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RESEARCH-BASED OPTIONS FOR EDUCATION POLICYMAKING

English Language Learners and Parental Involvement

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The education of all children is imperative for the well-being of a democratic society. Yet, our non-English speaking populations are often denied equal educational opportunities.¹ Children from Spanish-speaking families in particular have consistently scored below the children of native-English speakers.² Further, a number of school finance adequacy studies³ and court decisions have pointed to inequities in state funding systems that discount the unique needs of English Language Learners (ELLs).⁴ Estimated additional per-pupil costs needed for ELL students ranges from 25% to 140%, depending on the system's funding base and how the program is defined.⁵

Overall, ELL students have grown from approximately 2 million students in 1989 to more than 5 million in 2004-2005⁶ and increased to 5.3 million in 2009.⁷ The fastest-growing segment is among Hispanics,⁸ and Latino parents and students represent the largest segment (76.1%) of ELL learners. Asian-language speakers represent about 10% of the ELL student population and are increasing as a percentage of the total school population as well. Although the ELL student population is often portrayed as an immigration concern, only 24% of ELL elementary students and 44% of ELL secondary students are foreign-born.⁹

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ELL students are concentrated in certain states, metropolitan areas, communities, and schools.¹⁰ As a group, these schools have a low instructional capacity, serve a low-income population, suffer a shortage of trained teachers, and have limited instructional materials and fewer opportunities to learn.¹¹ These resource issues are often exacerbated by communications barriers. In particular, interactions between schools and parents are often unidirectional and fail to value and take advantage of the families' resources and culture.¹²

Parental Involvement

While many systemic inequalities in the US require correction at the national and state policy levels, some key improvements can be made locally. The education of ELL students could be significantly enhanced by school-based efforts to strengthen parental involvement in the child's education. Under typical circumstances, ELL parents are ill-equipped for effective engagement with the school due to their own limited facility in English, lack of formal education and education in US schools, unfamiliarity with the norms of US schooling, and limited time and ability to attend meetings and events – all exacerbated by school-home cultural differences.

Arias and Morillo-Campbell outline these issues in their NEPC policy brief on this topic.¹³ They describe best practices whereby schools can help foster educationally supportive parenting skills, establish two-way communications, recruit families as volunteers and audiences, involve families with homework, include families in school governance, and collaborate with community organizations.¹⁴

Arias and Morillo-Campbell further advise that ELL parental involvement will be enhanced if the school embraces the culture of the community in its activities calendar as well as in the cultural and linguistic interactions of schools with parents. ELL parental involvement will also benefit if schools provide parents with avenues to learn English and with techniques for parents to support and encourage reading and writing with their children. Two other elements they suggest are working with parents to increase their understanding of the school community, with the aim of increasing parental efficacy, as well as effective parental advocacy.¹⁵

Recommendations

For Policymakers

- Many states have conducted adequacy studies and identified financial inequities in serving ELL learners. These studies should be reviewed, updated and turned into legislation and budgetary allocations to rectify resource inadequacies and inequalities.
- State laws, rules and regulations should be reviewed and revised to ensure that school evaluation frameworks systemically and specifically evaluate the

instructional capacity of schools with a high concentration of ELL students. A particular focus must be placed on the training and quality of staff, the adequacy of instructional materials, and the overall funding and support for ELL students.

- States must provide adequate training for ELL teachers which embraces and builds upon the students' native and family culture.

For Districts and Schools

- Provide home-school coordinators, fluent in the children's language, to enhance communications and bridge school-home cultural differences.
- Incorporate community cultural events and celebrations into school activities.
- Provide translators for all key parent meetings.
- Publish bi-lingual or multi-lingual newsletters.
- Provide a multi-lingual telephone network.
- Provide parents with avenues to learn English.
- Open meetings to extended families.
- Assist parents in educationally supportive child-raising skills.
- Support and encourage parent reading and writing with their children.
- Recruit families as volunteers and audiences.
- Involve families with homework.
- Include families in school governance.
- Collaborate with community organizations.
- Boost parental understanding of the school community.
- Assist parents in effective advocacy and interactions with the school.

Notes and References

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3 Mathis, W. J. (2009). After five years: Revisiting the cost of the No Child Left Behind act. In C. Roellke & J.R. King (Eds.), *High Stakes Accountability: Implications for Resources and Capacity*, 197-223. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

4 See for example:

Mendoza and US v Tucson U. S. District Court, Court District of Arizona CV 74-204 TUC DCB (AZ) Case 4:74-cv-00090-DCB, Document 1436, Filed 02/06/13;

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5 Mathis, 2009 (see note 3).

6 Arias, M. B. & Morillo-Campbell, M. (January 2008). *Promoting ELL parental involvement: Challenges in contested times*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved February 6, 2013, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/promoting-ell-parental>.

The Arias & Morillo-Campbell brief is also available in Spanish at <http://nepc.colorado.edu/node/3467>.

7 *Education Week*, 2004 (see note 2).

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9 Arias and Morillo-Campbell, 2008 (see note 6).

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11 Arias and Morillo-Campbell, 2008 (see note 6);

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Arroyo, 2008 (see note 1).

12 Arias and Morillo-Campbell, 2008 (see note 6).

13 Arias and Morillo-Campbell, 2008 (see note 6).

14 Arias and Morillo-Campbell, 2008 (see note 6);

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15 Arias and Morillo-Campbell, 2008 (see note 6).

*This is a section of **Research-Based Options for Education Policymaking**, a multipart brief that takes up a number of important policy issues and identifies policies supported by research. Each section focuses on a different issue, and its recommendations to policymakers are based on the latest scholarship. **Research-Based Options for Education Policymaking** is published by The National Education Policy Center, housed at the University Of Colorado Boulder, and is made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.*

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