

# Investing in Our Next Generation:

A Funder’s Guide to Addressing the Educational Opportunities and Challenges Facing English Language Learners

## ENSURING THAT AMERICA’S NEXT GENERATION HAS THE ACADEMIC SKILLS TO SUCCEED

More than one in ten preK-12 students in the U.S. are English Language Learners (ELLs), yet a sizable achievement gap exists between these more than 5.3 million ELL students and their English-proficient peers. According to the 2009 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), only 6 percent of fourth-grade ELL students scored at or above proficiency in reading in English, compared to 34 percent of non-ELL fourth graders. These numbers reflect the urgent need to improve education for all students. But they also evidence how especially critical it is for grantmakers to deepen our collective efforts to increase learning outcomes for ELL students, if we want to close the achievement gap and ensure that America’s next generation has the academic skills to succeed.

In June 2010, Grantmakers for Education (GFE) convened funders, researchers, policymakers and practitioners to examine the role of philanthropy in supporting ELL students’ success. Recognizing that no single solution or short-term effort can adequately address this diverse and growing population, funders acknowledged the need for comprehensive, long-term commitments around ELL issues. This funder’s brief summarizes key themes from the gathering to deepen grantmakers’ understanding of our nation’s growing ELL student population, and to underscore how to make ELL success a priority across education philanthropy.

## WHO ARE OUR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS, AND WHY DOES THEIR SUCCESS MATTER?

### Who ELLs Are

Although English Language Learners are the most rapidly growing group of students in our nation’s schools, many funders, and the public generally, remain uninformed or misinformed about ELLs.

### Most ELLs are not immigrants.

While many immigrants are ELLs, the majority of ELL students are U.S.-born.

- More than 75 percent of elementary ELL students are second-generation or even third-generation Americans.
- More than one in five children in the U.S. has at least one immigrant parent.
- 95 percent of children under the age of six who live in immigrant families are born in the U.S.

Distinguishing between U.S.-born English Language Learners and their immigrant peers is important, because meeting the disparate needs of these groups may require different approaches.

**ELLs are a linguistically heterogeneous group, requiring agile, targeted solutions.** Although approximately three-quarters of ELLs speak Spanish at home, ELL students speak more than 150 different languages—and in seven states, Spanish is not the most common first language of ELLs. ELL students have varying levels of literacy in languages other than English, which can affect what interventions will most successfully enable them to achieve academic proficiency in English.

More than  
**1 in 10**  
of all preK-12 students are ELLs

There are more than  
**5,300,000**  
ELL students in our preK-12 systems

SOURCE: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition

More than  
**75%** of K-5th grade ELLs are  
2nd- or 3rd-generation Americans



SOURCE: Migration Policy Institute analysis of the 2006-2008 American Community Survey

### Where ELLs Are

**ELLs live throughout the country, including in many places funders may not expect.**

The areas with the fastest growth in ELLs are not the places that already have large, established ELL populations. As a result, the schools and communities where the number of ELL students is increasing most rapidly often have little experience serving ELLs.

In addition, ELL students attend both urban and rural schools, and each setting presents different challenges requiring appropriately targeted solutions. Even among geographically similar districts, those in which ELL students speak dozens or even hundreds of other languages face different challenges than those in which ELL students primarily speak only a few languages.

“Early interventions are important for ELLs, but we can’t think of this as a one-time inoculation. English Language Learners need support that continues throughout K-12, even into postsecondary, to develop advanced academic literacy across subjects.”

—ANDRÉS HENRÍQUEZ, *Carnegie Corporation of New York*

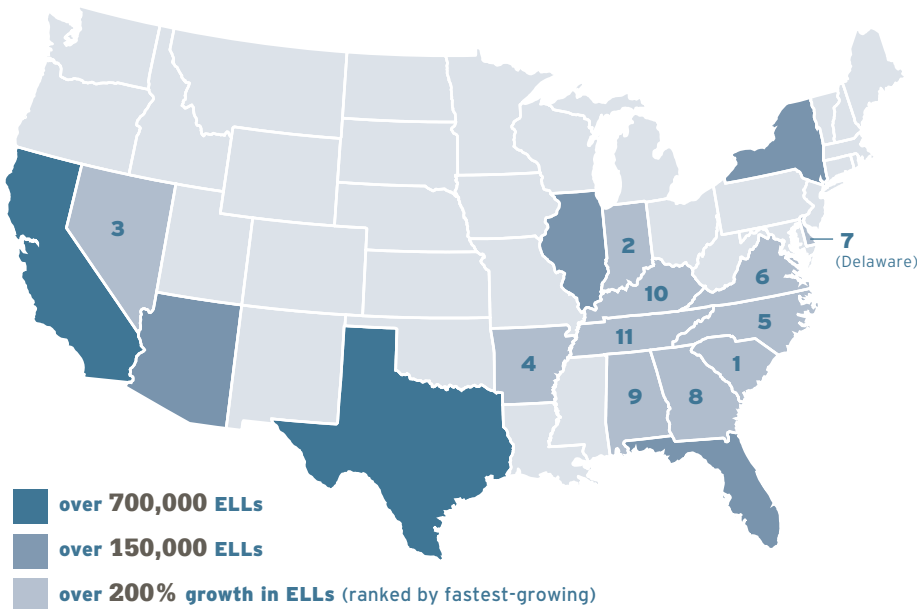
### What Affects ELLs' Success

**Some immigrant ELLs benefit from factors contributing to school success that U.S.-born ELLs and non-ELL students lack.**

Immigrants are often well positioned to achieve educational success if they have the right supports. Although immigrants account for a disproportionate share of Americans without a high school diploma, nearly one-third of Americans with doctoral degrees in 2009 were immigrants.

This disparity reflects what researchers refer to as “the immigrant paradox”: on average, immigrants do better academically, socially and even in terms of physical health than their U.S.-born peers. Researchers generally attribute these results to family structures and cultural practices that change in subsequent generations as families acculturate. ELL programs and supports that engage families and bring their culture into the learning environment can build on this potential for success. But different strategies may be needed for non-immigrant ELLs—those who are second or third generation in the U.S.—who are more likely to feel chronically disconnected from school systems.

### The fastest-growing ELL populations are in states with relatively less experience serving ELL students



SOURCE: Migration Policy Institute with data from National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition

### Developing early literacy is important, but it is not sufficient.

Achieving fluency is only the first step in attaining academic proficiency in English. Acquiring conversational fluency can take one to three years. Academic literacy—moving from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”—can take five to seven years. As a result, many ELL students speak, read and write English, yet they lack the advanced vocabulary and language skills required for success across subject areas, especially in the upper grades.

Early learning programs can have a huge impact on how well ELLs transition into the elementary grades, but continued school success requires

grade-appropriate supports that allow older students to continue to develop the increasingly complex vocabulary and skills needed for grade-level academic proficiency. Students who immigrate to the U.S. as teens may benefit from different supports than ELLs who enter American schools at younger ages. And to ensure high-level academic success and workforce readiness for the growing ELL population, postsecondary institutions need to adopt instructional and support strategies targeted to ELL students.

#### **What This Means for Education Grantmakers**

**The needs of this diverse and growing population of learners must be central to our efforts to improve educational outcomes.** Funders interested in eliminating the achievement gap, increasing high school and college completion rates, and improving workforce readiness must be active and even proactive regarding ELLs. Given the heterogeneity of our ELL populations, effective solutions have to be targeted to particular ELL groups—which adds complexity to testing and scaling what works.

Because heated debates about immigration often frame assumptions regarding ELL students, funders and others who are concerned with the educational success of all students should strive to position English Language Learning as an education issue outside of partisan debates. ELL students may be U.S. citizens, they may be documented immigrants or they may be undocumented, but their presence in our schools is undeniable. Unless we are willing to see one in ten of our students underserved and our nation's collective economic stability imperiled, we must make certain that our education systems have the capacity and commitment to drive success for ELL students.

“With ELLs, we’re talking about over one in every ten students, so whatever your focus is as an education funder, ELL is bound to touch on it.”

—KEN DOANE, *S.H. Cowell Foundation*

#### **MAKING ELL SUCCESS A PRIORITY FOR PHILANTHROPY**

Education grantmakers can play a critical role in deepening our education systems' capacity to serve the substantial and rapidly growing ELL population. To strengthen our sector's ability to take on this critical charge, grantmakers should:

- **Increase awareness and capacity within funding organizations around understanding and addressing ELL issues.** ELLs comprise a substantial and increasing demographic for the foreseeable future, requiring new strategies and understanding on the part of grantmakers. Funding organizations must identify what they need to learn and do to meet the current and emerging needs of ELLs.
- **Foster collaboration across funding organizations to leverage different areas of expertise.** As useful as it can be to increase capacity within your organization, recognize that when there is not an opportunity to cultivate in-house expertise, alignment across organizations can make the most of expertise where it already exists.
- **Raise awareness among other funders about the importance of ELL issues.** Peer-to-peer discussion among funders can be especially efficacious at the regional level, allowing grantmakers in communities with rapidly growing ELL populations to coordinate efforts to address local needs.
- **Integrate ELL strategies across your education portfolio.** Even as funders address the specificity of ELL issues, it is important not to position ELL support as an add-on outside of your core education work. Given the rising number of ELLs, achieving equity in education requires funders to think about language acquisition as central to the success of any educational initiative. (*see sidebar, page 5*)
- **Stage the “courageous conversation” about how prejudice and low expectations delimit outcomes for ELL students.** This conversation needs to happen within philanthropy, but it also must happen across other sectors, and it must be part of sustained public will building efforts. Philanthropy can be an important convener of these conversations.
- **Replicate what works—but do so thoughtfully.** Funders new to ELL work should seek out experts—practitioners, researchers and fellow grantmakers—to identify practices at the classroom, school and district levels that have proven successful for engaging ELLs (some examples are included in this report). At the same time, it is important to recognize that the success of a program often depends on the skills of the individuals delivering it, especially in the case of classroom instruction, which brings particular challenges for scaling up. Be prepared to provide the supports

necessary to ensure that what works for ELLs in one context will work in others as well.

- **Examine how strategies for success that work with other students can be applied and adapted for ELL students.** Although the specific needs of ELL students should not be ignored, funders can leverage previous investments in closing the achievement gap for low-income students and/or students of color by exploring how successful programs can be adapted for ELLs. This is especially true for ELLs whose first language is English and whose families have been in the U.S. for multiple generations.
- **Examine how effective strategies for ELL students' success can be applied and adapted for other students.** Many of the issues related to ELLs magnify the broader problems of the American education system, problems that increasingly affect the majority of students. As funders provide support for ELL success, the strategies implemented and lessons learned can drive solutions that serve all learners.

“American culture tends to individualize problems, but when it comes to educational success for ELLs, we need institution-, system- and policy-level solutions.”

—HUILAN KRENN, *W.K. Kellogg Foundation*

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### SUPPORTING RESEARCH, COMMUNICATIONS AND POLICY ENGAGEMENT TO PROMOTE ELL SUCCESS

Given the public's lack of understanding regarding ELL issues, grantmakers can fill an especially important role by providing accurate information about who ELLs are, why their success matters and how that success can be achieved. Relevant, compellingly framed data and messaging can ensure that policymakers and leaders at the school, district, state and national levels neither underestimate the scale of the issue nor remain unaware of tested, effective interventions.

Although funding organizations vary in the extent to which they directly support research, there are ample—and imperative—ways for grantmakers to put good research at the center of their ELL efforts.

- **Synthesize and interpret existing data** to create better understanding of the facts about ELLs, including what educational strategies do and don't work well for specific ELL populations.
- **Fill in gaps in the existing research** to expand accurate information and provide valid proof points.
- **Use research to inform education policy and drive programming** by

sharing best practices and scaling up effective approaches.

- **Craft strategic communications to disseminate research** in ways that best engage educators, school-system leadership, policymakers, fellow funders and the public around efforts to serve ELLs.

The specific needs of ELL students often go unaddressed in local, state and federal education policy—in part because of overlaps or gaps in jurisdictions, but also because ELLs and their families usually come from less empowered constituencies. In an increasingly polarized political climate, in which immigration remains a hot-button issue, grantmakers can bring crucial pressure to move past partisanship and address ELL as an education issue with important implications for our global competitiveness. By deepening understanding about successful approaches to ELL education, funders can build the necessary public and political will to drive improved learning outcomes. Philanthropy should play the role of critical friend, making ELL achievement a consistent priority with policymakers, so that ELL education does not fall into any gaps between state and federal policy areas, particularly in terms of instruction and assessment.

## SUPPORTING PROVEN STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Providing effective supports can make a critical difference for ELLs: in 2009, only 12 percent of ELLs were at or above proficient in fourth-grade math, compared to 40 percent of former ELLs. Former ELLs were nearly as successful as non-ELL students, 41 percent of whom were at or above proficiency.

Funders can have a high impact in:

- **Preparing our education systems, at the classroom, school and district levels.** Committed school and district leadership coupled with quality teaching can have enormous impact on improving ELL students' outcomes. ELL students do best when their teachers are experienced instructors with expertise in language acquisition across

subject areas. Effective ELL instruction incorporates students' culture into the classroom, and teachers who do at least some instruction in students' native language are effective at building students' bilingualism, an important foundation for school success.

Grantmakers can:

- \* Engage school and district leadership to prioritize ELL issues,

## Building Stronger Communities by Addressing ELL across a Funding Portfolio

**As grantmakers recognize the importance of meeting the needs of English Language Learners, they are making investments that have huge impacts for students, for schools and for whole communities.**

The S.H. Cowell Foundation funds in 17 high-poverty California communities, including urban neighborhoods, small towns and rural counties. More than 80 percent of elementary school students in these communities qualify for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program, and more than half are ELLs. ELL emerged as a focus for Cowell because it is a priority of local school leaders.

To enable school leaders and teachers to develop the expertise and resources to serve ELL students effectively, Cowell makes three main types of grants.

- 1. To support the development of instructional programs specifically for ELL students.** California law requires schools to provide ELL students with at least 30 minutes per day of explicit English-language development. Cowell funding enables districts to develop resources for these programs, including curricula, assessments and teacher training. Other grants focus on ELL students' success in subject-area classes by guiding teachers to identify academic vocabulary and language forms that can be stumbling blocks in each subject.

- 2. To support overall school improvement, with an evaluative focus on ELL students.** If teachers are to develop the particular knowledge, skills and practices they need to be effective, school systems must create conditions that sustain teachers' professional learning and support their success. Many Cowell grants focus on creating such conditions, for example, by providing time for structured collaboration among teachers. Although the goals for this kind of grant are broad, measures of progress can refer to supporting ELLs specifically. For example, if a grant supports collaboration time for elementary school teachers to establish common grade-level learning objectives and assessments, teachers should designate language-acquisition objectives along with content objectives.

- 3. To build expertise in the field and provide school systems with access to expertise.** The foundation supports research documenting the practices of schools with high-achieving ELL populations (as measured by the state standards tests); pairs providers of off-site teacher training on language develop-

ment with providers of on-site coaching and implementation support, to maximize the effectiveness of professional development; and engaged an outside research team to provide system-level assessment of ELL programs and outcomes in volunteer school districts seeking to address their growing ELL populations. Cowell is currently working with Stanford University to initiate a statewide ELL Leadership Learning Network to bring together ELL experts, providers and district leadership teams.

Employing a place-based strategy, the foundation makes complementary grants for local leadership development, affordable housing, family resource centers and youth development, as well as K-12 education. Cowell makes ELL-focused grants across program areas, for example, supporting adult and family literacy classes for parents with preschool-aged children; an after-school program in which ELL high school students guide elementary school students through hands-on science and art projects; and youth leadership programs in which bilingual teens speak, publish and organize in pursuit of neighborhood improvements.

emphasize accountability for serving ELL students and promote transparency regarding student outcomes.

- \* Support professional development for in-service teachers that focuses on success for ELLs, particularly to strengthen teachers' ability to provide language-acquisition instruction across subject areas. Research suggests a minimum of 30 hours of targeted professional development to provide the expertise teachers need in their classrooms.
- \* Advocate for the inclusion of ELL-related training for all precertification teachers, so the next generation of teachers has the expertise to deliver language-acquisition instruction across subject areas.
- \* Support alignment of certification requirements regarding ELL instruction across states, to develop a high-quality teaching force for all learners.
- \* Make sure effective teachers are placed in the classrooms and schools with the greatest needs.
- \* Ensure that ELL students have equal access to high-quality charter schools and other alternative options.

- **Designing for the complexities of continuing language acquisition, in school and out of school.**

ELLs need the time and opportunities to learn, particularly as they move from conversational fluency to advanced academic proficiency. Meeting grade-level proficiency in the early years provides an important foundation, but ELLs need continuing supports. Tailored opportunities can be critical for these students to continue building advanced vocabulary and school-related skills in subsequent grades.

Grantmakers can:

- \* Support programs that provide quality ELL learning time and opportunities in school and out of school.
- \* Invest in early learning systems, when the achievement gap can be prevented or most easily bridged.
- \* Expand investments in 0-8 for ELLs to ensure that they enter school ready to learn on par with their peers.
- \* Support preK-3rd programs to give students a solid foundation before they reach the more complex and specific areas of learning in fourth grade and beyond.
- \* Expand learning time through after-school, weekend and summer programs to give ELLs continuous and varied opportunities to apply and expand their vocabulary (especially subject-area vocabulary) and written and oral language use.
- \* Develop supports for students who immigrate during upper grades, as well as supports to serve ELL students who did not receive quality early education.
- \* Make ELL a priority in postsecondary education, especially in developmental courses in which subject-area language acquisition is critical for ELL students, and in workforce training.
- \* Invest in professional development for nonprofit staff so that out-of-school providers are prepared to serve ELLs.
- \* Create partnerships between schools and out-of-school providers to align learning objectives for ELLs, coordinate ELL-related professional development and capacity building, and track ELL student achievement in and out of school.

- **Promoting parent and community engagement.**

Although the average level of educational attainment for an ELL parent is eighth grade, ELL parents recognize the value of school for their children. ELL parents may need support to identify ways in which they can contribute to their children's school success—especially if cultural differences in expectations and assumptions prevent families and school staff from working together effectively.

Grantmakers can:

- \* Support family literacy programs. These programs strengthen parents' ability to be their child's first teacher, model a home environment that supports academic success and increase parents' capacity to communicate with school staff.
- \* Encourage school leaders to create avenues to engage parents regardless of the level of English literacy parents have, including providing parents access to assessments and other key information in their own language. Promote thoughtful use of technology, home visits, parent-teacher conferences that include translation services and other engagement strategies.
- \* Collaborate with school leaders to position schools as community centers for addressing ELL needs in the adult population.
- \* Support community-based advocacy around ELL issues, including programs that teach advocacy skills in immigrant and ELL communities.

- **Improving assessments specific to ELL students.**

*No Child Left Behind* created new levels of accountability around ELL

students' success, but it left assessment design to each state. As a result, our education systems lack coherent and consistent methods for effectively tracking how ELLs are doing, individually and in aggregate. As reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) proceeds concurrent with states moving from adoption to implementation of the Common Core and with two multistate consortia supported by federal funds building assessments aligned with the Common Core, addressing ELL students' needs can yield important national and state-by-state reforms.

Grantmakers can:

- \* Support the development of English-acquisition/ELL proficiency standards that take ELLs' native language proficiency into account, within the English language arts standards for the Common Core.
- \* Encourage states to standardize criteria for identifying and classifying ELLs and to measure ELL students' outcomes in comparable ways, both to provide consistent, comparative data on the aggregate success of ELLs and to ensure that if individual students move, their progress can still be supported and tracked.
- \* Advocate for standards and benchmarks that reflect the diversity of ELL students by addressing a student's literacy level in her or his native language and how long the student has been getting ELL instruction in the U.S.
- \* Prioritize the use of assessments to drive transparency and accountability regarding the success of ELL instruction.

## Meeting the Needs of Immigrant Teens

**English Language Learners who come to the U.S. as adolescents must simultaneously develop proficiency in a new language, learn rigorous academic content and adapt to a new culture. Although some immigrants arrive with a strong education and skills, many immigrant students have significant gaps in their prior education. By engaging students' life experiences, knowledge and strengths—regardless of their knowledge of English and/or their literacy level in their native languages—schools can prepare these young people for success in high school, postsecondary education and U.S. society.**

These older immigrant students can learn English and continue to develop their own native language skills if they are educated in an environment of high expectations with college-preparatory course work. Internationals Network for Public Schools develops and supports schools operated by public school districts in New York and the San Francisco Bay Area that serve students who have been in the country four years or fewer and who have low levels of English proficiency at the time of admission. Approximately 85 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and 70 percent have been separated from one or both parents for some period of time during the immigration transition process.

With support from local and national grantmakers, the network has developed five principles and practices that increase graduation rates for these students:

**1. Leveraging diversity:** Recognizing the extensive range of skills and literacy across the student body, classes are organized so that students work in heterogeneous rather than similarly skilled groups, on projects that emphasize peer learning and teamwork along with language acquisition.

**2. Teachers' learning mirrors students' learning:** Teachers undertake collaborative learning in heterogeneous groups, so that they have peer support for their professional development and understand their students' learning experience.

**3. Language and content integration:** Hands-on, academic, content-driven projects drive language learning. Teachers have the training and tools to support students' language development across subject areas.

**4. Experiential learning:** Internships, community service and entrepreneurship opportunities expand learning beyond the classroom while building students' participation in society.

**5. Localized autonomy and responsibility:** Schools operate with considerable autonomy, and faculty members participate in shared decision-making structures. Teams of four to five teachers design the instructional program for 75-100 students, and they are responsible for student outcomes.

- \* Engage with assessment consortia to develop pilot programs that focus on the design and development of assessment tools aligned with English Language Proficiency standards.

## ENGAGING AROUND ELL AS AN INVESTMENT IN THE FUTURE

Meeting the needs of our nation's diverse and growing ELL population will not be simple, and grantmakers must be committed to long-term investments and to approaches that respond to new needs as they arise. Comprehensive solutions must address cradle-to-career needs, including efforts that engage parents along with children.

As education funders increasingly recognize the social justice and economic imperatives of addressing the needs of English Language Learners, some grantmakers are already making substantial investments in this area. The field must develop venues for collectively identifying what we are learning from these investments. Sharing expertise across funding organizations will ease the learning curve for grantmakers who are new to ELL-related efforts; this support can be especially helpful for local funders in communities that are just beginning to have significant numbers of ELL students and families.

This diverse population is our nation's next generation, and our success will be measured by their success. Ultimately, funders need to recognize that English Language Learners present a tremendous opportunity, because addressing the complex challenges around ELL success can yield solutions and strategies that serve all students.

“If we succeed in educating ELLs effectively, it is likely that we will develop solutions that can work for all students.” —PEDRO NOGUERA, *New York University*

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[information@edfunders.org](mailto:information@edfunders.org)  
**503.595.2100**  
[www.edfunders.org](http://www.edfunders.org)