
Proposition 227 and Instruction of English Learners in California: Evaluation Update (2002)

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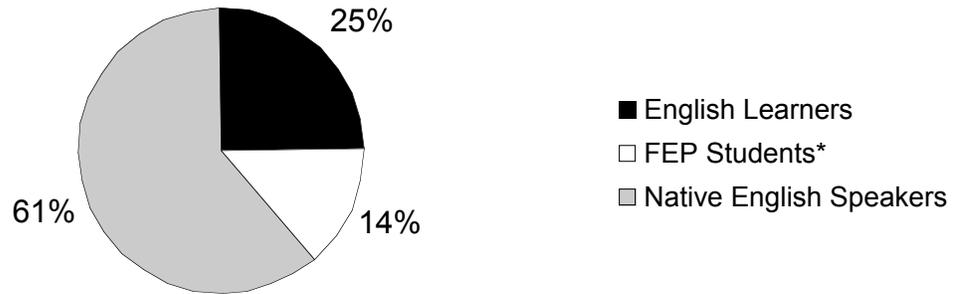
This update summarizes the first two years of a five-year evaluation study being conducted by American Institutes for Research and WestEd for the California Department of Education at the request of the California Legislature, under contract #9429. Its contents do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Education or the California Legislature.

How best to instruct students whose primary language is not English is a complex and hotly debated issue. In California, Proposition 227 was designed to replace the state's bilingual education programs with one-year English immersion programs. What impact has the Proposition had on English learners and educators? This document presents findings from the first two years of a five-year study examining the implementation of Proposition 227 and its effects on the education of English learners. Required by the state Legislature, this independent evaluation is being conducted for the California Department of Education by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) in collaboration with WestEd. This evaluation update contains general information on English learners in California, shows achievement results since Proposition 227, summarizes issues in regard to implementation, and concludes with specific policy recommendations.

General Information on English Learners in California's Public Schools

California's students fall into four broad categories based on their first language and their proficiency in English. A quarter of California's public school enrollment — some 1.5 million students — are identified as English learners (students whose primary language is not English and whose English language skills are not sufficient to allow them to function fully in academic English). When English learners meet criteria for linguistic and academic proficiency in English, they are redesignated as fluent English proficient (also referred to as former English learners). In addition, some students who speak a primary language other than English are identified as fluent in English upon school entry. In the 2001–02 school year, the combination of English learners, former English learners, and students identified as initially fluent in English accounted for almost 40 percent of California's total student enrollment (see Figure 1). The number of English learners in California's schools is increasing. Since the passage of Proposition 227 in 1998, the proportion of these students has increased by 7 percent.

Figure 1. Percentage of English Learners, Fluent English Proficient (FEP) Students, and Native English Speakers in California Schools in 2001-2002



*NOTE: Includes former English learners reclassified as fluent English proficient (FEP) and non-native speakers identified as such upon school entry.

Source: California Department of Education, California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) and Language Census Data Files (R30-LC), 2001-2002.

California's student population has enormous linguistic diversity — the California Department of Education's Language Census keeps track of more than 50 languages spoken by the state's students. Spanish is the primary language of the overwhelming majority of English learners in the state (83%), followed by Vietnamese (3%). The next eight most frequently spoken languages are Hmong, Cantonese, Pilipino (Tagalog), Korean, Khmer (Cambodian), Armenian, Mandarin (Putonghua), and Punjabi.

Although more than a third of the state's English learners are in Los Angeles County (38% in 2000-01), language minority students are not concentrated in large cities alone. As shown in Figure 2, high proportions of English learners can be found in schools across the state.

In addressing the needs of English learners, California schools provide programs attempting to meet two broad goals: (1) to help students become proficient users of English and (2) to provide instruction in academic subjects at a level comparable to that received by fluent English speakers in the same grade. Historically, California schools have attempted to meet these obligations using a variety of program designs. One way in which these programs have differed is in the degree to which the students' primary language is used for instruction while learning English.

The term "bilingual education" is commonly used to describe a variety of programs in which English learners are taught academic subjects at least partly in their primary language. Proposition 227 sought to reduce or eliminate the use of languages other than English for classroom instruction by requiring that students be taught "overwhelmingly in English" unless primary language instruction is specifically requested by their parents and approved by their school. Consequently, after the enactment of Proposition 227 in June 1998, the proportion of English learners receiving instruction in their primary languages was reduced in many, but not all, California schools.

To explore how instruction for English learners has changed since the passage of Proposition 227, we used the percentage of English learners receiving primary language instruction at a school in 1997-98 before Proposition 227 passed, and three years later (in the 2000-01 school year), to classify three types of schools¹ (see Figure 3).

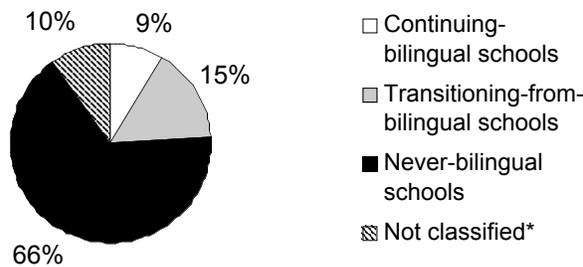
- **Continuing-bilingual schools** offered primary language instruction to a substantial proportion² of their English learners both before and after the passage of Proposition 227. These schools represent 9 percent of California schools.
- **Never-bilingual schools** offered primary language instruction to a small proportion or none of its English learners both before and after the passage of Proposition 227. This group comprises more than two-thirds (66%) of California schools.
- **Transitioning-from-bilingual schools** offered primary language instruction to a substantial proportion of their English learners prior to the passage of Proposition 227, but significantly reduced or eliminated it following the passage of Proposition 227. Fifteen percent of the schools fall into this group.

¹ As noted in Figure 3, 10 percent of the schools were not classified.

² For purposes of this study, we defined "a substantial proportion" to be 25 percent or more of the English learners enrolled at a school. Greater percentages were also examined, but found not to yield significantly different outcomes.

These data suggest that a relatively small percentage (15%) of California schools were substantially impacted by the passage of Proposition 227. However, the Proposition did affect a substantial proportion of the state’s English learners enrolled in bilingual programs. Before the passage of Proposition 227, just under a third (29%) of English learners were receiving bilingual instruction; in 2002, that figure dropped to 11 percent.

Figure 3. How Have Instructional Programs for English Learners Changed After Proposition 227 Implementation?

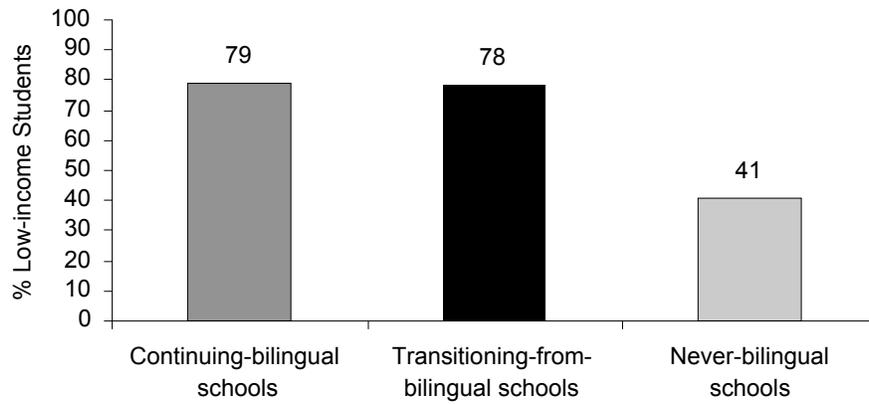


*Note: Ten percent of the schools were not classified in this framework — 8 percent of these schools could not be classified due to missing state data, and the remaining 2 percent consists of schools identified in a fourth model that appeared to have instituted bilingual programs following the passage of Proposition 227; however, early investigations during our case study data collection phase suggested that school districts classified in this way actually had significant student participation in bilingual programs prior to Proposition 227.

Source: California Department of Education, California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) and Language Census Data Files (R30-LC), 1997-98 and 2000-2001.

Substantial differences exist among the student populations served by the “never-bilingual” schools and the other two types of schools. On average, they have one-half the percentage of low-income students and much smaller concentrations of English learners (see Figures 4 and 5). This demographic information makes it clear that the “never-bilingual” schools serve very different student populations.

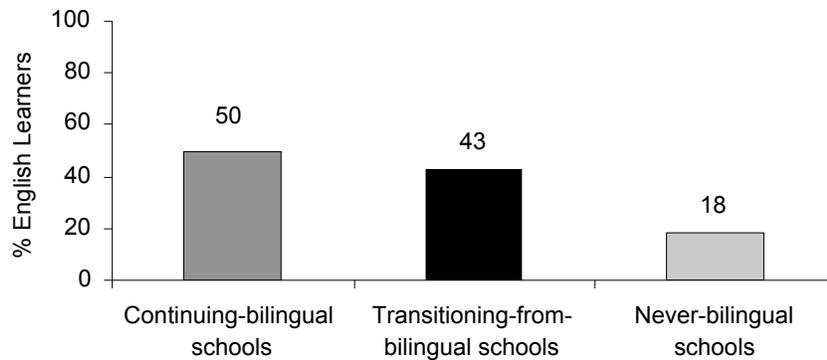
Figure 4. How Does the Family Income of the Students Served in the Three School Types Compare?



Note: Percentages refer to all students, not just English learners.

Source: California Department of Education, California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) and Language Census Data Files (R30-LC), 2000-2001.

Figure 5. How Does the Proportion of English Learners in the Three School Types Compare?



Source: California Department of Education, California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) and Language Census Data Files (R30-LC), 2000-2001.

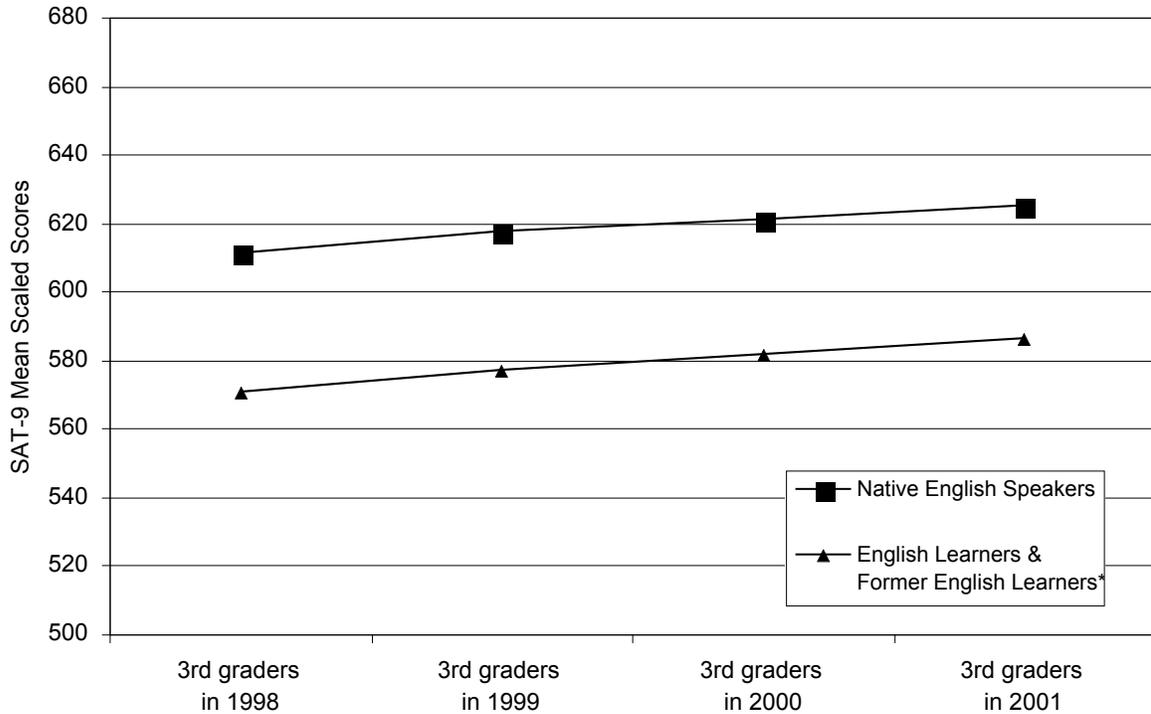
How Have Student Test Scores Changed Post-Proposition 227?

We examined changes in statewide test scores since the passage of the Proposition. Our analyses are based on results from the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT-9). This test, which was first administered to students in Spring 1998, is given annually to California students in grades 2 through 11. We compared the performance of native English speakers with that of current and former English learners — that is, students who either were classified as English learners at the time of the test or were former English learners who had been reclassified as fluent English proficient.

The results show gains for English learners over the four years of data analyzed (1998-2001). At the same time, the scores of all students (whether native English speakers, English learners, or former English learners) climbed during the same period. English learners continue to score substantially lower than their native English-speaking peers, but the performance gap appears to be closing very slightly. These patterns hold across virtually all grade levels and subjects (reading, language arts, and mathematics).

Figure 6 shows one example of these trends, comparing the performance of consecutive groups of 3rd graders on the reading portion of the SAT-9 between 1998 and 2001. As illustrated, since the passage of the Proposition, the test scores of native English speakers improved, as did those of English learners combined with former English learners. However, there is a persistent performance gap. While this gap closed modestly, the narrowing was slight. Prior to the passage of Proposition 227, the reading achievement gap for 3rd graders was 40 points; by 2002, it had narrowed to 38 points. Similar patterns were observed for other grades and subjects.

Figure 6. How Are English Learners Doing in Comparison with Native English Speakers in 3rd Grade Reading?



*NOTE: Former English learners are those English learners who have met the local criteria to be redesignated as fluent in English.

Source: California Department of Education, SAT-9 data files, 1998-2001.

Does the Type of School Appear to Make a Difference?

The study also examined how student test scores differed among schools categorized as continuing, transitioning away from, and never providing bilingual instruction to substantial numbers of their English learners.³ The results for each type of school show a similar pattern to our other analyses — all students (English learners and native speakers alike) made gains, and there was a very slight narrowing of the performance gap between current and former English learners and their native

³ State data on the instruction of English learners are available only in the form of school-level counts of students receiving services of various types. It was not possible, therefore, to compare the performance of individual students receiving different instructional services.

English-speaking peers. Based on these data, no clear pattern emerged indicating that one of these three school types was more effective than another in raising English learner achievement or in narrowing the performance gap.

As mentioned earlier, what did stand out was that the three types of schools serve substantially different student populations. Schools that have had bilingual programs — whether they transitioned away from them or continued them — enroll much higher proportions of low-income students and English learners. In these types of schools, test scores were lower for all students — native English speakers and their classmates whose first language is not English — compared to their counterparts in schools that never offered bilingual programs. This was true both before and after the passage of Proposition 227. In fact, the performance gap was often as wide or wider *among* the native English speakers across the three types of schools as it was *between* the native English speakers and the English learners within a school type.

Other Effects of Proposition 227’s Implementation

This study also examined how Proposition 227 has been implemented across the state and how its passage has affected students, schools, and districts. In order to learn more about the implementation of Proposition 227, we conducted statewide surveys and visited eight case study districts. We also interviewed key stakeholders such as advocates for and opponents of the Proposition, as well as others with a more general perspective on its origins and implementation. This section highlights the findings from these study activities.

Has Proposition 227 Affected the Quality of Instruction for English Learners?

District administrators, school administrators, and teachers across the state reported mixed or neutral effects of Proposition 227 on the quality and appropriateness of instruction for English learners. More than half of all surveyed districts and schools reported that as a result of the Proposition, there has been an increase in the focus on how best to educate English learners. Surveyed teachers also generally reported using instructional practices considered effective for addressing the needs of English learners.

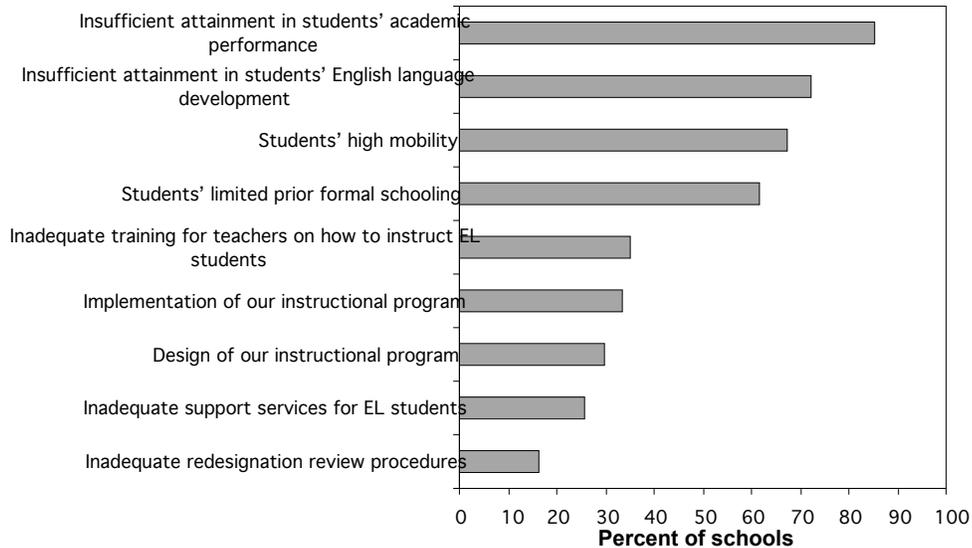
However, other findings suggest that the curriculum for English learners may be watered down. Less than half of all teachers surveyed report that they are able to cover as much material with English learners as with native English speakers. Evidence from surveys also shows that teachers have lower expectations for their English learners (particularly in the degree and depth of curriculum covered) than for other students. In addition, teachers responding to our survey indicated that they have difficulty providing their English learners with challenging content, and lack adequate time to address English learners’ instructional needs.

Additionally, instructional programs for English learners generally are not well coordinated across school levels within districts (such as elementary schools that feed into junior high schools), nor, in some cases, across grades within schools. Despite the presence of instructional program plans at district and school levels, only about half of the surveyed schools indicated that teachers implement them to a large extent, and a similar proportion indicated these plans were not well-coordinated with feeder/receiver schools.

Reclassification of English Learners as Fluent in English

Although the redesignation of English learners as fluent English proficient is one of the most commonly used measures of students’ progress, the majority of schools and districts reported that Proposition 227 has had no influence on redesignation rates. School administrators reported that just under half of their English learners met local redesignation criteria before graduating or being promoted to the next school level, and that the large majority of students redesignated took more than three years to meet those criteria. As shown in Figure 7, schools also reported that it is English learners’ academic performance in core subjects — even more than their acquisition of English — that keeps them from being redesignated.

Figure 7. Which Factors Limit the Rate at Which English Learners Are Redesignated to Fluent English Proficient Status?



Source: American Institutes for Research, School Survey, 2002.

Varying Interpretation and Confusion Surrounding Parental Waivers

Proposition 227 gives parents the right to seek waivers to place their children in an alternative program, such as a bilingual setting. However, enormous confusion exists regarding the availability and granting of such waivers. This has led to significant differences in policy interpretation and practice, resulting in very uneven implementation across school districts. Although waiver forms are available in most schools and districts, they are not consistently publicized or distributed to parents; in some cases, teachers say that they are discouraged from discussing instructional alternatives with parents. In addition, some districts lack an explicit policy on granting waivers, which may contribute to the relatively low and uneven use of waivers across the state.

Proposition 227 in Context

Proposition 227 is one of many policy reforms that were implemented in California schools during the late 1990s. Other important reforms implemented in the state during the same timeframe include class size reduction; a high-stakes testing and accountability system that rewards schools for test score improvement and threatens sanctions for continued failure; reading improvement programs; and the state's new English Language Development (ELD) standards and ELD test. These coinciding changes in California educational policy interact in complex ways, influencing the implementation of Proposition 227 and making it very difficult to isolate the impact of the law.

Impact of Related Funding Programs

The study also examined the implementation of two funding programs related to the education of English learners: the English Language Acquisition Program (ELAP) and the Community-Based English Tutoring (CBET) program.

ELAP provides funds to help English learners in grades 4 through 8 meet state academic achievement standards. Findings suggest that ELAP funds are being used as intended for students in grades 4 through 8. However, districts would like to see the program expanded to *all* grade levels, so that more English learners benefit from the available programs and services.

CBET, which is part of Proposition 227, funds adult English-language instruction for parents or other members of the community who in turn, pledge to provide English-language tutoring to English learners in California schools. CBET is generally popular with educators and community participants. However, its alignment with the education of school-age English learners is uneven. In particular, its link to neighborhood schools is often tenuous, and its participants often lack the English proficiency and tutoring skills needed to competently tutor English learners.

Recommendations

Based on our research to date, the study team makes the following 15 recommendations for state and local education leaders and policymakers to consider.

- 1) The state should provide additional clarification and operational guidelines for meeting the Proposition 227 requirement that instruction for English learners be provided “overwhelmingly in English.”
- 2) The state should provide additional guidance, and districts should carefully consider what constitutes best practice within English immersion settings.
- 3) Although the state has recently provided clarification regarding parental waivers for bilingual programs, additional steps may be needed to ensure that districts and schools better communicate these provisions to families.
- 4) Evaluation requirements for ELAP should be bolstered and made a state — not district — responsibility.
- 5) Rather than limiting the use of ELAP funds to grades 4 through 8, the state should consider giving districts flexibility in the use of these funds, while holding the local agency accountable for improved services and results.
- 6) The focus and purpose of the CBET program should more clearly emphasize coordination with instructional programs for English learners at neighborhood schools.
- 7) The state should consider ways to provide greater technical assistance to districts and schools to help them better define, implement, and evaluate instructional programs and services for English learners.
- 8) The state needs to improve its capacity to record, store, and utilize key demographic, instructional, and performance data on English learners at the individual student level over time.
- 9) The state should clarify its policy governing how parental waivers to exempt children from state standardized testing apply to English learners.
- 10) The state and school districts should review the incentives associated with the way programs for English learners are funded to provide greater emphasis on student success.
- 11) The state and school districts should make available supplemental resources to provide English learners with educational services comparable to those received by all students.
- 12) State policymakers and local educators need to revisit the purpose and meaning of the process of reclassifying English learners as fluent English

proficient within the context of standards-based expectations, instruction, and assessment.

- 13) District leaders need to ensure that their plan of instruction for English learners is carefully coordinated across classes within grades, across grades within schools, and across schools within the district.
- 14) District and school leaders should carefully consider the extent to which programs designed for English learners diminish or increase their segregation from native English speakers.
- 15) District and school leaders should take steps to ensure that English learners are not subjected to low expectations and watered-down curricula.

Future Research Plans

For the remaining three years of this study, AIR and WestEd will continue to use a variety of approaches to examine the impact of Proposition 227 including case studies, written surveys, student achievement analyses, stakeholder interviews, document reviews, and work group meetings. Next year, the study team will analyze newly available California English Language Development Test and California Standards Test data, and focus on high-performing schools with large populations of English learners. Gaining insight into what's working for English learners in these schools may provide lessons for the education of English learners across the state.

To Learn More

A full report on the findings and recommendations from the first two years of the study is available online at www.air.org (click on the "Elementary and Secondary Education" section of the Publications page) and at www.wested.org/cs/wew/view/rs/661.