

COMMENTARY

COVID-19's Impact on English Learner Students

Possible Policy Responses



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As an immensely diverse group of students, [English learners \(ELs\)](#) will have widely varying experiences during the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) and, as such, a broad range of educational and schooling needs—not to mention physical and mental health-related needs. For example, Asian American EL students may face [bullying and discrimination due to xenophobic responses to COVID-19](#) while [rural and migrant ELs may not have access to cell phone reception, let alone Wi-Fi hotspots and computers, for distance learning](#). As the state and local education agencies move into summer and planning for an uncertain 2020–21 school year, they have an opportunity to prepare, thoughtfully, to attend to the full spectrum of diverse contexts and needs of EL students.

Even as experiences among ELs differ, the group as a whole will surely enter the 2020–21 year having experienced an [academic “slide,”](#) especially among EL students who could not access distance learning this spring and who have [limited resources at home](#). As such, the achievement gap between EL and non-EL students (here, clearly an opportunity gap) is likely to be wider than prior to COVID-19.

We do not yet know what education will look like this coming fall nor into the future. In this commentary, I build from research evidence to provide recommendations for how policy can support EL students and schooling both if schools are physically closed and providing distance education, and once they partially or fully reopen.

SUPPORT FAMILIES

Universal basic income, health and safety protections, hazard pay, health care, and sick leave are all policy approaches that will help EL students. Undocumented persons should be included in these basic rights without compromising their path to citizenship. These supports can be provided by the state and are especially important for the families of EL students who are disproportionately low income and/or undocumented. Many EL family members are currently at [acute health risk](#) because they are still working, often in essential jobs such as the agriculture, health care, and food industries, or are experiencing economic hardship having lost their jobs due to COVID-19. [California's relief funding for immigrants](#) is a good step, as are accessible free meals and food boxes from districts, but neither is enough.

ENSURE ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY & WI-FI

Regardless of the specific design of schooling come fall, most experts agree that distance learning will be part of the plan. Evidence suggests that EL students [disproportionately need devices and Wi-Fi/hotspot access](#). Districts should ensure that all EL students have a [Wi-Fi-connected device](#) provided freely and without penalty, should a device be damaged. Distance learning should, like in-person education, provide [accessible content and English language development instruction](#) to ELs, and can benefit from the potential affordances technology offers for supporting multilingual learners (see this [list](#), which includes resources such as Khan Academy and Audible). Until access is universal, districts and schools should avoid penalizing students for their inability to access or complete distance learning activities and technology-free learning opportunities should be provided (e.g. books, activity packets, and educational games).

COMMUNICATE AND CONNECT WITH FAMILIES

Many students have [“disappeared”](#) since schools closed; among these are EL students. Districts and schools should draw on existing resources to [improve contact and communication with the families of EL students](#)—for example family liaisons, community partners, school/district translators, active parents, and bilingual and English language development teachers—all of whom can serve as bridges to EL students and their families. Schools should, in addition, send communications in all major languages spoken by their ELs via platforms that are accessible to parents.

DRAW ON AND CELEBRATE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ASSETS

EL students, like their peers, will have missed out on a great deal of instruction but will likely have had extended time with immediate family. They may have deepened their [knowledge of their home language](#), learned more about cooking and gardening, or taken care of family members. Leveraging this knowledge is central to [culturally relevant and responsive teaching and content](#), which entails schools and teachers drawing on students’ knowledge and skills and engaging community and family members in ways that bring culturally rich knowledge and skills into instruction and content.

EXTEND LEARNING TIME FOR ELS

The state should mandate that all EL students be provided extended learning time. Under distance learning conditions EL students should participate in everything that non-EL students participate in and also have additional small-group or one-on-one instruction with their general education or English language development teacher to scaffold and reinforce content and language development. Districts and schools should draw on multilingual educators and bilingual instruction to provide small-group instruction to the greatest extent possible. Ensuring that EL supports do not supplant general education content is also critical once schools physically reopen. English language development instruction, for example, could be moved to just before or just after school hours so that EL students don’t miss out on the content to which their peers have access. Districts could use Title III funds toward extended learning time; however, current funding levels may be inadequate.

BOLSTER COLLABORATION AMONG GENERAL EDUCATION AND ENGLISH LEARNER TEACHERS

During distance education, including English learner specialists and English language development teachers as members of core/classroom teachers’ online platforms (e.g., [Google Classroom](#)) can enable collaboration between EL and general education instruction. It will also keep EL students connected with their teachers and provide EL teachers the ability to see and provide feedback on their students’ general education work. Enhanced collaboration among general education and EL teachers will be equally critical once schools reopen; [practices](#) developed under distance learning conditions could carry over to in-person schooling.

HIRE AND TRAIN BILINGUAL FAMILY MEMBERS TO HELP DELIVER EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

[Unemployment has skyrocketed](#), especially among vulnerable, low-income populations. At the same time, ELs’ family members are often not only bilingual but also connected to and invested in their communities, giving them immense capacity for helping school

systems—potentially a highly mutually beneficial situation. EL family members could serve as teachers’ aides, lead extracurricular classes, tutor, and more, whether virtually or in person. Supporting EL students’ family members towards getting teaching licenses could create a new and much needed cadre of bilingual teachers. The state could provide funding to districts for the hiring and training of bilingual family members.

QUICKLY ASSESS RETURNING STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC STATUS AND USE ONGOING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT TO TRACK THEIR PROGRESS

Come the fall, teachers can use classroom-based formative assessment processes to adapt instruction to students’ actual circumstances. Importantly, however, instructional responses to assessment results should not exacerbate patterns in which EL students are [exposed to less advanced](#), engaging, and challenging content. [Reclassification decisions](#) should be based on [fall assessments and/or alternative, existing criteria](#) if state English language proficiency assessments were not undertaken prior to school closures.

MONITOR ELS’ ACCESS TO CONTENT AND TO FUNDING EXPENDITURES

Districts and schools should be required to (a) provide full access to content to all ELs [following Assembly Bill 2735](#) and (b) use targeted funds from the [LCFF for ELs](#) on EL expenditures (rather than on general education expenses). The state should monitor districts and districts should monitor schools closely for meaningful compliance in both of these areas.

This commentary highlights key policies for EL education that the state and districts can adopt in planning for the 2020–21 academic year. These recommendations are guided by several core principles, including that schools, communities, and families have immense assets with regard to EL students and their education; that building upon those strengths will require amplifying a focus on EL equity and opportunity along with amplifying resources for EL education; that EL students should not be separated from their non-EL peers nor from general education content; and that the COVID-19 pandemic demands that we reimagine education in a way that builds greater equity and creates more resiliency in advance of the next crisis.

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