

COMMENTARY

The Cost of Providing an Adequate Education to ELLs

What Does the Literature Say?

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In 2009, more than 11 million school-age children between the ages of 5 and 17 spoke a language other than English at home. These students represent 21% of all school-age children and 11% of all public school enrollments nationally. Under the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) and the [Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974](#), public schools are mandated to provide the academic and fiscal resources to help English Language Learners (ELLs) overcome language barriers and gain English fluency. English Language Learners is the fastest growing demographic and arguably the most complex to fund and educate, yet limited research has focused on *how* to fund this group to improve their educational trajectory.

The primary method for determining the costs associated with educating K–12 children, including ELLs, has been through the use of costing out studies. These studies began in the 1970s as resource cost models but have proliferated since the early 1990s. In [this study](#), published by the *Review of Educational Research*, [Oscar Jimenez-Castellanos](#) and [Amy Topper](#) undertake a review of this literature to highlight the issues involved in providing an adequate education to English Language Learners.

Currently, the four prominent cost study methodologies are professional judgment panel (PJP), successful school model (SSM), evidenced-based (EB) approach, and cost function analysis (CFA). Costing out studies, in general, seek to determine what resources are needed to provide an adequate education to public school students, how much an adequate education should cost to meet a determined benchmark, and how revenue should be generated. Most costing out studies rely on student performance data on state standardized tests to measure whether students are making adequate progress.

Jimenez-Castellanos and Topper’s integrative review of the cost study literature reveal that prior research varies widely in the ways in which ELL students are treated—or not treated—in costing out studies. Of the 70 empirical studies reviewed, only four focused specifically on ELLs. Although each of the costing out methodologies accounted for ELLs in some way, the level of consideration and detail varied substantially across methodologies. Overall, there are several important patterns evident in the cost study literature:

- States are not allocating sufficient funds to adequately education the general K–12 population;
- ELLs are inconsistently addressed across the cost study literature; and
- Current costing out methods need to be adapted to better account for the diverse and complex needs of the ELL student population

Determining the cost of educating ELLs is particularly relevant for California, which educates a large share of the nation’s English

Learners. As legislators debate Governor Brown’s proposal to move to a weighted funding formula, the question of whether and how to account for English Learners is sure to be part of the conversation. Although current research does not provide one ‘best number’ for a weight for ELLs, the literature can provide policymakers with a fuller picture of the costs associated with educating ELLs. Although this brings an additional layer of complexity to an already politicized process, it is in the best interest of states and cost study researchers to proactively account for the varied backgrounds, academic histories, and educational needs of ELL students.

Producing an accurate picture of the funding needed to provide ELLs with an adequate education is inherently an issue of social justice. It is too easy to diminish or obscure the needs and diversity of ELL students in funding formulas and costing out processes, as this review of the literature has shown. As the number and diversity of the ELL student population continues to grow, it has become even more important that state educational agencies and legislative bodies ensure that ELLs, and the schools and teachers that serve them, are provided with equitable resources. Expanding costing out methodologies to incorporate a more contextualized understanding of ELLs, their range of experiences, and their needs will be one step toward achieving educational adequacy and equity.

*The full study is [here](#) (gated): “The Cost of Providing an Adequate Education to English Language Learners: A Review of the Literature,” *Review of Educational Research* June 2012 vol. 82 no. 2 179-232.*

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