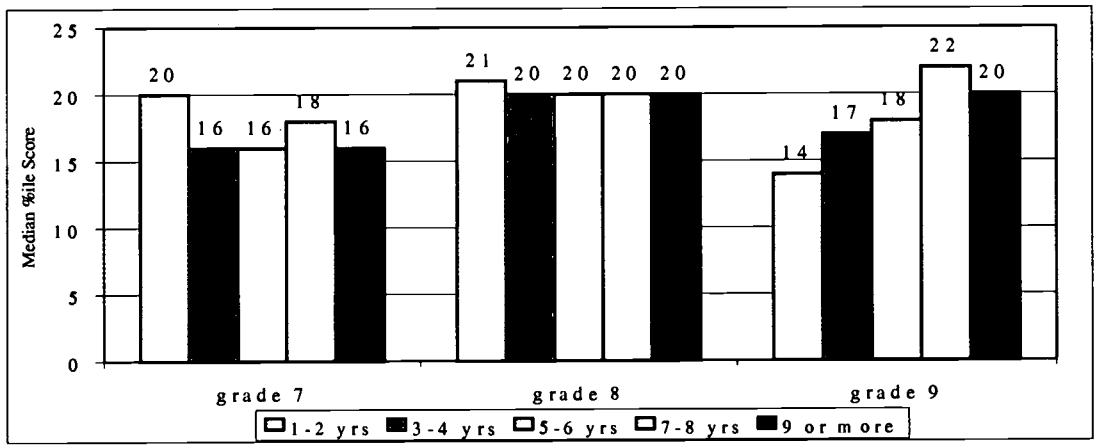


Figure 3. Percent of Secondary LEP students Passing *TAAS Reading* By Years Served

Spring 2000

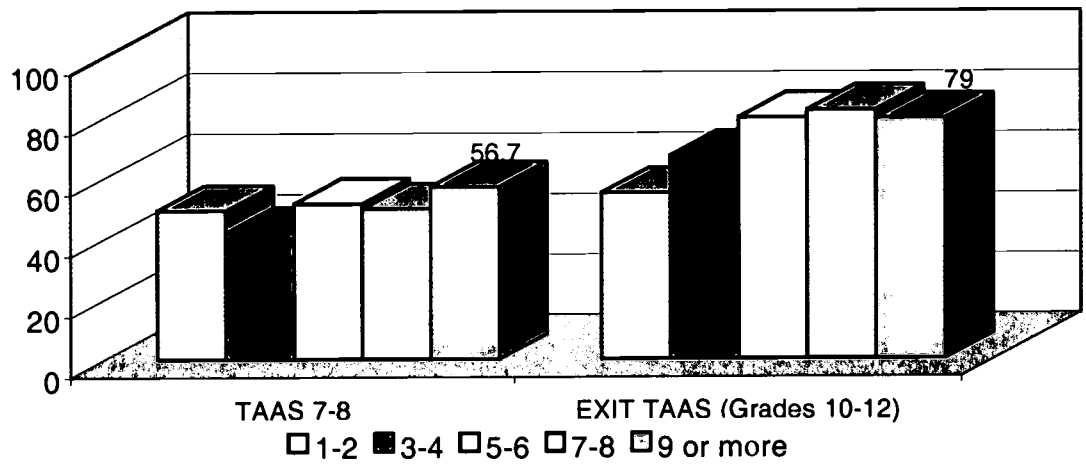


Table 2
Percent Mastering Each *TAAS* Objective by *WMLS* Level
Spring 2000

Mastery by *TAAS* objectives (%)	Non-LEP	Served LEP total	Served LEP by *WMLS* Level 1	2	3	4/5
		Grade 7-8				
Overall passing (%)	75.1	51.2	4.8	18.0	54.5	80.8
Word meaning	71.4	51.8	17.5	28.1	53.9	72.6
Supporting ideas	77.1	62.7	11.1	35.5	66.2	83.6
Summarization	66.9	42.4	6.3	16.6	44.3	67.6
Relationships, outcomes	73.4	52.2	11.1	24.1	54.9	74.7
Inferences, generalizations	57.8	32.1	1.6	8.9	32.9	53.9
Point of view, fact/non-fact	68.7	44.8	3.2	21.4	46.6	67.6
		EXIT *TAAS* (Grade 10 Only)				
Overall passing (%)	89.7	58.6	25.0	35.0	66.2	87.0
Word meaning	84.5	45.3	31.3	31.5	47.9	66.0
Supporting ideas	94.6	87.8	68.8	83.4	91.6	94.4
Summarization	82.1	55.4	24.0	38.6	60.4	77.8
Relationships, outcomes	82.6	59.3	36.5	45.7	62.6	80.9
Inferences, generalizations	57.7	14.9	8.3	7.4	13.9	34.6
Point of view, fact/non-fact	74.5	38.0	19.8	21.4	40.5	67.9

Note: The vast majority of continuing LEP students stayed at *WMLS* 3 and failed to reach *WMLS* 4.

Research Questions

Using DPS secondary LEP student data on course-taking patterns in the school year of 1999-2000, this study examined the impact of the state policy on the district regulations of the ESL program and the impact of the DPS ESL program course-offering plan on LEP student course taking patterns. The study focused on the following questions:

1. What are the changes shown in the DPS secondary ESL program course-offering plan (course sequence) since 1998-99? What are the differences between the course offering plans for middle school and the plans for high school?
2. What influence did the state policy have on the District's high school ESL curriculum?
3. How did the new DPS high school ESL curriculum affect LEP students' transition from ESL courses to sheltered English courses and to general education English courses?
4. How was LEP students' academic performance related to language courses taken?
5. What are the policy implications? What are positive impacts of the policy on LEP students' learning? What are potential negative consequences and challenges?

Methods and Data

This is a policy analysis study looking at the impact of educational policies on educational practice. Both state level policy and local level regulations were examined. Texas State High School Graduation Requirements and related documents were adopted from State Board of Education 19 TAC Chapter 74, Subchapter A. The DPS ESL program course sequence was obtained from the DPS General Information Bulletin (GIB) for Secondary Schools (school year 1996-97, 1997-98 and 1999-2000).

The focus of the educational practice in this study is the language course-taking patterns of secondary LEP students, i.e., what language courses (including ESL, sheltered English, general education English and remedial language courses--Reading Improvement) to which LEP students were assigned. Data were extracted from LEP student database (N=13,000) in May 2000 and were analyzed using frequency procedures from the *SPSS* statistical package. A list of course numbers of ESL courses, sheltered English courses and general education English courses was used to extract data.

Course-taking patterns of LEP students were compared between middle schools and high schools. Because the state regulations changed for high school level and not for middle school level, in the study the course-taking patterns of middle school LEP students was used as an informal comparison group to examine the changes that have taken place at the high school level.

The comparisons first focused on the overall picture of course-taking patterns, i.e., transition between language course clusters. Then an important variable, the number of years LEP students stayed in the BE/ESL program, was added to the analysis to see the pattern of promotion from ESL courses to sheltered English courses, from beginning level courses to more advanced courses, as students stay longer in the BE/ESL programs.

The study provided preliminary data linking achievement trends of LEP students and the language courses they attended.

Results of the Study

1. What are the changes shown in the DPS secondary ESL program course sequence since 1998-99?

Table 3 provides information comparing the DPS secondary ESL program course-offering plans (course sequence) in 1996-97 and in 1999-2000, for high school and for middle school. The comparisons reveal the follow patterns:

- Since 1998-99, the District regulations concerning **high school** ESL program course-sequence were more specifically defined and had major changes when compared to the ESL program course sequence in 1996-97.

  For LEP students at the **Beginning** level (year 1) and **Intermediate** level (year 2), ESL 1 and ESL 2 courses are required. These courses are equivalent to the general education courses English I and English II, in meeting the state credit for graduation

requirements. LEP students taking ESL 2 course are required to take the same State required *End Of Course* test as their non-LEP counterparts taking general education course English II.

Advanced level (year 3) LEP students are required to take an ESL 3 course as well as sheltered English[2] I-IV courses according to their grade and English proficiency level. The ESL 3 course, previously the only required course for LEP students at this level, can no longer be used to satisfy the English graduation requirement. It can be used as an elective course.

As a result, it was recommended in the GIB to high school counselors that the ESL 3 course be concurrently scheduled with sheltered English I-IV courses, according to students' grade level, to ensure the opportunity for LEP students to satisfy the graduation requirements for English credits.

For LEP students at **Transitional** and **Post-transitional** levels, sheltered English courses are offered. These are normally year 4 and year 5 LEP students (or beyond), who remain in the ESL program after the first three years, due to the failure in meeting the exit criteria.

Most important, all LEP students are required to take English III and English IV or sheltered English III/IV to meet graduation requirements. Previously, English III and English IV were not specifically required courses for graduation for LEP students.

- The current **high school** ESL program course sequence reflected the intention of the District to integrate the ESL program with the general education program. Meanwhile, it granted schools more flexibility in scheduling LEP students, considering different needs of LEP students at different levels, to satisfy the graduation requirements.

- **Middle school** ESL program course sequence in 1999-2000 had no major changes compared to the year of 1996-97.

[2] Sheltered English courses use the same state-adopted textbooks as regular English courses; but the instruction is "sheltered" and understandable to LEP students with special teaching strategies. Sheltered English courses should be taught by English teachers who were trained with ESL strategy.

Table 3
Secondary ESL Program Course Sequence: 1996-97 and 1999-2000

High School

Program Level	School Year 1996-97	School Year 1999-2000
Beginning	ESL 1-Listening Comprehension ESL 1-Speaking and Writing ESL 1-Reading and Composition	ESL I (English I credit) Reading I for LEP Academic Skills English for Math
Intermediate	ESL 2-Listening Comprehension ESL 2-Reading and Composition English for Science	ESL II (English II credit) Reading II for LEP English for Science
Advanced	ESL 3-Composition & Literature English for Social Studies	**Sheltered English I-IV** **ESL III (support course)** Reading for LEP III
Transitional/ Post-transition	Sheltered English I--IV Cultural Topics (*TAAS* Prep.)	Sheltered English I-IV Cultural Topics (*TAAS* Prep.)

Middle School

Program Level	School Year 1996-97	School Year 1999-2000
Beginning	ESL 1-Listening Comprehension ESL 1-Speaking and Writing ESL 1-Reading and Composition	ESL 1-listening, speaking, reading & writing Speech Academic Skills English for Math
Intermediate	ESL 2-Listening Comprehension ESL 2-Reading and Composition English for Science	ESL 2 (listening, speaking, reading & writing) Reading II for LEP English for Science
Advanced	ESL 3-Composition & Literature English for Social Studies	ESL 3-Composition and Literature English for Social Studies
Transitional/ Post-transition	Sheltered Language Arts Developing Study Skills (*TAAS* Prep.)	Sheltered Language Arts Developing Study Skills (*TAAS* Prep.)

2. How is the DPS secondary ESL program course sequence related to the new state graduation policy?

The changes shown in the current **high school** ESL program course- sequence are not groundless. They are the direct results of the recent state law that raised the high school graduation requirements and intended to align ESL program with the mainstream program.

Table 4 provides information comparing the State policy of high school graduation requirements on English credits prior to and after 1997-98. Table 4 also displays the DPS high school ESL program course regulations. A parallel relationship was observed between the changes in the state policy and in District regulations.

A subtle but critical change found in the new state graduation requirements (after 97-98) is that currently ESL 1 and ESL 2 courses may be substituted for general education courses English I and II **only**, while such specification was not mentioned previously. Under the previous plan, LEP students did not necessarily have to take English III and IV courses. Credits on ESL 1 and ESL 2 plus sheltered English I and II would be enough to qualify them graduating from high school (but may not qualify them for college admission, which requires English III and IV credits). Under the new policy, however, all students must take English III and IV (either general education or sheltered) to gain graduation credits.

Table 4
Texas State High School Graduation Requirements
and DPS High School ESL Program Course Regulations:
Prior to 1997-98 and After 1997-98

School year	State Policy-Graduation Plan English: Four Credits	DPS High School ESL Program Course Regulations
Prior to 1997-98	For students entering grade 9 in 1996-97 or before: A maximum of two of the four credits of English required for graduation may be ESL courses.	For students entering grade 9 in 1996-97 or before: --Each ESL course is given one unit of credit for two semesters' work. --A maximum of two of the four English credits required for graduation are ESL courses. --All credits earned in ESL courses which are not counted toward graduation requirements in English are counted as electives in meeting state graduation requirements.
1997-98	Transition year	
After 1997-98	Beginning with entering freshmen in 1997-98, ESL I and ESL II courses may be substituted for English I and II **only** for immigrant students.	Beginning with entering freshmen in 1997-98, --ESL I and ESL II courses may be substituted for English I and English II credit only. --ESL III course is a support course and does not substitute for any required English credit. --All students must take English III and English IV or English III/IV equivalents (sheltered English III/IV) in order to meet state graduation requirements.

3. How does the current ESL program course sequence affect LEP students' transition from ESL courses to sheltered English courses?

Figures 4 and 6 provide data on the course taking patterns of LEP students, two years after the new ESL program course-offering plan was implemented. Middle school (without a new plan) and high school (with a new plan) were compared.

Figure 4 is an overall picture of the course taking patterns. It shows in both levels, LEP students are enrolled in four kinds of language courses: ESL, sheltered English/language arts, general education English/language arts and remedial courses.

While the course taking patterns in high and middle schools were basically similar, there are differences in the percentages of students taking certain courses. It is noticeable that 20% of high school LEP students enrolled in ESL 1-3 courses and 37% in sheltered English courses; in middle schools the pattern was reverse with 32% in ESL and 26% in sheltered language arts courses. In high school, sheltered English courses replaced ESL courses, becoming a major component of the ESL program as a larger percent of students take these courses.

It is also noticeable that a considerable number (800+) of LEP students were not enrolled in any ESL, sheltered English or general education English courses but were enrolled in remedial language courses.

Figure 4. Overall Course Taking Pattern of Secondary LEP students, spring 2000

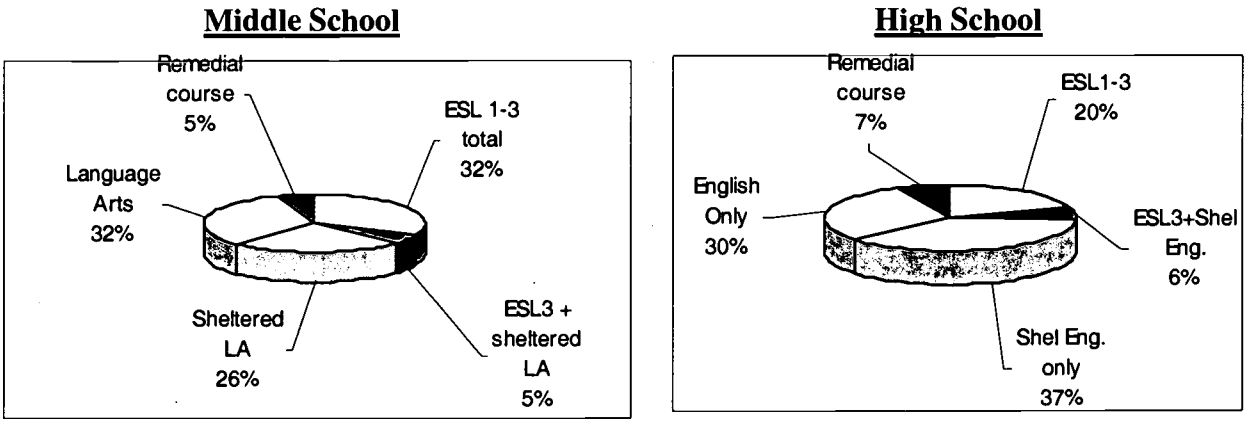
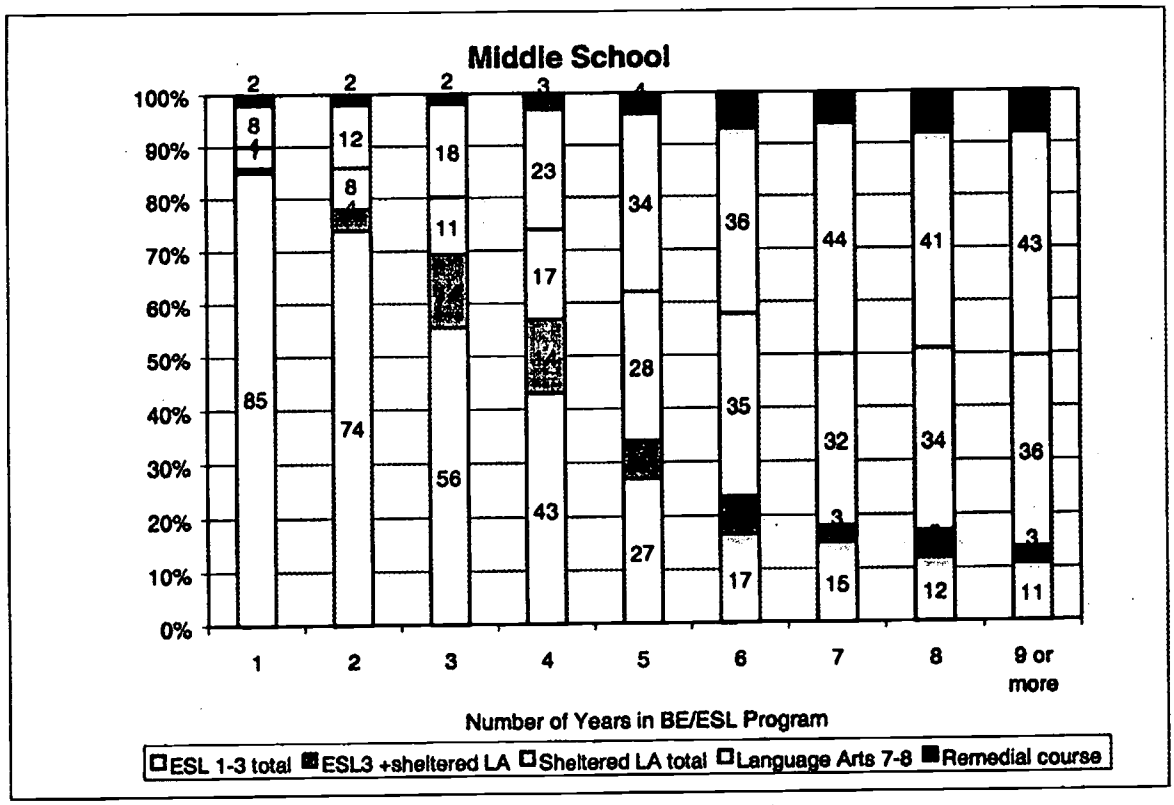
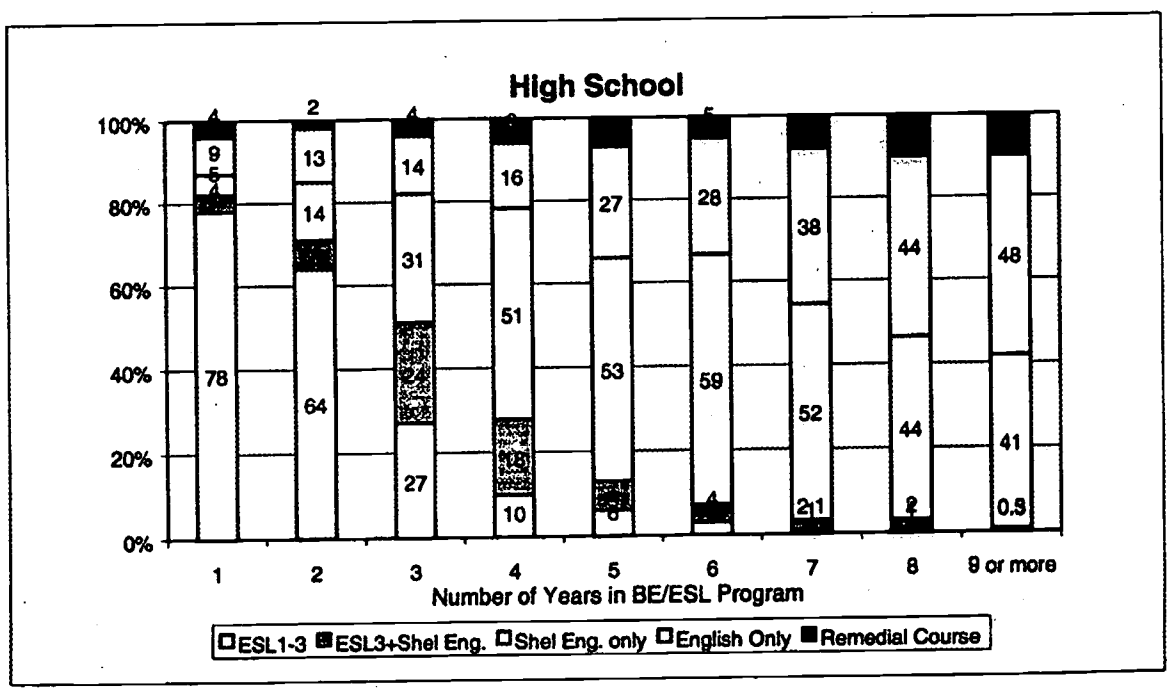


Figure 5 further compares course-taking patterns between middle and high schools by adding one critical variable, number of years of LEP students served in BE/ESL programs. Drastic differences emerged:

- In high school, the percent of LEP students taking ESL courses declined rapidly as they stayed longer in the program, from 78% of year 1 students to 27% by year 3. By year 4, only 10% enrolled in ESL courses while 69% were in sheltered English or sheltered English with ESL 3. Data show a pattern of accelerated transition from ESL courses to sheltered English courses, then to general education English of high school LEP students.
- In contrast, middle school LEP students tended to be retained in ESL courses after several years in the BE/ESL program. By year 4, 43% of the students were still in ESL courses. More than 10% of the LEP students who spent nine or even more years in the program were still assigned to ESL 1-3 courses, which are set up for newcomer students (1-3 years).

Figure 5. ESL/English Course-Taking Patterns of LEP Students by Number of Years in the BE/ESL Program, Middle school and High School, Spring 2000





4. How was LEP students' academic performance related to the courses taken?

Positive relationships were consistently found between the language courses in which LEP students were enrolled and their performance on English proficiency tests (*WMLS* and *RPTE*), norm-referenced tests (*Stanford 9*) and criterion-referenced test (*TAAS*) (spring 2000 test results).

By and large, high school LEP students taking general education English courses outperformed students taking sheltered English courses and students taking ESL courses. Evidently, high school LEP students' English proficiency level and the general academic performance at the end of the school year reflected the language courses to which they were assigned. English proficiency score for students taking remedial English courses (most are continuing LEP students) equals to the average of LEP students taking ESL 2 course (most are second year newcomers).

This suggests that either the course assignment had a positive effect on student learning or that schools had assigned appropriate language courses to students according to their previous performance scores. Without the benefit of a random assignment experiment, it is not possible to determine which of these explanations explain the results. However, longitudinal performance data coupled with process evaluation data might clarify the issue.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Positive impact of the state policy on LEP student learning

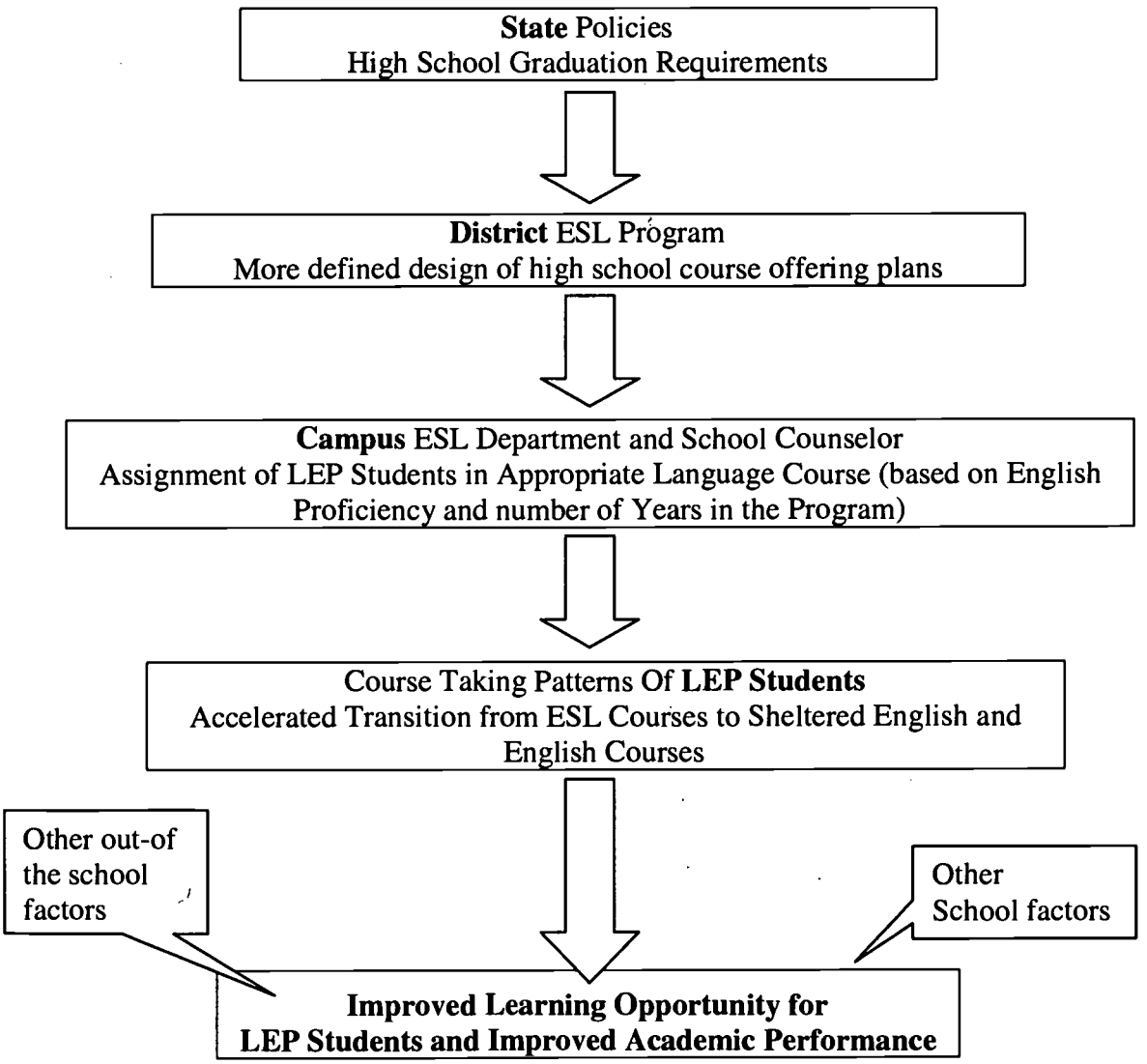
The contrasting course-taking patterns of LEP students (by year as LEP) between high schools and middle schools show the direct impact of well-thought state policy on educational practice (a conceptual framework in **Figure 6**). Following the state policies on raising high school graduation requirements and aligning the ESL program to the general education program, the District modified its high school ESL program course sequence in order for LEP students to have enough English credits to graduate in four years. The District plan was welcomed by most high school personnel, who have noticed a large number of continuing LEP students (they have been LEP for their entire school life) and the high dropout rate among LEP students, and therefore are willing to push LEP students forward fast. As a result, there was an accelerated course transition of high school LEP students from beginning level ESL courses to more advanced sheltered and general education English courses.

Compared to other accountability oriented state initiatives (e.g., high-stake testing programs and school ranking systems), the policies related to graduation requirements and curriculum arrangement seem to have advantages in the following aspects:

- It is more directly linked to instruction and course offerings and therefore has direct impact on teaching and learning.
- It has a potential of breaking the barriers to large-scale success in improving the educational opportunities for LEP students. Partial implementation (instead of standard, whole system implementation) is a major obstacle faced by urban education reforms (McDermott, 2000).

- It has the potential of improving learning opportunities for LEP students by breaking the tracking systems that has existed for so long in public schools, especially large urban schools. Tracking system, the tendency of placing LEP or poor, minority students into low-track courses or special education programs, and keeping them there, has been cited by studies as one of the institutional factors leading to LEP students' academic failure and high dropout rate (Mehan, 1997, Mellor, 1999, Lockwood, 2000).
- Enforced integration of the ESL program with the general education program has the potential of breaking the isolation status of the BE/ESL programs within a campus to achieve the holistic approach in making the education of LEP students a whole school issue.

Figure 6. Conceptual Framework: Improving Learning Opportunity of Secondary LEP Students through State and District Policies.



Implementation challenges.

Given the accelerated transition between ESL courses, sheltered English courses and regular English courses, the following issues are critical in implementing the current ESL program course-offering plan.

- Course placement and scheduling

  Secondary campuses need counselors who understand LEP students' special needs and the State, District and ESL program regulations. Special training on these issues is needed for school counselors.

  The role of counselor and the campus Language Proficiency Assessment Committee (LPAC) in scheduling LEP students needs to be clarified. Course assignment issues need to be stressed during the LPAC training.

  It is critical to provide accurate, sufficient and timely information to campus on LEP students' English proficiency level and their experience in the BE/ESL program (years). Accurate information are particularly important for counselors when LEP students transfer from lower school level to higher level or from school to school.

- Content coverage and staffing

  With the new plan, sheltered English courses replaced ESL courses becoming the major part of the ESL program. To ensure the quality of sheltered English courses, the best candidates to teach these courses would be certified English teachers endorsed in ESL who concurrently teach sheltered English courses and general education English courses.

- Organization of teachers

  To meet the challenges posted by the current LEP course-taking trend, the school ESL department should be merged with the general education English department to make ESL, sheltered English and general education English an integrated whole to best serve LEP students. This would smooth the transitions of LEP students from one course to another by breaking the departmental boundary, ensuring the cooperation between the three kinds of teachers, and systematically monitoring the quality of a variety of courses and course combinations.

Potential negative consequences and challenges

- A considerable number of LEP students were incorrectly scheduled into remedial language courses and they had the most unsatisfactory academic performance among all LEP students. Care should be taken to differentiate between students with developing English language skills and students with general low academic ability.

- A large number of newcomer LEP students were promoted from ESL 2 course directly to sheltered English III course in their third year in the US (to obtain graduation English credit). They struggle to survive due to the lack of solid basics in English. To help these students, the ESL 3 course (which students may take concurrently with sheltered English III) must play a constructive role in supporting sheltered English courses.

- A large number of LEP students were immersed in general education English courses before meeting the exit criteria of the ESL program. The progress of these LEP students needs to be carefully monitored and documented by the LPAC. Mainstream English teachers working with LEP students need training on ESL teaching strategies and knowledge related to the issues concerning LEP students.

- Given the progress achieved at the high school level, the weakness in the middle school ESL program in retaining LEP students for extended number of years becomes more evident. No graduation credit requirements at middle school make a system-wide reform more difficult. Nevertheless, appropriate policies and regulations must be considered to improve the learning opportunity for middle school LEP students and to stimulate a systematic acceleration for them to move forward.

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