COMMENTARY

The Gap That Can't Go Away

The Catch-22 of Reclassification in Monitoring the Progress of English Learners

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PACE | Policy Analysis for California Education

PUBLISHED: July 23, 2013

When English Learners (ELs) demonstrate English language proficiency they are reclassified as Fluent English Proficient (RFEP). At any particular grade level and across grade levels, evaluating the progress of "English Learners" might include current English Learners, those who have been reclassified (RFEPs), and the combination of the two, which includes all students initially classified as ELs (IELs = ELs + RFEPs).

This study demonstrates the importance of evaluating the progress of all three groups and illustrates a simple but often unrecognized "Catch-22." Among *all* the students who are *initially* classified as Initial English Learners (IELs), those who are most successful—those who develop and demonstrate proficiency in English and are reclassified (RFEPs)—typically do not factor into evaluations of English Learner progress. RFEPs typically do not factor into evaluations of English Learner progress because their reclassification (i.e., their success) makes them no longer an EL. That is the Catch-22: Those that succeed (RFEPs) are typically excluded from the analysis of progress. The study analyzed 2010 statewide California achievement data for ELs, RFEPs, IELs and English-only students (EOs) and produced three major findings.

First, focusing on current ELs and excluding RFEPs dramatically underestimates the population of students that were initially classified as ELs (IELs). At grades 7–11 more than half (51% to 60%) of all IELs are RFEPs. Indeed, achievement levels are low among students who remain ELs at grades 7–11 (Long-Term English Learners), but they represent only 40%–50% of all students who were initially identified as ELs (IELs).

Second, RFEP achievement levels are on par with native English speakers (EOs); therefore, focusing on current ELs and excluding RFEPs overestimates the achievement gap between EOs and all students initially classified as ELs (IELs). Averaged across grade levels, 60% of EOs scored proficient in English Language Arts. Results for RFEPs, ELs, and IELs are, respectively, 66%, 18%, and 38%. Indeed, EO-IEL comparisons still reveal a large gap (60% vs. 38%) but one that is considerably smaller than the one between EOs and current ELs (60% vs. 18%).

Third, focusing on current ELs and excluding RFEPs decreases the likelihood of detecting progress when positive changes have taken place over time. From 2005 to 2010, the percentage of RFEPs (relative to ELs) increased on average by 12% (from 30% to 42%). Moreover, across the same time span, the percentage of RFEPs scoring proficient in ELA increased on average by 14% (from 52% to 66%). These gains represent progress but they would not be recognized without analyzing RFEP results—both the proportion and achievement levels of RFEPs. With RFEPs excluded the gap between EOs and ELs from 2005 to 2010 increased from 38% to 42%. With RFEPs included the gap between EOs and IELs decreased from 26% to 22%.

The results of this analysis suggest at least two major policy implications for California. First, California needs to expand its reporting practices to include RFEPs in all analysis of progress, including the proportions and achievement levels of RFEP and ELs

per grade level per year and combined results for IELs. California is already ahead of most other states in retaining the RFEP classification across all grades (some states lump RFEPs in the EO category), but the analysis of RFEPs progress now needs to become a non-negotiable part of all state accountabilities associated with EL progress. Second, as the Common Core Initiative proceeds and federal ESEA legislation is developed and debated, California needs to remain politically vigilant, proactive, and persuasive about the regular inclusion of RFEPs in all federal accountabilities related to English learners.

The full study (gated) can be found in Saunders, W., & Marcelletti,, D. (2013). The gap that can't go away: The Catch-22 of reclassification in monitoring the progress of English learners. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 35*(2), 139–156.

Suggested citation

Policy Analysis for California Education. (2013, July). *The gap that can't go away: the catch-22 of reclassification in monitoring the progress of English Learners* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/gap-cant-go-away

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