English Language Learners in Massachusetts (ELLs) Factsheet

The Students

- MA has approximately 57,000 ELLs currently enrolled in public schools (MA DESE, 2009b).
- ELLs in MA are a consistently growing student population (Rennie Center, 2007).
- Over 50% of MA ELLs speak Spanish. The next largest language group is Portuguese (9.3%), then Khmer (4.1%), Haitian Creole (4%), Vietnamese (3.5%), Chinese (3.2%), Cape Verdean (2.7%), Russian (1.8%), Canton Dialect (1.3%), Arabic (1.2%) and Korean (0.9%) (MA DESE, 2005).
- While 15.4% of MA's public school students speak a language other than English at home, only about 5.9% of MA's public school students are enrolled as ELLs (MA DESE, 2009a).
- Approximately 8,200 ELLs in MA receive no ESL (English as a Second Language) instruction. Approximately 2,800 ELLs at the lowest levels of English proficiency (beginning and early intermediate) receive no ESL instruction. Approximately 5,160 ELLs receive only 1-5 hours per week of ESL instruction (MA DESE, 2009b).
- ELLs in MA are the lowest performing subgroup in the state by every measure.
  - MCAS – On both the ELA and Math MCAS, in every administration across every grade level and every year the data is available, ELLs have the lowest CPI (Composite Performance Index) score of any group in MA with only two exceptions where the Migrant subgroup performed lower.
  - Graduation Rates – ELLs in MA graduate at a significantly lower rate than the student aggregate. The four-year graduation rate for ELLs is around 55% each year, while the student aggregate rate is around 80% each year. For each year of data available about ELL graduation rates in comparison to other subgroups, ELLs have had the lowest graduation rate of any subgroup in the state except in one instance (2006) when the Pacific Islander subgroup had a lower graduation rate.
  - Drop Out Rates – ELLs in MA drop out at a significantly higher rate than the student aggregate. The drop-out rate for ELLs hovers around 25% each year where the student aggregate is around 10% each year. As with the data described above, ELLs consistently have the highest drop-out rate of any subgroup in the state. Only in one year, 2006, did ELLs have the second highest drop-out rate after the Hispanic subgroup.
  - Competency Determination Rates – The most recent competency determination (CD) reports available on the MA DESE website show that ELLs have the lowest rate of earning a CD. For the class of 2008, the CD rate for ELLs was 63% as compared to that of 94% for the overall student population. For the class of 2009, it was 46% as compared to that of 90% for the overall student population.
  - Participation in Special Education – The percentage of ELLs participating in Special Education Programs across the state is steadily rising each year. (Data from MA DOE website http://profiles.doe.mass.edu)

The Teachers

- “We have a critical shortage of licensed ESL teachers in the state” (MA DESE, 2009b, p. 2).
- DESE estimates the state needs roughly 2,150-3,250 additional elementary and secondary SEI (Sheltered English Immersion) content teachers and around 500 additional licensed ESL teachers (MA DESE, 2009b).

The Programs

- Current law mandates that ELLs “shall be educated either in sheltered English immersion or English language mainstream classrooms with assistance in English language acquisition” (M.G.L. Chapter 71A, § 4). The law promotes ELLs remaining in SEI programs for only one year and also requires a waiver process for any other program except two-way immersion (TWI). This one-size-fits all, inflexible approach to teaching ELLs in MA is problematic and inconsistent with decades of educational research.

Created by Kara Mitchell (advocacy@matsol.org) for MATSOL (Massachusetts Association of Teachers of Speakers of Other Languages), September 2009.
The Research

- Conventional wisdom suggests that children can quickly and efficiently learn new languages. However, the language children (and adult second language learners) quickly master is social or conversational language. Research suggests this kind of language development does happen rather quickly. The more complex, abstract and cognitively demanding academic language of classrooms takes significantly longer to acquire and effectively master. Research shows academic language proficiencies taking between four and seven years to fully develop (Cummins, 2000).

- A 2007 study by the Rennie Center looked at three schools in MA having high levels of success with ELLs and found each program utilizes native language instruction as well as programmatic options beyond SEI and ESL. The results of this study encourage flexibility and experimentation with innovative approaches to meet the needs of English language learners (Rennie Center, 2007).

- While there will never be one programmatic model of instruction for ELLs capable of working effectively in every school and district with every student, research has consistently shown the intense value of integrating students’ home languages and cultures into classroom instruction in order to ensure high academic achievement (Crawford & Krashen, 2007).

- Instead of focusing on and debating about specific program models, research provides clear guidelines about the fundamental elements necessary to offer quality programs for ELLs. Quality instruction for ELLs should be built on strong leadership, quality personnel, clear goals and partnerships with parents and the community. Every ELL program needs to be integrated into the whole school with every member of the staff participating in providing quality instruction. A positive school climate for ELLs needs to be built by valuing and fostering the development of the home languages and cultures, knowing all students well, setting high expectations for ELLs and providing the necessary supports in order to meet these expectations. Curriculum and materials need to be appropriate for the students as does instruction and assessment. The sought after outcomes for any program for ELLs should be: high academic achievement, strong language development, sociocultural integration, and a positive family and community impact (Brisk, 2006).

- “There is a critical national requirement for skilled speakers of languages other than English...As a result of 21st century economic globalization and international terrorism, it has never been more urgent to develop American citizens who fully understand and can communicate effectively with people of other cultures” (Jackson & Malone, 2009, p. 1). A quality education in the 21st century must include bilingual/multilingualism for ALL students, including ELLs.

References:


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