UC SANTA CRUZ LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINO STUDIES

| RECLASSIFYING AND NOT RECLASSIFYING ENGLISH LEARNERS AS FLUENT ENGLISH PROFICIENT: ACCESS AND ACHIEVEMENT | **Practitioner Research Brief 1** **March 2014** |

English Learner Reclassification to Fluent English Proficient: Meeting Criteria, Roadblocks, Opportunities, and Consequences: District 1 Years 1 and 2 Findings

A Focus on English Learners

District 1 is home to 14% of all of California's English Learners (ELs), while California is home to 33% of all U.S. ELs, the fastest growing group of K-12 students across the nation (Batalova & McHugh, 2010a; 2010b). Educational achievement remains the key pathway for reducing poverty and increasing upward mobility. Indeed, education is cited as the most important reason for lack of equality of economic opportunity (Stiglitz, 2013). Yet, ELs frequently experience not only economic poverty, but also an impoverished education in our schools. Poverty, persistent underachievement, and their consequences for diminished life chances lend urgency to developing much more effective educational policies and practices for ELs. District 1, with its high concentration of ELs (31%) and former ELs (33%), is well positioned for becoming a leader in EL education.

Research Background and Purpose

EL status ostensibly confers instructional support to develop English proficiency while providing access to the core curriculum until ELs can function in mainstream classes without such support. Reclassification to fluent English proficient (RFEP) signifies reaching that milestone. Despite the desirable intent of EL designation, delayed entry into the mainstream might be harmful to students' achievement if it delays access to core content, the full curriculum, and to non-ELs. This study is grounded in two observations. The first is the apparent discrepancy between the substantial percentage of ELs who meet state-specified minimum English proficiency and achievement criteria on the one hand and, on the other, the much smaller percentage who are reclassified as fluent English proficient in any given year. The second is that reclassification can be a gateway to full participation in the academic core and full curriculum and greater opportunity to learn (Estrada, 2014). We report findings on these issues for Years 1 and 2 of this 4-year project conducted in collaboration with District 1. The purpose of this research is to inform and improve EL educational policies and practices and to inform future research.

Research Questions

1. What percent of ELs meet all RFEP criteria, and of those, what percent are reclassified?
2. What factors impede or facilitate reclassification?
3. What are the consequences for access to the core, the full curriculum, and mainstream non-EL peers of remaining EL or reclassifying?

Research Design and Timeline

Over the 4-year period the project will provide a longitudinal view of seven cohorts of students in grades 2 through 8 at baseline and grades 6 through 12 at completion (see Table 1). The project uses a multimethod approach, answering the research questions quantitatively with student data, and qualitatively with staff interview data. Yearly student outcome data are analyzed the following project year.

Table 1. Project Design and Timeline

Project Year					
		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
School Year for Student-Level Data					
2009–10 Baseline	2010–11 Initial Reclass. Decision	2011–12 Follow-up	2012–13 Follow-up	2013–14 Follow-up	2014-15 Complete Analysis & Write up
Cohort Grade Level					
2	3	4	5	6	
3	4	5	6	7	
4	5	6	7	8	
5	6	7	8	9	
6	7	8	9	10	
7	8	9	10	11	
8	9	10	11	12	

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The Data We Analyzed: Student and Staff Samples

All students were ELs in the baseline year (2009–10). For the Year 1 findings, students entered grades 3 through 9 in 2010-11 as ELs. The Year 2 findings reported here include only students who continued as EL in grades 4 through 10 in 2011-12 who had complete reclassification data (CELDT, CST-ELA, and ELA grades) for all three years (see Table 2). These two factors account for the decrease in sample size. Demographically these students are poor (93% qualify for Free or Reduced Lunch Program), primarily Latino (94%), and U.S. born (86% in grades 3-5 and 74% in grades 6-9). Secondary students are overwhelmingly long-term ELs (84% LTELs), which we define as 6 or more years as an EL. We conducted staff interviews in 8 randomly selected schools: 2 elementary, 4 middle, and 2 high schools. School interviewees typically included the principal, English learner coordinator, and 4 teachers usually of English language development, English, math, or science who taught ELs and/or reclassified students. Interviews also included district staff.

Table 2. Year 2 Student, School, Staff, and Samples

	Quantitative Sample	
Participants	Year 1	Year 2
	(Grades 3-9)	(Grades 4-10)
Students	73,370	46,282
	Qualitative Sample	
Schools	8	8
Staff	54	55

The Alignment Challenge

To reclassify, students must meet in alignment (concurrently) state tests of English language proficiency (ELP) and English language arts (ELA) content standards, currently the CELDT Criterion and the CST-ELA at Basic or above, and ELA marks of 3 or higher (separately in listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in elementary school and a grade of C or higher in advanced ELD or English at the secondary level. Five different reclassification windows exist for elementary and 4 for secondary students (see Figure 1). Until current fall CELDT scores arrive in late January/early February the prior fall CELDT scores are used. The marking period grades that align with these windows are used as the final criterion. One can see that if in the first reclassification window, an elementary student met the spring 2011 CST-ELA and the spring 2011 marking period 3 ELA grades, but not the fall 2010 CELDT, then she would have needed the fall 2011 CELDT to be eligible in late January or early February of 2012 (the third reclassification window). If the score report in February, showed that she met the fall 2011 CELDT Criterion, but her marking period 1 ELA grades dropped, she would have remained ineligible. If her grades did not improve, she would have remained an EL for another year despite meeting the CELDT and CST criteria. During the next round of testing, if either test performance dropped, her EL status would have been prolonged further.

Figure 1. Assessments and Reclassification Windows

2011–12 Academic Year											
August	September	October	November	December	January	February	March	April	May	June	July
X					X	X	X	X			X
CELDT Fall 2010 Scores					CELDT Fall 2011 Scores						
CST-ELA Spring 2011 Score											
MP3 2010–11 Grades				MP1 2011–12 Grades			MP2 2011–12 Grades				MP3
Spring 2010–11 Grades						Fall 2011–12 Grades					Spring 2011–12 Grades

Note. X denotes when reclassification occurs. MP denotes marking period. Read vertically below each X to determine the assessments used for each reclassification window. For all analyses students have met criteria in alignment.

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What We Learned: *What percent of ELs meet all criteria, and of those, what percent are reclassified?*

1. **One fifth to nearly one quarter of ELs meet all criteria, but not all are reclassified.**

   In Year 1, 21% of ELs in grades 3 through 9 met all RFEP criteria. In Year 2, when the remaining ELs were in grades 4 through 10, 24% met all RFEP criteria. This increase is positive because each year the highest performing ELs reclassify, leaving behind their lower performing peers. Each year however, a significant minority of ELs who *met all* criteria were *not* reclassified, 8% in Year 1 and 9% in Year 2. Some schools do not reclassify when teachers do not think ELs meeting criteria are ready. In addition, lack of staff knowledge of the reclassification process and criteria led to errors such as applying the ELD portfolio as a criterion. Parents and students were also typically unaware of the reclassification process, criteria, and its implications for curricular placement.
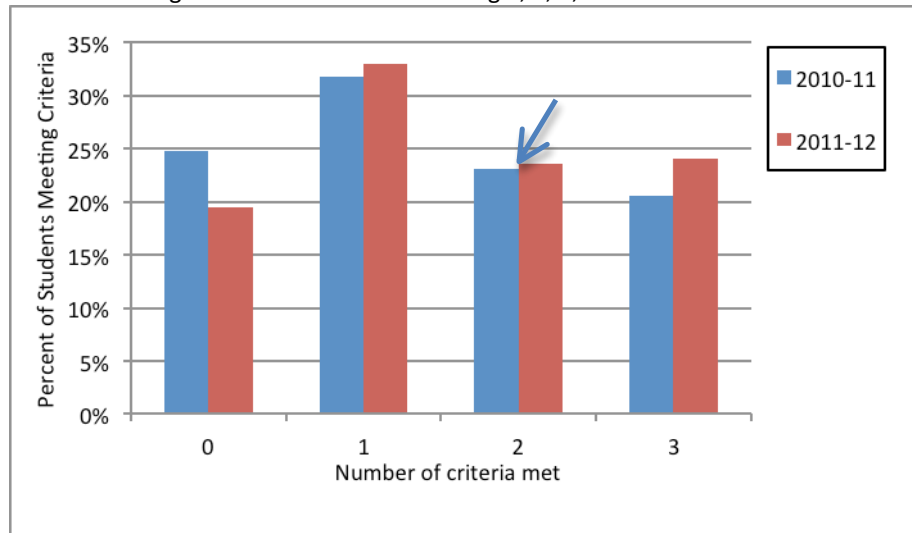
Table 3. Percent of English Learners Meeting All Criteria, and of Those, Percent Reclassified

Number of criteria met and RFEP status	Year 1	Year 2
Met all 3 criteria	21%	24%
RFEP when met criteria	92%	91%

2. **Nearly an additional one-quarter of ELs meets two of three criteria, making reclassification within reach.**
   Another positive finding is that for nearly an additional one-quarter of ELs, reclassification may be within reach because they missed only one of three RFEP criteria (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percent of ELs Meeting 0, 1, 2, and 3 Criteria

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3. **Meeting the ELP criterion (CELDT) is the major impeding barrier until middle school, when meeting the ELA content standard (CST-ELA) becomes the major impeding barrier.**
   In Year 1 for students missing only one criterion, the CELDT was the major barrier to reclassifying through grade 6. In Year 2, the CELDT was the major barrier to reclassifying through grade 5. In grades 7 through 9, the CST- ELA became the major impeding factor. In grade 10 the CELDT became the major impeding factor again (see Figure 3 below).

   Figure 3. For Students Missing One Criterion, Percent Missing CELDT, CST-ELA, and ELA Grade, by Grade Level
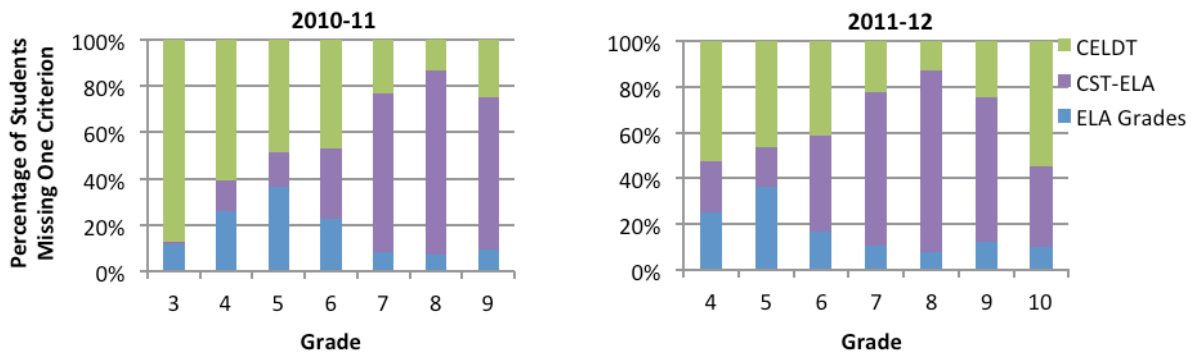
4. **Key factors impeding meeting the CELDT Criterion in elementary school include ELD instruction, teacher knowledge, teacher accountability, and test factors.**

   Staff reported the following as impediments to meeting the CELDT Criterion in elementary school:
   - Insufficient dedicated, quality ELD instruction that develops academic language and prepares students for the CELDT formats, skills, and performance requirements.
   - Insufficient teacher knowledge of CELDT question formats, skills, and performance requirements.
   - Teachers' view of CELDT as low stakes versus the CST, which is high stakes.
   - CELDT's questionable validity due to: (a) lack of alignment with ELD standards; (b) timing of its administration after the summer gap with insufficient time for academic learning; (c) poor testing conditions such as individual testing within a classroom setting and group testing in unfamiliar settings with unfamiliar teachers; and (d) repeated annual administration that students find demeaning, leading them to "blow off" the test.

5. **One potentially high-payoff opportunity for increasing RFEP eligibility includes monitoring and targeting students missing *any single* criterion, *especially CELDT in elementary school*.**
   Monitoring, targeting, and supporting students missing *any one* of three criteria would likely increase RFEP eligibility. Staff reported that the reclassification process targets students already meeting the CELDT and the CST-ELA, suggesting that students missing only the CELDT or only the CST-ELA may be overlooked in the process. Because the CELDT is the primary barrier in elementary school, targeting it has the potential to substantially increase reclassification prior to middle school. Staff consider this outcome urgent.
   To increase meeting the CELDT ELP Criterion:
   - Administer CELDT after ample instruction.
   - Support teachers' knowledge of the:
     – Importance of quality, dedicated ELD
     – CELDT question formats, skills, and performances
     – High stakes nature of CELDT for ELs
   - Provide students practice with CELDT released questions

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6. **Another potentially high-payoff opportunity for increasing RFEP eligibility *and* content standards achievement includes increasing teachers' capacity to provide access to the core.**

   Teacher reports of instructional challenges to providing access to the core converge with administrator and ELC reports of impediments to meeting the CST-ELA. This finding suggests that assisting teachers is key to increasing the number of ELs who meet the CST-ELA criterion. Both elementary and secondary teachers report a desire to instruct ELs more effectively and receiving little support to do so.

   Elementary teachers reported struggling with:
   - Pressure to cover an enormous amount of curriculum and standards with insufficient time and support.
   - Providing needed support to ELs due to the fast-paced curriculum.
   - Focusing on coverage rather than mastery and moving to the next lesson even when ELs don't "get it."

   Secondary teachers reported needing professional development on:
   - Providing access to the core in their specific content area and grade level.
   - Understanding and using academic language objectives in content instruction.

   Secondary ELD teachers reported focusing primarily on ELD and rather than ELA, due to the lack of alignment of the ELD curriculum with the ELA standards and sometimes due to lack of familiarity with those standards.

   At all levels teachers reported struggling with how to provide access to ELs with significant reading and comprehension difficulties.

7. **Acting on all opportunities has the potential to increase reclassification significantly** (see Table 4).

Table 4. Opportunities to Modify Process and Criteria to Increase Reclassification

Potentially Facilitating Factor	Potential Increase in RFEPs			
	Elementary		Secondary	
	Year 1 (Gr. 3-5)	Year 2 (Gr. 4-5)	Year 2 (Gr. 6-9)	Year 2 (7-10)
Increase staff, student and parent knowledge of RFEP process and criteria	Unknown, but potential high		Unknown, but potential high	
Reclassify all ELs meeting all criteria	833	713	309	345
Target ELs missing only CELDT	6720	2016	4211	2207
Target ELs missing only CST-ELA	697	757	5035	4839
Target ELs missing only ELA grades (or omit)	2202	1252	1935	1046
Bank scores for a year for ELs meeting all criteria	451	230	261	209
Bank scores for a year for ELs meeting 2 criteria	199	188	655	647
Total (non-overlapping)	8590	4513	9857	7916

Note. The total represents 25% of all ELs in Year 1 and 27% of Year 2 ELs.

What We Learned: *What are the consequences for access to the core, the full curriculum, and mainstream non-ELs of remaining EL or reclassifying?*

8. **ELs at the secondary level obtain the least number of core and advanced course credits and the most intervention course credits (as well as EL-specific course credits) (see Table 5). Staff tend to report that sheltered core courses compared to mainstream core courses involve less rigor, less depth, slower pacing, simplified language, and fewer language intensive assignments and activities**.

   This pattern of course credits is likely to make both meeting graduation and 4-year college eligibility very challenging to attain. Sheltered core and mainstream core courses are counted in the academic core category because the data do not permit us to distinguish mainstream and sheltered core courses. Therefore, the differences in course taking among ELs and non-ELs are likely underestimated.

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Table 5. Credits Earned in Core and Non-Core Courses with a C or Higher by Language Status (2011-12)

Language Status	Advanced	Academic Core	EL Academic Core	Academic Intervention	EL Academic Intervention	Other Courses	Total
Long-term EL	0.1	16.3	0.8	3.2	1.0	11.4	32.9
EL	0.2	18.5	2.3	2.2	2.0	12.0	37.3
RFEP 2010-11	0.4	24.9	0.0	2.6	0.1	16.4	44.4
Prior RFEP	0.8	28.1	0.0	1.8	0.0	15.7	46.5
EO	0.9	24.2	0.0	1.7	0.0	14.7	41.6
IFEP	1.3	27.6	0.0	1.4	0.0	16.5	46.9

9. **ELs at the secondary level are enrolled in courses primarily with other ELs, former ELs, and low-performing peers** (see Table 6)**.**

This finding substantiates staff views of EL isolation in secondary school.

Table 6. Average Classroom Percentage of EL and non-EL Students by Language Status (2011-12)

Language Status	Average Classroom Percentage of EL and non-EL students					Average Class Performance	
	% EL (Long-term & EL)	% non-EL (EO & IFEP)	% Prior RFEP	% RFEP11	% SPED	CST-ELA	CST-Math
Long-term EL	43	18	38	2	19	308	284
EL	42	18	38	2	10	313	291
RFEP 2010-11	20	21	45	14	10	328	301
Prior RFEP	15	23	60	1	5	343	312
EO	12	50	37	1	10	345	313
IFEP	12	41	46	1	6	353	322

10. **Staff report that remaining EL at the secondary level has significant negative academic and social consequences, which is substantiated by the quantitative pattern of fewer core and more intervention EL course credits and greater EL concentration in classes.**

The majority of staff reported that reclassifying by the end of elementary school is urgent and cited the following negative consequences of not doing so:
- Academic isolation and diminished opportunity to learn:
  - Isolation from more advanced non-EL peers, which provide more advanced language and achievement models
  - Non rigorous courses, lack of challenge, and engagement
- Academic derailment due to ESL, alternative content courses, and interventions:
  - Becoming off track for graduation and college eligibility
  - Not developing skills for academic success
  - Discouragement and hopelessness, which lead to dropping out for a job and/or marriage
- Social-emotional isolation due to "traveling together," which means separation from non-ELs and enduring targeting and bullying such as name calling
- Stigmatization from both peers and teachers
- Lowered self-esteem and academic self-concept

11. *Curricular Stream* **placement for secondary ELs is often outside the mainstream with restricted access to the academic core, the full curriculum, and non-EL students** (see Figure 4 below). **Several features of these Streams are implicated in the production of the pattern of EL core and intervention credits, EL concentration in classes, and the negative consequences of remaining EL in secondary school that staff report.**
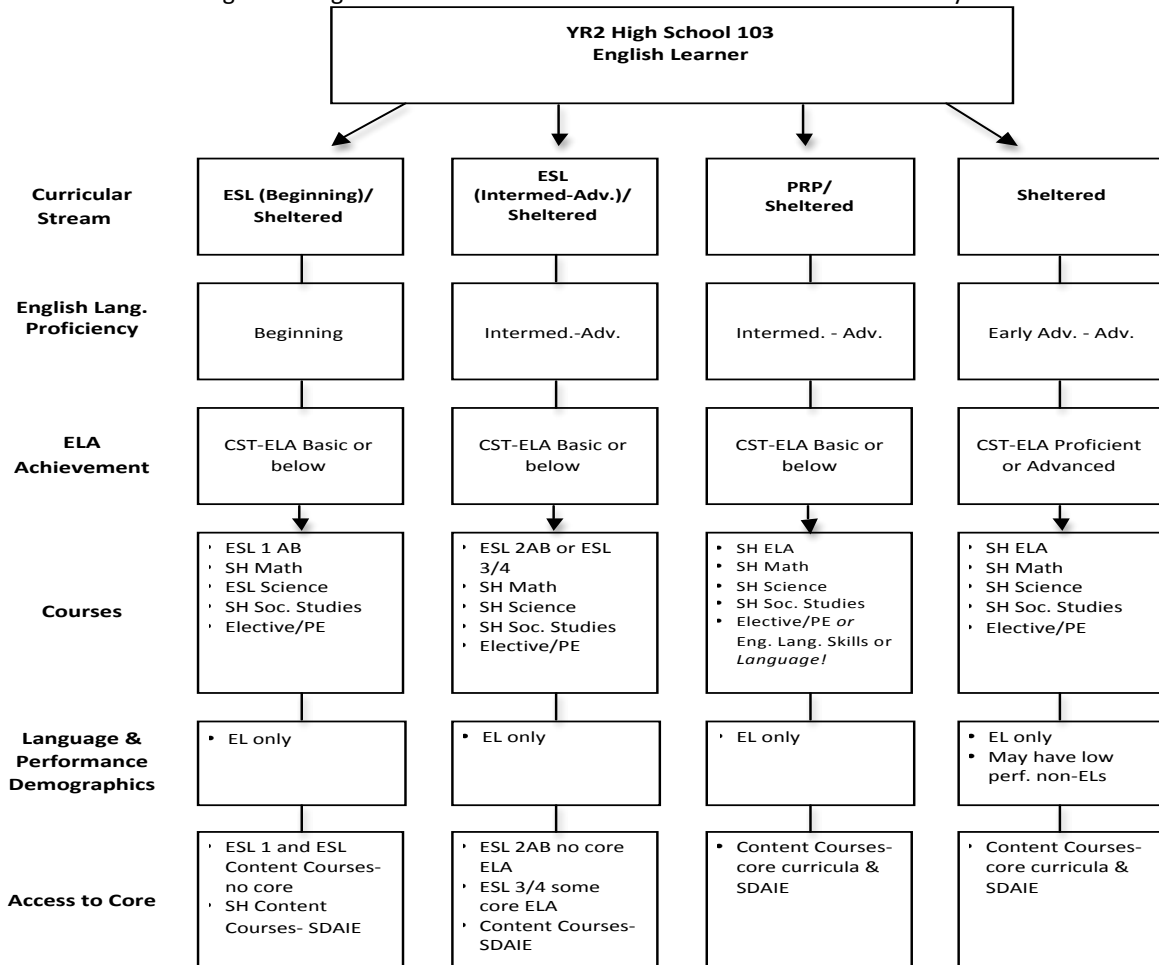
This school's *Curricular Streams* illustrate EL placement outside the mainstream and the consequent restricted access to the academic core, the full curriculum, and non-EL students that staff described at 5 of the 6 participating secondary schools (see Figure 4; see Estrada, 2014 for an explication of *Curricular Streams*). First,

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EL placement, which was based on ELP and ELA achievement, was in separate nonmainstream ELD or sheltered *Curricular Streams* where students remained isolated from the mainstream core, honors, magnet, and gifted streams and also from mainstream and more advanced non-ELs. Even high-performing ELs who had met the CELDT and CST-ELA criteria at Proficient or above typically remained in sheltered classes. Exit from EL *Curricular Streams* required reclassifying, thus, reclassification was the gateway to the mainstream academic core, full curriculum, and non-ELs. Second, in EL streams access to the core and remaining on track for graduation and 4- year college eligibility was reduced in numerous ways. EL *Curricular Streams* involving English Language Development (ELD), ELD "enabling" content courses, and interventions reduced access to the academic core and full curriculum markedly. The curricula in these courses did not align with core standards. Although advanced ELD ostensibly provides access to some core ELA, these teachers were not always familiar with ELA standards, making it challenging to provide access. ELD "enabling" content courses were intended to provide students the vocabulary and other language skills necessary to profit from core content instruction after their ELP had improved, but staff complained that they were "dumbed down." These courses, and ELD, until at least advanced levels, were usually considered electives, which garnered neither high school graduation nor 4-year college admission requirements credit, increasing the risk of derailment. In addition, sheltered core content teachers indicated that providing access was challenging. When comparing mainstream and sheltered core courses they often reported decreased depth, rigor, and pacing, use of simplified language, fewer language intensive assignments and activities, and increased use of alternative curriculum material. Finally, EL streams typically isolated ELs not only in ELD and ELD content courses, but also in majority EL sheltered classes. When non-ELs were in these classes, they tended to be low-performing and/or special education students. EL *Curricular Stream* features help us discern the processes that likely produce the negative academic and social consequences that staff report.

An exception to this pattern was one secondary school that had adopted the goal of providing equity and access by integrating ELs with non-ELs in mainstream classrooms with heterogeneous performance levels. The principal had eliminated sheltered classes and simultaneously initiated a schoolwide effort to adopt SDAIE strategies for all students. According to staff, although teachers needed to learn how to better support ELs, increase use of SDAIE strategies, and increase positive perceptions of ELs, they were beginning to use better instructional strategies. The school mainstreamed ELs outside of their ELD courses. Advanced ELD students enrolled in one period of ELD and one period of mainstream English as a cohort, but were mainstreamed for other content courses. The English department designed their lessons together, so advanced ELD students received the same lesson as the mainstream English students. Low-performing long-term ELs enrolled in an intervention Academic Literacy course that supplemented English, otherwise they were mainstreamed. Thus, reclassification did not act as a gateway to mainstream, magnet, honors, and AP courses, although the latter two types of courses had performance requirements.

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Figure 4. English learner *Curricular Streams* Common at the Secondary Level

YR2 High School 103 English Learner

	ESL (Beginning)/ Sheltered	ESL (Intermed-Adv.)/ Sheltered	PRP/ Sheltered	Sheltered
Curricular Stream				
English Lang. Proficiency	Beginning	Intermed.-Adv.	Intermed. - Adv.	Early Adv. - Adv.
ELA Achievement	CST-ELA Basic or below	CST-ELA Basic or below	CST-ELA Basic or below	CST-ELA Proficient or Advanced
Courses	• ESL 1 AB • SH Math • ESL Science • SH Soc. Studies • Elective/PE	• ESL 2AB or ESL 3/4 • SH Math • SH Science • SH Soc. Studies • Elective/PE	• SH ELA • SH Math • SH Science • SH Soc. Studies • Elective/PE *or* Eng. Lang. Skills or *Language!*	• SH ELA • SH Math • SH Science • SH Soc. Studies • Elective/PE
Language & Performance Demographics	• EL only	• EL only	• EL only	• EL only • May have low perf. non-ELs
Access to Core	• ESL 1 and ESL Content Courses- no core • SH Content Courses- SDAIE	• ESL 2AB no core ELA • ESL 3/4 some core ELA • Content Courses- SDAIE	• Content Courses- core curricula & SDAIE	• Content Courses- core curricula & SDAIE

Estrada, P. © 2013

What We Learned: Staff reports regarding mainstreaming and integrating ELs

12. **Mainstreaming high performing ELs would increase access to the core, according to staff.**

    The majority of staff support mainstreaming ELs meeting any two of three criteria or both the CST-ELA and CELDT ELP Criterion because it would increase access to the core via the routes described below.

13. **Integrating ELs with more advanced non-EL peers using a cluster model would increase opportunity to learn and reduce social isolation and its negative consequences, according to staff.**

    Staff favor a cluster model for curricular placement for ELs rather than separating them into majority EL and/or their own *Curricular Streams*.

    Staff report that both actions above would integrate ELs with mainstream and more advanced non-ELs, which would increase opportunity to learn and social inclusion and impede behavioral problems. Their rationale is that classrooms with mainstream non-ELs tend to be more rigorous and challenging and are often taught by more experienced teachers, thereby increasing access to the core. ELs in these classes are also exposed to more advanced English language and achievement models and more students with good study habits and fewer behavior problems. In these contexts, ELs are less likely to rely on Spanish to communicate with peers,

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often exhibit more of their capacity, rise to the challenge, and are less likely to become derailed by the behavior problems of a few students with whom they "travel together" for most of the school day.

Discussion

The Year 1 and 2 findings are both sobering and hopeful. They show that for the stable population of ELs in the grades studied a fifth to a quarter met reclassification criteria. However, 8% to 9% of these students were not reclassified. A good piece of news is that in Year 2, a slightly higher percentage of ELs met criteria, despite the fact that they were the lower performing students who continued in EL status. Remarkably in both years, for nearly an additional one-quarter of ELs, reclassification may be within reach because they were missing only one criterion. Surprisingly, for these students meeting the CELDT criterion was the major impeding barrier until middle school, when the CST-ELA became the major impeding barrier. Several high-payoff opportunities to increase reclassification are detailed in this report. Taken together, they could yield significant increases to reclassification—an outcome staff would likely support because they typically view reclassifying before middle school as urgent. The findings from all data sources, quantitative analysis of EL versus non-EL course credits earned, and EL concentration in classrooms, staff reports, and EL *Curricular Streams* indicate that remaining EL in secondary school restricts access to the academic core, the full curriculum, and non-EL students and that reclassification acts as a gateway to these opportunities. Staff articulated negative academic and social consequences of continuing EL status. Teachers reported a desire to instruct ELs more effectively and identified instructional challenges for providing access to the core and professional development needs. Staff also offered ways of increasing access to the core content and non-ELs, which included mainstreaming high-performing ELs and integrating ELs with the full range of non-ELs to increase opportunity to learn and social inclusion and impede behavioral problems.

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For Discussion at School Sites

1. What percent of ELs meet all reclassification criteria, and of those, what percent do we reclassify?
2. What factors impede or facilitate reclassification? Do we overlook ELs missing only the CELDT? CST-ELA? or ELA grades?
3. How do we monitor ELs, who is involved, and does it inform instruction? What structures to do we have for supporting ELCs and teachers to monitor EL progress and improve instruction?
4. What are the EL *Curricular Streams* at our school?
5. What are the consequences for access to the core of remaining EL or reclassifying in terms of: *Curricular Stream* placement? Opportunity to learn? Access to sheltered core versus mainstream core courses? Are these courses the same in terms of rigor, depth, pacing, and use of core materials?
6. What are the consequences for separation or inclusion of ELs with mainstream and more advanced non-ELs of remaining EL or reclassifying?
7. What are our school's EL policy-relevant research needs?