

# **Similar English Learner Students, Different Results:** *Why Do Some Schools Do Better?*



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## ***Similar English Learner Students, Different Results: Why Do Some Schools Do Better?***

**A follow-up analysis, based upon a large-scale survey of California elementary schools serving low-income and EL students**

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The data file for the original Similar Students study is referred to as SDR, EdSource 2005; for this extended analysis as SDR-EL, EdSource, 2007.

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This report is available to download for free at: [www.edsource.org](http://www.edsource.org) from the research studies section.

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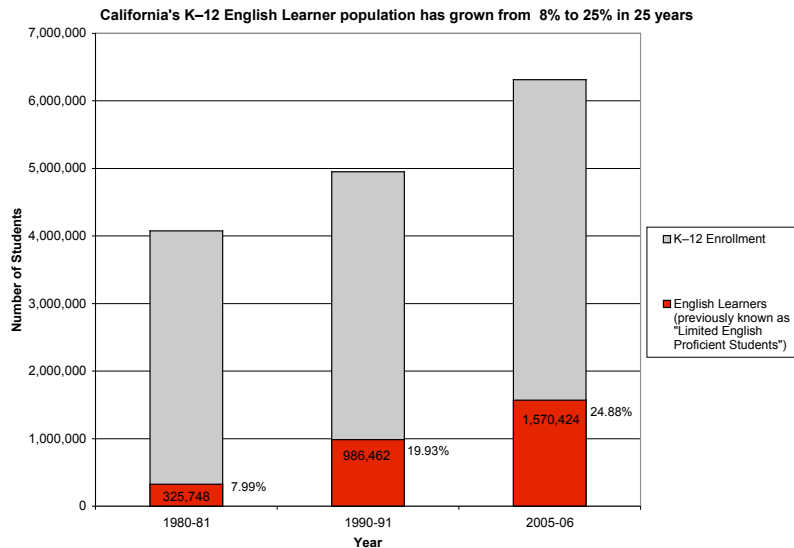
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## Similar English Learner Students, Different Results: Why Do Some Schools Do Better?

The number of EL students in California schools—and the proportion of all students they represent—has grown dramatically since 1980. Today, nearly 1.6 million pupils, or one in four, are English learners (ELs). At the elementary level, EL students make up a third of the total. In fact, California currently educates close to one-third of all the English learners in the nation. They are enrolled in almost every California district and in the vast majority of schools.



Data: California Department of Education

Although almost 100 languages are spoken in these students' homes, approximately 85% of California's EL students are Spanish speaking. That uniformity masks important variations in the family background, English language proficiency levels, and academic readiness these students bring to their school experience. All of those influence EL students' performance on state academic tests, which are given in English.

In spring 2006 California released its first ever school-level Academic Performance Index (API) scores for English Learners. These EL-API scores were based on California Standards Tests taken in the spring of 2005, and make it possible to identify how well schools were doing with this student population. The EL-API offers the best available statewide information concerning this important student population and their academic achievement.

### The research questions

It is not unexpected that elementary schools that differ widely with regard to their student poverty and EL demographics also differ widely on the state's API. What is striking, however, is how wide the EL-API gap is between schools that serve similar students (based on California's Schools Characteristics Index or SCI).

Why do California elementary schools serving similar proportions of low-income, Spanish speaking EL students differ by over 250 points on California's new EL Academic Performance Index score? What school practices can help explain this API gap?

This report uses an analysis of principal and teacher survey responses from a random sample of 257 schools, correlated with the EL-API, to address those questions. The data came originally from the *Similar Students, Different Results* study that EdSource and its collaborative research partners published in October 2005.

## What sets this study apart?

Many of the available reports on best instructional practices for English Learner students are based upon case studies and research reviews. This study differs in several ways:

- The sample of districts, schools, teachers, and principals is unusually large and representative of the overall population of schools with very strong response rates;
- It examines the effects of a broad range of standards based district, school, and classroom practices and policies on the academic achievement of the school's English Learner students;
- It also examines a small set of survey questions on specific EL instructional practices against those same student outcomes; and
- It analyzes a variety of student outcome measures used for state and federal accountability purposes and for measuring academic and English language proficiency.

### Sample of schools

This extended analysis is based upon a sample of 237 schools from the 25th to 35th percentile band of the School Characteristics Index (SCI), which means their student populations were similar in terms of low parent education levels, high poverty levels, and high proportions of Spanish-speaking EL students. The sample was randomly selected then narrowed to only include schools with an EL-API.

- In the study sample, the median school had:
  - 42% EL students, and schools ranged from 17% to 80%.<sup>1</sup>
  - 68% Hispanic students.
  - 32% of students with parents who were not high school graduates
  - 78% of students eligible for free and reduced price meals.
  - 98% fully-credentialed teachers.
- For the schools as a whole, 88% of the EL and RFEF students were Spanish speakers.
- The 2005 school EL-API scores in this sample ranged from a low of 555 to a high of 811, with a median of 667.

### Methodology

The main focus of this new analysis was to determine what correlations might exist between various broad effective schools practices and the academic achievement of the English Learner students in our sample of schools. To that end, we conducted multiple regression analyses using as school-level outcome variables: the 2005 base EL-API, the mean scale scores on California Standards Tests (CSTs) in English language arts and math in grades 2-5, percent of students proficient on those CSTs, and the AMAO 1 and 2 which measure EL students' progress in learning English based on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT).

Limiting the sample to a narrow SCI band helped control for student demographics. To do so further, the research team controlled separately for parent education, school size, student ethnicity, poverty, percent of students new to the school, percent English Learners, and percent enrolled in migrant education. For this EL analysis, the team also controlled for the concentration of EL students in the school and for the stability of the school's EL population through the ratio of initial CELDT test takes to all EL test takers in grades 2-5.

### The Survey

This extended analysis used the results of completed surveys from 237 principals and 4,700 teachers (for most of the schools, 80% or more of K-5 classroom teachers). The surveys were completed in spring of 2005.

The survey questions addressed classroom, school level, and district practices and policies conceptually grouped into seven broad domains: implementing a coherent, standards-based instructional program; involving and supporting parents; using assessment data to improve student achievement and teacher practice; encouraging teacher collaboration and professional development; ensuring instructional resources; enforcing high expectations for student behavior; and prioritizing student achievement by using measurable objectives.

In addition, our surveys to teachers and principals asked several questions related to specific practices and policies for the instruction of English learner students.

**For more detail on the sample and methodology; copies of the survey instruments; and a full report of the findings and their implications, download the May 2007 EdSource report at [www.edsource.org](http://www.edsource.org)**

## **A summary of the findings**

This new analysis indicates that the EL-API gap among similar schools could likely be narrowed most effectively if schools focused on improving school-wide practices in four major domains. Specific strategies for EL student instruction should be nested within these four larger school-wide reforms.

### **Using Assessment Data to Improve Student Achievement and Instruction**

One practice strongly correlated with a higher EL-API among our sample of elementary schools was the extensive use of student assessment data by the district and the principal in an effort to improve instruction and student learning. For example, principals from better performing schools more often reported that they and the district use standards aligned assessment data from multiple sources to evaluate teachers' practices, to identify teachers who need instructional improvement, and to identify struggling students and develop plans for intervention.

### **Ensuring Availability of Instructional Resources**

EL-API performance was higher in schools where principals reported that a larger proportion of their teaching staff had qualities such as a demonstrated ability to raise student achievement, strong content knowledge, and others. The schools where more teachers reported having regular or standard certificates for California also had, on average, higher API scores. Teachers with at least five years of full time teaching experience were more likely, on average, to be from schools with higher APIs. Principals' years of experience was also correlated with higher school achievement.

Principals from higher performing schools also more often reported that their district ensures the school has up-to-date instructional materials, and provides supplementary instruction for struggling students, enough instructional materials for all students, and support for facilities management.

### **Implementing a Coherent, Standards-based Curriculum and Instructional Program**

Higher EL-API was correlated with schools in which teachers reported most strongly that there is schoolwide instructional consistency within grades, curricular alignment from grade-to-grade, and that instruction is based upon state academic standards. Examples of practices teachers reported using to accomplish this coherence include examining the scope or sequence of curriculum topics and reviewing a grade-level pacing calendar.

Principals who reported a strong district role in this domain are also from higher performing elementary schools. These principals say the district has a coherent grade-by-grade curriculum that it uses for all schools and that the district expects the principal to ensure implementation of the curriculum. These principals report that the district evaluates the principal based on the extent to which instruction in the school aligns with the curriculum.

Higher school EL-API was also correlated with principals who affirmed that in the last four years, their school had implemented a new program for EL students.

### **Prioritizing Student Achievement (Using Measurable and Monitored Objectives)**

A shared culture within the school regarding the value of improving student achievement and a sense of shared responsibility for it seems to distinguish the higher performing schools in our sample based on EL-APIs. Both teachers and principals reported that their school has well defined plans for instructional improvement. They also reported that they make meeting the state's API goals and the NCLB adequate yearly progress goals a priority, and that their schools set measurable goals for exceeding their API student subgroup growth targets. Principals at higher performing schools also report on average that their school's statewide rank and similar schools rank on the API influence school wide instructional priorities, and that they are clear about their district's expectations for meeting API and AYP growth and subgroup targets.

### **Other School-wide Practices Important, But Not As Strongly Related to Student Achievement**

A school's outreach to parents, encouragement of teacher collaboration, and enforcement of positive student behaviors (like attendance and tolerance) have long been recognized as important contributors to the student and professional culture at a school. Our analyses indicate that, while important, these are not the most critical features that differentiate higher- from lower-performing schools with similar students with respect to scores on their EL-API and California Standards Tests in math and English language arts.

### The Importance of District and School Site Leadership in Driving Change

Although not examined as a separate domain, the importance of school district and principal leadership comes through clearly in the responses by teachers and principals. Specifically, it appears that:

*Principal leadership in the context of accountability-driven reform is being redefined to focus on effective management of the school improvement process.* In general, EL-API scores were higher in schools with principals whose responses indicate that they act as managers of school improvement, driving the reform process, cultivating the school vision, and using student assessment data to focus on school improvement, including evaluation of teacher practice and assistance to struggling students. They also report implementing instructional programs to address the needs of EL students.

*District leadership, accountability, and support appear to influence EL student achievement as well.* Principals in schools with higher EL-API responded strongly and affirmatively to statements that their districts: set clear expectations that schools meet API and AYP growth targets, including for subgroups, provide schools with achievement data, and evaluate principal performance and teacher practices based on that data. They also ensure that math and language arts curricula are aligned with state standards; that instruction is focused on achievement; that schools have adequate facilities and textbooks as well as resources for struggling students; and that they address the instructional needs of English language learners at their schools.

### **Instructional Practices and Outcome Measures for English Learners Only**

The surveys asked several questions related to specific practices and policies for the instruction of EL students that were not analyzed as part of the original *Similar Students, Different Results* study. Most of those specific EL questions were directed to teachers and asked how they and their schools: provided explicit English Language Development (ELD) instruction (by whom and how many minutes daily); taught mathematics to EL students; and used CELDT and other ELD test results. Other questions dealt with the school's access to an EL specialist, the English language arts/ELD curriculum program it used, teachers' experience and credentials, etc.

Of the specific EL instructional practices we surveyed, only two were significant and positively related to EL academic achievement on the EL-API or the CSTs:

- A response by a school's teachers that explicit English Language Development instruction was delivered to the teacher's EL students through a pull out program (e.g. resource teacher).
- A response by the teachers at a school that their EL students were taught mathematics using ESL or immersion techniques (SDAIE).

Several practices that we expected to show a relationship to either academic achievement or language proficiency did not do so based on our analysis:

- The presence in a school of more teachers with CLAD/BCLAD certification.
- The number of daily instructional minutes reported by teachers that the school devotes to explicit English Language Development.

### Discussion

There may be multiple interpretations of these findings, but they suggest the importance of paying attention to how school and classroom organization influences EL student progress in core subjects and in English language development.

It is possible that the absence of a relationship between CLAD/BCLAD certification and student outcomes might be because the training represented by these credentials is not uniform. The training might also not be sufficiently effective to make a difference in student outcomes. In this regard, it is notable that a higher percentage of teachers who had this certification also cited "instructional strategies for EL students" as one of their highest professional development priorities.

One possible explanation for the lack of findings in regard to instructional minutes is that the quality of ELD instruction matters more than a given number of minutes for ELD instruction. It is reasonable to speculate that when ELD is delivered by a highly qualified specialist in a pull-out program, for example, the classroom teacher is able to better focus his or her energy on teaching the core academic curriculum. In these schools, EL students might be benefiting from having that division of labor and expertise among teachers. The other teacher survey response highly correlated with EL-API was that EL students are taught mathematics using ESL or immersion techniques (e.g.,

SDAIE-Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English). This finding and the one related to pull-out programs might both be indicative of schools that are giving EL students better access to the core academic curriculum.

Additional findings from the study raised questions regarding the limitations of the CELDT as an assessment instrument that can guide teachers in their ELD instruction and principals in the development of schoolwide instructional priorities. A full discussion of these findings and their implications are part of the full Report of Findings.

## **The policy context in California**

The policy context for this large-scale survey and study includes California’s standards-based curriculum, assessment, and accountability systems. But it is important to note that English learner instruction has its own unique policy context. In California, heated debates about bilingual instruction in the mid-1990s led to the passage of Proposition 227, a statewide ballot initiative intended to curtail the use of bilingual instruction for EL students. As a result—although parents wanting such an instructional setting may request it—only 8% of the state’s English learner students are currently taught in bilingual instructional settings (compared to 29% before the proposition's passage).

The debates about EL instruction have continued in California, most notably in the summer of 2006 when the State Board of Education adopted new evaluation criteria for the next adoption of K-8 English language arts and English language development (ELA/ELD) curriculum programs.

### **Implications of Our Findings For Policy and Practice Related to English Learners**

It is good news that when school practices and policies aligned with California’s academic standards are intensely implemented—with regard to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and monitoring progress—they contribute to higher school performance for English learner students just as they do for all students. This assumes, of course, that adequate resources are also available at the school, including experienced and credentialed teachers who have appropriate skills, content knowledge, and enthusiasm. The implementation of these practices, and the availability of these resources, seem to occur most often when the school district and the principal actively support and oversee school change.

One implication for state education policy is to stay the course with its reforms and to continue to ensure that curriculum programs and state standards tests are well aligned with the state’s academic standards.

Another implication is that if school districts play a strong role initiating school change and facilitating its implementation, then state policymakers should consider providing more support to districts in this role. This might mean providing better assessment and other data on their students in easy-to-access formats, and supporting professional development for district administrators and board members on data analysis, implementation of curriculum at the school level, and best EL instructional practices from districts with higher EL-API scores.

Third, state policymakers should also be aware that California has the highest pupil-to-administrator ratio in the country. Finding out what additional support is needed for school principals to do this challenging work is critical for administrative credential programs and professional development. The 237 principals answering our surveys ranked “using assessment data” as their highest professional development priority (54%), but “training and instructional strategies for EL students” was a very close second (47%).

A final implication relates to teacher preparation and professional development. The top priorities for professional development identified by elementary teachers were more training in the English language arts and math programs, in specific strategies for working with English learners, and in explicit English Language Development. Our findings suggest that these could indeed yield significant benefits for EL students.

## **Conclusion**

Our analysis indicates that districts and schools should focus first and foremost on establishing a strong foundation of excellent, coherent school-wide practices related to the core standards-based curriculum, on assessing and monitoring student academic achievement, and on providing the adequate resources schools need to do this work. These standards-based, effective-schools practices appear to benefit the academic achievement of low income, Spanish speaking English Learner students in California as they do other students in the school. Further, thoughtful attention to delivering ELD instruction and evaluating its effectiveness, informed by evidence-based best practices, will continue to be important.