

Reparable Harm

**Fulfilling the Unkept Promise of
Educational Opportunity for California's
Long Term English Learners**



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A CALIFORNIANS TOGETHER RESEARCH & POLICY PUBLICATION

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laurie Olsen, Ph.D., has worked with hundreds of teams of district and school leadership and with county offices of education across California to design and implement powerful English Learner programs and services, and to support effective school change strategies. Her career spans four decades as a researcher, writer and provider of leadership development and technical assistance on educational equity for immigrant students, language minority students and English Learners. She currently directs the SEAL Initiative, a preschool-third grade demonstration project for Spanish-speaking English Learners in Silicon Valley. She served as chief consultant to The PROMISE Initiative (a six county, six district collaborative focused on transformative education for English Learners in southern California), and was for many years the Executive Director of California Tomorrow. Dr. Olsen has published dozens of books, videos and articles on English Learner education, including the award winning *Made in America: Immigrants in U.S. Schools*. She holds a Ph.D. in Social and Cultural Studies in Education from U.C. Berkeley, and serves on the Executive Board of Californians Together.

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Baldwin Park Unified School District	Modesto City Schools
El Monte City Schools	Pasadena Unified School District
El Monte Union High School District	San Francisco Unified School District
Escondido Union High School District	Ventura Unified School District
Glendale Unified School District	Whittier Union High School District

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Executive Summary

Reparable Harm is a wake up call to California educators and policymakers to recognize the large number of English Learner students amassing in California secondary schools who despite many years in our schools and despite being close to the age at which they should be able to graduate, are still not English proficient and have incurred major academic deficits — the “Long Term English Learners.” This publication presents new survey data collected from 40 school districts throughout all regions of California in 2009–2010. It includes information on 175,734 secondary school students, almost one-third of all secondary school English Learners in the state. It is further informed by existing research literature, and inquiries conducted in California secondary schools. Together, these sources provide an emerging and startling picture of students left behind, parents uninformed, educators unaware, and districts largely stumped about what to do.

Major findings

- **The majority (59%) of secondary school English Learners are “Long Term English Learners”** (in United States schools for more than six years without reaching sufficient English proficiency to be reclassified). In one out of three districts, more than 75% of their English Learners are Long Term.

- **California school districts do not have a shared definition of “Long Term English Learners.”**

Most districts lack any definition or means of identifying or monitoring the progress and achievement of this population. Only one in four districts has a formal definition or designation for identifying, counting, serving or monitoring services for these students — and their definitions vary in the number of years considered “normative” for how soon English Learners should have reached proficiency (range from five to ten years).



- **English Learners become “Long Term” English Learners in the course of their schooling experience.** Several factors seem to contribute to becoming a Long Term English Learner: receiving no language development program at all; being given elementary school curricula and materials that weren’t designed to meet English Learner needs; enrollment in weak language development program models and poorly implemented English Learner programs; histories of inconsistent programs; provision of narrowed curricula and only partial access to the full curriculum; social segregation and linguistic isolation; and, cycles of transnational moves.

- **By the time Long Term English Learners arrive in secondary schools, there is a set of characteristics that describe their overall profile.** These students struggle academically. They have distinct language issues, including: high functioning social language, very weak academic language, and significant deficits in reading and writing skills. The majority of Long Term English Learners are “stuck” at Intermediate levels of English proficiency or below, although others reach higher levels of English proficiency without attaining the academic language to be reclassified. Long Term English Learners have significant gaps in academic background knowledge. In addition, many have developed habits of non-engagement, learned passivity and invisibility in school. The majority of Long Term English Learners wants to go to college, and are unaware that their academic skills, record and courses are not preparing them to reach that goal. Neither students, their parents nor their community realizes that they are in academic jeopardy.

- **Few districts have designated programs or formal approaches designed for Long Term English Learners.** Instead, the *typical “program”* and placements for Long Term English Learners in secondary schools appear to be similar to what they received in elementary school. It consists of: inappropriate placement in mainstream (no program), being placed and kept in classes with newcomer English Learners, being taught by largely unprepared teachers, overassigned and inadequately served in intervention and support classes, being precluded from participation in electives, and with limited access to the full curriculum.

Promising Approaches

Reparable Harm offers a set of basic principles for more effectively meeting the needs of English Learners that can be applied across contexts, understanding that the actual program that can be mounted in any one school or district will differ depending on the numbers of students, dispersal across district sites, and capacity.

The report presents a *comprehensive secondary school program* for Long Term English Learners based upon these principles. The recommended program includes: a specialized English Language Development course designed for Long Term English Learners; clustered placement in heterogeneous and rigorous grade-level content classes (including honors, A–G) mixed with English proficient students and taught with differentiated SDAIE strategies; explicit language and literacy development across the curriculum; native speakers classes (in an articulated sequence through Advanced Placement levels); a master schedule designed for flexibility and movement as students progress; systems for monitoring progress and triggering support; and a school-wide focus on study skills, among other components.

What goes on inside those classrooms is equally crucial. Placing students with language needs and academic gaps into rigorous courses with high-level content depends upon instruction that is designed and adapted to their needs. The report describes the *instructional characteristics* of a strong secondary school Long Term English Learner program. Teachers need to know their students and engage in careful analysis of the language demands of the content they are teaching, as well as possess skills in implementing appropriate instructional strategies.

It is the *role of the district* to ensure high quality implementation of research-based programs for English Learners through: clearly defined pathways and clear descriptions of program models in English Learner Master Plans; providing professional development (including coaching and collaborative time) for teachers and administrators in understanding the needs of English Learners and strategies to meet those needs; communication and clarity of expectations about what quality instruction looks like; curriculum materials that facilitate differentiation for varying levels of needs; published expectations of growth and achievement for English Learners by length of time in program and by proficiency levels; systems of observation and mechanisms for monitoring student progress; emphasis on articulation between levels; systems for holding site administrators accountable for high quality programs for English Learners; and increasing access to preschool programs designed for English Learners.

Systems issues and policy recommendations

Beyond the overall challenges facing the public school system, *Reparable Harm* identifies significant challenges facing districts in seeking to address the specific needs of Long Term English Learners. These barriers include: inadequate data and student information systems; shortage of teachers prepared with the knowledge and skills to effectively teach Long Term English Learners; lack of appropriate curriculum and materials targeted for this population; contradictory mandates and counsel; general misunderstandings and lack of knowledge of the research about effective practices for Long Term English Learners; inadequate assessments and systems to know how English Learners are doing or to identify English Learners who are not adequately progressing; widespread lack of understanding related to English Language Development and misunderstandings about what constitutes “English proficiency.” These are all, fundamentally, policy issues. They are also *leadership* issues.

Civil rights legislation and court action has been necessary in past decades because schools, on their own volition, were not adequately including or addressing the needs of English Learners. The No Child Left Behind Act has now created new pressure on schools to serve this population. Yet still, throughout the state too many schools and districts make English Learners a low priority. It has taken state law, compliance monitoring and protected categorical funding to build and maintain some measure of response to English Learners in the schools. State policies that protect resources and require schools to serve English Learners must be preserved. And, *leadership* needs to step forward to clearly, squarely, fully make English Learners a focus of school improvement efforts in this state.

This report drew upon multiple types of sources to piece together the first-ever picture of what is occurring with Long Term English Learners in California. The data and

research that is available does not yet add up to the solid foundation that is needed to inform a definitive response to this urgent challenge, but action cannot wait. *Reparable Harm* offers seven recommendations to move California towards the remedying and preventing harm that has been done to Long Term English Learners. These include:

- Calling for a standard state definition of Long Term English Learners, and data collection mechanisms to support monitoring, early identification, planning and response.
- Ensuring the availability of appropriate and effective English Language Development materials and academic content materials to promote access to the core content.
- Developing consistent state messages and counsel (across accountability, corrective action and compliance functions) based upon English Learner research, setting benchmark expectations for student progress, and speaking to the differentiated needs of Long Term English Learners and more accurately reflecting research.
- Build the capacity and skills of teachers and administrators in California so they are more prepared and skilled to work with English Learners and Long Term English Learners.
- Ensure that English Learners have access to the full curriculum.
- Provide parents with the information needed to monitor the impacts of the schools' services and programs on their students, to know whether their children are progressing normatively, and to play an active role in helping shape their child's education and future.
- Invest in research and innovation to further the knowledge base about what works to prevent the development of Long Term English Learners, and to address their needs in secondary schools.

Californians Together is a statewide coalition of 22 parent, professional and civil rights organizations that mobilize communities to protect and promote the rights of 1.6 million English Learners, 25% of Californian's students. Californians Together has served for 11 years as a statewide voice on behalf of language minority students in California public schools. The coalition is committed to securing equal access to quality education for all children.

This report and updates on Californians Together's work to create the policies and practices for accelerating the language and academic needs of Long Term English Learners will be posted on the organization's website.

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Californians Together

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