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## Key Education Issues in Review: English Language Learners

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## Key Education Issues in Review: English Language Learners

### Introduction

Throughout the United States, and particularly in Nevada, education for English Language Learners (ELLs) and Limited English Proficient (LEP) learners has become a topic of critical and timely importance. Across the nation, ELLs constitute the fastest growing subpopulation in our public schools. While most states see at least a moderate rise in their populations of ELL students, Nevada continues to experience the steepest rises in the country.

### Nevada's Facts and Statistics

- In 2013-2014 Nevada's ELL enrollment was 452,220 total students.
- At least 1 in 7 students in Nevada is an ELL (NSEA, 2013).
- Between 1998-2008, the number of ELLs increased more than 200%.
- In 2010, 31% of children did not speak English as their first language.
- In 2010, 33% of children ages 5-17 spoke a language other than English at home.
- Nevada is one of only 8 states that do not factor the additional expense of educating ELL students into state funding formulas.

### U.S. Facts and Statistics

- Nationally 4.4 million children were classified as ELL in the U.S. during 2011-2012 (NCES, 2014), speaking a total of 400 languages.
- In 2010-2011, 16% of children nationally came from homes where English is not the primary language.

- Most of these students are in states located in the southwest region of the country.
- 25% of ELLs speak a language other than Spanish.
- There are 7 states where the top language spoken by ELL students is something other than Spanish (Alaska, Hawaii, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Maine, Vermont).
- Some estimates suggest that by 2020 there will be more children with a non-English home language than children who speak only English at home (ECS, 2013).

### Nevada's Recent Actions to Date

- In 2012 the Nevada Legislature commissioned an equity study by the American Institutes for Research, which found that approximately \$145 million annually (through pupil-weighted adjustments) would be required to support the state's projected ELL needs.
- In the 2013 legislative session, Nevada made its biggest single investment in ELL education to date with the enactment of Senate Bill 504.
- The bill provided a \$50 million allocation over 2 years for designated low-performing elementary schools with high populations of ELLs.
- In the first academic year of SB 504 implementation, schools in Washoe and Clark County school districts implemented new programs and changes that have yielded positive outcomes.
- The bill created the statewide English Mastery Council to conduct ongoing review and recommendations for policymakers.

## Considerations for Future Directions

Stakeholders should examine Nevada's current programs within the national context. Nevada has the opportunity to evaluate the successes of programs funded and implemented by Senate Bill 504 and to improve and expand those programs as necessary. Doing so will allow policymakers to predict a meaningful return on any new funding or resources invested. Key issues that policymakers could address include:

- Develop a sustainability plan for current effective practices for ELLs.
- Consult experts and use task forces to evaluate research, data, and programs.
- Develop a consistent definition of ELL and LEP among districts in Nevada.
- Require high-quality teacher preparation and professional development for those educating ELLs.
- Develop an adequate short- and long-term funding plan that will meet the projected needs of Nevada's ELLs.

## Statewide Benefits of Future Action

- Ensures that all children have equal access to a high quality education and equal chances for academic success.
- Produces citizens better able to participate in effective citizenship for the betterment of Nevada.
- Takes advantage of the momentum of early successes from current initiatives.
- Produces stronger teachers for ELL students when attention is paid to professional development.
- Ensures consistency, uniformity, and reliability with ELL definitions and interpretations to improve program data, assessment, and decision-making.

## Implications of Status Quo

- The ELL numbers will continue to grow even if no new actions are taken.
- Young ELLs are less likely than other children to have access to and attend high-quality preschool programs, leaving less time to mitigate achievement gaps in elementary school.
- ELLs with inadequate English language skills are approximately two times more likely to drop out of school than their native English-speaking peers.
- Students with inadequate English will lack the skill set to compete in the job market, resulting in the state absorbing the myriad costs associated with long-term unemployment and under-employment.

## Selected Resources

- Batalova, J., & McHugh, M. (2010). States and districts with the highest number and share of English language learners. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. *Provides statistics, data tables, and maps related to nationwide enrollment of ELL students.*
- The Council of the Great City Schools. (2014). A framework for raising expectations and instructional rigor for English language learners. Retrieved from: <http://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/4/Framework%20for%20Raising%20Expectations.pdf> *Toolkit developed by the Council of the Great City Schools and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to provide a framework for districts as they implement higher standards for ELL students, as well as considerations for selecting instructional programs, materials, and strategies.*
- Education Commission of the States. (2013). The progress of education reform: English language learners – A growing, yet underserved population. Retrieved from: <http://dev.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/10/20/11020.pdf> *Brief document presenting recent statistics, research, and data about ELLs and promising policymaking practices for states.*

This paper represents a portion of work and research from a faculty member in the UNLV College of Education. For more information or to receive a copy of a comprehensive paper on this topic, please contact:

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