



REVIEW OF *MEETING THE NEEDS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS AND OTHER DIVERSE LEARNERS*

Reviewed By

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Summary of Review

The “research summary” titled “Meeting the Needs of English Learners and Other Diverse Learners” outlines the administration’s proposals for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to address the special educational needs of a broad category of students described as “diverse learners.” While it purports to address recommendations for three groups (English learners, other diverse learners, and students with disabilities), the report does not in fact include students with disabilities. The research summary provides general recommendations without a systematic review of the research in support of the recommendations and without specific suggestions for how to put them into effect. The research summary highlights challenges but fails to provide solutions or suggest program improvements. For example, it indicates that all prospective teachers should be trained in English-learner teaching but does not address how this could be accomplished. The report introduces topics such as inadequate funding, program flexibility, and the need for data disaggregation, but provides no insights into how to progress in these areas. It says little about the rich research base in English-language learning and in meeting the needs of diverse learners. The research summary is also notable for the challenges and possible recommendations it fails to address, such as content area assessments and instruction.

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REVIEW OF *MEETING THE NEEDS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS AND OTHER DIVERSE LEARNERS*

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I. Introduction

In March 2010, the Obama administration released a *Blueprint* outlining its proposals for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).¹ In May 2010 the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) followed with a set of six documents, offered as “research summaries” supporting the administration’s plans.²

The fourth of these six reports, titled “Meeting the Needs of English Learners and Other Diverse Learners,” is the focus of this review.³ The administration’s approach promotes the following policies: (1) improving programs for English learners; (2) meeting the special educational needs of a broad category of students described as “Diverse Learners”—which includes “children working to learn the English language, students with disabilities, Native American students, homeless students, the children of migrant workers, and neglected or delinquent students”;⁴ and (3) meeting the needs of students with disabilities “throughout ESEA and through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.”

The report only presents research and offers recommendation for the first two categories, ignoring the third. No explanation is offered for the omission. This review examines the research summary (also referred to herein as the “report”), looking in particular at the strengths and weaknesses of the research support provided for the *Blueprint* proposals.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

English Learners

The first and largest section of the report focuses on English learners (ELs). Its two principle recommendations for ELs are quite broad:

1. Strengthen programs for ELs by requiring states to put in place certain key conditions for reform.
2. Focus on developing promising practices and scaling up effective practices for improving the instruction of ELs and for preparing and developing effective teachers of ELs, through competitive grants, research, and graduate fellowships.

Due to their breadth, these recommendations are innocuous and of little consequence. The subsequent narrative begins by presenting population statistics and documenting the

achievement gap between ELs and non-ELs, citing data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This is followed by a section asserting that states must adopt and develop college- and career-ready standards for ELs and make sure that assessments provide valid and reliable evaluations of students' English proficiency. No research is cited here until the last sentence, where a peer-reviewed article⁵ is referenced in support of the need to ensure that assessments are non-discriminatory.

The next section addresses instruction and notes that more research is needed on the types of programs and practices most effective for ELs. The report cites two comprehensive research reviews,⁶ noting that "it is critical that teachers modify instruction for EL students in order to address their specific language needs." The report only singles out one specific instructional approach as effective: peer-assisted learning.⁷

The next section of the report claims that teachers receive inadequate initial preparation and professional development to support their teaching of ELs.⁸ The report asserts that all prospective teachers should demonstrate competence in teaching ELs, but that currently only

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four states require this. No guidance is offered about how to achieve this goal. The following section of the report discusses teacher shortages, noting that only 11 states offer incentives for earning an English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching license.⁹

Next, the report conveys that many states and districts do not track ELs over time and do not maintain data on key background variables. Citing the National Evaluation of Title III (NET3)¹⁰ and a working group on ELL policy¹¹ the report notes how important it is to be able to track ELs longitudinally, following them as their proficiency improves, and to be able to disaggregate data.

In the final section, the report again cites NET3¹² and the Working Group on ELL Policy,¹³ noting that the tremendous inconsistencies in the identification and classification of ELs affect the validity, accuracy, and comparability of outcome data.

The EL part of the research summary concludes with a case-study description of a school district that has successfully changed its approach to educating ELs. The case study is useful for illuminating the processes that the district underwent to bring about change, as well as the subsequent results. There are two citations in this vignette: an e-mail communication¹⁴ and a report published by the Council of the Great City Schools.¹⁵ Notwithstanding the potential usefulness of this illustration, the choice of a case study is curious given the aversion of the U.S. Department of Education, the Institute for Education Sciences and the National Research Council to qualitative research,¹⁶ and even more so given that the case study was not published in a peer-reviewed journal. The case study does not demonstrate the rigor necessary to be considered high-quality research.

Diverse Learners

The second part of the report addresses the needs of “Diverse Learners,” which includes sections on Migrant Student Education, Homeless Children and Youths Education, Neglected and Delinquent Children and Youths Education, Indian Student Education, Native Hawaiian Student Education and Alaska Native Student Education, Rural Education, and Impact Aid. As in the previous part, the recommendations are broad:

1. Continue our commitment to programs that target historically underserved students.
2. Adjust formulas for homeless and migrant programs so that funds reach the students they are meant to serve.
3. Provide better support for rural and high-need students.
4. Focus more on student outcomes for transparency purposes.
5. “Other minor changes to address long-standing community concerns or implementation challenges.”

The format is similar to that of the EL section in that only a paragraph or two summarize the challenges and research findings for each identified group, sometimes supplemented by mentions of programs identified as successful.

The report explains that migrant students face considerable challenges “as a result of their mobility, poverty, and often limited English proficiency,” citing statistics from the U.S. Department of Education.¹⁷ Although a concern is raised regarding the outdated mechanisms for allocating migrant education funding, no recommendations to change them are offered. Funding formulas are similarly identified as a problem affecting homeless children and youths, and the report cites only a U.S. Department of Education report¹⁸ regarding the significant barriers to their enrolling and succeeding in school.

Turning to youths served through the Neglected and Delinquent Children and Youths Education program, the report asserts that despite facing significant challenges, these youth have shown academic gains in recent years and are taking more high school credits.¹⁹ No specific information is provided regarding these gains. Again, the report mentions that funding disparities are a concern.

The report’s next section describes challenges related to American Indian education, noting that although students have shown some progress, achievement gaps persist.²⁰ In a break in format, the report offers recommendations for practice, citing congressional testimony,²¹ a book chapter,²² and an eleven-year-old ERIC document²³ rather than peer-reviewed journal articles as evidence that native-language and cultural programs enhance academic performance and lead to other benefits for American Indian students. This is curious because the report fails to discuss similar programs for ELs, even though there is more research to support their use. The government’s policies regarding students’ native/heritage languages seem inconsistent: language retention is encouraged for American Indian students but not for ELs.

The report goes on to provide statistics documenting gaps in the academic performance of Native Hawaiian and Alaska Native students compared with other students in their respective states, citing the U.S. Department of Education.²⁴ The report notes that Alaska’s geography presents a challenge unique to the region, but it offers no solutions.

Next, citing a U.S. Department of Education Rural Education Task Force document, the report notes that rural schools face several unique constraints.²⁵ It recommends allowing rural districts

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greater flexibility to identify their most serious problems and to determine how to solve them. It is not clear how increased flexibility might add to enhanced student outcomes. The report’s bibliography includes two peer-refereed journal articles on rural education, but these articles are never referenced in the body of the research summary.

The last section of the report cites the U.S. Department of Education in noting that school districts need “impact aid” to help cover the costs of educating students who reside on federal and Indian lands or whose parents work on federal property. No policy changes are recommended.

III. The Report’s Rationale for its Findings And Conclusions

The bulk of the report focuses on describing and documenting challenges to meeting the needs of ELs and other diverse students. To the extent that this was the purpose of the report, it succeeds. Yet, for the most part, the report offers only vague recommendations for improving schools and rarely includes research in support of its suggestions. Programs that have been successful in addressing each challenge, as established through rigorous research, are not described. The closest the report comes to doing this is a case study of the Saint Paul Public School District’s efforts to improve educational opportunities for ELs.

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

The bibliographies for the two sections of the report are brief. Furthermore, the research cited is not representative of what is known about meeting the needs of ELs and other diverse learners. There is a heavy reliance on government reports rather than research meta-analyses, reviews, and original studies, which is perplexing since a great deal of the peer-reviewed research related to educating diverse learners was funded by the federal government, but not cited here. In the bibliography for the EL section, only two journal articles are cited, and one of them is not peer-refereed.

For the Diverse Learners section, two peer-refereed journal articles appear in the bibliography (both concerning rural education) but neither is actually cited in the report. One of these is a review of research.²⁶ The other is an “editor’s swan song,” lamenting problems in the rural education research base.²⁷ In the Diverse Learners section, along with multiple cites to government reports, there are also references to congressional testimony²⁸ and “issues discussed at White House meeting.”²⁹

With just a couple of exceptions, the report does not mention research-based practices that can serve as a foundation for addressing the challenges emphasized in the report. This gives the

In sum, this research summary could have drawn from a rich body of peer-reviewed research, much of it government-sponsored, but it opted instead for government reports, general statements, poorly supported illustrations, and inconsistent conclusions.

impression that research on effective practices is lacking. A more fruitful approach would have been to cite research indicating how to address each problem, describe or set out the policies that would follow from this research, and then suggest questions for further research to help move each field forward. This would help readers understand what is already known that can serve as a foundation and what still needs to be learned. The report missed an important opportunity in this regard.

The report’s section on instruction for ELs cites two comprehensive research reviews.³⁰ Although both reviews offer clear recommendations for practice, these ideas are left out of the report. For example, the reviews establish that home language instruction can promote English-language development and academic achievement, particularly in literacy. Goldenberg writes, “Teaching students to read in their primary language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English” than English-only instruction, according to “dozens of studies and evaluations ... over the past 35 years.”³¹ Goldenberg adds that “the higher-quality, more rigorous studies showed the strongest effects.” It is interesting that in the section on American Indian students, the report touts such native language and cultural programs with far less research support.

Another example of an existing research base ignored in the report is a number of recent large-scale experimental studies that provide a great deal of information about specific interventions that can improve first grade ELs’ reading skills in their first language, in English, or both. These include intensive, small-group interventions that incorporate a read-aloud routine with explicit vocabulary instruction and assisted story retelling, word study and phonics strategies, word-reading and reading-connected texts, comprehension strategies, and repeated reading.³²

Although the report includes a single case study describing the promising practices of one school district, published research on the characteristics of successful schools and teachers is never even mentioned. Much can be learned from qualitative and mixed-methods studies about the educational contexts and practices that support enhanced EL achievement. For example, Lucas,

Henz and Donato studied six exemplary high schools with high percentages of ELs and noted common characteristics across the schools: (a) the students’ native languages and cultures were valued; (b) teachers had high expectations for student success; (c) parental involvement was high; and (d) students benefited from a challenging, coherent academic curriculum while learning English.³³ At the classroom level, Gersten, Baker, Haager, and Graves observed that effective first-grade EL teachers (a) provided explicit, focused instruction, (b) emphasized vocabulary development and oral as well as written language, (c) used Sheltered English techniques to make sure instruction was comprehensible, and (d) engaged and motivated students at high levels.³⁴

In sum, this research summary could have drawn from a rich body of peer-reviewed research, much of it government-sponsored, but it opted instead for government reports, general statements, poorly supported illustrations, and inconsistent conclusions.

V. Review of the Report’s Methods

It is not clear how the report’s authors selected which research to cite. Nor is it clear how they decided which issues to prioritize and which to leave out. In the noted reliance on governmental reports, the limited use of peer-reviewed research and the brevity of the sections themselves (despite the existence of a large body of research), the objective of the report appears to be to provide the appearance of some research foundation to the administration’s pre-determined conclusions.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The findings and conclusions of the report appear valid to the extent that they summarize several of the challenges faced when attempting to meet the needs of ELs and other diverse learners. However, the report fails to validly reflect research-based solutions to these challenges and leaves out some critical issues. The report is notable not for what is said, but for what is not said. Though space limitations prevent a thorough discussion of omitted issues, the following are several examples:

- The report neglects to discuss positive aspects of bilingualism and how ELs can be well-positioned to contribute in a global economy if their strengths are optimized. The Blueprint asserts that “students need a well-rounded education to contribute as citizens in our democracy and to thrive in a global economy—from literacy to mathematics, science, and technology to history, civics, foreign languages, the arts, financial literacy, and other subjects” (p. 4, emphasis added). Although the value of proficiency in a foreign language is mentioned four times in the Blueprint, there is no recognition of the value of potential bilingualism among students who begin school as ELs. If the goal of education in the U.S. is to prepare well-rounded, multilingual students ready to thrive in a global economy, students who start school speaking another language than English should be considered a valuable resource.

- There is no mention of accountability (i.e., teacher and school evaluation) as applied to these “diverse learners” even though the Blueprint indicates that accountability will be a central feature of a reauthorized ESEA. Perhaps accountability was omitted because it is such a thorny topic, with many unresolved issues. In a recent brief, Holdheide, Goe, Croft, and Reschly described several challenges in applying value-added models to EL teacher evaluation.³⁵ One difficulty is that standardized tests are unreliable measures of EL student achievement and progress.³⁶ Further, learning trajectories may be different for ELs than for fluent English speakers, adding to the challenge of interpreting growth. Additionally, in classrooms, schools or districts with small numbers of ELs, the value-added results will be less statistically reliable than they would for populations with larger numbers. The Working Group on ELL Policy cautions that classification systems for determining students’ eligibility for federal English Language Learner programs (Title III services) must be kept separate from the classification systems for school accountability and adequate yearly progress (AYP) purposes.³⁷ The working group points out that there are important differences between establishing a student’s status as an EL and assessing academic progress. Yet these continue to be conflated. Current classification procedures create a “revolving door” effect – and a measurement headache – as ELs who acquire English proficiency are reclassified and exit the program and new ELs enter.³⁸
- The report fails to address the assessment of ELs’ content learning. The report emphasizes that “states need to adopt and develop college- and career-ready standards for their EL populations and need their EL assessments to provide valid and reliable measures of a student’s English proficiency level” (emphasis added). But assessing a student’s English proficiency level is not enough—valid and reliable measures of content learning are also needed to determine progress towards meeting content area standards. As noted above, inadequate content assessment procedures consistently underestimate ELs’ progress in content learning. Because all content assessments essentially become language-proficiency assessments when used with ELs, it is difficult to determine what ELs actually know and can do. Consequently, their mastery of content is often underestimated, which can result in students recycling through material they have already learned and being tracked into inappropriate, lower-level classes.³⁹ Two promising lines of research indicate ways to improve content area assessment: test accommodations and universal design. Test accommodations for ELs, particularly in using supplied dictionaries and glossaries during testing, may help students understand test items and improve test performance.⁴⁰ Reducing the language complexity of assessment items (universal design) may also make tests more understandable for ELs.⁴¹
- Another significant omission concerns content area instructional practices for ELs. Effective science instruction, for example, provides opportunities for ELs to develop scientific understanding, engage in inquiry, and construct shared meanings more actively than with traditional textbook-based instruction.⁴² Research also establishes that collaborative small-group work provides structured opportunities to develop English proficiency in the context of authentic communication about science.⁴³

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Much of the report consists of a “statement of the problem” rather than research-based recommendations. It is not a blueprint for change so much as a summary of the need for it. The usefulness of the report for guiding policy and practice is therefore limited. One problem is the way the diverse groups discussed in the report are combined or lumped together, giving the impression that their needs are similar. While there are some similarities in instructional approaches, assessment procedures, and support mechanisms, there also are significant differences. Treating diverse students as more homogeneous than they are increases the risk that students will be misunderstood and miseducated. For instance, referring to ELs as having “special education needs” is misleading. (As mentioned at the outset, students with true special education needs are inexplicably omitted from the research summary.) The report sets up a false dichotomy, as if the education that everyone else gets is distinct from the “special education” needed by diverse learners. *All* students need access to high-quality, appropriate instruction that is responsive to their particular needs.

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