



# **The English Learner Dropout Dilemma: Multiple Risks and Multiple Resources**

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By

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## **Introduction**

### **The EL Dropout Dilemma: A Multiplicity of Risks**

In the 2008-09 school year, nearly 11 percent of U.S. students in grades K-12 were classified as English learners (EL), and many more were former EL students, no longer identified by their 'limited' English proficiency. By definition, EL students speak a language other than English in the home (language minorities) whose English proficiency has been assessed by the school system as limited. This determination indicates that the student has not yet mastered English to the degree that s/he can benefit from academic instruction delivered solely in English.

Regulations regarding EL entry and exit criteria vary from state to state, but generally consider English proficiency upon entrance and both English proficiency and academic prowess to exit EL status (Ragan and Lesaux 2006). EL students' progress is assessed annually until results indicate that reclassification from limited to fluent English proficient is due, such that the student no longer requires linguistic support services to access academic content in English. Although there is no specific time for which EL students remain EL classified, students generally remain EL classified until they demonstrate not only English proficiency, but also grade level academic competency.

California alone enrolls more than one-third of the nation's EL students (Aud et al., 2012, Table A-8-1), with EL students accounting for 22% of the total enrollment in 2011-12, and ever-EL students for 21% (California Department of Education 2012). Similarly, a survey of students in Texas estimates that 18% of students enrolled are or were ever-EL-identified (Flores, Batalova, and Fix 2012). While not all EL students are children of immigrant parents, the great majority of language minority children are. Over the past two decades, children of immigrant parents have accounted for the bulk of the growth in the school-age population: from 13 percent

in 1990, to 23 percent in 2009 (Fortuny and Chaudry 2011). This demographic shift has presented schools and educators with an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse student body.

Whether EL students currently comprise one-in-five (ever-EL), or one-in-ten (current-EL), future workers, future voters and future taxpayers nationally, their educational pathways will shape the economic and demographic future of the nation. The ability of EL students to graduate from high school will increasingly influence the American economy, labor market, and higher education system. This report will explore the causes, consequences and ultimately, potential solutions to the EL dropout dilemma. In particular, I will explore whether and how the causes, consequences and solutions for the dropout dilemma among the population in general may or may not apply to EL students in particular.

Many, although certainly not all, children of immigrants speak a language other than English. The English proficiency of all language minority students must be assessed upon entry into U.S. schools. Those students whose English is determined to be not yet sufficient to master academic content in English are thus identified as English learners (EL) by U.S. schools (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition 2011). Identification into the EL status group alerts educators in a school that a language minority student requires linguistic support services in order to access content area instruction. Once EL students identified, schools are expected, if not required, to alter their educational offerings to meet EL students' linguistic needs. EL services are not isolated offerings in select schools in a few target regions. The rapid growth of the immigrant population has occurred not only in traditional immigrant receiving states such as California, Texas and Florida, but also in relatively new destinations such as Georgia, the Carolinas and Iowa (Fortuny and Chaudry 2011). In addition, the recent growth in

the Hispanic/Latino population corresponds to increases in both the immigrant and EL populations. In California, 85 % of EL students speak Spanish (California Department of Education 2012), while nearly 80% do so nationally (National Clearinhouse for English Language Acquisition 2011). The prevalence of both immigrants and Latinos among the EL student population speaks to the importance of investigating the overall school experience, not just linguistic development.

In historically immigrant receiving destinations, educational programs and policies have long been in place to address EL students' linguistic and academic needs. In contrast, districts, schools and educators in new destination communities have had to adjust their programs and policies to meet EL students' distinct learning needs (Wortham, Murillo, and Hamann 2002). The pedagogical shift necessary to address EL students' educational needs does not always occur seamlessly. In fact, in an analysis of national data from both the *Schools and Staffing Survey* and Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (*ELS*), Dondero and Muller (2012) found evidence of a growing Latino-White achievement gap that they hypothesize may be due to the limited linguistic support services available in the majority of new destination districts. In short, not only has the share of EL students increased overall, but their presence is now felt in states, districts, and schools that previously enrolled few, if any, EL students.

Defining an accurate dropout rate is complicated even under the best of circumstances, as illustrated repeatedly throughout the briefs in this series of California Dropout Research Project (CDRP) reports. Understanding the dropout dilemma among EL students is even more complex. The consequences, causes and solutions, although similar in some ways to the general dropout issue, are also unique to EL students' educational, social and linguistic experiences. Unlike general education students, EL students must learn English while also learning math, science and

history *in* English. In fact, EL students must learn to balance the expectations of their immigrant parents with those of their teachers and schoolmates in the adopted culture. EL students are a linguistically identifiable subgroup of the K-12 student population whose schooling and academic placement are shaped by a series of policies put in place to address their linguistic and educational needs.

Yet, accurately identifying the dropout rate among EL students remains fraught with difficulties. EL students are a constantly changing demographic; the most academically and linguistically proficient among them exit from the EL status group on a regular basis. Tenure with the EL label depends on not only English proficiency, but also academic performance, both of which are also highly and independently associated with dropping out. Disentangling English proficiency from academic ability is a daunting task that has long challenged educational researchers and policymakers.

To further complicate matters, EL students often belong to at least one or more additional ‘at-risk’ status groups: e.g., disadvantaged racial/ethnic minorities, poor, highly mobile, immigrant, and whose parents have low levels of education (Capps, Murray, Ost, Passel, and Herwanto 2005). Aggregate analyses show EL achievement levels far below those of their native- and fluent-English speaking peers (Fry 2007), however the careful researcher will also take into account additional measures of individual and environmental risk. Combined with low achievement, these factors may increase the EL student’s risk of dropping out.

Schools’ assessment and interpretation of students’ ability also come into play. Prior research using national data found an increased likelihood of identification with a learning disability based on a student’s *ever* having been in an English as a second language (ESL) program (Shifrer, Muller, and Callahan 2011). Such a distinct association is particularly

troubling given that special education students demonstrate a greater incidence of dropping out relative to non-special education students (Thurlow and Johnson 2011), suggesting the risk may be even greater among EL students. School mechanisms may work to produce inequitable educational outcomes based on student characteristics.

Beyond individual risks, the schools EL students attend may contribute to the EL dropout dilemma. A recent study of Chicago schools found that enrollment in a low-performing high school drove EL students' significantly lower graduation rates. The association with dropping out persisted above and beyond the effect of early academic performance experienced by all students (Gwynne, Lesnick, Hart, and Allensworth 2009). For the most part, EL students enroll in two distinct school settings: the majority attend urban, high-minority schools characterized by overcrowding and high student-teacher ratios; and the remainder, rural or suburban schools where EL students comprise a relatively small portion of the student body (Cosentino de Cohen, Deterding, and Clewell 2005; Fry 2008). In fact, the top 24 EL-enrolling districts account for a full quarter of the nation's EL enrollment (Batalova and McHugh 2010). In these urban, high minority schools, EL students' peers are also economically disadvantaged, learning English and likely to be taught by un-or under-credentialed teachers (Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, and Callahan 2003). Although generally not plagued with poverty and limited resources, majority white suburban and rural schools are rarely prepared to meet the unique academic and linguistic needs of the growing EL population (see earlier reference to Dondero and Muller 2012). School level factors alone or in tandem with individual characteristics may increase an EL student's risk of dropping out of high school. Understanding the similarity and differences of many of these issues for EL students compared to the general population will allow for a better understanding of the unique nature of the EL dropout dilemma. Only once we clearly understand

these distinctions, can we begin to identify effective solutions that are unique to the EL student population.

### **Incidence and Trends**

Educators in U.S. schools are tasked with the almost immediate English proficiency assessment of all language minority students upon entry into the school system. Schools use these measures of English proficiency to determine which language minority students will require linguistic support services, provided either through English only, or through some combination of the primary language and English (i.e., bilingual instruction). Dropout rates among language minority students are much higher than students from English only backgrounds. In 2004, 31 percent of language minority youth ages 18-24 not enrolled in school had neither completed high school nor earned a GED, compared to only 10 percent of native English speakers (Klein, Bugarin, Beltranena, and McArthur 2004). Among tenth grade students in 2002, language minority youth were twice as likely to drop out as students from English backgrounds (Rumberger 2006).

EL students are generally perceived to be the most at-risk among language minority youth. As EL students in U.S. schools must master both English and the academic content in English to succeed academically, they may be particularly vulnerable to content-area struggles as they acquire English. Current and past EL educational policies drew heavily on the belief that EL students' instruction should focus heavily on English, often at the expense of academic content, to improve their academic standing (Gandara and Baca 2008). This belief continues to provide the impetus for programs such as Arizona's four-hour English blocks, which take precedence over EL students' content area placement. (Gándara and Hopkins 2010). Today, a number of

scholars argue that schools' placement of EL students, which may prioritize linguistic above academic needs, may in fact exacerbate the academic struggles of some EL students. Some provision of linguistic support services are of course required as EL students develop English proficiency, however research suggest that current programs may favor the most recent immigrants, and may poorly serve long-term, more English proficient students who fit the recent immigrant-EL prototype less well (Callahan, Wilkinson, and Muller 2010; Mosqueda 2010). The great heterogeneity of English proficiency and academic competency within the EL student population complicates the provision of EL programs, especially appropriate support services. A conclusive answer to whether EL students' well-documented academic struggles (Fry 2007; Kim and Herman 2009) are *due to*, or alternately, *result from* their placement in less challenging classes remains to be found. In the case of EL student placement, distinguishing cause from effect requires a careful, systematic approach. Not only must EL students learn English and learn math, science and history *in English*, but they also face additional barriers to their success based on their race/ ethnicity and social class.

Whether low levels of English proficiency threaten achievement, or school processes designed to support EL students may inadvertently prioritize language over academics to hold them back, it is clear that they do not yet experience academic equity with their English proficient peers as required under federal educational policy (Castañeda v. Pickard 1981; Lau v. Nichols 1974). For example, in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), Silver, Saunders and Zarate (2008) show that only 33 percent of EL students graduate from high school, compared to 58 percent of former EL students reclassified as fluent English proficient, and 54 percent of native English speakers. Given that LAUSD alone enrolls six percent of the nation's



EL students (Batalova and McHugh 2010), the strikingly low EL graduation rate presents cause for concern.

Despite the difficulties in accurately defining a dropout rate for EL students, given the threats outlined above, researchers repeatedly show that EL students are more likely to drop out than native English speakers, or even fluent English speaking language minority students (Kim and Herman 2009; Olsen 2010; Silver, Saunders, and Zarate 2008; Watt and Roessingh 1994). Whether EL students' greater risk of attrition is due to linguistic, academic, background or school characteristics, or any combination of these, remains to be determined. In their review of 25 years of dropout research, Rumberger and Lim (2008) identify EL students, along with disadvantaged minorities (Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans), and males, as more likely to drop out than students belonging to other status groups.

Using 2010-11 graduation data from the state of California, Rumberger illustrates the disparities in dropping out of high school by status group. Figure 1 shows the disparities in the dropout rate for students in each of these three at-risk status groups relative to the population as a whole: EL students, socio-economically disadvantaged youth, and students identified for Special Education services. The reader will note that at the bivariate level, 25 percent of EL students are identified as high school dropouts, compared to 18 percent of both special education and socioeconomically disadvantaged students and 14 percent of the overall population.

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### **Concurrent Risk Factors**

Identification with one or more additional at-risk status groups may contribute to EL students' overrepresentation among high school dropouts.

***Racial-ethnic minority status.*** Nationally, nearly 80 percent of EL students speak Spanish as a native language (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition 2011) and are of Hispanic<sup>1</sup> origin. Although Hispanic dropout rates have declined since 1970, this does not tell the whole story for a population that has changed significantly in the last 40 years, nor does it properly address the risk relative to other groups. Hispanics comprise one of the fastest growing sectors of the U.S. population; a high dropout rate poses a threat to the economic and civic future of American society. Nationally, nineteen percent of Hispanic youth drop out, compared to 10 percent of Blacks, and five percent of Whites (Fry 2009). Although certainly not all EL students are Hispanic, the vast majority are, complicating the EL dropout dilemma with the well-documented Hispanic-White achievement gap.

***Children of immigrant status.*** Kao and Tienda's (1995) immigrant optimism hypothesis suggests that immigrant parents' optimism and high expectations for their U.S.-raised children may diffuse any number of negative environmental or contextual influences. Research repeatedly documents the relatively high expectations immigrant parents hold of their children (Glick and White 2004; Rosenbaum and Rochford 2008; Zhou and Bankston 1994), regardless of the societal and academic roadblocks these children of immigrant parents may face. For many EL students, their status as children of immigrants—either foreign-born, first generation, or U.S.-born, second generation—may protect them relative to their third-plus generation coethnic peers. Using national data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (*NELS*), Driscoll (1999) found that among Hispanics, both first- and second generation sophomores, and second generation eighth graders were significantly more likely than their third-plus generation peers to

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<sup>1</sup> The research literature employs both the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino*, while federal and state educational entities use the term *Hispanic*. For consistency of usage, I will use the term *Hispanic* for the most part, and *Latino* when citing the research literature employing this term. Technically the term *Hispanic* refers to any person of a Spanish language heritage, and the term *Latino* to individuals whose origins are in Latin American countries.

complete high school once English proficiency was taken into account. Driscoll observed a protective factor among first- and second-generation youth not readily apparent among later generation students: the immigrant optimism effect. Immigrant parents are by definition novices in the navigation of the U.S. education system, likely to also be racial/ethnic minorities whose patterns of underachievement in U.S. schools are well-documented (Crosnoe 2006; Hirschman 2001). Together, these two factors would appear to place many recent immigrant EL students at considerable risk of dropping out; however, the theory of immigrant optimism suggests there may be protective factors at play, shielding the children of immigrant parents from the full negative influence of these factors.

In an investigation of graduation rates among immigrant and native-born minorities using a national sample of students, Perreira and colleagues (2006) found that first generation students were more likely to graduate from high school than their later generation counterparts. The authors also found a negative association between dropping out and English proficiency as measured by a vocabulary test, suggesting that greater English proficiency may buffer some immigrant students from the risk of dropping out. Perreira's team (2006) argued that first generation students' higher odds of graduation could be attributed to a combination of immigrant optimism and differences in human, social and cultural capital between children of immigrant and U.S.-born parents.

Both Perreira and Driscoll's findings bolster Kao and Tienda's immigrant optimism hypothesis (1995) which suggests that immigrant parents' optimism and expectations for their U.S.-raised children may diffuse any number of negative environmental or contextual influences. Although immigrant youth may be protected from dropping out, net of other important factors, neither of the aforementioned studies takes EL status and schools' processing of EL students into

account in predicting immigrant students' academic attainment. Among first- and second generation immigrant youth, placement in one or more ESL courses during high school has been found to preclude full academic access and exposure (Callahan, Wilkinson, Muller, and Frisco 2009). Later, using the *Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS)* dataset, the authors were able to clarify that the bulk of the negative effect of ESL placement was experienced by the more English proficient, longer-term EL students who, although less likely to be placed in ESL, comprised the majority of the population (Callahan, Wilkinson, and Muller 2010). In fact, the authors found that the most recent immigrants with the lowest levels of English proficiency experienced a significant, positive estimated effect of ESL placement on both math outcomes: course taking and test scores. That recent immigrants are the EL students most high school teachers expect—and for whom most EL programs are designed—is not lost on the authors. These findings call into debate what types of services will best meet the needs of the growing high school EL student population, and how to best provide these services.

Although the most recent immigrant EL students benefitted from placement in ESL coursework, it is important to keep in mind that the majority of high school EL students are long-term students who fit the recent-immigrant EL stereotype less well. This body of work calls to question the debate surrounding the root causes of the EL achievement gap, and subsequent dropout dilemma: whether the EL students' relatively low academic performance *stems from* or *results in* their placement in low-level coursework. Placement in academically appropriate courses—academic and linguistic—is critical to all students' preparation for high school graduation and further post-secondary endeavors.

***Parental education level.*** The association between parental education and student achievement (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfeld, and York 1966),

suggests that EL students are much more likely to have parents with little education than their non-EL peers, and thus may be at greater risk for academic difficulties. Along with parental education levels, recently parents' and even students' legal status has been added to the mix. The EL student herself, or her family members may lack documentation, adding additional stressors to the social and educational integration processes (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes 2009). The larger social discourse regarding immigration and immigration reform has come to negatively affect the schooling of numerous children of immigrants whose parents, or who may themselves lack legal documentation.

### **The Costs and Consequences of Dropping Out: Individual and Societal**

The costs of dropping out of high school are steep, both to the individual who must navigate the adult labor market without a base set of academic credentials, and to the society at large that must incorporate an inadequately prepared individual into its' economic and civic spheres. High school dropouts not only earn lower wages and have fewer economic, social and educational prospects compared to high school graduates, but they are also quite costly to society as a whole (Belfield and Levin 2007; Catterall 1987) . Dropouts often do not participate as fully in the labor market as their counterparts who graduated from high school; when employed, their wages are strikingly low (Rouse 2007), and as a result, they pay less in taxes than high school graduates and more educated groups (Belfield and Levin 2007). Dropouts cost more to society through their use of social services and health care than high school graduates (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, and Rouse 2007), and they are more likely to become involved in criminal activities due to their limited economic prospects (Lochner and Moretti 2004). Their bleak situation contributes to a

cycle of poverty that crosses generations, as their children will have a parent unable to successfully navigate the educational system to their child's benefit.

### **Earnings and Educational Potential**

*In general.* The labor market outcomes of those who drop out of high school are bleak at best. In models predicting wages, hours of work, job tenure and unemployment experiences, high school dropouts generally face bleak economic futures with little chance for social or economic mobility. In fact, Heckman, Lochner and Todd (2008) demonstrated a 50 percent rate of return on wages for high school graduates compared to dropouts, confirming the severe economic penalty to the individual for dropping out of high school. Dropping out has consequences not only for the individual, but for society as well; since the early 1990s a gender gap in college attendance has begun to emerge. In 2005, females earned 58 percent of bachelors' degrees in the United States (Snyder, Dillow, and Hoffman 2007). High school dropouts are not inconsequential to this growing educational disparity; Heckman and LaFontaine (2008) found that half of the gender gap in college-going could be attributed to significantly higher dropout rates among male adolescents alone. Gender disparities in high school graduation contribute not only to differences in earnings, but also educational potential.

*Among EL students.* The review of research that led to the present report was unable to identify empirical work exploring whether the wages of EL students who drop out of high school differ significantly from those who graduate from high school. Lacking as well were any studies exploring the economic returns of earning a General Equivalency Degree (GED) among EL students. Prior research suggests that a GED is not economically equivalent to a high school diploma with respect to future earning power; of considerable consequence given the research suggesting that educators and administrators may guide EL students toward GED exams in lieu

of high school graduation (Menken 2008). Careful, systematic analyses of national data could determine whether EL students are in fact actively directed toward GED certification, and the answer would have important implications for educational policy and practice. To date, a dearth of research addresses the potential societal impact of disparate dropout rates among EL students. The economic and academic consequences to the individual EL students, as well as to the largely immigrant communities from which they hail, will increasingly shape the economic and civic future of the nation.

### **Civic and Political Participation**

*In general.* One of the less obvious, but critically important benefits associated with education is an increased probability of political involvement, as dropouts are significantly less likely to vote and to participate in the core of civic society. In her ethnographic exploration of dropouts, Fine (1991) suggested that the community suffers the most, both economically and socially, when schools produce inequitable outcomes among students. Communities require not only the political investment of voting, but also the social, religious and civic involvement that strengthens societal bonds from within. 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.

From a cost to the community perspective, not only are dropouts likely to employ more social services (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, and Rouse 2007), as they are more likely to remain close to home than high school graduates, but they are arguably less likely to contribute to the social, civic and political fabric of their home community (Bartels 2008). High dropout rates in a lead to low levels of social support and connections (Ross and Wu 1995). Dropouts are unlikely to participate in local school bond elections, much less volunteer their time and/or energy,

leaving the community without an audible civic voice (Fine 1991). It is not only the simple act of voting that disadvantages dropouts in the civic sphere. Bartels (2008) argues that the increasing economic inequity plaguing the U.S. economy represents even deeper divisions in the political representation of the rich and the poor. Dropouts are less likely to vote to address their own economic self-interests, and as those in power attain more wealth, they are less likely to support programs and services that will address the social and economic interests of high school dropouts. Rumberger (2011) articulates the link between the limited political involvement of high school dropouts and the isolation of political power among the moneyed classes, resulting in a direct threat to democracy.

*Among EL students.* The relationship between dropping out and political participation may be even more acute among EL students, the vast majority of whom are children of immigrant parents. In a study investigating the role of high school social science coursework and performance on young adults' later political participation, Callahan, Muller and Schiller (2010) found social science coursework to matter for immigrant youth in a way that it did not for children of U.S.-born parents. Specifically, net of overall academic achievement and attainment, the authors found that social science course credits were directly associated with the odds of voting and registering to vote among children of immigrant parents, but not for the children of U.S.-born parents (Callahan, Muller, and Schiller 2010). This work demonstrated the direct role that schools have in shaping not only individuals' civic futures, but also those of their communities.

Callahan and Muller (forthcoming) further illustrate how the direct transmission model of political participation that drives civic and political development among children of native-born parents may not apply to immigrant youth. Rather, the authors argue, schools and schooling play



a pronounced role in political participation among children of immigrants. The authors highlight the critical importance of high school graduation to ensure a minimal level of civic and political participation among the growing children of immigrant population. Given the potential of social science course taking to shape EL students' future political participation, high school graduation has the power to influence not just their individual futures, but those of their communities as well.

### **Causes: Engagement, Academics and EL Students**

Multiple models of dropping out have been proposed over the years in an attempt to not only better understand, but also to staunch the dropout dilemma (Rumberger 2011). Focused on academic experiences, psychological factors and school engagement, Finn (1989) proposed two distinct models to predict dropping out of high school: a frustration/ self-esteem model, and a participation/ identification model. The former identifies early school failure as the mechanism that will later produce low levels of self-esteem. Low self-esteem in turn will trigger anti-academic behaviors and ultimately dropping out. The latter model identifies involvement, both behavioral and emotional engagement with the school, as key to predicting dropping out. In the second model, students' lack of participation in the social milieu of the school leads to disengagement with school and schooling, eventually facilitating the dropout process. Student engagement, both academic and social, is central to both models. Several life-course models take family interactions, parental expectations and early educational experiences into account as well. Tinto's (1993) model of post-secondary institutional departure incorporated family background, prior school experiences, skills and abilities, as well as educational goals and motivations. When Rumberger and Larson employed Tinto's model in predicting dropping out between eighth and

twelfth grades, they found not only strong associations with academic and social engagement, but also that mobility in particular heightened students' risk of dropping out. Moving beyond the home and into the school, Wehlage and colleagues (1989) developed a model that focused on school membership and educational engagement. Later, Battin-Pearson and her team (2000) further developed a model addressing issues of deviance—from behaviors to affiliations, to negative socialization within the family.

Building on these multiple models, and focusing on several core elements of EL students' educational experiences, the next section of this report will explore the causes of dropping out as they fall into three broad categories: engagement, opportunity to learn, and teacher expectations. First, this report will explore engagement and mobility as they shape students' ability to form strong social and academic ties. Mobility in particular warrants consideration as EL students experience high rates of residential and school mobility relative to native English speakers and the general population (Conger, Schwartz, and Stiefel 2007; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). The second section will investigate opportunity to learn, as shaped by both academic stratification (tracking) and pressures from a national accountability system. The third and final section will address teacher quality and certification as factors uniquely associated with EL students' likelihood of dropping via their academic preparation and performance.

### **Academic and Social Engagement**

*In general.* A student's integration into the social and academic spheres of the school are argued to drive the decision to remain in, or drop out of high school (McNeal 1997; Ream and Rumberger 2008). On the brink of adulthood and independence, adolescents begin to grant greater influence and importance to friends than to family members (Borman and Schneider 1998; Lesko 2001). Friendships in adolescence offer support and influence students' decision-

making processes. Middle class students who reported close friendships with youth who had already dropped out, or were working, were found to be among those most at-risk of dropping out of high school (Ellenbogen and Chamberland 1997). Using national data, South, Haynie and Bose (2007) found that both students' positions within their peer networks, and their peers' academic performance mediated the association between mobility and dropping out. Social involvement as measured by friendships and positioning in peer networks is highly associated with a young adult's risk of dropping out.

Racial and ethnic disparities in social and academic engagement further contribute to the dropout dilemma among underrepresented youth. Social and academic identification, highly associated with the decision not to drop out of high school, are significantly lower among Black and Hispanic youth, relative to their White and Asian counterparts (Griffin 2002). The strength of the association between social involvement and dropping out varies with race and ethnicity as well. Although Ream and Rumberger (2008) found school-oriented friendships to reduce students' risk of dropping out, they also found ethnic disparities in engagement due to the lower rates of social and extracurricular involvement among Mexican-origin youth. These findings suggest that these particular youth do not experience the full benefit of high school's informal networks in deflecting the risk of dropping out. A student's integration into the informal social support network of a school represents a measure of stability and belonging.

High levels of mobility present an additional challenge to a student's social and academic engagement and mobility in and of itself presents a complex association with dropping out. Using data from the *National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS)*, Rumberger and Larson's (1998) early work positioned mobility both as a risk factor for dropping out and as a symptom of disengagement. Rumberger and Larson's models reinforced the complexity of understanding

mobility itself, neither a clear-cut, nor isolated mechanism. Mobility can be the product of multiple economic, educational and familial forces. Prior research exploring family status and dropping out found that 30 percent of the difference in the risk of dropout associated with step-, as opposed to intact-, family status resulted from the residential mobility attached to the change in family status (Astone and McLanahan 1994). The context in which mobility occurs clearly matters and must be taken into account. Transfer early on in high school has been found to lead to long-term educational benefits (Swanson and Schneider 1999), but the same does not hold true for transfer later, nor under adverse circumstances (Langenkamp 2010). For the most part, however, high rates of mobility during adolescence are associated with an increased risk of dropping out.

*Among EL students.* The demographic differences in student engagement noted earlier may place EL students—often racial and ethnic minorities—at greater risk of dropping out than their White, native English speaking peers. In an engaging ethnographic account of the development of an EL student’s academic and social engagement, Ek (2009) investigates the high school experiences of Edgar, a Mexican immigrant EL student in urban California. Edgar’s narrative painted the school as a prison for immigrant youth, replete with expectations of passive compliance—an environment that did little to foster either social or academic engagement. The immigrant EL students in Edgar’s school were socially, academically and physically disengaged from the mainstream student body. Edgar’s academic experiences occurred primarily in an ESL classroom designed to address students’ language “disabilities” and focused on rote-skill development. Ek’s study illustrates the processes at play in schools that produce social and academic disengagement as they relate to an EL student’s decision to drop out.

Focusing on Korean immigrant EL students, Lew (2004) further explores perceptions of student-teacher interactions and school engagement. Korean EL students in Lew's study perceived their teachers to be uncaring and disparaging, and internalized this reception as a disincentive to remain in high school. The processes by which EL students' academic and social engagement developed as a byproduct of a negative school climate in both Ek (2009) and Lew's (2004) studies, align with findings from other descriptive studies of the academically, socially and physically disengaged learning environments experienced by EL students (see, for example: Dillon 2001; Harklau 1999; Katz 1999; Olsen 1997; Romo and Falbo 1996; Valenzuela 1999). Suppressed social and academic engagement among EL students appears to stem, at least in part, from social and educational experiences in negative school environments.

The association among EL students between an isolating school environment and dropping out may not be surprising given the greater likelihood of EL students to attend high poverty, high minority schools compared to non-EL students (Fry 2008; Silver, Saunders, and Zarate 2008). Likewise, the relatively high level of mobility among immigrant EL students (Olsen 1997; Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix 2000) has the potential to increase their risk for dropping out. Ultimately little, if any, research has explored academic and social engagement and dropping out among EL students relative to their non-EL counterparts.

### **Opportunity to Learn**

Although Finn's models address academic performance, social behaviors and psychological factors, they leave several key attributes also associated with students' achievement unaccounted for. Specifically, two school mechanisms central to student performance, academic stratification (tracking) and teacher expectations are relatively unaddressed by these models. Just as academic

and social engagement shape students' school connections and performance, students' academic performance is also associated with dropping out. Academic achievement reflects not only student ability, but also school factors such as course placement and teachers' expectations. The following section will explore these two factors as they are related to dropping out, first with respect to the general population, and then with a focus on EL students.

### **Academic Stratification or Tracking**

*In general.* A student's placement within the school's academic hierarchy (tracking) shapes not only learning, but also the quality and quantity of the social connections forged, relating directly back to academic and social engagement. Gamoran's (1987) early work on academic stratification using national data found that student placement within the school may matter more to overall cognitive development than whether or not a student is even enrolled in school. Systematic placement of racial and ethnic minority students in low-track classes has been found to decrease their likelihood of high school graduation, and increase the risk of dropping out (Lucas 1999; Oakes 1985). Romo and Falbo's (1996) work on Latino achievement in Texas found that students whose parents had little understanding of the differences between levels of high school classes were likely to accept placement into low-track coursework without question. School counselors in particular have been reported to directly influence students' decisions to drop out of high school: Latino dropouts interviewed in focus groups by Avilés and colleagues (1999) frequently referred back to their counselors' assertions that they would not graduate from high school. Students, especially children of immigrants whose parents are unfamiliar with the U.S. system, often fail to question the authority of the counselor who has placed them in low-level academic coursework. While these classes may or may not contribute to the completion of high school graduation requirements, it is unlikely that the low-level content will prepare

students for college, much less the labor market. In fact, recent research points to a relatively new trend in which schools focus only on the highest achievers, to the detriment of the rest of the student body (Attewell 2001). This stratification of academic experiences and exposure results in lower levels of achievement among all but the most highly prepared.

Likewise, grade level retention, one of the more drastic measures taken to counter low achievement, in theory allows a student an additional year to master grade level content. In practice, however, the effectiveness of retention remains contentious at best. Among middle school students, retention prior to sixth grade has been found to positively predict dropping out, even net of other important academic and social characteristics (Roderick 1994). One must keep in mind, however, that the causal relationship between grade retention and dropping out may be spurious at best (Gottfredson, Fink, and Graham 1994); further research is necessary to identify alternate explanations. In a study using national data, Rumberger (1995) found the relationship between retention and dropping out to vary by race/ethnicity. Although Hispanic and Black students are more likely to experience grade level retention than their White counterparts, being held back significantly predicts dropping out among Hispanic and White youth, but not Blacks (Rumberger 1995). Racial differences in the association between retention and dropping out suggest that further research is necessary to explore the specifics of the situation.

***Among EL students.*** The debate regarding the root sources of the EL achievement gap remains at full force; whether low levels of English proficiency result in placement in low-level academic content, which in turn produces low levels of academic performance presents a classic *Catch-22* for EL education. Early high school course placement strongly predicts end of high school achievement. In a study focused on Chicago students and schools, Gwynne and colleagues (2009) found ninth grade performance to be a much stronger predictor of high school

graduation than English proficiency for all students, regardless of linguistic status. Notably, among language minority youth, reclassification out of EL status prior to sixth grade predicted the highest levels of achievement. This relationship may be due to students' placement in appropriate academic grade level content following reclassification, or alternately may reflect a pattern of early and/or timely reclassification of the most linguistically and academically capable EL students, who are among the most academically capable students in general. In addition, although the newest EL students performed equally as well as or better than their coethnic peers in ninth grade coursework, they were significantly less likely to graduate (Gwynne, Lesnick, Hart, and Allensworth 2009). Taken together, these results suggest an unsettling mismatch between academic performance and graduation among EL students.

The students who struggle academically are also most likely to be placed in low-level coursework. Whether EL students perform below their peers is not at issue; rather the root cause(s) of this performance gap is. Researchers have suggested that EL students' low achievement may be due to their exposure to subpar academic content as they learn English (Harklau 1994; Olsen 2010). Although unable to measure cognitive development as Gamoran (1987) did previously, Callahan, Wilkinson, and Muller (2010) attempted to isolate the effect of placement in ESL coursework on academic outcomes (course placement) and achievement (test scores, grades). Taking English proficiency, race/ethnicity, parent education, prior achievement and a myriad of other factors into account, the authors found placement in ESL during high school to limit access to college preparatory math and science courses among some language minority youth.

Systematic placement of EL students in lower level content area classes due to their EL status—not their academic ability—poses a very real threat to their academic and social



potential. Content area placement cannot, and should not be associated with a student's linguistic competency in English. An academically capable beginner or emergent proficient EL student need not be held out of grade level math and science; rather instruction in these courses should and can be modified to address EL students' linguistic development. For too long, schools and educators have conflated limited proficiency English with limited intelligence; the parameters of EL programs need to address the range of English, as well as academic proficiency across the EL student population.

The subset of EL students in Callahan and colleagues' study who experienced a negative estimated effect of placement in ESL on their math and science course-taking did not fit the traditional EL student stereotype: they were not recent immigrants with relatively low levels of English proficiency. Rather, this group resembled the long-term EL students whose low achievement has been documented elsewhere in the literature (Callahan 2005; Olsen 2010). Long-term EL students may be especially at risk for dropping out given their prolonged tenure in EL programs, with relatively little access to rigorous academic content during the time they are purportedly learning English. This issue of course is not limited to EL students, but rather applies to the majority of students placed in relatively low-level academic coursework. Once a student has been labeled in need of remedial instruction, be it in language or in content, the academic expectations held for her are lowered as well.

Grade level retention among the native English speaker population is problematic at best, suggesting that its relatively high frequency among EL students merits careful consideration. Educators' anecdotal reports of placing recent immigrants below grade level upon entry or even holding them back a grade to allow additional time to acquire English while mastering the content, are not uncommon. The practice of EL retention is well-enough known that educational

outlets very clearly and publicly admonish against it in handbooks and guidelines for states, districts and schools<sup>2</sup>. In a recent court case concerning the education of EL students in the El Paso Independent School District (Fernandez 2012), investigations revealed systematic grade retention of EL students. Many of these EL students were recent immigrants from Mexico who were retained, if not pushed out of high school, in order to prevent their participation in the state of Texas' tenth grade accountability system. Anecdotal evidence suggests that El Paso is not alone in placing EL students at risk of retention for linguistic or accountability, rather than academic, reasons (Menken 2008). Due to educators' practice of retaining EL students to allow time to acquire English, the association between retention and dropping out among EL students merits careful consideration.

Another aspect of academic stratification is the systematic pushing out of relatively low-performing students in order to improve or maintain the reputation of the school, often in the guise of maintaining discipline and strict academic standards (López 2002; Losen 2011). In her work exploring high school EL students' educational experiences in New York City, Menken (2008) found that counselors and administrators frequently guided these youth, especially recent immigrants, toward a GED rather than high school graduation. Counselors, teachers and administrators indicated a range of linguistic and academic reasons for their recommendations, most often citing a desire to meet the student's needs as efficiently as possible. The systematic routing of EL students out of the academic mainstream is not isolated to New York City public schools.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the Colorin Colorado website that provides information and advice on English language learners (<http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/assessment/placement/>) and a publication by the National Association of School Psychologists ([http://www.nasponline.org/resources/instruction\\_curriculum/retentionho\\_educators.pdf](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/instruction_curriculum/retentionho_educators.pdf))

In a recent lawsuit against the El Paso Independent School District (Fernandez 2012), former students and their parents charge that the superintendent led an organized effort to ‘push out’ many undesirable, often EL, students, in order to boost test scores to meet statewide accountability goals. Under then-Superintendent López’s plan, EL students and other low achievers were not only discouraged from attending school on testing days, but were actively encouraged to enroll in alternative or charter schools. Educators offered little to no follow up to ensure that students re-enrolled elsewhere. The push-out of EL and other low-performing students was so widespread that language minority parents and youth coined a term for these drop outs, *los desaparecidos*, reminiscent of the political casualties of past South American dictatorships.

### **Teacher Expectations**

*In general.* Low-level course placement not only exposes students to less academic content than they would experience elsewhere, but also to teachers who often expect little of their students. In a recent review of the literature, Jussim and Harber (2005) argue that regardless of actual student performance, low teacher expectations may have a powerful effect among students from stigmatized groups, such as EL students. Similarly, Ream (2003) documents the danger to students whose teachers may “like” them, but hold low expectations for them, providing the youth with what Ream terms *counterfeit social capital*. Educational theorists have documented the negative effect of teachers who may care (or feel sorry) for their students, yet expect little of them academically (Thompson 1998). Although the teachers may truly care for their students, their relaxed expectations work against their students’ best interests.

*Among EL students.* Low expectations on the part of the teacher, while detrimental to all youth (Thompson 1998) may be particularly powerful among EL students, who may rely to a

greater degree on school-related measures of their worth than their native English speaking, native-born peers. The conflation of low expectations and ‘caring’, alternately referred to as the “*Ay Bendito*” (Antrop-González and De Jesús 2006) or “*Pobrecito*” (Berzins and López 2001; Manzo 2003) *syndrome*, has proven particularly problematic in the education of EL and language minority students. The “kind” nature of these syndromes is deceptive, masking the potential for long-term damage in the form of depressed educational achievement and attainment. The teacher purportedly cares a great deal for the student, yet holds very low academic expectations; the student, recognizing that the teacher cares for her, incorporates those expectations into her own academic self-concept. Minimal expectations inhibit students’ academic development—as illustrated by Ream’s (2003) concept of counterfeit social capital—and limit their post-secondary prospects, possibly even increasing their likelihood of dropping out of high school. Limited academic exposure and low teacher expectations masked in caring pose a considerable threat to EL students’ high school graduation, yet together may also provide a key to one aspect of the EL dropout dilemma.

### **Causes Specific to the EL Dropout Process**

***Teacher Preparation and Certification.*** One factor that may uniquely fuel the EL dropout dilemma is the shortage of certified, but especially EL-certified, teachers, that typically defines EL programs (Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, and Callahan 2003; Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, and Driscoll 2005). The shortage of EL-certified teachers is not limited to EL programs alone, but applies to the growing number and proportion of schools and districts that actively enroll EL students.

In a national survey of teacher preparation programs in colleges of teacher education, Menken and Antuñez (2001) found that very few certification programs were designed to

prepare bilingual educators. In and of itself, this is not entirely unexpected given the relative rarity of bilingual instructional programs among EL support services nationally (Hopstock and Stephenson 2003). More striking, however, were the survey results suggesting that even fewer teacher certification programs prepared mainstream teachers to meet the needs of EL students. Rather, EL instruction was to be left entirely to EL specialists. This lack of EL training among mainstream teachers is increasingly disconcerting as the number and proportion of EL students in U.S. schools continue to increase.

Later, in a survey of rural bilingual and ESL educators who worked with high EL populations, Batt (2008) found that nearly 2-in-5 (39 percent) did not consider their peers who served EL students to be qualified to do so. In response to an open-ended question on the survey, a full twenty percent of the teachers indicated that a lack of knowledge and skills needed to meet EL students educational needs presented one of the most pressing challenges to their practice. The persistent shortage of EL-trained teachers, coupled with a lack of EL-specific training among mainstream teachers points to a dangerous void in the professional capacity among those assigned to instruct EL students. Together these two areas of need exacerbate the struggles of the few EL-certified teachers who are required to provide services for too many EL students across too many schools. Both the rural Midwest and the Southeast have experienced a sharp rise in their immigrant, EL student populations over the past decade (Millard and Chapa 2004; Wortham, Murillo, and Hamann 2002). The need for EL-certified teachers is no longer isolated to traditionally high immigrant receiving states such as Texas, California, New York, Florida, Illinois and Arizona.

Research exploring teacher certification and preparation in traditionally EL areas suggests that the problem is not just one of new immigrant destinations, although certainly the

effects may be more pronounced in these areas (Dondero and Muller 2012). Even in California, which boasted a long history of bilingual and EL education prior to the passage of the English-Only Proposition 227 in 1998, the need for EL-certified teachers persists. In a survey of California teachers, Gándara and Maxwell-Jolly (2005) found that EL students were more likely to be placed with an under-certified teacher than their non-EL peers. In addition, the most qualified EL teachers, those who held bilingual, cross-cultural and ESL training, also expressed the greatest concern about the heterogeneity of EL student needs across the grade levels (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, and Driscoll 2005). Not surprisingly, the more training and certification teachers held to teach EL students, the more confident they felt in their positions.

In California, EL students are markedly more likely to be taught by an emergency-credentialed (non-certified) teacher than their non-EL peers, even when accounting for the effects of poverty (Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, and Callahan 2003). In fact, 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 issues is meant to help teachers simultaneously meet EL students' academic and linguistic needs.

This disparity in teacher certification may be reflective of the quality of educational programs experienced by EL students, both in terms of their general education, and the linguistic support services required to address their unique academic and linguistic needs (Castañeda v. Pickard 1981; Lau v. Nichols 1974). Despite federal requirements that EL students receive linguistic support services (Hakuta 2011), a national survey of services and support for EL students reported that 16 percent received no EL services or support; an additional 34 percent received some, but not extensive, EL services in an English-only environment (Hopstock and

Stephenson 2003). Research has long connected teacher quality and qualifications to student learning (Darling-Hammond 2000); the disparity in teacher quality experienced by EL students relative to their non-EL peers suggests that teacher quality alone may be a risk factor in the EL dropout process. In addition, although not measured here, the placement of non-EL certified teachers in EL classrooms might contribute both to the relatively low academic rigor of many EL instructional contexts, and even the negative estimated effect of ESL placement in some cases.

*Accountability: Can Pressure to Improve EL Students' Education Backfire?* Much like teacher certification, the current national accountability system under No Child Left Behind (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education 2001) may inadvertently place EL students uniquely at risk of both dropping out and being pushed out of high school. Proponents claim that NCLB's attention to certain subgroups (i.e., EL and special education students) forces schools and educators to focus educational and instructional attention on these students. In response, however, critics contend that NCLB holds schools to unfairly high standards for students who face additional challenges on their academic pathways. Multiple high stakes assessments may discourage EL students who perform well in classroom-based activities, prompting them to drop out of high school (Valenzuela 2000). In addition, under NCLB, schools are penalized if the EL student subgroup fails to demonstrate sufficient gains from year to year. The threat of federal sanctions provides an incentive for educators and administrators to persuade the lowest performing EL students to enroll elsewhere. Whether a student population is racially, economically, or linguistically diverse matters little in the measurement of school effectiveness under current federal standards. This demographic blindness may produce an unintended consequence: educators' identification of EL students as particularly problematic to and

incongruent with school success. Schools may construe EL students as undesirable, a threat to overall test scores and measures of student growth.

Researchers have found that the relationship between individual student performance and school evaluation has prompted some educators and administrators to ‘push out’ the least desirable students, those most likely to perform poorly on statewide accountability measures (Darling-Hammond 2006; Menken 2008). In fact, in the previously-referenced El Paso ‘*desaparecidos*’ scandal (Fernandez 2012), then-superintendent García’s systematic program to prevent EL students from participating in the Texas state TAKS assessment system began the process for many to drop out entirely. Although it may seem intuitive to place the onus for student achievement solely on the schools that educate them, current accountability efforts arguably act as a disincentive to schools to actively engage EL students across the pipeline.

The association between accountability and dropout is felt not only at the school level, but also by the students who must take the state-mandated tests. By their very position learning English, EL students’ test scores often reflect their proficiency in English as much as their competence in math, science, or history (Abella, Urrutia, and Shneyderman 2005; Lam 1993). Chronic mis-measurement of EL students under the purview of an educational system that questions neither the validity of test results for language minorities, nor the use of individual student scores to measure school and teacher effectiveness ultimately constructs EL students as a liability to the school. Although architects of the current accountability system might argue that it was designed to improve the achievement of the most at-risk students (Ravitch 2010), its current incarnation has resulted in increased barriers to EL achievement. Failure on minimum competency and other tests motivates students’ decisions to drop out of school (Bishop and Mane 2001), especially among racial and linguistic minority youth. The disconnect between EL



students' content area competency and test performance is highlighted in the National Research Council's report on high stakes assessment (Heubert and Hauser 1998). In fact, Reardon and colleagues (2010) found that rather than improving student performance, high school exit exams effectively lowered graduation rates, especially in high minority regions. Findings from student interview research suggest that failing a minimum competency exam causes even strong students to doubt their ability to graduate, opening the door to dropping out (Catterall 1989). In addition to content area and minimum competency tests, EL students are subject to annual English proficiency assessments (Menken 2008; Wright and Li 2008). As a result, a greater proportion of EL students' instructional time is given over to assessment and preparation for assessment compared to their non-EL peers. Excessive assessment not only demoralizes EL students, but also narrows their window for actual learning.

In a multiyear ethnography of an urban, high Latino school in Texas at the onset of the accountability movement, Valenzuela (2000) investigated the relationship between the school social context and dropping out among immigrant language minority youth. This work focused on the experiences of Mexican-origin youth who performed well in their classes, but lacked the English proficiency necessary to pass the high school competency exam. Valenzuela's (2000) work documented the oppressive influence of a school-wide and statewide focus on test mastery and graduation rates among EL students and other minority youth in a high minority-enrolling high school. Ultimately, she argued that the school's focus on tests and testing, rather than individual efforts and achievements devalued the students' hard work and diminished their academic accomplishments. This work vividly portrayed the disillusionment EL students and other language minorities expressed as they contemplated the schism between the relatively high grades they earned in class and their inability to pass the state exit exam. Ironically, those most

affected by the test requirements were among the highest performing in class. The most recent immigrants with the highest levels of schooling in their home country performed relatively well in U.S. classrooms, compared to their later generation peers, but were unable to pass the exam 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 nontrivial at best. Ultimately, the lost talent is devastating to both the individual and to society as a whole.

### **Solutions to the EL Dropout Dilemma: Targeted, Comprehensive and Systemic**

The dropout dilemma remains a substantial threat to the economic and civic future of the nation; however, research and practice point to several potential solutions. Some of these solutions might work for large groups of students, not just EL students. Others are more narrowly tailored to the educational and programmatic needs of EL students. Based on a framework developed by Rumberger (2011), the following section will explore solutions to the EL dropout dilemma on three levels: (1) targeted reforms at the programmatic level; (2) comprehensive reforms at the school level; and (3) systemic reforms to the field of education in general. Systemic reforms in particular are of interest; not tailored specifically to the dropout dilemma, these reforms are designed to improve educational experiences and outcomes in general. In theory, systemic reforms will reduce dropout rates as more EL students engage with education in a positive, constructive manner, however their effectiveness remains unmeasured.

#### **Targeted**

Targeted reforms are programmatic, designed to address issues unique to a local context, or to specialize instructional offerings to the educational and linguistic needs of a specific student body. Mentoring and outreach programs, such as AVID, PUENTE, and Upward Bound, are all

targeted reforms designed to develop students' relationships with adults outside of the family context (Gándara 2002; Riggs, Bohnert, Guzman, and Davidson 2010). These targeted intervention programs provide youth with tangible social resources and connections that can be translated into knowledge and understanding. School and program based connections range from the formal student-teacher relationship in the classroom; to the less scholastic, but still school-sanctioned relationships students develop with coaches and advisors through extracurricular activities.

*1. Mentoring: Building social capital.* Authentic teacher-student bonds benefit all students. Stanton-Salazar (2001) focuses on the importance of these relationships in his tome describing Mexican-American youths' access to these sociocultural resources. The most successful students are those whose relationships with their teachers can be characterized by both high academic expectations and targeted, instrumental 'caring' (Antrop-González and De Jesús 2006; Ream 2003; Ream 2005). The development of interpersonal bonds has been found to be particularly effective in buffering at-risk students, such as those with learning disabilities, from dropping out of high school (Dunn, Chambers, and Rabren 2004). EL students, new not only to the English language, but often to the U.S. school system and culture as well, may also be especially predisposed to the benefits of interpersonal relationships and bonds formed with academic role models and mentors. Through their research, Antrop-Gonzalez and De Jesus, Ream, and Stanton-Salazar all found that Latino and immigrant students in particular have the potential to benefit academically from the social capital embodied in mentoring relationships.

2. ***Extra-curricular involvement: Building in- and out-group ties.*** Outside of the classroom, extracurricular involvement offers a second type of targeted reform expected to diminish the risk of dropping out. Participation in school-based clubs and activities bolsters students' connection to the school, not only through the friendships they develop with peers during these activities, but also through the relationships they develop with coaches, advisors and mentors. Not all extracurricular involvement is equally effective in promoting school engagement, however. McNeal (1995) found that although athletic and fine arts involvement in particular work to derail the dropout process, the strength of the association between race and dropping out is formidable and cannot be overlooked. Likewise, although some research has shown sports involvement may be problematic due to its association with alcohol consumption and other risky behaviors (Eccles and Barber 1999), other studies suggest it may help to prevent dropping out among some, but not all, minority youth, depending on the school context (Melnick, Sabo, and Vanfossen 1992). And still other researchers suggest that the benefits to extracurricular involvement appear to differ little across racial/ethnic groups. For example, Davalos, Chávez, and Guardiola (1999), found that both Mexican-American and non-Latino White students were 2.3 times more likely to remain in school when they participated in extracurricular activities than when they did not. Although the strength of the association between extracurricular involvement and dropping out may or may not vary by race/ethnicity, ultimately the evidence suggests that involvement reduces the chances of dropping out of high school.

The challenges to increased EL participation must address racial, social and cultural expectations of youths' behavior. Schools and educators may wish to invest time and attention in carefully building an infrastructure to support students' extracurricular participation. Maxwell-Jolly (2011) elaborates on the potential of out of school time (OST) programs to bolster the achievement of EL students, preventing them from dropping out of high school. The ability of OST programs to fortify and develop primary language literacy skills, provide cultural role models, meet students' individual differences, and foster stronger engagement between the home and the school suggest that they may be well-suited to address EL students' distinct linguistic and academic needs. Further research will be necessary to determine the magnitude of the effects of extracurricular involvement among EL students relative to their non-EL peers.

3. ***Migrant education: Building success via instrumental caring.*** Mentoring through formal, academic avenues has also been found to improve achievement; the migrant education program offers an intervention infrastructure that specifically targets EL students. In an analysis of data from both a long-term ethnographic study of a high school, and a second study of migrant education advisors across several high schools, Gibson and Hidalgo (2009) illustrate the powerful role mentoring can play in EL students' academic and social trajectories. The migrant programs they studied reported remarkably high (80 percent) graduation rates among the primarily EL, Mexican-origin migrant student population, with a substantial segment accepted into four-year colleges.

The migrant advisors involved in Gibson and Hidalgo's analyses balanced multiple roles (e.g., teacher, advisor, counselor, coach) while always maintaining high expectations of their students. Expecting academic success from their students, the migrant education advisors often acted as counselors, taking the initiative to move their charges into more academically appropriate classes. The migrant advisors acted to catch students before they could fall through the cracks; their actions ensured the migrant EL students would be prepared to graduate. Gibson and Hidalgo argue that the success of the migrant population relative to other EL students is due in large part to the social and cultural capital embedded in their relationships with the migrant advisors as they steer the youth toward higher education and adulthood.

### **Comprehensive**

Reforms in the second category, comprehensive, address school-wide solutions to educational problems. In light of the considerable research documenting EL students' academic stratification, two direct, comprehensive solutions are proposed to address the EL dropout dilemma. The first addresses systematic access to academic content, and the second, fully certified teachers.

1. *Opportunity to learn: Academic content in EL programs.* Nesserodt's (2007) case study of a high school reform process provides an account of a comprehensive response to lower-than-expected EL performance. The documented reforms were aimed at maximizing EL student success aligned to NCLB guidelines. These comprehensive reforms included academic and linguistic support services integrated across all content area departments: math, science, social science, ESL and English language arts (ELA). Educators from all disciplines worked together toward a

content-based literacy concentration. Focused on EL students' academic development, teachers and staff members were able to identify incongruences between the EL students being served and the programs serving them, addressing these issues through curricular modifications. Although EL graduation rates were not reported, EL students' success as measured through English and math test scores and continued attendance was predicated on academic and linguistic supports across all departments. Two factors shaped this reform: first, *all* teachers became responsible for teaching EL students, and second, EL students' academic development became an instructional priority.

Similarly, Gold (2006) argues that EL programs must address comprehensive content area development, not just English proficiency if EL students are to graduate from high school. Content area preparation is a key component of EL programs—a component often considered to be missing, if not incompletely addressed. Movement out of EL programs requires not only demonstration of English proficiency, but also grade level content area academic proficiency (Mahoney and MacSwan 2005; Ragan and Lesaux 2006). Shifting to an academic focus within EL programs would arguably improve the movement of EL students *out* of such programs. Timely exit from EL programs, or reclassification, has been found to reduce the risk of dropping out (Silver, Saunders, and Zarate 2008). Reframing EL education to focus on academic rigor along with English acquisition has the power to address one of the root causes of the EL dropout dilemma: poor academic preparation.

In addition, EL education cannot continue to rest solely on the shoulders of the EL program and staff. Gold (2006) recommends a more comprehensive view of EL

education, traversing departments and even systems—a framing of EL education beyond the traditional school walls, and beyond the ESL teacher as well. In this view, all educators, math and science teachers as well as the EL specialist, take responsibility for EL students' academic development.

Arguing for structural changes in the attainment of a high school education, Gold recommends reconceptualizing the traditional high school course taking to both address and capitalize on EL students' linguistic and academic resources. Expanding content area learning outside of the walls of the traditional classroom could incorporate online coursework offered in the primary language and mentored internships, while also maximizing the learning of academic English in the school setting. Gold also hypothesizes that collaborations between high schools and community colleges could provide valuable support services for EL students, preventing them from dropping out of high school. Flexibility in the provision of EL programs and curricula has the potential to improve content area instruction and achievement. However, as with all comprehensive changes, careful attention must be paid to the quality of the instruction and the content as the infrastructure evolves.

**2. *Teacher certification: Improving pedagogy in EL programs.*** Instructional quality is tied directly to content area access; access to rich academic content in turn, depends on capable teachers and mentors. Without qualified instructors prepared to meet EL students' linguistic and academic needs, even the most engaging hands-on science curriculum will go underutilized. As prior research has indicated, the shortage of EL teachers is real and growing (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, and Driscoll 2005; Menken and Antuñez 2001). It is easy to theorize that having certified, and especially EL-



certified teachers, in all classrooms with EL students would improve EL achievement and graduation rates.

Prior research shows a relationship between teacher certification and EL student graduation. In their LAUSD study, Silver and colleagues (2008) found that although teacher certification did not have a direct effect on the school graduation rate, it did mediate the dropout risk associated with EL status. The low levels of teacher certification evident in and across EL programs threaten the quality of EL education as a whole.

**3. *Primary language instruction: Moving beyond the English-only high school.***

Intervention programs for recent immigrants in particular have proven relatively effective in keeping EL students in high school through graduation. For example, Luperón high school in New York was designed to address the social and linguistic needs of first generation Spanish-speaking immigrant students. While most high schools offer coursework in English only, the faculty at Luperón provided a bilingual program to prepare its largely recent immigrant EL students for the New York state graduation exams, the Regents exams, in Spanish (Michael, Andrade, and Bartlett 2007). Luperón educators recognized the power of their students' primary language (Spanish) and used it as an academic resource in the classrooms.

In a similar vein, recent intervention work out of UCLA's Civil Rights Project, *Project SOL*<sup>3</sup>, provides online math and science coursework in Spanish for recent immigrant youth from Mexico. *Project SOL* targets newcomers with high academic potential who could apply to college if the college preparatory coursework were

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<sup>3</sup> <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/project-sol>

delivered in a familiar language. The implementation of *Project SOL* recognizes the untapped potential of these recent-immigrant EL students—perceived by the U.S. school system as lacking, but educated and well-versed in academic discourse prior to immigration. School and project personnel alike noted the improvement of the social and academic engagement, central to high school graduation, among *Project SOL*'s participants, as well as the positive influence of participating teachers' high academic expectations (Hopkins, Martinez-Wenzl, Aldana, and Gándara forthcoming). The success of these programs lies in the capitalization of EL students' resources (literacy in the primary language) to allow content area academic development while EL students acclimate not only to a new academic context, but to learning in English as well.

- 4. *Time: Removing traditional program constraints.*** In her edited volume exploring time and school reform, Gándara (2000) proposes a flexible approach to the allocation of time as an educational resource. Specifically, Olsen and Jaramillo (2000) outline the high school reform process at Alisal High School in Salinas, California focused on meeting the academic, social and linguistic needs of the immigrant EL population. Not only did Alisal educators revisit the allocation of time for instruction, but they also carefully reevaluated how they would use the time allotted. Instructional minutes were reapportioned in a modified block schedule, and teachers also modified their pedagogical approaches to meet their EL students' language and literacy needs. Focused on improving EL student achievement and graduation rates, the time-based reforms at Alisal High School restructured not only

the school day, but also EL students' experiences with the curriculum and their teachers during instructional time.

Long-time EL program advocate Gold (2006) also proposes breaking out of traditional time constraints as one of the chief components of improved high school programs for EL students. Both Gándara and Gold hypothesize that flexibility with time as it pertains to the EL student's academic development is key. Longer school days, and more time to graduation will allow more EL students to develop the linguistic and academic competencies necessary to successfully complete high school. Extended instructional time and reconsideration of how such time is used may also improve how schools address the dual tasks facing EL students. In a study using student data from LAUSD, Cannon, Jacknowitz, and Painter (2011) found that EL students' enrollment in full-day kindergarten was associated with a decrease in their likelihood of later grade level retention, a factor also associated with dropping out. This early supplement of additional instructional time had a long-term impact on the educational trajectories of the EL students under study.

### **Systemic**

The third type of solution, systemic reform, entails overarching changes to the educational system as a whole. Given evidence to support the mis-education of EL students on several fronts, especially those that deal with students' opportunity to learn, systemic reforms address the EL dropout dilemma via reform of underlying educational perspectives. The following section proposes three distinct systemic reforms that would deal with the construction of the EL student, the current high stakes accountability system, and finally, EL teacher certification. All three of these systemic solutions address factors underlying the greater EL/non-EL achievement gap.

*1. A shift in focus: From deficit to additive education.* 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 perceived language needs (Gold and Maxwell-Jolly 2006). In response, educational theorists long argued for the need 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 (Moll and González 1994). From a language policy perspective, this shift positions EL students' home language as a resource rather than a problem (Ruiz 1984). 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.

García (2009) proposes the use of the term 'emergent bilingual' to describe those youth identified by the school system as in the process of learning English. While the term forefronts EL students' strengths in matters related to pedagogy, practice and policy, it proves problematic as well. First, until research and practice consistently identify and develop EL students' academic and linguistic potential from early elementary on, application of the term in adolescence and early adulthood will ring hollow. Second, many familial, individual and societal factors conspire to prevent the development of bilingualism in language minority students in U.S. schools. Today, the loss of the home language occurs within one generation, where in the past the process took at least two generations within a family (Portes and Hao 1998).

Problematizing the term does not negate its impetus and motivation; without a doubt, educators and researchers must shift EL student and program discourse from a deficit (i.e., limited English is a problem) to an additive orientation. Doing so will focus attention on the resources EL students bring with them to U.S. classrooms.

This is not to say that state and federal policy cannot or should not support and promote biliteracy; doing so offers considerable economic and academic advantages for the future. In fact, the state of California took formal steps to recognize the civic and political importance of biliteracy in its emerging young adult population. Since January of 2012, the state has awarded a *Seal of Biliteracy* to more than 10,000 high school graduates who demonstrate high levels of proficiency speaking, reading, and writing in one or more languages and English<sup>4</sup>. Educational and political leaders in the state recognize the civic and political importance of bilingualism. State Superintendent Torlakson refers to the symbolism of the Seal in recognition of the “second language as an asset not just for (the students), but for the state, nation and world<sup>5</sup>”. Both *Project Sol*’s primary language college preparatory intervention program (Hopkins, Martinez-Wenzl, Aldana, and Gándara forthcoming) and the *Luperón* school reform project (Michael, Andrade, and Bartlett 2007) employed a focus on development of immigrant students’ key asset: their emerging bilingualism/biliteracy in young adulthood.

Bilinguals not only possess a skill set in two languages, but also have greater access to institutional and informal supports necessary for academic success (Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995). In fact, among language minority youth, maintenance

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/sealofbiliteracy.asp>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr12/yr12rel68.asp>

of the primary language can be instrumental in facilitating educational attainment. Callahan (2008) hypothesizes that the significant association between primary language maintenance and college-going among Latino language minority males may reflect these young men's greater access to social support networks and adult role models through their proficiency in the primary language. White and Kaufman (1997) find bilingual youth 17 percent less likely to drop out of high school than those who speak only English. These studies support the cognitive, as well as social and economic benefits of bilingualism (Bialystok 2009). Like Callahan, White & Kaufman also suggest that bilingualism may allow youth to capitalize on their relationships with any number of adults, drawing on and benefitting from home and school resources simultaneously.

Although a focus on biliteracy development in EL programs could motivate critical transformations, currently such a movement is limited by the very real and practical constraints of the educational system. Although recent immigrants constantly enter U.S. schools during adolescence and many certainly fit the description of emergent bilinguals, already competent in their primary language; however, they do not begin to comprise the majority of EL students. Some estimates suggest that 50-60 percent of high school EL students are considered '*long-term*', schooled primarily in U.S. contexts (Olsen 2010; Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix 2000). These are the EL students, often no longer fluent in the language of the home (Portes and Hao 1998; Wong Fillmore 1991), whose educational outcomes pose the greatest risk to their own futures and to society's. The presence of long-term EL students in our schools indicates a need to focus on the academic orientation of our EL programs.

Framing the EL student's home language as a resource rather than a problem (Ruiz 1984) proposes an additive educational framework. Changing the discourse in elementary education from a deficit toward an additive orientation focuses on academic development, placing comprehensive and programmatic emphasis on curricular alignment and access to qualified teachers. These changes have the potential to minimize the presence (and permanence) of long-term EL students in the secondary system, ultimately reducing the dropout rate. Until this point in time, however, use of the term "emergent bilingual" to discuss the EL dropout dilemma in adolescence and young adulthood has the potential to mischaracterize schools' classification and treatment of these youth.

**2. *Accountability: Assessment to facilitate, not impede EL student achievement.***

Assessment and accountability systems alone do not threaten students' opportunities to learn; however, punitive implementation of a system and use of students' test scores for purposes for which they were not designed, does. The current stranglehold of assessment and accountability on education poses a threat for many students, not only those learning English. As implemented, the present system imposes extensive content *and* English proficiency testing on EL students, and penalizes their teachers for teaching students who fall outside the norming sample. Presently, the system places EL students at risk not just of dropping out due to struggles with multiple exams, but also of being pushed out of the school system entirely.

Prior to the implementation of NCLB, the assessment and evaluation of EL student progress was sporadic and inconsistent, both across and within states. Complicating the matter, EL students were generally exempted from state and local

assessments due to their EL status (Lam 1992), removing them from the academic focus of district and school educators and administrators. Currently, the linguistic and academic assessment of EL students still varies greatly from state to state (Ragan and Lesaux 2006), however, NCLB has brought with it greater consistency in the inclusion of EL students in state accountability measures.

So, while EL students now comprise a demographic subgroup to be monitored through assessment, this increased attention does not and cannot ensure valid content area assessment (Abedi 2004; Lam 1993). Among others, Darling-Hammond (2006) argues that the increased focus on test-based academic performance under NCLB may inhibit the full participation of EL students in the high school academic experiences. The heightened focus on EL students' linguistic *and* academic progress comes with a considerable cost: higher dropout rates (arguably) by the students themselves, and higher push-out rates as reported in Menken's (2008) work and the recent El Paso case.

Even prior to NCLB, many states implemented high school graduation exam requirements, despite research evidence suggesting a negative association with the high stakes tied to the tests. Drawing from a survey of state assessment directors, Rivera and colleagues (1997) explored EL students' high school completion in states with high school graduation exams and found that several states responded to EL students' high failure rates by implementing accommodations, deferrals and native language assessments, proving helpful for some. Today, many states assess EL students with accommodations, such as additional time and use of a glossary, in order to improve EL achievement while also maintaining test validity (Abedi, Hofstetter,



and Lord 2004). States such as New York offer EL students to take the high school exit exams in their native language; however, they must still pass an English proficiency exam as well. Currently, New York's EL graduation rate remains just below 50 percent<sup>6</sup>.

Referring back to the use of accommodations in assessment, Rivera and colleagues offer a series of recommendations designed to counteract the negative impact of high stakes assessment on the EL graduation rate. Recommendations included: evaluation and analysis of program effectiveness, limited use of test deferrals, careful use of accommodations, development of primary language assessments, and alternate assessments aligned with instruction (Rivera, Vincent, Hafner, and LaCelle-Peterson 1997). The need to recommend the alignment of assessment to instruction speaks to a current lack of articulation between research, policy, pedagogy, and evaluation—key tenets of EL educational policy under the Lau and Castañeda decisions (Hakuta 2011). The coordination of curriculum, instruction, and assessment is considered good pedagogy for all students, not just EL students.

3. ***School segregation: Equality of access.*** Possibly more than any other status group, EL students attend racially and linguistically segregated schools (Fry 2008). Gwynne and colleagues' (2009) study of the Chicago public schools demonstrated a separate, significant effect of school segregation on EL students' likelihood of graduating from high school, net of academic performance and other important predictors. A concerted focus on the part of policy makers and educators to address the linguistic and academic segregation of EL students- and EL programs- has the potential to reshape EL achievement and address issues at the core of the EL dropout dilemma.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://archives.jrn.columbia.edu/coveringed/schoolstories07/regents.html>

Any and all reforms, however, would have to extend beyond the needs of the EL population alone. Despite the desegregation efforts of the 1970s and 1980s, U.S. schools today have become increasingly resegregated (Anderson 2011; Frey and Wilson 2009). While the societal costs of segregation are disheartening, the disparate social and linguistic impact on EL students and their achievement makes the case for integration even more compelling. As a growing segment of the population, EL students disproportionately suffer from current school segregation patterns (Rumberger, Gándara, and Merino 2006). Should it continue on its current course, the EL dropout phenomenon stands to extract significant individual costs as well as major social, economic and civic costs to the larger society through the loss of talent and human capital.

### **Conclusions**

Whether EL students succumb to individual or societal pressures to drop out of high school, or are pushed out through a mix of administrative and social pressures, the societal costs will be great. Not only do EL students belong to a number of status groups that experience relatively high risk of dropping out (e.g., racial, ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged), but they are also further objectified by an educational system that measures their value in terms of their lack of greater English proficiency. The vast majority of current or former EL students are children of immigrants, the fastest growing youth demographic (Fortuny and Chaudry 2011). Conservative estimates show that current EL students account for 11% of the U.S. K-12 student population; if we add to that number former EL students, estimates rise to one-in-five students. Exploring, understanding and tackling the issues related to the EL dropout dilemma require that we confront the racial/ethnic and social class disparities in educational achievement and

attainment so prevalent in U.S. society. High school completion for the growing EL population is critical at both the individual and societal levels.

EL students are already at-risk and marginalized in U.S. schools; their exclusion from the population of high school graduates will only increase the economic and civic disparities that confront U.S. society. The EL dropout dilemma threatens the economic and civic future of our nation; it cannot be addressed solely through piecemeal solutions. Only through concerted efforts by policy makers and educators will EL education shift from a compensatory, deficit-oriented approach to an additive, academically centered design. Only a systemic paradigmatic shift will fully prepare EL students academically and socially, for higher education and the workforce.

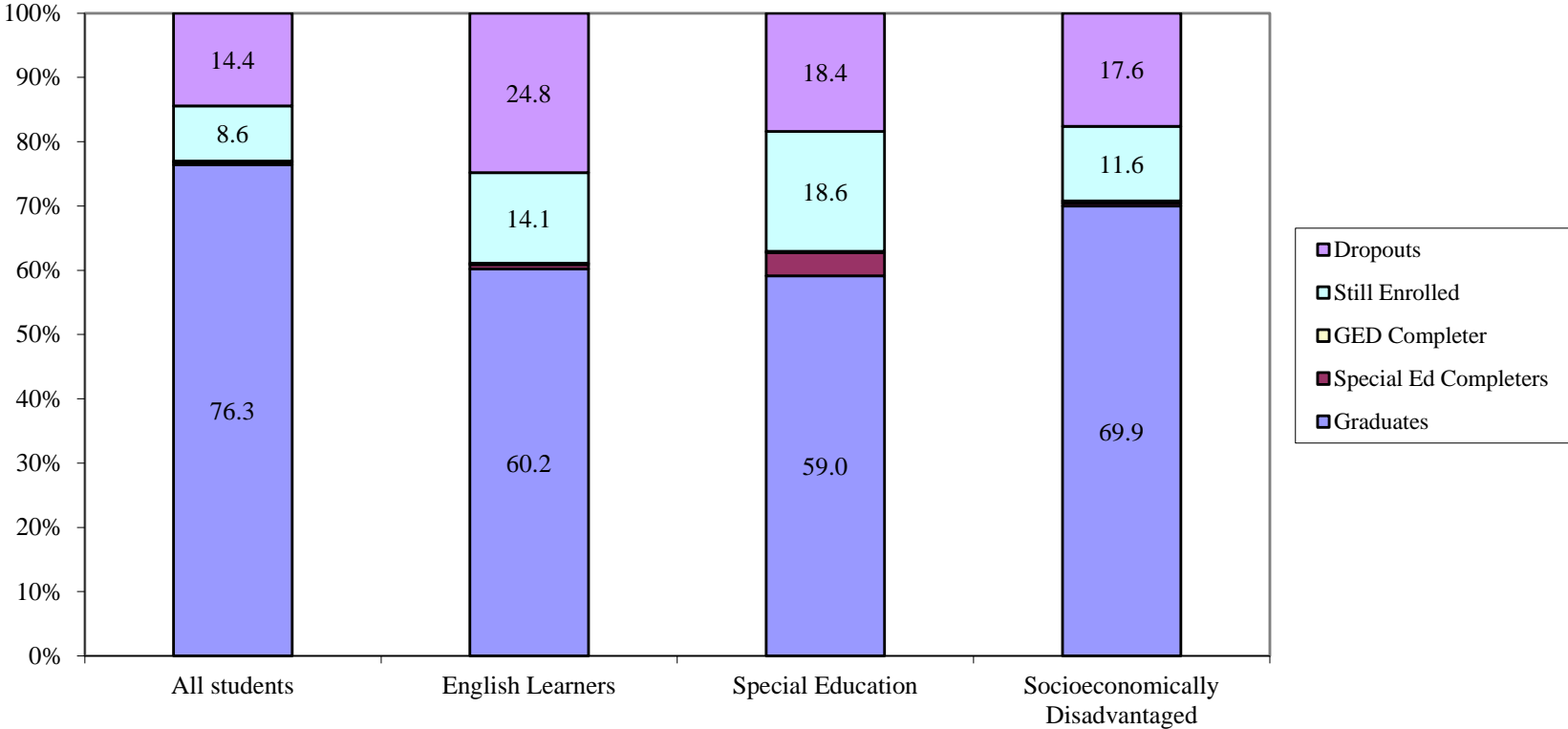
Targeted, local reforms such as AVID and PUENTE, offer short-term, local solutions that can and do change the academic and civic trajectories of their participants. While highly effective in many ways, the success of targeted reforms often rests on the individual or individuals working within a specific local context. Successful programs may or may not survive a transition in personnel; weak programs may fail to thrive due to local constraints as well. Similarly comprehensive reforms speak to pedagogical and programmatic improvements at the school site level, but their effectiveness may only last as long as administrative support allows. The comprehensive school reform movement launched many innovative programs and pedagogies that have fallen to the wayside in the decades since. While again, these reforms may be effective locally, the deeper societal inequities driving the EL dropout dilemma remain. Ultimately, systemic reform is necessary in order to reframe EL educational programs as additive rather than subtractive, and EL students themselves as resources rather than problems.

To be effective, systemic reform must address the social and cultural beliefs about language and learning that today result in major inequities in educational experiences and

outcomes. The deficit, rather than additive, approach to EL education hails from the 1968 Bilingual Education Amendment developed as part of U.S. President Johnson's war on poverty (Wiley 2007). EL educational programs have been marginalized by their concentrated focus on language at the expense of content development. This linguistic focus, however, derives from the inextricable nature of the relationship between English proficiency and the American identity (Mertz 1982). The American conscious places such great emphasis on the English language as a marker of Americanization (Mertz 1982; Pavlenko 2002), that the academic needs of EL students often take a backseat to their acquisition of English.

Similarly, the current accountability system rests on another shared societal belief: that of the ability to sort, quantify and measure individual aptitude, ability, and ultimately, worth (Valdés and Figueroa 1994). As a society, Americans give credence to the premise that learning can be standardized and measured accurately and thoroughly, although considerable evidence suggests that the tools currently used to measure these outcomes pose threats to reliability and validity. Rather than exploring inequities in input, the current accountability system concentrates solely on outputs, which not surprisingly, vary with both student and school characteristics. Likewise, the differences in resources and curricula from school to school, district to district, perpetuate educational inequities based on social class, race and ethnicity. Without serious attention to issues of racial inequity and the true costs of poverty, U.S. schools will remain caught in the current cycle of social reproduction, with little variation.

**Figure 1: 2010-2011 High School Graduation Status 5 years after 9<sup>th</sup> Grade by Student Status Group**



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