English Language Learners

A growing—yet underserved—student population

How many U.S. students are English-language learners? The number may be more than you'd imagine. In the 2010-11 school year, approximately 4.7 million public school students—nearly one in 10 students in U.S. public schools—were English-language learners (ELLs).[1] In eight states, ELLs comprised 10% or more of the public school population, with ***29% of California's public school students being English-language learners***.[2]

While Western states have the largest concentrations of ELLs, federal data document an increase in the percentage of ELL public school students in all but 12 states between 2002-03 and 2010-11, with the largest percentage point growth in Kansas, South Carolina, Hawaii, and Nevada. In fact, 28 states saw increases in the percentage of ELL students from 2009-10 to 2010-11, with Nevada's 3% gain that year the largest seen in any state.[3]

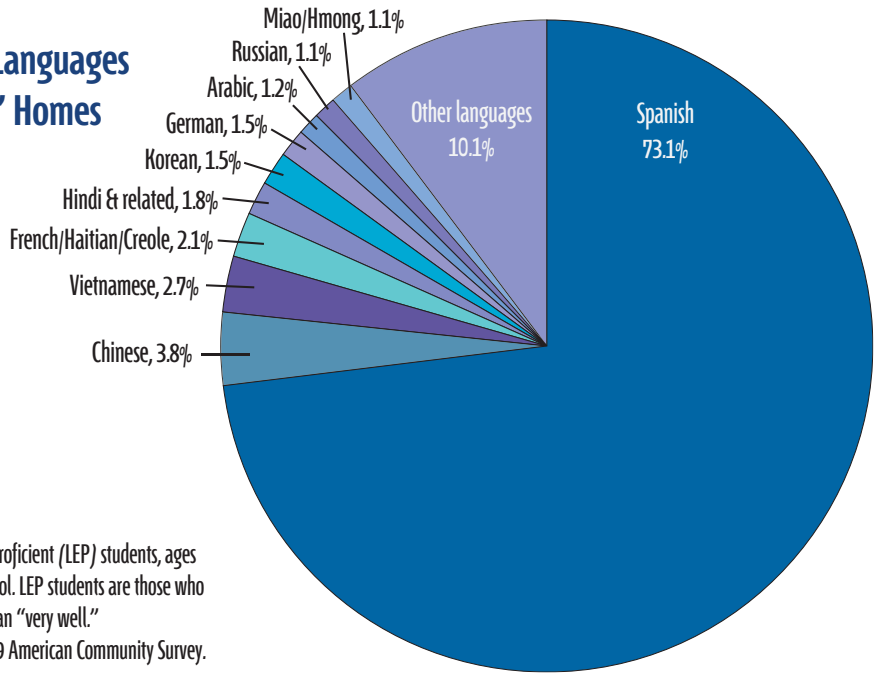
KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Nearly one in 10 K–12 students in public schools is an English-language learner.
- Many preschool programs are not equipped to adequately serve English-language learners.
- Long-term English learners suffer worse outcomes than other English learners. States generally do not monitor how long students spend in English-learner programs.
- In spite of the prevalence of English learners, many general classroom teachers receive little to no training in addressing the needs of ELLs.

For many, the term "English-language learner" automatically conjures an image of native Spanish speakers—yet as the chart below shows, more than 25% of ELLs speak a language other than Spanish or one of the other top nine languages. In fact, in some states, the majority of ELLs speak a language other than Spanish (see map on following page).

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* explores the research and data that underscore the urgency of better serving this growing student population, and highlights recent research and promising approaches that may inform state responses.

Top Ten Spoken Languages in ELL Students' Homes



Note: Refers to limited English proficient (LEP) students, ages 5 to 18, currently enrolled in school. LEP students are those who reported speaking English less than "very well."
Source: MPI analysis of the 2009 American Community Survey.

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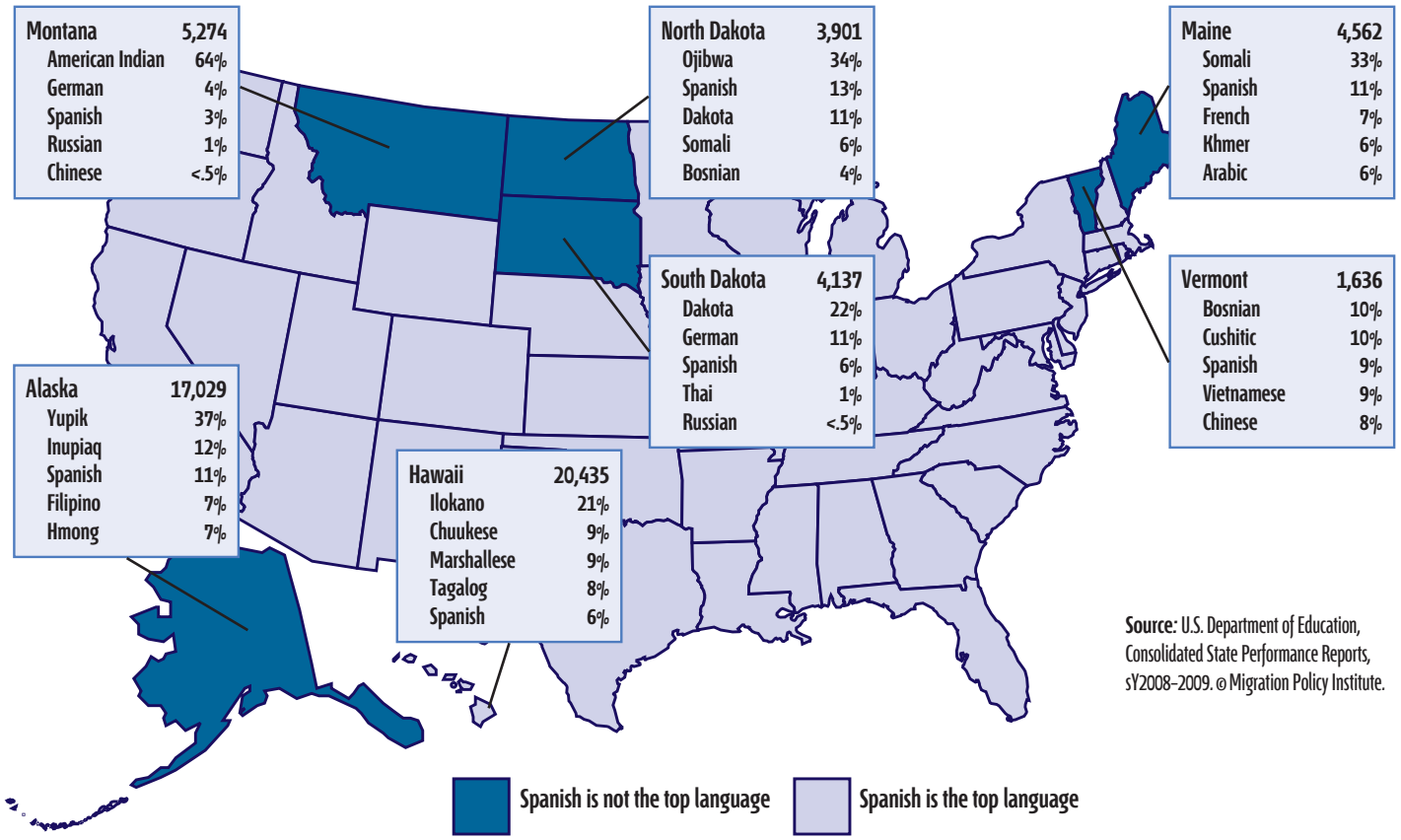
Map 1: Seven States with a Language Other Than Spanish as the Top Language Spoken by ELL Students, SY2008–09



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Consolidated State Performance Reports, SY2008–2009. © Migration Policy Institute.

What have we learned?

While the ELL population is growing, sobering achievement gaps and shortcomings in schools' capacity to serve these students should be cause for serious concern:

- ELLs' academic ***performance significantly lags*** that of their non-ELL peers—and more rigorous state standards and assessments undergoing implementation may exacerbate this gap.
- Students who remain in ELL programs over a number of years—so-called long-term English learners—fare ***even worse*** than other ELLs. Defined in a California report as ELLs who have been in U.S. schools for at least six years, long-term ELLs typically have grade point averages below 2.0 and are two to three years below grade level in English language arts and math. Many drop out.[4]
- Texas data reveal a similar story. Studying a cohort of students who entered Texas public schools as 1st graders in 1995 and graduated on time in 2006, researchers found that students who completed and exited programs after three years achieved the best results in basic math and reading proficiency among all ELL groups. However, students who remained in ELL programs for five or more years performed significantly worse in reading and math than their ELL *and* non-ELL counterparts.[5]
- The means to demonstrate English proficiency—and thereby exit an ELL program—vary from state to state and, in some cases, even vary from district to district. This contributes to the troubling number of long-term ELLs. Sometimes a student's classification as an English learner can change simply when that student crosses from one district into another. A 2008 study found 12 states use only English language proficiency tests to determine exit, while other states use between two and five measures, including some determined by districts. Eighteen states were identified as leaving reclassification measures completely to each district's discretion.[6]
- Many general classroom teachers lack the specific knowledge and skills to bring ELLs to proficiency in the four domains of language acquisition—speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

- The continuation of some states' Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) waivers are contingent on adoption of assessments aligned with college- and career-ready standards, but "[d]eveloping valid and reliable content-area assessments for ELLs will be challenging"—particularly for "ELLs with very limited English proficiency.[7]

Research suggests several underdeveloped areas of policy that, with appropriate state action, could reap tremendous returns for ELL student performance. The section that follows sets forth the need for greater policy action exposed by research and state policy gaps in these areas, and examples of emerging state action to address these policy gaps.

What we've learned: Get 'em while they're young

In 2010-11, 16% of kindergartners came from households where English was not the primary language.[8] And some estimates suggest that by 2020, the number of preschool-age children using or exposed to a language other than English at home may outpace the number of their peers who speak only English at home.[9]

When awareness of this increasing need is added to the fact that critical brain development occurs between 0-5, it is not surprising that states are expanding state-funded pre-kindergarten programs.

Yet many pre-K programs (and teachers) are not equipped to address the special needs of ELL pre-K students. **Illinois** is one exception. Legislation enacted in 2008 extends the definition of ELLs to include pre-K students.[10] This amendment made children in state-funded preschools eligible for English language program services previously only provided to K-12 students, and made English proficiency screening, assessment, and teacher preparation and certification applicable to pre-K programs.

A 2012 publication by the New America Foundation points to some unique approaches that are assisting Illinois programs in coming into compliance with these requirements:

- A Transitional Bilingual Certificate that provides a temporary credential to certified educators actively seeking full bilingual/ESL certification[12]
- Expansion of postsecondary programs targeting bilingual/ESL instruction for early childhood instructors.[13]

Since ELL programs in state-funded Illinois preschools do not need to comply with these requirements until July 2014, it remains to be seen how efforts in this trailblazer state will play out. Yet lessons learned from this initiative could provide valuable lessons for other states.

Research supports Illinois' extension of bilingual programs to preschoolers.

A 2013 analysis published by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill cites the significant advantages preschoolers reap when afforded the opportunity to become bilingual in English and their first language. Specifically, the authors cite numerous studies documenting advantages bilingual preschoolers have:

- Greater or enhanced ability to control their attention while engaged in tasks such as math problem solving, or using vocabulary with meaning
- Greater working memory
- Advanced problem-solving capabilities, particularly in executive control functions like planning, rule acquisition, and abstract thinking
- Helpful learning behaviors related to creative thinking and symbolic reasoning.[14]

States begin to focus on improvements for dual-language learners in early learning programs

The Center for American Progress convened nationally known early childhood education experts to determine key reforms to early learning programs. The resulting report notes that:

- Ten states require that services be provided to dual-language learners, although they vary in what those services must include.
- Eight states require that early education providers prepare written plans for how they will provide dual-language-learner services. However, the required elements and acceptable standards for those plans vary .
- Seventeen states require that providers screen and assess dual-language-learner students. The states do not, however, prescribe what instruments should be used, and only Delaware requires that screening be conducted in the home language of the child.[11]

Source: Donna Cooper and Kristina Costa, *Increasing the Effectiveness and Efficiency of Existing Public Investments in Early Childhood Education*, Center for American Progress, June 2012, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2012/06/pdf/earlychildhood.pdf.

What we've learned: Teachers need critical skills and dispositions

Teachers play a critical role in bringing ELLs to proficiency in English. General classroom teachers need specific knowledge and skills (not necessarily knowledge of the ELL student's native language) to bring ELLs to proficiency in the four domains of language acquisition: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. However, a 2007 state policy scan by the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition found a broad spectrum of pre-service requirements related to teaching ELLs. Four states, including Florida, where all classroom teachers must complete training in teaching English as a second language (TESOL), fell on the strongest end, although as the Center for American Progress commented, "While these requirements are a step in the right direction, they certainly do not provide all that a teacher needs to know in how to serve ELLs."[15] On the weakest end of the spectrum were 15 states that had no provisions requiring teacher certification candidates to have any "expertise or training in working with ELLs."[16]

Nationwide data from the district level bear out these shortcomings in preparation and certification requirements. In a 2012 national evaluation of the Title III program, 73% of Title III district officials surveyed indicated that "'lack of expertise among mainstream teachers' ... was a moderate or major challenge."[17]

And regardless of teacher training or instructional approaches, classroom teacher attitudes toward ELLs can significantly impact the instruction they receive. In one 2008 study, teachers who perceived that it was primarily the specialist's (ESL teacher's) role to provide instruction to ELLs took no ownership for ELL student performance, and relegated teaching duties for ELLs to that teacher. When teachers did not engage ELLs as participants in classroom instruction, mainstream students followed suit and did not spur their participation or seek to work with them.[18]

Other critical issues to consider:

- **Lack of teacher training extends beyond candidates in traditional certification programs**–the many teachers certified through alternative pathways, and existing teachers, need ELL training, too.
- States need to be aware of the **reduced impact of state-level policy on Office of Civil Rights (OCR) court-ordered oversight of districts.** Provisions in the district's OCR court order take precedence over state policy.
- **Funding is a serious issue**–there is no federal mandate to provide specialized services to ELL students as there is for special education students. And a 2012 analysis of state-level school finance cost studies–the type of studies used to estimate what it costs to provide an adequate education-- found studies either did not mention ELL students at all or combined them with special education and low-income students to arrive at an overall per-pupil funding weight. States consequently risk allocating insufficient instructional resources to students with greater need.[19] Family literacy in English can be an impediment to student progression to English proficiency due to parents' limited capacity to provide support at home.
- **ELL subgroup improvement "is systematically underestimated"** due to the subgroup's built-in revolving door: as higher-achieving students reach English proficiency and leave, new students with lower proficiency levels come in. **Creating a cohort that includes "current and former ELLs** can provide a more complete picture of schools' and districts' performance in supporting ELLs for accountability purposes." To ensure cross-district comparability "within a state, the **SEA also should set uniform, valid, and reliable criteria for ELL identification and exit from ELL status**–an important condition for accountability and program evaluation analyses."[20]

What we've learned: Access to core standards and the general curriculum is critical

The pullout programs that many districts rely on to teach ELLs limit ELL students' exposure to the regular curriculum. Preparing classroom teachers to teach English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) can reduce or eliminate the need for pullout programs. **Florida's** certification requirements for regular and special education classroom teachers go beyond those in other states. The Sunshine State requires teaching candidates in elementary education, exceptional student education, pre-kindergarten/primary education, Middle Grades English (5-9), and English (6-12, and high school English to complete 15 semester hours (or the equivalent) of ESOL preparation covering the five ESOL areas: 1) "methods of teaching ESOL, 2) ESOL curriculum and materials development, 3) cross-cultural communication and understanding, 4) applied linguistics, and 5) testing and evaluation of ESOL." Teacher candidates for all other programs must complete a three-semester course that is intended to raise awareness of the five ESOL areas.[21]

Some suggest that literacy curricula proven effective with English natives can achieve the same outcomes with English learners. In fact, research does not bear this assumption out. A large, multi-year study of the impact of successful elementary grades literacy development strategies on ELLs in San Diego found that "practices that have the most robust relationship to improved reading comprehension for non-[ELL] students have little discernible benefit for [ELLs]."[22]

What we've learned: Help on valid and reliable assessments is on the way

The two Common Core-aligned assessment consortia are working to identify appropriate accommodations for ELLs. In February 2013, Smarter Balanced released *Accommodations for English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities: A Research-Based Decision Algorithm* to guide member states' decisions on appropriate accommodations for ELLs on these assessments.[23] In June 2013, PARCC released the first iteration of the *PARCC Accessibility Features and Accommodations Manual*, noting that the manual is a work in progress during the piloting process in spring 2014 and the first administration of the assessments in the 2014-15 school year.[24]

What we've learned: Monitoring student progress matters

As mentioned, students who remain in ELL programs over a number of years—so-called long-term English learners—fare worse than their peers who exit ELL programs more quickly.

California is taking on this problem by quantifying the number of long-term English learners in the state. 2012 A.B. 2193 defines "long-term English learner" and "English learner at risk of becoming a long-term English learner" and directs the department of education to annually determine the number of students in all schools, including charters, who are or are at risk of becoming long-term English learners. With passage of this legislation, California became the first state in the nation to monitor long-term ELLs.

Other emerging initiatives could bring more consistency to how states define ELLs and identify students who have achieved fluency in English. Specifically, states participating in the Smarter Balanced or PARCC assessment consortia or in either of the English proficiency assessment consortia must agree to a "common definition of English learner." The CCSSO has released a framework for a shared English learner definition, adapted from a 2011 National Research Council report.[25]

The Downside of Pullouts

"While [pull-out English as a Second Language] is not necessarily different from content-based ESL, pull-out programs do not usually incorporate the lessons going on in the English class (McKeon, 1987). The 30–45 minutes seems insufficient time for instruction to many ESL teachers (Duke & Mabbot, 2001). ... While each of these students are attending ESL, they will all be missing different subjects in their main class, making it difficult for ESL teachers to incorporate content-based lessons into the ESL curriculum (Ovando & Collier, 1998). As a consequence, students pulled out for ESL help are forced to miss instruction time in their mainstream classes (Duke & Mabbot, 2001). These difficulties are accentuated by the fact that pull-out programs are the most expensive and least effective model of the ESL and bilingual education programs (Ovando & Collier, 1998)."

From University of Michigan website, "ELL in Elementary Schools" (n.d.) http://sitemaker.umich.edu/356.hunemorder/pull-out_esl_

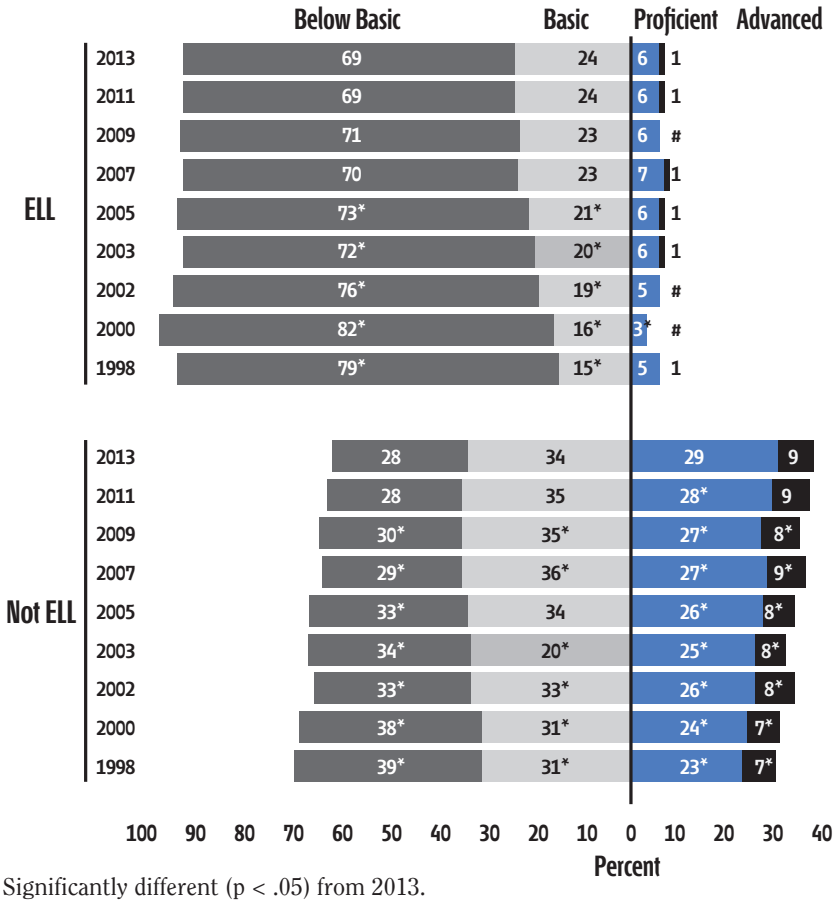
An excellent review, *Improving Education for English Learners: Research-Based Approaches*, suggests that ELLs should be carefully grouped by language proficiency for instruction in the English language, but otherwise should be in mixed classrooms and not in classrooms segregated by language proficiency.

Alternatives to pullout:

- Dual immersion programs, which allow native English speakers and ELLs access to the same curriculum
- Extended instructional time for ELLs to learn the English language (outside the traditional school day)
- Assigning TESOL or other foreign language teachers to teach English as a second language (even though they are trained to teach other languages).

California 2012 S.B. 1108 likewise calls on the department of education to review and analyze the criteria, policies, and practices that a representative sampling of districts uses to reclassify ELLs. It also asks the department to make recommendations for statutory or regulatory provisions for better identifying when ELLs are prepared for successful transitions.

Trend in fourth-grade reading achievement-level results, by status as English-Language Learners (ELLs)



* Significantly different ($p < .05$) from 2013.
Source: Nation's Report Card, http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2013/#/student-groups.

For further consideration

Ensure access to the core curriculum and rigorous K-12 standards by providing support to teachers: A December 2012 AIR report notes that "**New York** is developing assessments, curriculum modules, and other instructional supports to support practitioners in helping ELLs master the Common Core State Standards." [26]

Bundle teacher capacity-building, including cultural competency, and data use: As principal of Halle Hewetson Elementary in **Clark County, Nevada**, Lucy Keaton implemented a set of reforms—including requiring all classroom teachers to gain TESOL certification, having all staff review student performance data together on an ongoing basis and addressing cultural competency—that led to large gains in reading and math achievement. Keaton is now working to implement these reforms across Clark County.

Frame biliteracy as an asset: **California**, **New York**, and **Illinois** have enacted legislation to create a State Seal of Biliteracy to affix to the diplomas of high school graduates who demonstrate a high level of proficiency in one or more languages in addition to English.

ECS Resources

From the ECS State Policy Database: Bilingual/ESL

Summaries and links to newly enrolled or enacted legislation and recently approved state board rules from across the states. Updated weekly.
http://www.ecs.org/ecs/ecscat.nsf/WebTopicView?OpenView&count=-1&RestrictToCategory=Bilingual/ESL

ECS Research Studies Database FAQ: English Language Learners: Which approaches best impact achievement?

Links embedded in titles will take you to each study's major findings and recommendations.
http://www.ecs.org/rs/SearchEngine/SearchResults.aspx?faq_id=a08700000004sA8sAAE

Other Resources

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

Essentially a to-do list for state and federal policymakers seeking to improve educational outcomes for English learners—and, in spite of the title, not just those in the early grades.
http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/FCD%20ELLsBrief6.pdf

Preparing All Teachers to Meet the Needs of English-Language Learners

In particular, see "What general education teachers should know to effectively teach ELL students."
http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/04/pdf/ell_report.pdf

The Role of Language and Literacy in College- and Career-Ready Standards: Rethinking Policy and Practice in Support of English Language Learners

Explains the implications of more rigorous college- and career-ready standards on English learners and their teachers; identifies key skills for teachers to learn to expand English learners' content learning; and identifies state policy recommendations around college and career readiness, teacher effectiveness, use of data, and support systems.
http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/LangAndLiteracyInStandardsELLs.pdf

Supporting English-Language Learners: A Pocket Guide for State and District Leaders

Provides research-based suggestions for implementing reforms in serving ELLs that were proposed in state flexibility plans approved as of September 2012.
http://www.air.org/files/ELL_Pocket_Guide1.pdf

Endnotes

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