The Impact of the No Child Left Behind Act on English Language Learners

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Abstract

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This paper examines the affect of the No Child Left Behind Act on English Language Learners. The two different types of programs used in teaching ELLs, English-only programs and bilingual instruction, were examined. Through a study of six states—Arkansas, Georgia, Virginia, California, Florida, and Texas—the achievement gaps between ELLs and all students in reading and mathematics were analyzed. In addition to standardized test scores, the impact of certified teachers, federal aid and low-income students were analyzed to determine which method was most effective. It was found that the success of these programs relies more on the individual circumstances of the state than any other factor.

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Introduction

Education policy in the United States has traditionally been left up to the authority of state and local governments. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, signed into law by Lyndon Johnson in 1965, was the first step toward increasing federal government involvement in education (Mantel and Greenblatt 2008, 13). George W. Bush’s crowning domestic policy achievement, the No Child Left Behind Act, further involved the federal government in education, with the ultimate goal of every child achieving grade-level proficiency in mathematics and reading by 2014 (Mantel and Greenblatt 2008, 2). These standards apply to all students, regardless of socioeconomic status or special needs. This policy raises questions regarding the education of English language learners (ELLs): What methods are states using to ensure achievement among these students? Are these methods increasing performance and closing achievement gaps between ELLs and all other students? If these methods alone are not increasing achievement, what factors are contributing to the success of some states and the lack of progress in others?

Literature Review

The number of students in American public schools who are not proficient in English has been on the rise for more than ten years. This increase is related to the increase in immigration during the 1990s; there were between 14 and 16 million immigrants who entered into the United States during the decade (Capps et al. 2005, 5). From the 1994 to 1995 school year to the 2004 to 2005 school year the enrollment of limited English proficiency (another term for ELL) enrollment has increased by over 60%, from almost 3.2 million students to over five million students (NCELA November 2006). Forty five states had a growth in the ELL population in 2003 (Watson, et al. 2005). In contrast, the total enrollment of U.S. students has increased by only 2.6% in the same decade (NCELA November 2006). With the increase in the number of students who are not fluent in English has come an increased concern about how to address these students’ needs.

When the No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2001, the Bilingual Education Act, commonly known as Title VII, was replaced with Language Instruction for Limited English Proficiency and Immigrant Students, or Title III. Passed as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Bilingual Education Act was seen as an acceptance by policymakers that the “sink or swim” approach to teaching English had failed (Ovando 2006, 51). Bilingual education was supported by the Supreme Court in 1974 when it required schools to provide special assistance to students that did not speak English (Crawford 2002, G1). Competitive grants were distributed to local education agencies (LEAs), which meant that most of the funding was going to states with long histories of bilingual education, such as California, Texas and New York (Crawford 2002, G2). By the mid 1970s, however, when early bilingual programs were not showing impressive results, there was a backlash against bilingual education, and Congress voted to limit funding (Ovando 2006, 51). Over time, with continued pressure from conservatives about the dangers of “ethnic pride,” Congress continued to limit funding and extend it to LEAs using English-only programs, until the Bush administration revamped ESEA entirely into No Child Left Behind (Crawford 2002, G2).

The ultimate goal of Title III is to hold ELLs to the “same academic content and academic achievement standards that other children are expected to meet” (Department of Education 2002). The Department of Education, however, has left it up to the states to determine which type of program they will use in educating limited English proficiency students (ELLs). This approach is similar to the one taken by Congress when passing the ESEA—at the time they were unsure as to how bilingual education would work, but they knew something had to be done to combat rising dropout rates among Hispanics (Ovando 2006, 51). The system of competitive grants under the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 rewarded innovation by the states without clarifying whether bilingual or English-only programs were preferable (Crawford 2002, G1). As with all other components of NCLB, there has been extensive research concerning the most effective methods in helping students achieve. There are currently two different approaches used in educating ELLs: English-only programs or bilingual education programs.

States may opt for English-only programs, usually involving one or more of three categories. The first includes Sheltered English, Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) or Content-based English as a Second Language (ESL). This category, used in some form by every state except for Massachusetts, combines students from multiple backgrounds in the same class and may be used in conjunction with other methods. A separate category is Structured English Immersion (SEI), in which classes contain only LEP students. The third category, English language development of ESL Pull-out, where students leave the mainstream classroom to spend part of the day receiving ESL instruction, but it is not focused on academic content. For all of these categories the objective is for students to obtain proficiency in English (U.S. Department of Education 2004).

Alternatively, states may choose bilingual programs, defined as any program that continues development of the student’s primary language while working on the acquisition of the second language (Ovando 2006, 9). Two-way immersion involves instruction in both languages. In the beginning students receive smaller proportions of instruction in English and over time move to half in each language. Students usually remain in the program throughout elementary school. Conversely, early exit transitional aims to develop proficiency in English as quickly as possible. Dual language programs may be the same as two-way immersion, or it may refer to students developing fluency in two languages. Late exit transitional, developmental bilingual and maintenance education all strive to develop some proficiency in the native language and strong skills in English (U.S. Department of Education 2004). Heritage language programs are taught by teachers fluent in both languages, and are often used as an ethnic or cultural resource (Ovando 2006, 9). The Department of Education allows the states to choose from any of these programs, and many states choose more than one program.

Research on the assessment of English language learners has suggested that there is a discrepancy between what works best in helping students achieve and what the states actually practice. During the summer of 2007, the LEP Partnership Initiative[[1]](#footnote-2) met with state education officials to provide guidelines on what a “high-quality” English-language proficiency test will contain. The draft of these guidelines was published in October 2007, but it provides more of the same vague language that has been used by the Department of Education. There are suggestions that states create a “comprehensive and cohesive plan” for ELLs (Department of Education 2007, 9). Standards should be based on “sound theoretical and research bases,” though the Department stops short of recommending what that might entail (Department of Education 2007, 9). Not only is this ambiguity a problem on the national level, but school districts are being told that their ELLs need to be brought up to the academic standards of all students, yet most states have yet to provide guidance on how to translate standards into curricula (Zehr 2007 c). Other states, such as Virginia, have been using specially-designed English-proficiency tests, only to find that the law requires them to use the standard reading test in calculating adequate yearly process (AYP) (Zehr 2007 a). While the federal government has declined to recommend specific programs to the states, independent groups have made their opinions known.

As Hector Montenegro, the superintendent of the Arlington Independent School District, said, “Dual language has been very successful because it is very inclusive. But it’s also very controversial” (2008, 128). Various researchers have found that bilingual education is more beneficial to ELLs. The organization Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) advocates bilingual instruction as the best approach for teaching ELLs (Ovando 2006, 10). The LISA study found that academic success is related to bilingualism (Zehr 2007 d). Other experts, such as Joy Peyton at the Center for Applied Linguistics, believe that becoming proficient in two languages provides value to students (Breaden 2007). Even the Department of Education sponsored a study by the National Literacy Panel that states bilingual education has a “small to moderate” advantage over English-only programs, although the Department ultimately decided not to publish the study (Zehr 2007 b).

Not only do bilingual programs provide academic advantages over English-only programs, but they take away the some of the social stigma attached to pullout programs. When interviewed by Mary Ann Zehr, Zha Blong Xiong, a professor of education at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, noted that while pulling newcomers out of regular classes for ESL instruction is necessary, U.S.-born students experience stifled motivation from being singled out (2006). Keeping ELLs motivated is important, especially since attaining proficiency can take many years. St. Paul schools found that 22% of students enrolled in kindergarten as ELLs were still receiving services in seventh through eleventh grade (Zehr 2006). Achieving grade-level fluency in English may take ELLs up to ten years, depending on prior education and a student’s proficiency in their native language (Virginia Department of Education 2006; Harper and de Jong 2004). It is important for states to find an English proficiency program that works because their students will need many years to achieve proficiency.

Despite this apparent need for bilingual education, more states are moving towards English-only programs. Citizens in Arizona, California and Massachusetts have voted against bilingual education (Zehr 2007 b). Why are states choosing English-only programs over bilingual programs, if the latter has so many obvious benefits? One of the reasons has to do with tradition and politics. Out of the 12 states using English-only programs, 10 have passed laws or amended their constitutions to make English the official state language; only Vermont and West Virginia have not (ProEnglish 2008). These states have taken steps to make English the official language; they are likewise interested in their students using English too as their primary language. Out of these states, seven are located in the south: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Bilingual versus English-only education has become a political issue, with conservatives typically advocating English-only programs. Advocates of this approach contend that learning English “empowers immigrants” and that bilingual education is leading to an increasing lower-class because students never fully learn English. Some critics of bilingual education believe that it is the role of the schools to unite its students by teaching them all English, and promotion of minority languages could turn into separatism within the United States (Ovando 2006, 51). They also argue that while bilingual education was originally designed as a transitional program, students “linger” in programs for many years (Pro English 2008).

The other main reason for using English- only programs has nothing to do with cost or success, but rather, practicality. English-only programs are employed when “low-incidence” language groups are present—there are too few speakers of a native language to form a whole class (Ovando 2006, 10). By definition, a bilingual program is taught by a bilingual teacher, and so without a teacher certified in a low-incidence language, English-only is the obvious choice. In Virginia, Fairfax County has the greatest ELL enrollment—32,857 in the 2007-2008 school year. These students speak 128 different languages, and 58 of these languages are spoken by 10 or fewer students in the county (Virginia Department of Education 2007). It would be impossible for the county to find a teacher fluent in every one of these languages and impractical for the teachers to travel around the county to teach a few students in every school. In states with areas where low-incidence languages are not a problem, bilingual programs should be implemented, if they prove to be more effective than English-only programs. Measuring the actual achievement of ELLs (in terms of standardized testing scores) and the cost of these programs, when analyzed in tandem, provide the basis for the argument of which type of English proficiency programs, English-only or bilingual, are more effective in teaching ELLs.

Methodology

With each state following its own course in creating ELL programs, there are 50 potential sets of data to analyze. In selecting states for further analysis, all 50 states were categorized as either employing English-only or bilingual education programs, using data provided by the states to the Biennial Evaluation Report to Congress on the Implementation of Title III, Part A of the ESEA , published in 2004. From there, data was obtained on the ELL enrollment in each state, from the National Center for Education Services Common Core of Data (see Table 1). In summary, out of the 50 states, 12 use English-only programs exclusively. The other 38 states use bilingual as well as English-only programs. In English-only states ELLs make up less than 4% of all students; in bilingual states ELLs are just over 10% of the student population.

On average, states using English-only programs have a smaller population of ELLs and a lower percentage of ELL students in the total population than those employing bilingual programs as well. On average, states using English-only methods have almost 25,000 ELLs, while bilingual states have more than four times the enrollment—over 110,000 ELL students on average. A t-test was performed to determine if the ELL population is significantly larger in states using bilingual programs. The t-test compared the means with a significance level of 0.05. The test resulted in a p-value of 0.038, which means the probability of seeing these results from random sampling is very low. Therefore, the difference is statistically significant.

To narrow down this field, six states were chosen for further analysis: Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Texas and Virginia. Arkansas, Georgia, and Virginia were chosen because out of the states using English-only programs, these three had the greatest number of ELLs. Virginia has the largest ELL enrollment out of the states using English-only methods, with over 72,000 ELL students; these students make up nearly 6% of the total student population in the state. Similarly, California, Florida and Texas were chosen because out of states using bilingual programs, they had the greatest number of ELLs. California has the most ELL students out of all 50 states, with over 1.5 million ELL students—nearly a quarter of all students in the state.

Analysis

Standardized testing is a major component of NCLB, and so comparison of test scores can be used to analyze the effectiveness of state programs (Ovando 2006, 69). Along with limited guidance on which programs to implement in teaching ELLs, Congress and the Department of Education have also provided little guidance on the type of testing that should be used to assess ELLs. There are a variety of tests used to place ELLs in the correct program, with the most widely used being the ACCESS for ELLs (Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners) (NCELA 2006). These tests are not used for all students, however, and so they are useless in comparing the achievement gap between ELLs and all other students. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, run by the NCES, is the closest thing to a national standardized test. From these test scores, the six states were further compared.

NCLB aims to bring all students up to grade-level proficiency, and so one of the main objectives of the law is to close the achievement gap between subgroups. This achievement gap was calculated by subtracting the percentage of ELL students scoring basic or above (passing the test) from the percentage of non-ELL students passing the assessment. The achievement gaps were calculated for fourth graders in mathematics and reading (NCES 2007). Then, the achievement gaps of the six states were compared to the gap for the national public. Those states with achievement gaps smaller than the national public were put into a “small” group, while the states with achievement gaps larger than the national public were put into a “big” group. Arkansas, Virginia, Florida and Texas were placed in the “small” group, while California and Georgia were placed in the “big” group (see Table 2).

For all six states, the achievement gaps for mathematics are smaller than reading. This can be attributed to a number of factors. Generally, there are more accommodations made to ELLs on mathematics testing. Some of these include having directions read aloud in a student’s native language, providing them with bilingual test booklets, and having test materials read aloud in English (NAEP 2008). There is less reading comprehension involved in fourth grade math and in class teachers typically use more illustrated representations to explain concepts, which will make it easier for students to understand the testing material. This is not the case for students entering middle school, however, and around this time students begin performing worse in mathematics than in reading. In addition, depending on the student’s prior education, he may already have a solid foundation in mathematics.

From these two groups, the NAEP scores were compared in relation to the methods used within the states. The states were also evaluated using NAEP scores and the growth in ELL students over recent years. Finding a relationship between these two variables may suggest which states are better prepared for an influx of ELLs, and which still have a ways to go in adapting to the needs of these students. On an economic level, the federal funding provided to the states was analyzed in relation to scores to see if the money spent on ELLs has resulted in notable achievement. In addition, the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunches was analyzed. Lower-income students generally score lower on standardized testing, and there is a much greater percentage of ELL students living in low-income families (32%) than the national average (18%) (Padilla 2007).

Growth in ELL Enrollment and the Importance of Teachers

As noted previously, ELL enrollment has increased by over 60% in the past ten years (NCELA November 2006). Among the states with small achievement gaps, there is a wide range of growth in ELL enrollment. Arkansas, over the past decade, has experienced more than a 200% increase in ELL enrollment; Virginia, between a 100 and 200% increase; Florida, between a 50 and 100% increase; and in Texas, less than a 50% increase. There is a similarly wide range of increases in the big achievement gap states: more than 200% for Arkansas, and less than 50% for California (NCELA November 2006). With this increase in ELL enrollment, the states should have been increasing the number of bilingual or ESL certified teachers.

In the Biennial Evaluation Report to Congress issued by the Department of Education in 2005, states were asked to report the number of certified or licensed teachers working in language instruction programs, as of the 2003-2004 school year (Department of Education 2004). All six states reported this information: Virginia, despite having more ELL students than Arkansas and Georgia, had fewer certified teachers per ELL—36 ELLs per teacher in Virginia compared to 23 ELLs per teacher in Arkansas and Georgia (see Table 3). California, with the most ELL students in the country, also had the greatest number of certified teachers. In addition, the states were asked to estimate the number of certified teachers that will be needed in the next five years. Two states, Virginia and Florida, did not provide this estimation, so it is hard to determine how the states were preparing for an increase in enrollment. Arkansas estimated the greatest increase in certified teachers, nearly a 90% increase. Texas had the second greatest increase—55%. Both California and Georgia had a smaller projected increase in the number of certified teachers: 25 and 22%, respectively (see Table 3). Interestingly, these two states also had the highest achievement gaps between ELL and non-ELL students.

The small increase in California’s number of certified teachers is not as alarming when the rate of ELL enrollment is considered. While still growing, the number of ELL students was not expected to increase dramatically. All of the major immigration states, including California, Texas, and Florida, saw a decrease in immigration in the 1990s (Capps et al. 2005, 12). Georgia, however, was experiencing a tremendous growth in the ELL population—a 671% increase in 2003 (Watson, et al. 2005). This relationship—a lack of qualified teachers for an overwhelming increase in ELL students—could be one possible cause to Georgia’s large achievement gaps. Putting highly qualified teachers into classrooms has been a main objective of NCLB, and the need for these teachers is greater still with ELLs. One of the major misconceptions about teaching ELLs is that good teaching for mainstream students is good teaching for ELLs. Teachers of ELLs need to understand the differences between the student’s native language and English for the most successful chance at literacy (Harper and de Jong 2004). Georgia has done its ELLs a disservice by not providing them with the most prepared teachers, and consequently, their performance has suffered.

Even though Arkansas recognized the need for more certified teachers, the need did not translate into smaller achievement gaps. Between 2005 and 2007, the achievement gap for fourth graders in math increased by over 10 percentage points. In reading for fourth graders, the achievement gap increased by 19 percentage points (see Table 2). It should be noted that in the Biennial Evaluation Report to Congress, Arkansas indicated that there was no special certification for teachers in language instruction programs, so while Arkansas may indeed be adding more teachers, the quality of these teachers may be debated (Department of Education 2004). Texas, meanwhile, had a decrease in the achievement gap in both math and reading. The state also estimated a 55% increase in the number of certified teachers needed, and required a special certification to insure the quality of these teachers (Department of Education 2004). The ability of states to prepare for an increase in the ELL enrollment appears to contribute to achievement.

Federal Funding

Under Title III, the minimum level of federal funding for language acquisition in any given year is $500,000, but the greater the ELL enrollment, the more money is allocated (Department of Education 2002). California, for example, received almost $150 million for FY 2005, while Arkansas received just less than $2 million for FY 2005. More important than the total amount received by the states is the funding per student (see Table 4). The more federal funding a state is allocated, the better able it is to monitor students’ progress, provide transfers and tutoring, create assessments and help schools needing improvement (Mantel and Greenblatt 2008, 12). For ELLs, funding must also go towards additional staff training and instructional materials (Crawford 1998). There is a common misconception that bilingual programs cost more than English-only programs, while many bilingual programs cost far less than ESL pull-out. In 1992, the California legislature commissioned a study to determine the additional cost of bilingual education programs, and found that late exit transitional programs cost around an additional $180 per ELL student, with half coming from administrative costs. Early exit transitional programs were found to cost about an extra $214 per ELL, with only about $20 contributed to direct instruction. Even, two-way immersion, the most expensive bilingual option, with an additional $876 per ELL, costs less than ESL pull-out. The additional teachers required for ESL pull-out adds an extra thousand dollars to the total cost of the program (Crawford 1997). In 2005, out of all the states with available data, English-only states received over $188 per ELL student in language acquisition grants, whereas bilingual states received just over $120 per ELL student (see Table 4).

Federal language acquisition funding per student does not appear to account for achievement gaps. Both Georgia and California had large achievement gaps in 2005, yet Georgia spent more than the other five states—more than $220—and California spent the least, with under $100 per student. This observation does agree with the argument that English-only programs are more costly than bilingual education programs. The federal funding allocated to Virginia and Arkansas does not support this argument, however. Their funding was less per student than Florida’s. Also, Virginia and Arkansas’s results do not support the idea that more funding produces better results. In 2005, Florida had a larger achievement gap in math and reading than Virginia and Arkansas (see Table 2). From this data, it appears as though federal language acquisition funding per student does not positively correlate to achievement levels. The amount spent per student alone will not increase performance; it is only with better teachers and more effective methods that achievement will increase, as is the case in Georgia.

There is no relationship between the spending on ELL students through language acquisition grants and the total funding per student. Arkansas has by far the lowest total expenditure on education—less than four billion dollars, but federal funding gives the state more per ELL than California, which has the largest total expenditure (see Table 5). This can be attributed to the great difference in the total enrollment between the two states (California’s enrollment in 2005 was more than 10 times that of Arkansas). Even though Arkansas spends more per ELL, the total expenditures per student are less than that of California, though only by a few hundred dollars. On average, out of all 50 states, states using bilingual programs spend about $200 more per student than those using English-only programs (see Table 5). There is also no correlation between the amount of funding allocated per student and the achievement gap. This supports the assertion that funding alone will not make students achieve.

Low-Income ELLs

In 2000, 68% of ELLs in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade were low-income (Capps et al. 2005, 25). There appears to be a positive correlation between the achievement gaps in the six states and the percentage of all students eligible for FARL (see Table 6). Virginia, for example, had the smallest achievement gap in reading for 2005, and also has the smallest percentage of students eligible for FARL. Nearly half of Georgia’s students are eligible for FARL, and the state also had the largest achievement gap in reading for 2005. Arkansas is the one exception to this relationship. It has the highest percentage of students eligible for FARL, but its achievement gap is small.

ELLs face numerous challenges in overcoming their economic disadvantage. NCLB promotes the involvement of parents, but involvement and notification are more difficult because 50% of ELL parents do not have a high school degree (Capps et al. 2005, 26). Their low level of education may keep them from understanding their child’s homework and the student’s overall performance in school (Capps et al. 2005, 23). Also, schools with high levels of ELLs typically have an overall larger percentage of low-income students. These schools have more subgroups, which makes it more difficult for the school to make AYP each year. If a school does not make AYP, it risks being labeled “in need of improvement,” which means the school will have to use more of its resources to provide “supplemental services,” such as tutoring or an option of transferring (Mantel and Greenblatt 2008, 7). In addition to all of these challenges, research has shown that ELLs from low-income families require more time to acquire English (Crawford 2004). All of these problems compound to make it more difficult for ELLs to achieve.

Recommendations

The most accommodating recommendation for ELLs would be the abolition of AYP requirements, or at least, the classification of ELLs as a separate subgroup. The probability that 100% of ELLs will meet proficiency standards in math and reading in 2014 is miniscule. ELLs are improving, but the definition of ELL prevents the group from meeting this goal. An ELL is not proficient in reading; a student proficient in English would be moved into mainstream classes and would no longer qualify for the ELL label (Crawford 2004). To address this problem, the Department of Education allows states to include former ELLs in the subgroup for up to two years after transitioning out (Department of Education 2006). The department has also allowed students to be tested in their native language for up to three years (Crawford 2004). Even with these changes in policy, 100% proficiency in 2014 is an unrealistic goal.

Instead of using standardized testing to measure the progress of ELLs, the Department of Education could rely on states to provide other academic criteria to measure success, such as graduation and retention rates (Crawford 2004). The current method of assessment does not allow for comparison among the states. States may create their own standardized tests, which means scores cannot easily be compared. In addition, states create their own standards for progress, so there is no guarantee that students from different states are actually achieving on the same level. If the Department of Education wants to have more control over the states, it needs to create a uniform system so that all states will be held to the same standards. The Department has already demonstrated that it is willing to mandate federal standards for the states. Similar to the inaccuracy in standardized testing among the states, states have traditionally been allowed to use their own methods in calculating high school dropout rates that have been known to severely underestimate the number of dropouts. Now, however, graduation rates will be calculated for all states using one formula (Dillon 2008). The same principle could be applied to monitoring the progress of ELL students, and even using the new uniform dropout formula could help determine which states are best serving the needs of their ELLs.

The Department of Education should also enforce its policy regarding professional development. As of 2004, only 79% of states had provided assistance in helping teachers meet state and local certification requirements for teaching ELLs (Department of Education 2004). With the ELL enrollment on the rise, it is important that all teachers have training to help them understand the unique circumstances of ELLs through continued professional development activities designed specifically to address the “curricula, assessment measures, and instruction strategies” used when teaching ELLs (Department of Education 2002) . While it may be impractical for every school to have a bilingual teacher or one certified in ESL, it is not impractical to include training in teaching ELLs in the qualifications for a highly qualified teacher.

Together with Congress, the Department of Education should recommend specific programs for the states so there is no hesitation about which method is most effective. Bilingual education appears to be the most successful program, although this will continue to be debated. Simply being immersed in a mainstream classroom does not guarantee that a student will pick up English. Even if they learn conversational English, they need additional support in their native language to understand the more complex language used in textbooks (Harper and de Jong 2004). There are some circumstances in which bilingual education is impractical, such as the case of Fairfax County mentioned earlier, in which there are over 50 different languages spoken, often by not more than one student. States should not be penalized for using English-only programs in these situations. In large metropolitan areas it would be easier to mandate bilingual education. In many schools there may be a large enough population to warrant a separate class in the native language. Even if at each school there is not enough to make up a class, students from nearby schools could be combined to create a class. It would be most convenient for bilingual education to be mandated in areas with a large Spanish-speaking population because most teachers who are certified in bilingual education speak Spanish. In California, for example, bilingual teachers were certified in 17 languages—96% of them in Spanish (Crawford 1998). Congress could also amend Title III so that the ELLs in schools labeled in need of improvement could transfer to schools offering bilingual education in their native language. Bilingual education does not have to be mandated everywhere—it would be very costly to employ so many teachers certified in so many different languages—but it should be endorsed by the Department of Education wherever it is practical.

Conclusions

States are given the option under NCLB to use either English-only or bilingual programs in ELL instruction. The majority of states use bilingual education programs, although they may not be employed in all areas within a state. Within these two broad categories, there are multiple methods, ranging in the amount of English immersion and the additional cost per student. There is no across the board evidence that one type of program will guarantee a decrease in achievement gaps between ELL students and all students in the state. The reading achievement gaps increased between 2005 and 2007 for four of the six states analyze—Arkansas, Georgia and Virginia (all English-only states), as well as California (a bilingual education state). The achievement gaps for mathematics increased in two states—one using English-only programs (Arkansas) and one using bilingual education programs (California). It appears that the type of program used is not the only factor contributing to success for ELLs. Other factors that contribute to achievement include the quality of teachers, the amount of federal funding and the percentage of low-income students.

Under NCLB, states are given the choice between English-only and bilingual education programs for their ELLs. In large metropolitan areas with high concentrations of students speaking the same native language, it may be practical for states to implement bilingual programs. In rural areas, however, where ELLs are scattered throughout the state, it may not be cost-effective to hire the additional teachers for bilingual programs. Neither program seems to consistently bring about a smaller achievement gap between ELLs and all other students. For example, between 2005 and 2007, some states have seen a decrease in the achievement gap for mathematics while seeing an increase in the achievement gap for reading (see Table 2). While the best type of program used is relative to the circumstances of each state, there are some common critiques of the federal government’s involvement in language acquisition programs. These critiques stem from the principle elements of NCLB, including the effectiveness of standardized testing, accountability and requirements for highly qualified teachers (Mantel and Greenblatt 2008).

The disagreements over NCLB are numerous and will not disappear as the 2014 deadline for 100% proficiency quickly approaches. Many of the problems cited by critics are magnified in the case of ELLs. The success of ELLs, for example, is more profoundly impacted by a lack of qualified teachers. Teachers who do not understand the specific needs of ELLs may use the same strategies they use for teaching native English speakers, even though the process of language acquisition is notably different for primary and secondary languages (Harper and de Jong 2004). In addition, NCLB has been widely labeled as an unfunded mandate, and like many other programs in the act, there is a shortage of federal funding for language acquisition programs (Mantel and Greenblatt 2008, 12). More money is required for effective language acquisition programs, however, because of the need for more instructional materials and extra teachers. Low-income ELLs face additional challenges, including lack of parental involvement, which is supposed to be a tenet of NCLB. All of these combined factors highlight the shortfalls of a well-intentioned law, one that doesn’t need to be abolished but does need to recognize that perfection is not an attainable goal.

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Table 1. Total Enrollment in Public Schools and ELL Enrollment by State.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **STATE** | **TOTAL STUDENTS** | **ELL STUDENTS** | **ENGLISH-ONLY OR BILINGUAL?** |
| Alabama | 741758 | 16,550 | EO |
| Alaska | 133288 | 20,743 | B |
| Arizona | 1094454 | 174,856 | B |
| **Arkansas** | **474206** | **20,709** | **EO** |
| **California** | **6437202** | **1,571,463** | **B** |
| Colorado | 779826 | 99,797 | B |
| Connecticut | 575059 | 29,789 | B |
| Delaware | 120937 | 5,919 | B |
| **Florida** | **2675024** | **221,705** | **B** |
| **Georgia** | **1598461** | **86,615** | **EO** |
| Hawaii | 182818 | 18,106 | B |
| Idaho | 261982 | 18,184 | B |
| Illinois | 2111706 | N/A | B |
| Indiana | 1035074 | 56,510 | B |
| Iowa | 483482 | 15,156 | B |
| Kansas | 467285 | 24,671 | B |
| Kentucky | 679878 | 10,138 | B |
| Louisiana | 654526 | 12,006 | EO |
| Maine | 195498 | 3,353 | B |
| Maryland | 860020 | 31,416 | B |
| Massachusetts | 971909 | 51,618 | B |
| Michigan | 1741845 | 65,419 | B |
| Minnesota | 839243 | 57,831 | B |
| Mississippi | 494954 | 2,859 | B |
| Missouri | 917705 | 18,745 | EO |
| Montana | 145416 | 6,711 | B |
| Nebraska | 286646 | 17,449 | B |
| Nevada | 412395 | 63,856 | B |
| New Hampshire | 205767 | N/A | EO |
| New Jersey | 1395602 | 50,515 | B |
| New Mexico | 326758 | 62,682 | B |
| New York | 2815581 | 194,123 | B |
| North Carolina | 1416436 | 73,634 | B |
| North Dakota | 98283 | N/A | B |
| Ohio | 1839683 | 29,804 | B |
| Oklahoma | 634739 | 47,381 | B |
| Oregon | 552194 | 64,676 | B |
| Pennsylvania | 1830684 | N/A | B |
| Rhode Island | 153422 | 7,468 | B |
| South Carolina | 701544 | 14,388 | EO |
| South Dakota | 122012 | 5,110 | B |
| Tennessee | 953928 | N/A | EO |
| **Texas** | **4525394** | **711,737** | **B** |
| Utah | 508430 | 49,973 | B |
| Vermont | 96638 | 1,775 | EO |
| **Virginia** | **1214472** | **72,420** | **EO** |
| Washington | 1031985 | 75,103 | B |
| West Virginia | 280866 | 1,944 | EO |
| Wisconsin | 875174 | 30,130 | B |
| Wyoming | 84409 | 3,077 | EO |

Source: NCES, Common Core of Data.

Table 2. 4th Grade Achievement Gaps.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2005 | |  | 2007 | |  |
|  | Mathematics | Reading | Gap between Mathematics and Reading | Mathematics | Reading | Gap between Mathematics and Reading |
| Arkansas | 6.4% | 16.2% | 9.8% | 16.9% | 35.3% | 18.4% |
| Georgia | 35.3% | 38.8% | 3.5% | 28.7% | 42.9% | 14.2% |
| Virginia | 11.3% | 12.4% | 1.1% | 6.7% | 22.0% | 15.3% |
| California | 30.2% | 38.7% | 8.5% | 31.3% | 40.3% | 9.0% |
| Florida | 27.3% | 35.1% | 7.8% | 23.9% | 34.4% | 10.5% |
| Texas | 20.3% | 32.2% | 11.9% | 15.4% | 31.0% | 15.6% |
| National Public | 28.1% | 38.7% | 10.6% | 28.1% | 39.4% | 11.3% |

Source: NAEP.

Figure 1.

Table 3. Certified ELL Teachers.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| State | Number of ELL Students 2003-2004 | Number of Certified Teachers 2003-2004 | Certified Teachers per ELL | Estimated Number of Teachers Needed in Five Years\* |
| Arkansas | 17,174 | 735 | 23.37 | 1,394 |
| Georgia | 65,876 | 2,831 | 23.27 | 3,460 |
| Virginia | 60,301 | 1,630 | 36.99 | N/A |
| California | 1,598,366 | 154,650 | 10.34 | 193,312 |
| Florida | 196,037 | 46,000 | 4.26 | N/A |
| Texas | 661,052 | 21,710 | 30.45 | 33,710 |

\*includes those currently certified

Source: Department of Education, “Biennial Evaluation Report to Congress on the Implementation of Title III, Part A of the ESEA.”

Table 4. FY 2005 Funding per ELL.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| State | Language Acquisition State Grants | ELL Enrollment 2004-2005 | Funding per ELL |
| Arkansas | $1,986,077 | 18,647 | $106.51 |
| Georgia | $13,281,802 | 60,334 | $220.14 |
| Virginia | $9,222,809 | 66,970 | $137.72 |
| California | $149,565,827 | 1,585,647 | $94.32 |
| Florida | $38,999,401 | 214,562 | $181.76 |
| Texas | $82,422,240 | 684,583 | $120.40 |
| English-Only Average | $40,571,229 | 214,930 | $188.76 |
| Bilingual Average | $447,135,605 | 3,685,227 | $121.33 |

Source: Department of Education; NCES, CCD.

Table 5. FY 2005 Funding for All Students.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| State | Total Expenditures for Education | Total Enrollment | Funding per Student |
| Arkansas | $3,546,998,578 | 463,115 | $7,659 |
| Georgia | $12,528,855,797 | 1,553,437 | $8,065 |
| Virginia | $10,705,162,345 | 1,204,739 | $8,886 |
| California | $50,918,654,264 | 6,441,557 | $7,905 |
| Florida | $19,042,877,250 | 2,639,336 | $7,215 |
| Texas | $31,919,106,851 | 4,405,215 | $7,246 |
| English-Only Average | $5,247,053,160 | 658,005 | $8547 |
| Bilingual Average | $9,488,776,430 | 1,074,267 | $8772 |

Source: Department of Education; NCES, CCD.

Table 6. 2005 Reading Achievement Gaps and FARL.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| State | % of All Students Receiving FARL | Reading Achievement Gap |
| Arkansas | 52.9% | 16.2% |
| Georgia | 49.8% | 38.8% |
| Virginia | 31.1% | 12.4% |
| California | 48.5% | 38.7% |
| Florida | 45.8% | 35.1% |
| Texas | 48.2% | 32.2% |

Source: NCES, CCD.

1. The LEP Partnership Initiative was created by the Department of Education to work with states to create high-quality assessments for ELLs. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)