

PreK-3rd: Raising the Educational Performance of English Language Learners (ELLs)

Dale Russakoff

Introduction

English Language Learners (ELLs) are students who cannot understand enough English to learn in mainstream classrooms without support. High quality PreK and elementary schools, and teachers who can effectively teach both the English language and content, can improve ELLs' academic achievement. Quality PreK-3rd programs would reach the largest number of ELLs, and research has shown that quality education during these grades provides the foundation for later educational and life success.

Challenges

There is a shortage of teachers who are adequately prepared to teach ELLs. Most teachers of ELLs are not trained to effectively teach academic English, which leaves ELLs to fall significantly behind their peers by middle and high school. Vocabulary, comprehension, and oral English skills must be included in the curriculum for ELLs. There are no national standards for identification and appropriate placement of ELLs, and their struggles with the English language is often misinterpreted as a learning disability. There is an absence of learning disability identification tests that are valid for children who do not speak proficient English, and a shortage of personnel trained to assess this population. The problems with the reliability of assessment of ELLs are problematic in an environment where data and accountability facilitate educational reform. Achievement standards and different dismissal criteria from state to state undermines accountability.

Solutions

Currently, the majority of ELLs are in the elementary grades. Therefore, research professional development should be focused on instruction and assessment in early education. There needs to be an explicit definition of what is required to be qualified to teach ELLs. Research in teaching the foundations of academic English for the PreK-3rd grades, development of nationally-normed tests for learning disabilities in ELLs, and school assessment specialists' training should be funded by both public and private sources. Accountability should be standardized, and federal policy should require that ELLs be monitored through Grade 12. Children should be assessed in both English and their native language, as a language disorder would be evident in both.

Conclusion

High quality PreK-3rd instruction for ELLs is desperately needed. This includes specialized training for teachers and assessors, development of valid and reliable bilingual

assessment instruments, creation of national standards, and continuity of accountability between states. Targeting the needs of ELLs during the early years increases their success and decreases the need for schools to fund interventions and support for these students in later years.

Russakoff, D. (2011). PreK-3rd: Raising the educational performance of English language learners (ELLs). *PreK-3rd Policy to Action Brief*, 6.