

## **Policy Brief: Additional English Learner Course Requirements for Preservice Teachers**

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*Recommended Citation:* Pocoski, Jeanine and Michel, Kelly (2020). Policy Brief: Additional English Learner Course Requirements for Preservice Teachers, *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Fall 2020 Special Issues on Educational Leadership Policy Briefs: Perspectives of Doctoral Students*

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### **Executive Summary**

English Learners are the fastest growing population of school-aged students in the past decade (Migration Policy Institute, 2016). Nearly one in four students in the United States is an immigrant or the child of an immigrant. Most of these students come from homes in which a language other than English is spoken (Gandara, 2013, p.156). Many of these students qualify as English Learners (ELs), which is defined by Connecticut's General Statute 10-17e as, "students who lack sufficient mastery of English to assure equal educational opportunities in the regular school program" (CSDE Data Bulletin, 2015, p.1). These language differences along with other socio-cultural factors are impacting EL students' achievement in the classroom. Gandara (2013) states, "These students perform worse than any other subgroup except learning disabled students on most academic measures, and they pose significant challenges for teachers and schools that are not prepared to meet their needs" (p.157). A lack of teacher training in instructional methods effective for addressing the needs of this student population has contributed to an opportunity gap resulting in only 10% of ELs scoring proficient in reading at the beginning of Fourth Grade and 65% of EL students scoring below basic on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Assessment of Educational Progress

[NAEP], 2019). Therefore, new policies addressing preservice teacher training must be adopted. In particular, in the state of Connecticut where there were 34,833 EL students as of August 2015 (Connecticut State Department of Education's Data Bulletin, 2015), new policies are needed in the certification requirements for elementary education teachers. The policy proposed in this brief includes additional coursework for preservice teachers focused on cultural awareness, research-based teaching methods, and effective strategies for addressing the social, cultural, linguistic and academic needs of EL students.

### **Plan Policy: Conditions, Issues, & Needs**

With an increasingly diverse population of students, it is imperative that teachers receive the necessary training to effectively address the needs of all students. The number of culturally and linguistically diverse students – referred to both as English Language Learners (ELLs) and English Learners (ELs) - has grown significantly in recent years. The EL population has increased from 2 million to 5 million since 1990, a 150% increase compared to only a 20% increase in the general population (Goldenberg, 2010). According to the Connecticut State Department of Education's Data Bulletin, there were 34,833 English learners in 173 public local education agencies (LEAs) in the state of Connecticut alone (2015).

Rapid increases in the EL population has resulted in an estimated 25% of children in America coming from immigrant families who speak a language other than English at home (Samson & Collins, 2012, p. 1). Approximately half of these children are identified as English Learners (ELs) by their schools. While the other half is not formally identified as EL, these students still encounter challenges without additional support (Gandara, 2013, p.156). Despite the majority of EL learners speaking Spanish, more than 56% of the schools in the US have students coming from 3-50 different language backgrounds (Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010, p. 32).

Data shows a disproportionate number of EL students being identified for special education services. Over the last five years, the number of ELs who were identified for special education in Connecticut increased by 36.1%, compared with a 5.8% increase for others (Connecticut State Department of Education [CSDE] Bulletin, 2015). This might be attributed to the rapid increase in the EL population over the past 20 years but nonetheless, shows a severe discrepancy between EL and non-EL students. In Connecticut, 18% of EL students were identified for special education compared with 12.5% of other students (CSDE Data Bulletin, 2015).

Due to compounding socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic barriers - as well as inequitable educational opportunities - EL students, in general, find themselves on the wrong side of the achievement gap. Historically, EL students, “perform worse than any other subgroup except learning disabled students on most academic measures” (Gandara, 2013, p. 157). Nationally, only 10% of ELs were proficient in reading at the beginning of Fourth Grade compared to 39% of non-EL students. Additionally, 65% of EL students scored in the below basic range in reading while only 29% of non-EL students scored in the below-basic range (NAEP, 2019). As seen in figures 1 and 2, eighth grade ELs scored significantly lower over a four-year span in both reading and math as assessed by the NAEP. In addition, EL students experience low graduation rates and pose, “significant challenges for teachers and schools that are not prepared to meet their needs” (Gandara, 2013, p. 157).

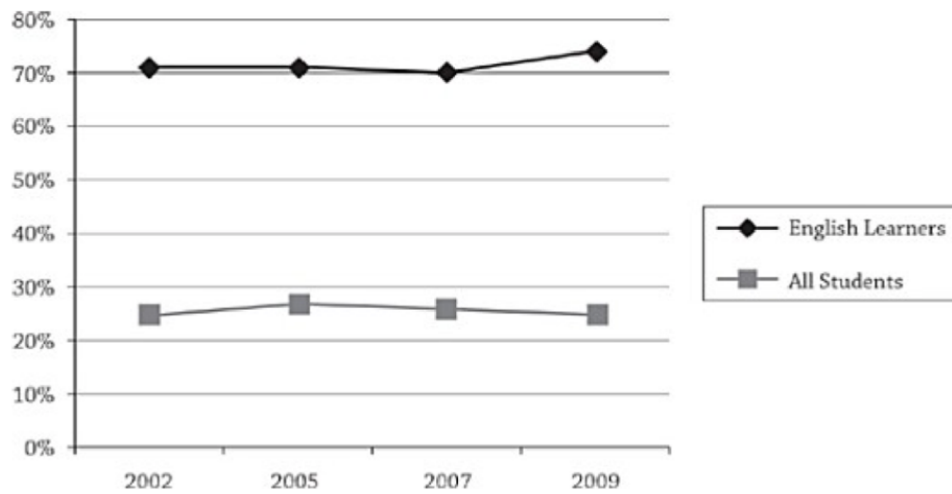


Figure 1 NAEP Eighth-Grade Reading Scores, Percentage Below Basic Level, EL and All Students, 2002-2009 (Gandara, 2013, p. 158)

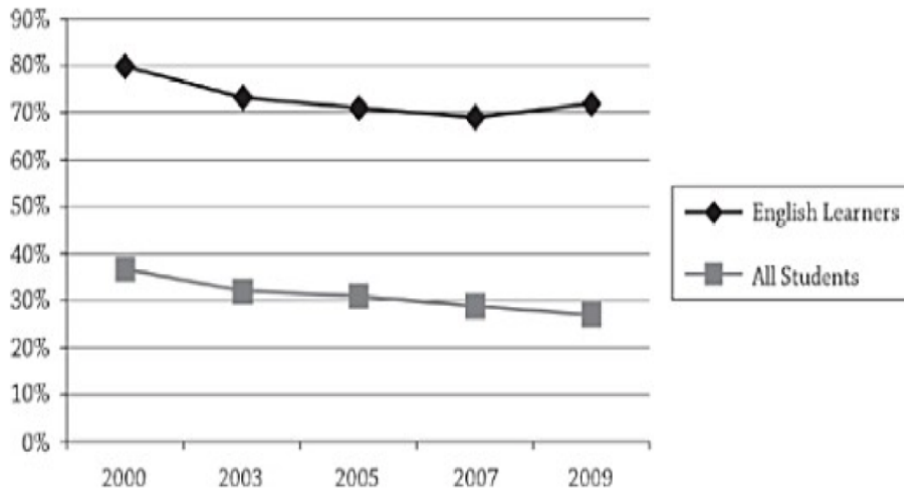


Figure 2: NAEP Eighth-Grade Math Scores, Percentage Below Basic, EL and All Students, 2000-2009 (Gandara, 2013, p. 159)

Assessments used to identify EL students do not help the matter. Varying assessments across state lines, coupled with students being prematurely exited from the EL category, compound the issues and lack of achievement experienced by this population. In some states, a student who possesses strong oral skills, can pass the required EL assessment, despite being, “unable to read or write well in English” (Gandara, 2013, p. 156). In addition to low performance and faulty assessment practices, EL students are also forced to, “contend with the fact that their parents may have significantly less education – and therefore less knowledge of how to support school learning – than the parents of native English speakers (Gandara, 2013, pp. 158-159). For this reason, parents are typically uninvolved and reluctant to provide academic guidance, despite possessing strong aspirations for their children to do well.

### Policy

Policy over the decades has attempted to rectify the severe underachievement of the EL population. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act ended segregation in public schools and banned discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Shortly thereafter, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 attempted to create equal opportunities for students by providing professional development and resource grants in elementary and secondary schools (Rusakoff, 2011). In 1974, the *Lau v. Nichols* case ruled that districts must take steps to provide

supplemental language instruction to English learners to support them in the classroom. In 2001, The No Child Left Behind Act held districts accountable for students' academic achievement and required states and districts to disaggregate their reading and math scores by subgroups on annual assessments (Rusakoff, 2011, p. 3). Most recently, under Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act, the federal government guarantees funds to help ensure that English learners, including immigrant children and youth, attain English proficiency and develop high levels of academic achievement in English (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2016). Despite these policies and efforts to improve the educational experiences of EL students, achievement for this population continues to suffer.

In 2015, the Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education teamed up to assert that schools, "must take affirmative steps to ensure that students with limited English proficiency (LEP) can meaningfully participate in their educational programs and services" (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This order fell under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and was enforced by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the Civil Rights Division at the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). Through the enforcement of the departments' work, guidelines were issued to school districts and State Educational Agencies (SEAs) to ensure compliance and guidance in meeting the requirements. Requirements included, but were not limited to, identifying and assessing EL students, providing them with a language assistance program, ensuring EL students have, "equal opportunities to meaningfully participate in all curricular and extracurricular activities," prohibiting the segregation of EL students, and "ensuring meaningful communication with LEP parents" (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Oversight of programs implemented through the Department of Justice (DOJ) and U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) held districts and SEAs responsible for, "producing results that indicate that students' language barriers are actually being overcome" (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The Departments used data from current EL, former EL, and non-EL students to determine whether a program adequately prepares EL students to participate in general instruction within a reasonable length of time. While the regulations put in place through DOJ and USDOE protected the civil rights of EL students, they neglected to take into account the preparation and training needed for districts, administrators, and teachers, to properly execute and deliver the instruction required through these mandates. As a result, teachers were held

accountable for delivering instruction that they were not properly trained or prepared to implement.

While systems have historically fallen short of providing teachers with the proper preparation to teach EL students, more recent policies are attempting to address this issue in an effort to close the opportunity gap. Prior to guidelines being issued by the Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education, Connecticut statute C.G.S. Sec. 10-145a (g) was passed in 2006 stating that, “any program of teacher preparation leading to professional certification shall include as part of the curriculum, instruction in the concepts of second language learning and second language acquisition and processes that reflects current research and best practices in the field of second language learning and second language acquisition” (Educator Preparation Statutory Requirements, 2020).

Even with Connecticut’s law surrounding ELs, individual teacher preparation programs remain autonomous in deciding how - or if at all - they will deliver on this statute. For example, at one Connecticut State University, the elementary education undergraduate program includes a 1.5 credit course titled, Supporting English Learners for School Success. At another Connecticut State University, students pursuing certification in elementary education (1-6) complete a BS in Elementary Education: Interdisciplinary Major. However, coursework for the certification does not include EL coursework within the course sequence according to the university’s website (Elementary Education Handbook, 2018, p. 9).

At a third Connecticut State University, preservice elementary education teachers complete a course titled, Second Language Acquisition and Strategies (Advisement Guide for Undergraduate BS in Elementary Education, 2020). At a fourth Connecticut State University, students are required to complete a 3 credit course titled, Methods of Foreign Language Instruction, Pre-K through 12. Putting aside the inconsistencies across programs, one must ask if the completion of one course aligned to the needs of EL students is sufficient in providing preservice teachers with the tools needed to effectively teach these learners. Despite three out of four Connecticut universities demonstrating alignment to statute C.G.S. Sec. 10-145a (g), the lack of credit hours required coupled with the misalignment between programs, shows a profound lack of urgency to properly address the needs of our EL students through robust EL teacher programming.

### **Arguments for Policy and Agenda Setting**

In a recent national survey conducted on the status of EL students and teachers, it was found that, “although 40 percent of teachers had at least three EL students in their classes, the typical teacher had attained only four hours of professional development on how to teach these students over the most recent five years” (Gandara, 2013, p. 162), and that only 35% of elementary-school teachers participated in even one hour of professional development related to EL learners (U.S. Department of Education proposal for reauthorizing ESEA, 2010).

Furthermore, a study conducted in California found that out of 5,300 educators of ELs – for those whose classes consisted of 50% or more of EL students - half of the teachers had received no more than one professional development session over the course of five years (Gandara, 2013, p. 162). While this lack of preparedness speaks to the importance of ongoing professional development, it also points to the need for strong EL training and preparation at the preservice level for all teachers.

While, “all 50 states plus the District of Columbia offer a certificate in teaching English as a second language, only 21 states require a specialized certification to teach ELs, and only 20 states require all teachers to have knowledge specific to the education of ELs (American Institutes for Research, 2018). According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), only one in five teacher-preparation programs in the U.S includes a full course on teaching ELs (GAO, July 2009). ~~In fact, preservice teachers seeking a degree and certification in education more often than not, do not acquire, “promising teaching methods,” for ELs.~~

This lack of preparation was reflected in a national survey of classroom teachers, in which, “57% of all teachers responded that they either “very much needed” or “somewhat needed” more information on helping students with limited English proficiency. In addition, nearly half of the teachers assigned to teach ELLs had not received any preparation in methods to teach ELLs” (Waxman, Tellez, & Walberg, 2006, p. 190). In other words, “A multi subject elementary school teacher candidate may be required to take courses in child development, English language arts, math, science, social studies, art, behavior management, and assessment, but not in the pedagogy of teaching ELLs” (Samson & Collins, 2012, p. 8).

Varying certification and program requirements regarding EL training across states creates variations in programming for preservice teachers

seeking general teaching certification. Inconsistencies range from required EL coursework and credit hours to no content requirements whatsoever. For example, in California, teachers are expected to meet a “Developing English Language Skills,” requirement. In Florida, students are required to take a minimum of three credit hours of teaching ESL (English as a Second Language) and for primary literacy instructors, 15 credit hours, as opposed to varying credit hour requirements in Connecticut programs, as stated earlier. In Pennsylvania, coursework is aligned to the needs of ELs (Samson & Collins, 2012, pp. 8-9).

In other states however, preservice teachers are not necessarily exposed to EL content. In New York for example, college students are expected to complete coursework focused on general language acquisition and literacy development. However, these courses do not necessarily focus on specific EL needs (Samson & Collins, 2012, p. 12).

Inconsistencies and a lack of EL content in higher education courses also fails to provide preservice teachers with the necessary knowledge and skill set needed to successfully complete certification requirements. For example, in the state of Connecticut, all teachers pursuing certification in Elementary Education, Integrated Early Childhood/Special Education, or Comprehensive Special Education, are required to pass the Foundations of Reading Test.

The Foundations of Reading Test assesses preservice teachers’ knowledge of reading development, comprehension, assessment and instruction. Embedded within these various domains, are questions aligned to specific EL teaching strategies (Connecticut Teacher Certification Examinations, 2020). By not exposing preservice teachers to EL content through higher education curricula, aspiring Connecticut teachers are not as prepared to meet pre-certification requirements. Contrary to Connecticut’s exams - which include specific EL content - New York’s exams are void of EL content all together. In both cases, one must question the impact on preservice teachers’ preparedness - or lack thereof - to teach EL students.

With a continuously changing EL population – both in size and diversity, teachers are being held accountable for student achievement despite not having received the appropriate training. As stated by Waxman, Tellez, and Walberg, “All teachers, not just English teachers, need policies supporting their work with ELLs” (2006). Therefore, the responsibility to provide all teachers with this knowledge begins at the preservice level. Without proper coursework and experiences offered in teacher preparation programs,



educators will continue to enter the classroom unprepared to teach EL students. The obligation we hold to these students, coupled with a lack of training for preservice teachers, warrants a close and urgent look at higher education policies dedicated to properly preparing educators to effectively teach this population.

### **Develop and Formulate Policy**

Policy actors at various levels would be called upon to enact revisions to statute C.G.S. Sec. 10-145a (g) and accompanying policy. At the state level, legislators involved with composing the statute would be responsible for making the appropriate statute revisions. In addition, the Connecticut Bureau of Certification and State Department of Education would alter certification requirements to reflect the new EL coursework and fieldwork requirements. These alterations would need to be communicated to higher education administrators across the state of Connecticut (See Table 1).

Administrators would include Deans of the Schools of Education, Assistant Deans, and Associate Deans. The next level of policy actors would involve Department Chairs. Chairs would then disseminate policy information to professors, who would in turn make necessary adjustments to syllabi and deliver curriculum to preservice teachers. In addition, university advisors would need to be familiarized with curriculum changes and requirements to ensure accurate communication to prospective education students entering education certification programs.

The proposed policy would be described as group equilibrium because it is driven by pressures from various stakeholders including the State Department of Education, local educational agencies, and teachers' unions. The State Department of Education is interested in policies or practices that will lead to higher achievement scores for high needs populations. Local educational agencies are supportive of policies that lead to highly qualified educators, and local teachers' unions influence policy that supports additional teacher training to prepare teachers to meet the needs of this diverse population of students (Steward, Hedge & Lester, p. 98). Please see table 1 below.

Table 1

Legitimize and Implement Policy

Goals and Expectations: <i>Increase skills and knowledge of Connecticut preservice educators to meet the social, cultural, and linguistic needs of English Learners so that they can achieve academic success relative to non-EL peers.</i>		
Actions to be taken	Key Actors/Roles	Time Frame
Evaluate Connecticut universities' current implementation of statute C.G.S. Sec. 10-145a (g)	-CT Legislators -CT university administrators	-12/20
Prepare and legitimize policy aligned to statute C.G.S. Sec. 10-145a (g), by circulating to key representatives and inviting feedback to make necessary adjustments	-CT Legislators -CT university administrators -CT Bureau of Certification	-by end of the 2020-2021 school year
Communicate policy and implementation plan to Connecticut Universities and Bureau of Certification	-CT Legislators -CT university administrators -CT Bureau of Certification	-12/21
Communicate policy requirements to appropriate university departments for implementation and prepare for field work partnerships with neighboring districts	-CT university administrators -CT university department chairs -K-12 public school district personnel	-4/22
Implement EL policy for preservice teachers	-Education professors -preservice teachers	-9/22
Evaluate policy implementation and effectiveness - FORT data, preservice student surveys, CAEP accreditation data collection	-CT university administrators -CT Department of Education -CT Bureau of Certification	-7/23

Currently, the state of Connecticut statute C.G.S. Sec. 10-145a (g) requires programs to include - as part of the curriculum - instruction of second language learning, acquisition, and processes (Educator Preparation Statutory Requirements, 2020). As previously noted, despite the statute, inconsistencies exist across programs resulting in varied experiences for students preparing to teach EL students. In addition, in programs that do fulfill the statute, course requirements are minimal and require elementary

preservice teachers to complete only one course dedicated to EL instruction.

The proposed policy changes would be conducted through an Incremental Model. Since the Incremental Model is, “public policy formulation as continuation of past government activities with only minor modifications,” Connecticut statute C.G.S. Sec. 10-145a (g) would be used as a foundation. Doing so would allow for attention to be, “concentrated on new programs and policies” (Stewart, Hedge, & Lester, 2008, p. 94). In considering the existing statute and the inconsistencies that have ensued from its conception, revision of the current statute would be the very first step in improving EL curriculum for preservice teachers. “Pre Service curriculum should contain comprehensive features that make it more relevant to improving the quality of ELL teaching.” Revisions would be grounded in the recommendation for, “All preservice programs - both elementary and secondary - should include a greater ELL component in methods courses. Additionally, field experiences for preservice teachers should integrate work with ELL students.” Field experiences would be aligned to methods course content and allow for multiple opportunities to apply theory to practice.

These field experiences would take place in, “linguistically and culturally diverse settings,” so that all teachers would develop skills needed to engage with families of all backgrounds. In addition, curriculum must assist teachers in learning how to, “adapt instruction to the needs and realities of ELLs,” all while, “maintaining compassion and high expectations for students while viewing them not just as language learners but as whole persons.” In addition, preservice programming must include opportunities for teachers to identify and analyze their personal biases, as well as examine issues related to, “language, race, poverty, privilege, and social justice” (Waxman, Tellez, and Walberg, 2006, p. 192). Based on these recommendations, alterations to Connecticut statute C.G.S. Sec. 10-145a (g) would require preservice programs to include - 1.) a minimum requirement of 3 credit hours aligned to coursework developed specifically toward teaching EL students, 2.) special topics aligned to the needs of EL students - including but not limited to - language, race, poverty, privilege, and social justice, embedded into existing teacher preparation curriculum, 3.) a minimum of ten hours of field work connecting coursework to practice, and 4.) evaluation measures for university implementation.

## **Evaluate Policy**

Following the communication and implementation of statute C.G.S. Sec. 10-145a (g) policies, accountability measures would need to be put in place to determine policy outcomes. This can be done both through existing assessments required for certification (Foundations of Reading Assessment), preservice teacher surveys, as well as through accreditation processes such as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). Using various assessments, a meta-evaluation, process evaluation, and impact evaluation can be conducted to determine policy effectiveness (Stewart, Hedge, & Lester, 2008).

As previously noted, teachers receiving elementary education certification must successfully pass the Foundations of Reading Test (FORT). This assessment requires preservice teachers to successfully understand and apply EL teaching practices. Through the collection of Foundations of Reading assessment data - along with the analysis of additional existing data - a meta-evaluation can be conducted to determine the effectiveness of statute revisions and policy.

Through a process evaluation, preservice teachers would be surveyed at the completion of their certification to gauge their satisfaction with the degree of EL content delivered throughout the program. Questions such as, “Do you feel your teacher preparation program adequately prepared you in teaching EL students in your future classroom,” and, “How satisfied are you with the content presented on EL students throughout your program?” would assist in evaluating whether the depth and breadth of the policy needs to be revised. In addition, field work experiences connecting theory to practice would be assessed using a similar method. Programs would be able to determine the effectiveness and impact of preservice teachers’ time spent applying skills learned through the curriculum, in K-12 classrooms.

In considering impact evaluation, the accreditation process through CAEP would provide data to determine whether EL students were positively affected by the proposed EL policy. For each of the five CAEP standards, universities are required to provide data and evidence outlining impact and results from preservice teacher programming. In other words, this process would assist in answering the question: Did the EL policy, “produce the intended result on the target population” (Stewart, Hedge, & Lester, 2008, p. 132)? Accountability for EL content at the preservice level would be done through Standard 4: Program Impact. For standard 4.1, “The provider documents, using multiple measures, that program completers contribute to

an expected level of student-learning growth,” in P-12 education. CAEP defines P-12 learners as, “children or youth attending P-12 schools including, but not limited to, students with disabilities or exceptionalities,” as well as, “students who represent diversity based on ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, language, religion, sexual identification, and/or geographic origin” (CAEP, 2019). By collecting data from providers (universities) documenting completers’ (preservice teachers who completed the certification program) contributions to achievement of linguistically diverse students, further accountability for policy formulation and implementation can be put in place.

### **Conclusion**

As educational leaders, we recognize the relationship between policy and practice. Having analyzed the current data related to the academic achievement of ELs, along with current policy for preservice teachers, we see a need for policy revision. In an attempt to address the public problem of low academic achievement of EL students, the policy ~~being~~ proposed is a rights policy as it supports the right to highly trained educational professionals and equal opportunities to this historically marginalized group (Steward, Hedge & Lester, p.88). After evaluating other policy options, we propose this incremental policy change calling for additional coursework and field requirements for preservice teachers. The intended goal of this policy is increased teacher knowledge and skill in providing high-quality instruction to EL students leading to higher levels of academic achievement and equal educational opportunities for ~~our~~ culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

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