

National Association of State Boards of Education

## → ESSA and English Language Learners

By Ace Parsi

Representing an estimated 4.4 million students in the United States, English language learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing segment of the public school population and yet are twice as likely to drop out of high school and significantly less likely to attend and complete postsecondary education.<sup>1</sup> The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes explicit new provisions related to ELL students and more generally offers greater flexibility that states can use to serve these students better.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, almost one in ten students

is classified as an ELL.<sup>2</sup> Between the 2002–03 and 2012–13 school years, the percentage of ELL students grew in all but 11 states (see map).

These students face many challenges. At home, ELL students' native language, culture, and traditions may be of central importance, but at school, their culture and identity may be mistakenly perceived as a deficit to be overcome rather than assets that enrich the classroom. They are more likely to live in poverty, and they often have less access to rigorous coursework and educational opportunities.

### NEW UNDER ESSA

Under ESSA, states must establish clear English language proficiency (ELP) standards.

ESSA moves accountability for ELP from Title III of ESEA to Title I. With this provision, states must establish long-term goals for achievement and identify persistently failing schools for targeted or comprehensive reforms.

ESSA is more explicit than was No Child Left Behind about ensuring that educators develop skills to serve ELL populations. For example, under the Title II state plan, states must identify how educators are prepared to support ELLs.

And rather than having multiple definitions and systems for classifying students as ELLs, states must now develop one consistent process for all students and schools statewide. This action can promote clarity and transparency, and it can also serve as a starting point to create a more coherent system of addressing the needs of ELL populations statewide.

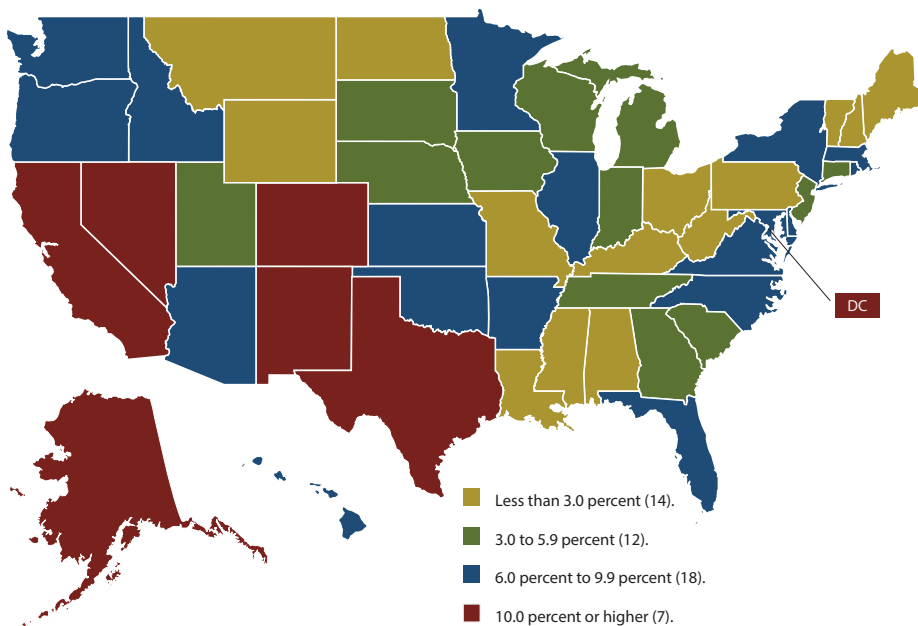
ESSA also calls for states to make accommodations for ELLs in assessments, public reporting, and parental engagement, ensuring that assessments and public outreach accommodate the needs of nonnative English speakers and their families.

### ROLE FOR STATE POLICY

State boards of education should make the most of ESSA's explicit provisions on ELL success and the added flexibility the law provides generally. No one policy will address the challenges these students face. Rather, states must build a system that addresses the gap in expectations facing ELL students, ELL student diversity, English language proficiency, and the capacity of educators to address ELL challenges. State boards can begin by asking the following questions:

- How is our state ensuring high expectations and accommodations to support the success of our ELL population?
- How are we supporting English language proficiency as a continuum rather than an event?

English Language Learners by State, 2012 (percent)



Source: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2012-13. See Digest of Education Statistics 2014, table 204.20.

- How are we supporting a personalized system of education that serves ELL as well as non-ELL populations?
- How are state policies and practices enhancing family and community engagement?

**Expectations Gap.** ELLs typically experience a climate of low expectations and fewer educational opportunities, such as gifted education and Advanced Placement offerings, compared with their non-ELL peers.<sup>3</sup> Latino students in particular face a significant stereotype threat that correlates directly to lower levels of achievement. When negative stereotypes about these students' abilities are replaced with more positive self-images, achievement outcomes improve.<sup>4</sup>

State efforts to overcome stereotype threats must embrace common, positive expectations for all students by empowering students, parents, and educators to close the gaps; ensuring access to rigorous coursework and assessments; and establishing accountability systems that benchmark ELL students' progress.

**English Language Proficiency.** By moving ELP from Title III to Title I and thus placing greater emphasis on outcomes, ESSA took a step forward in addressing the overall expectations gap. Without resources to back it up, however, this change will be another unfunded mandate. Federal and state policy action is needed to ensure the necessary accommodations on assessments, instructional tools, materials, and professional learning.

Policymakers must recognize that proficiency is not a binary variable—something a student has or doesn't have—and that students with different levels of proficiency need different types of interventions and supports. Under a new Title III provision, states must determine how students enter and exit ELP status and how they are supported throughout the process.

State boards of education can support ELLs not only through their policymaking authority but also their capacity to convene key stakeholders and ask questions related to the ELL population in their states. For example, state

boards can convene experts to advise them on a policy strategy to support ELLs from their entry into the education system to high school graduation.

**Better Instruction.** State boards often oversee the implementation of ELL instruction. They can leverage this influence as they devise plans around use of Title II funds and other resources to support evidence-based approaches to ELL instruction. Such approaches can build on the experiences of ELL students to engage students with content that is relevant to them while teaching language skills, promoting higher order thinking and problem solving, and coordinating and collaborating across disciplines in facilitating English instruction.<sup>5</sup> States can enhance school capacity to meet the needs of ELL students in high-poverty schools by leveraging schoolwide program funds under Title I, part A, section 1008 to facilitate mental health, mentoring programs, and other services that address barriers to learning for ELLs.

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Families and communities are an underused resource in driving ELL students' academic success. Language and schools' lack of openness to different perspectives often prove to be significant barriers to family and community participation. There are a number of ways states can overcome these barriers: soliciting public feedback on state plans in multiple languages, mandating that schools and districts involve parents and communities in school improvement planning, training educators and school leaders to engage diverse communities, and using Title IV, part E funds to facilitate outreach to families of ELLs.

## CONCLUSION

In reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, federal policymakers looked to turn the page on how the nation's education system operates. Two broad trends that are significant for ELLs rose to the fore: Greater weight is placed on incorporating ELLs in schools' definitions of success, and states are granted greater flexibility in determining how to deliver on that success. For state education systems across

the country, these changes represent both an opportunity to drive significant reform and a responsibility to deliver on educational equity for all students. States' appetites for seizing this opportunity will determine not only the short-term success of their educational systems but their states' long-term economic health, social well-being, and vibrant civic life as well.

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## RESOURCES

US Department of Education, "Meeting the Needs of English Learners and Other Diverse Learners," supplementary paper to *ESEA Reauthorization: A Blueprint for Reform* (Washington, DC, 2010).

US Department of Education, "English Learner Toolkit for State and Local Education Agencies," (Washington, DC, 2015).

English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA21), <http://www.elpa21.org/standards-initiatives/elp-standards>.

## NOTES

1. R. Callahan, *The English Learner Dropout Dilemma: Multiple Risks and Multiple Resources* (Santa Barbara, CA: California Dropout Research Project, 2013).

2. US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "The Condition of Education 2015," NCES 2015-144.

3. US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, "Data Snapshot: College and Career Readiness," Issue Brief No. 3 (March 2014).

4. David K. Sherman et al., "Deflecting the Trajectory and Changing the Narrative: How Self-Affirmation Affects Academic Performance and Motivation under Identity Threat," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 104, no. 4 (April 2013): 591–618, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0031495>.

5. M. Gottlieb, *Essential Actions: A Handbook for Implementing WIDA's Framework for English Language Development Standards* (Madison, WI: WIDA, 2013).