

Schools Often Fail to Educate, Support English-Language Learners

By Corey Mitchell on February 28, 2017 11:00 AM

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Schools across the United States often provide substandard instruction and social-emotional support to the nation's English-language learners—and fail to properly train the educators who teach them, a new **report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine finds**.

Noting that limited English proficiency remains a substantial barrier to academic success for millions of children in K-12 schools, the study explores how under-resourced schools and under-prepared educators can hinder efforts to help those students learn and master English.

The committee behind the report—consisting of a who's who of experts on language acquisition and educators—also explored the struggles of specific populations of English-learners such as those with disabilities, who are less likely than their native English-speaking peers to be referred to early intervention and special education programs. The report examined the challenges for long-term English-learners—those who are not considered proficient after being educated for seven or more years in U.S. schools.

One theme remains consistent throughout the wide-ranging, 460-page report: The nation's schools must devote more resources and research to educating students who aren't native English speakers.

"Because literacy lies at the center of success in educational systems, educating dual language learners and English learners effectively is a national challenge with consequences both for individuals and for society," said Ruby Takanishi, a senior research fellow at New America in Washington who is the chairwoman of the committee that conducted the study and wrote the report.

"Despite their linguistic, cognitive, and social potential, many of them are struggling to meet the requirements for academic success in American schools, a challenge that jeopardizes their prospects in postsecondary education and the workforce with consequences for their health and well-being."

Education Week's 2016 special report, **Teaching America's English-Language Learners**, explores how well the educators are serving ELLs, who account for more than 9 percent of enrollment in public K-12 schools.

The committee behind the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report stressed the importance of schooling the parents and childcare providers of dual-language learners—children up to age 5 who are not yet enrolled in K-12 schools—to help the nation's youngest English-learners begin school with a firm foundation in the language. The study dispels the notion that students must discard their first language to learn another.

"Being fluent in two or more languages is a natural human attribute; the majority of the world's population is bilingual or multilingual," the authors write.

The work wasn't restricted to what educators and researchers would consider more traditional English-learner populations. The study also examined language revitalization efforts in American Indian and Alaskan Native communities, finding evidence that such programs can yield positive benefits for students.

The committee detailed a research agenda that identified knowledge gaps about dual-language learners and English-language learners, including comparing student achievement and outcomes in states—such as New York and Texas—that embrace bilingual education against places like Arizona and Massachusetts that have English-only policies.

The researchers also argued that more work needs to be done to understand how to address the social-emotional needs of the diverse range of English-learners, including refugees, migrant children, unaccompanied minors, and undocumented children, who face outside factors and stress while trying to learn a new language.

The group also calls on the federal government, namely the departments of education and health and human services, to expand outreach to English-learner parents in states with burgeoning ELL populations such as Georgia, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania, that may not be prepared to meet the needs of ELL students.

Here's a [link to the full report](#).

Photo: Kevin Pineda, pictured at age 18, credits a course designed to help struggling ELL students become proficient in English, and for putting him on track to earn his diploma at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles. (Emile Wamsteker for Education Week)

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