

THE ENGLISH LEARNER DROPOUT DILEMMA: MULTIPLE RISKS AND MULTIPLE RESOURCES

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Highlights:

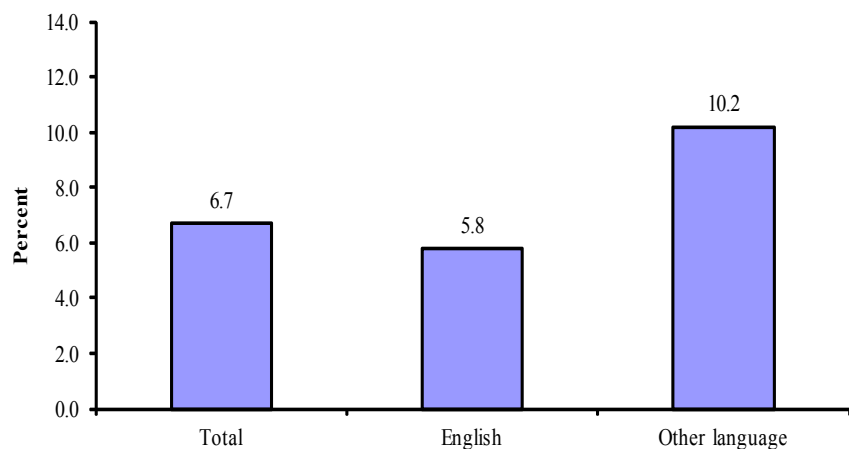
- ▶ Research shows that EL students are about two times more likely to drop out than native and fluent English speakers.
- ▶ The social, economic and health consequences of dropping out threatens both the general population as well as EL students.
- ▶ A conclusive answer to whether EL students' well-documented academic struggles are due to, or result from their placement in less challenging classes remains to be found.
- ▶ The social and academic isolation of EL students educated in separate, but not equal, EL contexts results in their social, academic and physical disengagement.
- ▶ EL students enter the U.S. educational system with numerous linguistic and cultural resources that remain largely untouched; capitalizing on these resources will not only improve EL achievement but also stem the flow of dropouts.

Current English learner (EL) students comprise 11% of students nationally, however if we consider former EL students as well, that number likely increases to one in five. Accurately identifying the EL dropout rate proves difficult as EL students are not meant to remain EL-identified for the entirety of their K-12 career. Nonetheless, research repeatedly shows that EL students are about twice as likely to drop out as native and fluent English speakers.

The dropout risk is high among EL students not only because they are learning English, but also because they are also significantly more likely than the general population to be disadvantaged racial or ethnic minorities, poor, and born to immigrant parents, each a status group at heightened risk of dropping out. Whether EL students' pronounced risk of attrition is due to linguistic, academic, background or school characteristics, or any combination thereof remains to be determined.

This Policy Brief examines the consequences, causes, and solutions to the dropout crisis among EL students and the extent to which these issues are similar or different among dropouts relative to the general population.

Tenth Grade Dropout Rates by Native Language, 2002-04



SOURCE: Analysis of data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (N=14,713)

Read the full report at: cdrp.ucsb.edu

► Consequences

The social, economic and health consequences of dropping out that threaten the general population likely influence EL students as well.

One of the less obvious, but critically important consequences of the dropout dilemma to the individual, and to society in general, is a reduction in political participation. While research links educational attainment to political participation, among immigrant students, social studies course taking in particular influences voting in young adulthood.

The future of the democratic society depends not only on the voter, but also on the informed, aware—educated—citizen to make choices and act in the best interest of the greater community.

► Causes

The academic and social disengagement motivating dropouts among the general population holds true for EL students as well.

The social and academic isolation of EL students educated in ESL programs perpetuates the notion of EL students' language deficiencies. The creation of separate, but not equal, EL contexts results in their social, academic and physical disengagement.

Immigrant EL students' negative perceptions of student-teacher interactions also fuel their disengagement, which can be exacerbated by a negative school environment.

The schools EL students attend, on average, are higher-poverty, higher-minority and poorer

than those that serve native and fluent English speaking populations. A negative school environment places EL students at even greater risk of dropping out than their non-EL peers.

While many of the same factors that produce dropouts in the general population apply to EL students, others are unique: tracking as a result of EL status, access to certified teachers, and a high stakes accountability system.

Low track placement

Current and past EL educational policies draw from the belief that EL instruction should focus primarily on English acquisition; a feat arguably accomplished at the expense of academic rigor. For too long, schools and educators have conflated limited proficiency English with limited intelligence.

Although the most recent immigrant EL students benefit from placement in EL programs as they are currently configured, it is important to keep in mind that the prevalence of long-term EL students in high school (estimates range from 60-70 percent) motivates research into the root causes of the EL achievement gap and subsequent dropout dilemma: whether EL students' relatively low academic performance stems from or results in their placement in low-level coursework.

Teacher certification

Another factor that may uniquely fuel the EL dropout dilemma is the shortage of certified, especially EL-certified, teachers. For EL students, the issue of teacher certification is twofold:

they are more likely than non-EL students to be taught by a non-certified teacher, and even when the teacher is certified, s/he likely has not received EL-specific training or certification. Training in EL instructional strategies is meant to help teachers simultaneously meet students' academic and linguistic needs.

EL certification issues affect not only EL programs, but also the growing number of schools and districts that actively enroll EL students. The persistent shortage of EL-certified teachers, coupled with a lack of EL-specific training among mainstream teachers produces a dangerous void in the professional capacity of those assigned to instruct EL students.

In addition, the placement of non-EL certified teachers in EL classrooms may contribute to the relatively low academic rigor of many EL instructional contexts, and even the negative estimated effect of ESL placement in some cases.

Accountability

Current federal and state accountability systems threaten high school completion among EL students on two fronts: via the disparaging effect of a single measure of high school completion (e.g., a high school exit exam), and the systematic pushing out of EL students in order to improve or maintain schools' scores.

Rather than improving student performance, high school exit exams lower graduation rates—especially in the high minority regions where many EL students enroll. Additionally, EL

students are subject to annual English assessments on top of content area and exit exams.

As a result, a greater proportion of EL students' instructional time is given over to assessment and preparation for assessment relative to non-ELs. Excessive assessment not only demoralizes students, but also narrows the window for actual learning. While some counselors, teachers and administrators cite a desire to meet EL students' needs as efficiently as possible, others participate in organized efforts to 'push out' undesirable EL students, discouraging them from attending school on testing days and encouraging a move to alternative or charter schools.

The contrast between EL students' classroom successes and their exit exam failures contributes to the dropout dilemma. Ironically, those most affected by exit test requirements are often the highest performing EL students. The most recent immigrant EL students with the highest levels of prior schooling outperform their later generation peers, yet are unable to pass the exit exams, despite repeated attempts.

The considerable loss of human capital embodied in these high-performing recent immigrant EL students when they opt out of the educational pipeline is devastating to both the individual and to society as a whole.

► Solutions

Specific to the EL dropout dilemma, three main reforms rise to the top in importance: Academic exposure, use of the primary language, and a shift from a deficit to an additive perspective.

Academic Content Exposure

Content area preparation is a key component of EL programs. Movement out of EL programs requires not only demonstration of English proficiency, but also grade level academic competency. Increasing the academic focus within EL programs facilitates movement of EL students out of such programs.

Timely exit, or reclassification, may also reduce the risk of dropping out as EL students will no longer stagnate academically and socially in programs that no longer meet their needs. Reframing EL programs to focus on academic rigor along with English acquisition addresses one of the root causes of the EL dropout dilemma: poor academic preparation.

Primary Language as a Resource

In a similar vein, content area coursework in the primary language represents an untapped resource.

A recent intervention project out of UCLA's Civil Rights Project, Project SOL, provides online math and science coursework in Spanish for recent immigrant youth from Mexico. Project SOL targets newcomers with high academic potential who could become college-ready if the necessary coursework were delivered in a familiar language. This implementation utilizes the untapped potential of recent-immigrant EL students—perceived by the U.S. school system as lacking, but educated and well-versed in academic discourse prior to immigration.

Programs that capitalize on EL students' resources (literacy in

the primary language) allow content area development while they acclimate both to a new academic context and to learning in English.

An Additive Approach

Ultimately, improved access to academic content and the use of students' primary language reframe EL educational programs and policies from a deficit to an additive approach.

Compared to other at-risk youth, immigrant language minority EL students enter the school system with unique assets that have the potential to support them through high school graduation and beyond.

Social, cultural and linguistic tools become resources only when valued by teachers, educators, families and peers.

Traditionally, the educational policy that motivates education has framed EL students as products of their linguistic needs. An alternative view is to discuss EL students and their educational programs not based on what they lack (e.g., English), but rather on the resources they bring to the classroom. From a policy perspective, such a systemic shift positions EL students' home language as a resource rather than a problem.

EL students enter the U.S. educational system with numerous linguistic and cultural resources that remain largely untouched by their teachers and classrooms even today; capitalizing on these resources promises to not only improve EL achievement but also stem the flow of dropouts out of the academic pipeline.

Research Reports and Policy Briefs in Print

1. **THE ECONOMIC LOSSES FROM HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS IN CALIFORNIA** (*August 2007*)
2. **THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT FOR IMPROVING CALIFORNIA'S HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE** (*August 2007*)
3. **DOES STATE POLICY HELP OR HURT THE DROPOUT PROBLEM IN CALIFORNIA?** (*October 2007*)
4. **CAN COMBINING ACADEMIC AND CAREER-TECHNICAL EDUCATION IMPROVE HIGH SCHOOL OUTCOMES IN CALIFORNIA?** (*November 2007*)
5. **STUDENT AND SCHOOL PREDICTORS OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION IN CALIFORNIA** (*December 2007*)
6. **CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS THAT BEAT THE ODDS IN HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION** (*December 2007*)
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9. **BUILDING SYSTEM CAPACITY FOR IMPROVING HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES IN CALIFORNIA** (*April 2008*)
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15. **WHY STUDENTS DROP OUT: A REVIEW OF 25 YEARS OF RESEARCH** (*October 2008*)
16. **HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS AND THE ECONOMIC LOSSES FROM JUVENILE CRIME IN CALIFORNIA** (*September 2009*)
17. **THE CONNECTION BETWEEN HEALTH AND HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT** (*March 2010*)
18. **THE HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT DILEMMA AND SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS** (*September 2011*)

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