Equity and English Learners Post-Pandemic

State leaders should ramp up supports for EL students and their families.

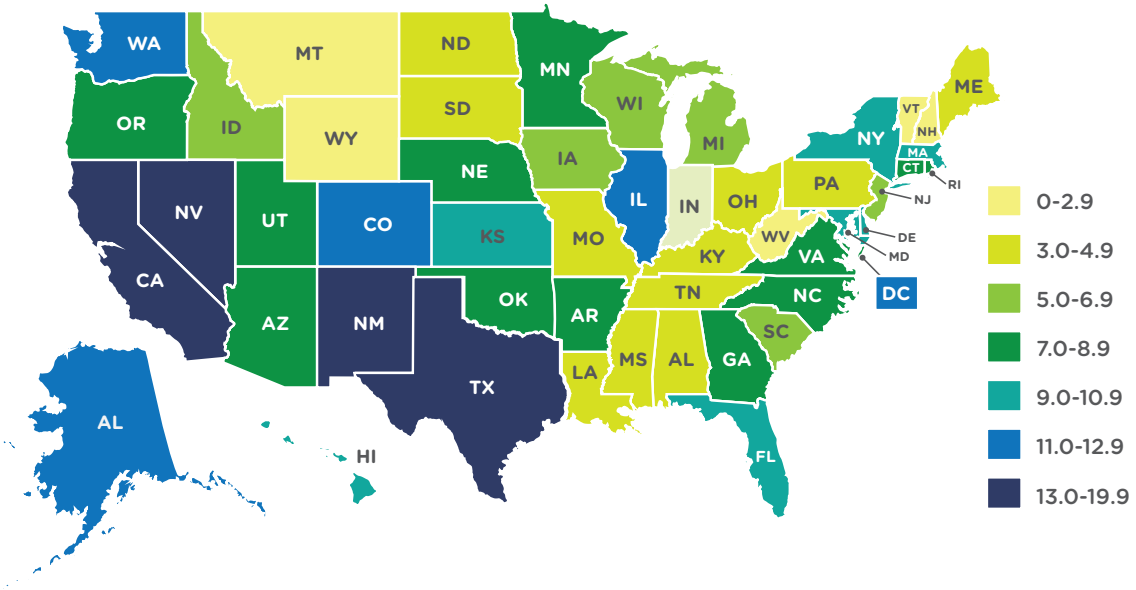
Julie Sugarman and Melissa Lazarín

The past several years have been exceptionally challenging for the nation's five million English learners (ELs) and their families. On the heels of widespread antagonism toward immigration during the Trump administration, linguistically and culturally diverse communities experienced disproportionate effects from the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, poverty and violence in Central America led tens of thousands of young people to seek refuge in the United States, with especially large numbers of arrivals in 2019 and 2021. Amidst all of this, schools strive to serve each child who enters their doors, in accordance with civil rights laws and to ensure a bright, economically secure future for children, their families, and their communities.

Roughly 10 percent of U.S. school children are formally identified as ELs, meaning that they require instructional supports to learn English and help them access state educational standards in English language arts, math, science, and other content areas. Beyond this common definition, however, ELs are a diverse group. While around three-quarters of ELs speak Spanish at home, many schools serve families speaking dozens of languages.

And ELs are no longer concentrated in a few states and districts. ELs make up at least 5 percent of the student population

Figure 1. Public School Students Who Are English Learners by State, 2018–19 (percent)



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, "English Language Learner (ELL) Students Enrolled in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by State: Selected Years, Fall 2000 through Fall 2018," table 204.20, Digest of Education Statistics *(2020), https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_204.20.asp.*

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in 34 states plus Washington, DC, which is up 15 states since school year 2000–01 (figure 1). Despite their geographic dispersion, ELs are disproportionately likely to live in poverty. About 79 percent of them are served by Title I programs, compared with 51 percent of all children. Most children of immigrants—about 88 percent—were born in the United States and are thus citizens.[1]

Because of the EL population's diversity and the fact that students exit the EL subgroup once they are fluent in English, looking at EL educational outcomes can be somewhat tricky. State accountability systems consistently show gaps in academic achievement and graduation rates between ELs and their non-EL peers. However, former ELs who have exited EL services typically demonstrate comparable outcomes to their peers who were never ELs.

Furthermore, looking only at overall EL outcomes may mask important differences between EL subpopulations, including students who enter U.S. schools with limited or interrupted formal education, other newcomers to the country, and long-term ELs—that is, students who continue to be identified as EL longer than the five to seven years than it typically takes students to develop academic proficiency.

During the pandemic, immigrant and linguistically diverse families have both borne the brunt of America's job losses and are overrepresented in professions that are considered essential to the country's response and recovery.[2] Children in these households have experienced increased economic and food insecurity, instability in their child care, and trauma. Moreover, language barriers, poor digital literacy skills among parents, inequitable access to appropriate digital devices and robust internet, and lack of digital instructional resources for ELs affected the quality of students' home learning environments during remote learning. Predictably, ELs have experienced setbacks in their English language development, academic learning, and social and emotional health due to more than a year of interrupted learning.[3] As the pandemic recedes, schools approach normalcy, and a historic investment of federal education dollars flows to states and school districts, state education leaders face the exceptional responsibility of

charting a new course for public schools and the ELs whom they serve.

State and Federal Funding

The federal government has passed three laws that together sent nearly $200 billion to public schools as financial relief and recovery from COVID-19. The funds were allotted based on schools' shares of students in poverty (using Title I formulas), but all three laws mentioned the unique needs of ELs as a potential target of funds, along with a wide range of other subgroups and educational purposes. The third measure, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act, went further, requiring states to reserve 5 percent and districts 20 percent of their share of funds to meet students' academic and socio-emotional needs and to address the pandemic's disproportionate impact on student subgroups such as ELs.

While the federal government allowed schools considerable flexibility in how they spend ARP and other COVID-19 relief dollars, states can provide technical assistance to schools on the use of funds and monitor whether schools used equitable shares of those funds on resources specifically tailored to EL needs. States can inquire, for example, whether schools implementing remote learning used funds for digital resources tailored to EL needs (such as language learning software and bilingual versions of curricular materials); outreach to immigrant families in the languages of the community; and targeted, multilingual digital support tailored to the needs of families with low digital literacy and other barriers to helping their children access remote learning. As schools transition to all in-person learning, states should encourage districts to use COVID-19 recovery funds for these purposes:

- offering afterschool and other out-of-school-time instruction for ELs that is staffed by EL specialists and focused on ELs' specific learning needs;
- purchasing curricular materials (including digital media) designed for ELs;
- hiring bilingual and culturally competent support staff such as guidance counselors and mental health practitioners;
- offering professional development for all staff on trauma-informed teaching and evidence-based instructional strategies for ELs; and
- improving data collection and reporting systems to provide better information on EL needs and progress.

Despite the unprecedented size of federal relief funds and the ongoing availability of federal Title III funds for ELs and immigrant students, adequate and equitable state funding is a more important priority than ever. Going into the COVID-19 crisis, many states were spending a smaller share of their gross state product on education than they did before the 2008 recession, and only a handful spent a sufficient amount in high-poverty districts to achieve national average test scores.[4] Overall, state and district spending is a critical element of a quality education for ELs, as most ELs are integrated into mainstream classes for much of the school day. They also benefit from schoolwide resources like libraries and recreational facilities and interventions such as reducing class size and lengthening the school day or year.

In addition to attending to the overall adequacy and fairness of their funding systems, there are other steps that states can take to ensure that schools have sufficient funds to serve ELs. First, state officials may review their supplementary funding mechanisms for ELs, both to ensure a sufficient level of funding and the appropriateness of rules such as different rates for students at different English proficiency levels and for how many years a student qualifies for the extra funding.[5] Second, ARP requires states to observe a maintenance of equity requirement, which protects high-poverty districts and schools from greater-than-average cuts in spending or staffing levels. While the maintenance of equity provision is based on school poverty levels, states and districts could apply the same principle of fairness to schools serving large numbers of ELs.

Data for Decision Making

Testing and accountability have been a matter of contention throughout the pandemic. Statewide testing for school accountability purposes was cancelled in 2019–20 but reinstated for 2020–21, albeit with lower stakes, as states received waivers for reaching 95 percent participation and identifying new schools for

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comprehensive or targeted school improvement. There is a great thirst among policymakers to understand the impact of school-building closures on student outcomes, but it remains to be seen whether the data that have been collected over the last two years can validly help them do that.

For ELs, it is particularly important for outcome data to be contextualized with opportunity-to-learn data, such as what proportion of ELs attended and were engaged in instruction (whether remote, hybrid, or in person), their access to digital resources for remote learning, and whether services such as English language development instruction were made available at the same levels during remote and socially distanced instruction as pre-pandemic. State policymakers examining assessment data should also know whether accommodations for ELs (such as the use of bilingual dictionaries or extra time) were available for tests given during the pandemic.

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In addition to data from state reading, math, and science tests, state policymakers have two new indicators required by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that should provide useful information about how well schools serve ELs. The first is the English language proficiency indicator, which shows the percent of ELs making annual progress toward proficiency and is included in ESSA accountability calculations. The second is the number of EL students who have not exited EL status after five years—a requirement for Title III reporting. Although the pandemic may affect the interpretations of these outcomes, comparisons across schools—taking numerous contextual aspects into account—may prove useful.

The issues that the pandemic underscored in regards to ELs have great resonance going forward. As discussed in a recent National Academy of Sciences report, policymakers should consider what equity indicators can help them better understand trends in student outcomes.[6] For ELs, these should include the type and amount of EL-specific instruction students receive (including bilingual education, sheltered instruction in English, and English language development), whether ELs have equitable access to schoolwide programs and resources, and the ratio of ELs to EL- or bilingual-certified instructors.

Teacher Development

During the pandemic and remote learning, teachers had the unenviable responsibility for delivering high-quality instruction under conditions that were far from ideal. Many struggled to keep ELs engaged. The pandemic put into sharp focus how school systems depend on EL specialists to not only support ELs' English language development but also their social and emotional health. They also often serve as an important touchpoint for parents of ELs, especially if they can directly communicate with them in their home language. State leaders can help ensure that districts and schools have sufficient funding to support the recruitment and retention of EL specialists and paraprofessionals, whose roles might be of even greater significance in the months and years ahead, especially as districts consider increasing learning time.

At the same time, states and school systems need to further embrace a shared system of responsibility for the education of ELs. A recent scan of state statutes and regulations found that only about half of states require course taking or professional development for general classroom teachers to support EL instruction.[7] Now that nearly two-thirds of all teachers have at least one EL in their classroom, states should consider how to strengthen preservice training and professional learning for all teachers so they can better serve ELs.[8] This training should include advising EL specialists, general education teachers, and other school staff on how to implement collaborative teaching practices and structures to support ELs.

Finally, since states and school districts might be inclined to use federal relief funds for curricula and instructional materials to address unfinished learning, all educators need to be well trained to identify materials and programs that are appropriate for ELs. Appropriate materials are aligned to state English language development standards, which help students develop academic language skills while deepening their understanding of content concepts. Even before the pandemic, EL specialists and general classroom teachers alike had insufficient expertise in incorporating digital learning resources into their instruction of ELs.[9] Looking ahead, teacher training and professional learning should be deliberate in its focus on instructing ELs.

Family and Community

The pandemic exacerbated the challenges in school-family communication in many school districts. Few districts had adequate capacity to disseminate critical information regarding schooling and health and safety precautions in families' home languages and in a timely fashion. State education agencies missed important opportunities to coordinate a systemic, equity-focused response and support district-level engagement with families. As such, many school districts found themselves experimenting with new strategies to inform and support ELs and their families.

Metro Nashville Public Schools in Tennessee, for example, implemented a navigator system in which a broad cross-section of school staff that included teachers, cafeteria workers, and other school employees conducted regular outreach to a handful of students to identify concerns and connect them to resources as needed. The effort, while experimental, incorporates key elements that are instrumental in supporting families of ELs, including personalized outreach in parents' home languages. As schools continue to normalize, state leaders have an opportunity to elevate and invest in promising family engagement practices, which may include investing in linguistically diverse staff and digital literacy training for parents of ELs to mitigate the homework gap.

Community-based organizations have been critical partners in supporting immigrant families throughout the pandemic, providing them with financial and food assistance, academic support, and mental health services.[10] States should consider ways to formalize these partnerships at the state and district levels to support ELs and their families. Familiar with and trusted by immigrant communities, these organizations can reach families and communities that many schools struggle to engage.

Conclusion

In the coming years, schools will have an opportunity to build stronger, more resilient systems to support the education of ELs. Working together with practitioners, parents, and communities, state policymakers can lead the effort to ensure equitable prioritization of resources and implementation of policies that help students meet states' rigorous learning goals. ■

[1]Julie Sugarman and Melissa Lazarín, "Educating English Learners during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Policy Ideas for States and School Districts" (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute [MPI], 2020), https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/english-learners-covid-19-pandemic-policy-ideas.

[2]Julia Gelatt, "Immigrant Workers: Vital to the U.S. COVID-19 Response, Disproportionately Vulnerable" (Washington, DC: MPI, 2020), https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigrant-workers-us-covid-19-response.

[3]Juliana Kim, "With Remote Learning, a 12-Year-Old Knows Her English Is Slipping Away," *New York Times*, December 29, 2020; EmpowerK12, "COVID-19's Impact on Student Achievement and Academic Growth in DC" (Washington, DC: EmpowerK12, 2020), https://www.empowerk12.org/research-source/covid-impact-achievement-dc.

[4]Bruce D. Baker et al., "The Adequacy and Fairness of State School Finance Systems," 3rd ed. (Washington, DC, and New Brunswick, NJ: Albert Shanker Institute and Rutgers Graduate School of Education, 2021), https://www.schoolfinancedata.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SFID_AnnualReport_2021.pdf.

[5]Julie Sugarman, "Funding English Learner Education: Making the Most of Policy and Budget Levers" (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021), https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/funding-english-learner-education-policy-budget-levers.

[6]National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Monitoring Educational Equity* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2019).

[7]Education Commission of the States, "50-State Comparison: English Learner Policies" (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, 2020).

[8]National Center for Education Statistics, "Percentage of Public School Teachers Who Teach English Language Learner (ELL) Students and Students with Disabilities and Percentage with Selected Qualifications or Coursework, by Selected Teacher and School Characteristics: 2017-18," table 209.42, *Digest of Education Statistics* (2019), https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_209.42.asp.

[9]U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service, "Supporting English Learners through Technology: What Districts and Teachers Say about Digital Learning Resources for English Learners. Volume I: Final Report" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2019), https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/title-iii/180414.pdf.

[10]Melissa Lazarín, "COVID-19 Spotlights the Inequities Facing English Learner Students, as Nonprofit Organizations Seek to Mitigate Challenges," MPI commentary, June 2020, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/covid-19-inequities-english-learner-students

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