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## Improving Educational Outcomes for English Language Learners in PA

**Why This Matters:** Across Pennsylvania, increasing numbers of “multilingual” learners, referred to as “English Language Learners” (ELLs) are entering public schools every day. Providing high quality instruction, equal access to educational opportunities and sufficient support to empower students to become proficient in English is a threshold goal. As multilingual students strengthen their English skills, they become more successful academically. Teaching critical language acquisition skills to students rapidly and efficiently in a high priority and teachers must address both linguistic and cultural differences to support learning. At the same time, schools must also ensure equal access to content areas. This means that **all** teachers need training and support to modify instructional methods and implement effective instructional programs across content areas. The failure to provide both quality ESOL programs and modified instruction through all teachers can result in ELLs falling far behind their peers.

**Current Academic Outcomes of ELLs** According to standardized test scores released for 2012, the academic proficiency of ELLs falls far below their non-ELL peers and is trending in the wrong direction: downward. For example, in 2012 **only 17.8% of ELLs scored “proficient” or above in reading** (compared with 23.8% in 2011) and 35% scored proficient in math (compared with 41.9% in 2011). During those same years, the statewide average PSSA scores were over 70% in these categories: with 71.9% in reading (compared with 73.5% in 2011) and 75.7% in math (compared with 77.1% in 2011).

***As a group, ELLs rank below other nationally-recognized at-risk student cohorts – including Economically Disadvantaged, students with disabilities and all tracked ethnic subgroups.***

### ***ELC’s Recommendations:***

- (1) We need a statewide funding formula that drives additional resources to support ELL students.*** Schools struggle to effectively serve ELL students and there are great disparities among school districts in meeting student needs. Many of these disparities and deficiencies result from a lack of adequate resources allocated ELL students. Such resource deficiencies include: (1) lack of professional development training for content teachers, ESOL instructors and administrators; (2) higher teacher-student ratios that often disproportionately impact ELL students; (3) failure to provide sufficient hours of ESOL instruction and remedial help to ELL students and lack of transportation to effective programs; (4) the absence of monitoring and

oversight due to a shortage of central office staff to address the needs of this population; (5) the inability to support more costly bilingual programs and (5) the absence of translation and interpretation services to ensure parent participation.

**(2) We must support expanded parent engagement.** ELL students suffer significantly as a result of the inability of their families to meaningfully participate in their education. There are often significant gaps in translation and interpretation services for families. At many schools, there is nothing unusual about notices coming home entirely in English, parent meetings at which no interpreter is available and the absence of office staff who can communicate with non-English-speaking parents. Translation and interpretation services are often viewed as an “extra” that schools can’t afford to provide, instead of something essential to the success of ELL students. Funding cuts often disproportionately impact school districts with the highest needs. For example, the School District of Philadelphia serves 25% of ELLs statewide. In the last few years, the District has been forced to cut nearly one-half of ELL support staff and over 35 ESOL/Bilingual teachers. Yet during the 2012-2013 school year, the District served over 25,000 families whose primary home language is other than English. The District provided ESOL instruction to over 11,000 students and served over 1,800 ELL students with disabilities. Additional funding is needed to ensure the participation of non-English speaking parents. Such services are also mandated in the special education context and school discipline proceedings. These issues must be tracked at the school district and statewide level.

**(3) We need to ensure the consistent use of effective instructional modalities that meet the needs of ELL students.** Bilingual programs and “sheltered classes” which are commonly used as a method for teaching content to students who are at lower levels of English proficiency, are effective only in schools where they are properly implemented with fidelity. Yet, often students at very different levels of English proficiency are mixed together in sheltered classes, an approach that defeats the purpose of the model. This is also an issue in charter schools, who often enroll fewer than 40 ELLs and therefore do not report disaggregated ELL student achievement data. In general, charters do little outreach to non-English-speaking communities, and are not known to these communities as having multilingual services. ELL students are often not served in some charter schools at all, are disproportionately represented in comprehensive district schools and do not access magnet or special admit schools.

**(4) We need to reform Pennsylvania’s laws to create an infrastructure that will meet the needs of ELL students, including providing highly-qualified certified ESOL teachers; ensuring that educators receive professional development training to modify content-area instruction. More detailed regulations are needed to ensure sufficient hours of ESOL instruction,**

***modification of instruction in regular education classrooms and equal access to educational opportunities in school.***

In many schools across the Commonwealth, non-ESOL teachers receive no training regarding how to modify and deliver content-based instruction to ELL students. There is wide variation in the number of hours of ESOL instruction provided to ELL students at different levels of English proficiency and great disparities in the qualifications of ESOL/Bilingual teachers. All of these issues should be addressed through comprehensive state legislation that addresses the needs of ELL students. Pennsylvania's current state regulations merely require that every *school district "provide a program for each student whose dominant language is not English for the purpose of facilitating the student's achievement of English proficiency and the academic standards under § 4.12 (relating to academic standards).* Programs under this section include "appropriate bilingual-bicultural or English as a second language (ESL) instruction." See 22 Pa. Code § 4.26. We are told the term "program" encompasses planned instruction by a qualified ESL /Bilingual teacher; adaptations/modifications in the delivery of content instruction by all teachers based on the student's language proficiency level and the Pennsylvania Language Proficiency Standards (PA ELPS) for ELLs. However, there are no established standards, benchmarks or evidence-based programs to ensure effective implementation of these goals.

- (5) **ELL students need more targeted supports in school, such as liaisons as well as changes in school climate.** Many ELL students, particularly students from immigrant and refugee families, often need additional help in navigating in the school environment. For example, credits from schooling in another country may not be recognized; students who had had several years of high school mathematics in Asian or African countries may be placed improperly in remedial math courses or English as a Second Language services that limit them. There are also often vast cultural differences for students etc. In order for these students to thrive, schools must provide liaisons and mentors, multi-culturally sensitive guidance counselors as well as school climate that is welcoming and respectful to students from other countries. In addition, all staff must understand the rules: enrollment personnel cannot inquire into immigration status; a bilingual special education evaluation must be provided etc.

The Education Law Center seeks to work with other stakeholders to further develop and implement these core recommendations. To learn more, visit our website at [www.elc-pa.org](http://www.elc-pa.org).