



# Meeting the Early Learning Challenge:

## Supporting English Language Learners

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### Meeting the Early Learning Challenge: Resources and Technical Assistance

CLASP is providing resources and technical assistance to states as they prepare their applications for the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC), a grant competition to increase the quality of early childhood programs and increase the number and percentage of low-income and disadvantaged children, birth to five, in high-quality programs. For all available resources, visit [www.clasp.org/childcare](http://www.clasp.org/childcare).

CLASP staff are available in person, via telephone and virtually to provide technical assistance on any aspect of the Early Learning Challenge application, including data, model policies, and best practices. Our staff can respond to immediate informational needs or provide ongoing support as your plan is developed and implemented. CLASP is available to provide assistance that is responsive to the needs of individual states. For more information, contact Danielle Ewen at [dewen@clasp.org](mailto:dewen@clasp.org).

By Hannah Matthews

More than one in four (27 percent) young children under age 6 in the United States have at least one parent who speaks a language other than English, and one in seven (14 percent) has at least one parent who is limited English proficient (LEP).<sup>1</sup> The Race to The Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) is designed to improve the quality of early learning and development and close the achievement gap for children with high needs. The Departments of Education and Health and Human Services define high needs to include children who are English learners, often referred to as English Language Learners (ELLs) or Dual Language Learners (DLLs).

The Early Learning Challenge is an opportunity for states to direct their attention to the needs of this group of children who are often overlooked in policy conversations. The challenge for states in addressing the needs of ELLs in the Early Learning Challenge rests on gaps in research on the most effective early education practices for young ELLs and the current state of early care and education standards and policies related to ELLs. Still, strategies for how to most effectively reach and serve ELLs in quality early education exist and can be implemented.

This paper presents strategies for creating and implementing a high quality RTT-ELC plan that includes ELLs by addressing the following topics:

- Data on ELLs
- Developmentally, Linguistically and Culturally Appropriate Standards
- Appropriate Assessments for ELLs
- Professional Development and Workforce Competencies and Knowledge for Working with ELLs
- Access to High Quality Programs for ELLs

## Data on ELLs

One in four young children in the United States has a parent who was born outside of the country, most of whom speak a language other than English at home. Data on young ELLs is difficult to obtain as most states lack a standard identification tool for young ELLs and Census data only report on limited English proficiency as of age five. States and programs can adopt home language surveys and developmentally-appropriate language screenings to better identify young ELLs; however this strategy is limited to those already enrolling in programs.

**Illinois** requires school districts to administer a home language survey to all new students—including in preschool—and assess the English proficiency of children who are identified as speaking a language other than English.

In their applications, states will have to decide the best data source to estimate the number and percent of English learners. States may consider using other data points as proxies for English learners, such as children with foreign-born or limited English proficient parents. While not all children of immigrants are ELLs, it is possible to use data on immigrant households and limited English proficiency to estimate the number and percent of English learners in a state. The growth of immigrant families in every state is dramatic and underlines the need to pay attention to this group and understand where they live, the various languages they speak, and their familiarity with early education.

States may consider the following possible data points and caveats:

- *Children (ages 5 to 17) who speak a language other than English at home from the American Community Survey.* Caveat: National data suggests that larger shares of young children live in households that speak languages other than English at home, as compared to older children.

- *Children (ages 0 to 5) in linguistically isolated households from the American Community Survey.* Linguistically isolated households are ones in which no one over the age of 14 is proficient in English. Caveat: Children in linguistically isolated households are a subset of English learners. This data point does not capture ELLs who speak a language other than English at home and have at least one parent who speaks some English.
- *Children (ages 0 to 5) with one or more foreign-born parent(s).* Caveat: Not all immigrant families speak a non-English language at home and a small portion of English learners are native-born families. Therefore, this data point both overcounts and undercounts the ELL population.

In addition to the US Census website, where American Community Survey data can be accessed, state data can be available from the following organizations:

- CLASP DataFinder: Young Children Demographics, including Immigrant Family Status of Children Under Age 6: <http://www.clasp.org/data/>.
- Urban Institute Children of Immigrants Data Tool: <http://datatool.urban.org/charts/datatool/pages.cfm>
- Migration Policy Institute, MPI Data Hub, 2010 American Community Survey and Census Data on the Foreign Born by State: [http://www.migrationinformation.org/datahub/acs\\_census.cfm](http://www.migrationinformation.org/datahub/acs_census.cfm)

As states collect data on ELLs, they will want to consider the diversity of their ELL population and incorporate in their planning strategies to address both majority non-English language groups (typically, Spanish speakers), as well as smaller populations of non-English speakers. They may also want to consider different groups' experiences with early education programs in their native countries.

## Developmentally, Linguistically and Culturally Appropriate Standards

States can improve participation of ELLs in early education programs by supporting programs to be more responsive to the needs of ELLs. While best practices for linguistic and cultural competency in early education are still emerging, there are approaches that states can take now to encourage programs to better serve young ELLs. Research shows that young children need support in developing both their home language skills and their English skills.<sup>2</sup> However, teachers and programs must have better training and knowledge to understand how second language acquisition happens for young children and what instructional practices are most beneficial.

### Early Learning Standards

Existing early learning standards related to ELLs are often vague or contain little guidance for implementation. According to analysis by the National Council of La Raza, only one state—Alaska—currently has comprehensive early learning standards that include indicators and strategies for supporting dual language learning across developmental domains.<sup>3</sup> The state has a demonstrated goal of children preserving native language, while acquiring English.

Early learning guidelines must be implemented with an awareness of the multiple and diverse ways children can demonstrate competence in particular skills. Children from different cultures approach learning and demonstrate competence in different ways, based on diverse childrearing practices and concepts of normative behavior.<sup>4</sup>

States can revisit their early learning standards and consider what changes or additions may be necessary to make them "linguistically and culturally appropriate" based on the most recent research on second language acquisition, bilingualism, and cultural competency. This will require resources to invest in expert advisors who are steeped in research on these topics. States can:

### Head Start Resources on Working with English Language Learners

[Head Start Multicultural Principles](#)

[Program Preparedness Checklist: Serving Dual Language Learners and Their Families](#)

[Program Performance Standards: Supporting Home Language and English Acquisition](#)

- Revise standards to stress the importance of both first and second language acquisition for ELLs and include appropriate expectations for progress in speaking, listening, and understanding in both home language and in English. Standards should reflect the most current research on second language learning.
- Align standards, curriculum, instruction and training to support first and second language acquisition. Standards providing instructions for implementation are most practical for teachers and other staff working with children. Materials should not only explain instructional practices that benefit ELLs, they should include basic explanation of second-language acquisition to aid teachers' understandings of the dynamics of how ELL children acquire language skills.
- Include appropriate practices for how bilingual staff should use children's home languages in the program and serve as language models and describe appropriate classroom environments for ELLs.

### Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

The Early Learning Challenge requires interested states to adopt a common, statewide Quality Rating and Improvement System based on a set of tiered program standards. In adapting program standards to meet the needs of ELLs, states might consider looking to the federal Head Start program.

The federal Head Start Program Performance Standards include a number of standards related to home language, learning English, or the cultural background of families and children. Programs are required to meet the needs of ELL children and their families in multiple service areas,

### **Cultural Mediators**

Cultural mediators, or cultural liaisons, can be employed to help build trust and create linkages with immigrant and language minority communities and families. Cultural mediators have the trust of the community they represent and are thoroughly knowledgeable about their cultural group. Cultural mediators interpret nuances of culture and communication. They can help translate child care and early education practices for families and provide relevant cultural information for program staff. They help build cultural competency and in doing so facilitate relationships between diverse individuals. States can employ cultural mediators to connect diverse families with early education agencies and programs.

including education, family partnerships, and health and developmental services, and the Office of Head Start (OHS) is increasingly working to address the needs of dual language learners. OHS has developed tools for programs and provides professional development opportunities for staff to better serve culturally and linguistically diverse children.<sup>5</sup>

States can adopt specific program standards related to meeting the needs of ELLs in QRIS, as well as embed criteria within broader QRIS standards. States should consider the following:

- Require in learning environment standards that program materials be representative of diversity and reflect value for children’s home cultures and languages.
- Require programs to plan for communications with LEP families (i.e. translation, interpretation, use of cultural mediators).
- Require in standards that programs offer families linkages to comprehensive services and supports in their home language, and provide opportunities for them to connect to culturally diverse organizations in the community.
- Incorporate standards for bilingual staff and interpretation and translation requirements in higher

quality rating levels. Head Start, for example, requires bilingual staff when a majority of children speak a language other than English. Programs with ELLs who do not constitute a majority could be required to have policies in place to provide translation and interpretation for families as necessary.

- Require bilingual certification for teachers working with ELLs at higher levels of quality standards.
- Include standards that require staff to receive meaningful training in cultural competence, second language acquisition, and other topics that will better prepare them to work with ELLs.
- Include family engagement criteria that reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of families in programs and offer meaningful family leadership opportunities in families’ home languages.
- Target monetary and non-monetary supports to help programs achieve greater proficiency in working with ELLs.
- Translate QRIS parent education materials to ensure that LEP families have access to information on quality early childhood standards.

## **Appropriate Assessments for ELLs**

Assessing ELLs generally is a complicated and heavily debated issue and an area where there is a sizeable gap between current practices and research on best practices. In general, there is a lack of available instruments to use with ELLs. Most early childhood assessment tools have not been normed on representative samples of ELLs and translated assessment tools, often available in Spanish, may not be as valid and reliable for ELLs as they are for their monolingual-English speaking counterparts. Further,

### **Practical Resources on ELL Assessment**

[Where We Stand on Assessing Young English Language Learners](#)

[Making the Most of Assessment: What Every Practitioner Should Know About Assessing Young English Language Learners](#)

the early childhood workforce has insufficient knowledge and training on the issues related to the assessment of ELLs.<sup>6</sup>

The RTT-ELC identifies a Comprehensive Assessment System—a coordinated and comprehensive system of multiple assessments—as a key “building block” for a high quality early learning system. Comprehensive Assessment Systems include screening measures, formative assessments, measures of environmental quality, and measures of the quality of adult-child interactions. States may choose to focus their efforts on supporting effective implementation of comprehensive assessment systems, including working with programs to select appropriate instruments and supporting providers in using assessments; aligning and integrating assessments across programs; and training providers on administering assessments and interpreting and using assessment data.

States may also choose to compete for points by developing a plan to implement a statewide Kindergarten Entry Assessment that, among other criteria, is “valid, reliable and appropriate” for English learners. The Assessment must also be aligned with the state’s early learning standards, which underscores the importance of including attention to ELLs within those standards as discussed above. States designing new or reviewing existing kindergarten assessments will need to consider how to appropriately include ELLs, as well as other special populations. The lack of available tools for assessing ELLs, coupled with insufficient training and knowledge on the issue of ELL assessment and a shortage of bilingual assessors and assessors with appropriate knowledge of second language acquisition, should give states pause in their implementation of statewide Kindergarten Entry Assessments.

As states consider the development of Comprehensive Assessment Systems and Kindergarten Entry Assessments, they must consider how these systems will be appropriate for ELLs and should include how their efforts to support effective uses of the System will provide needed assistance to programs and providers on ELL assessment.

### Assessing the Progress of English Language Learners

- Document children’s early language experiences in the home.
- Evaluate young English Language Learners both in the primary language and the language(s) of instruction. Dual-language assessment will generate data on the trajectories of children’s development in both languages, reflecting the goals of helping children progress towards English acquisition as well as supporting ongoing development in their home language. Assessors should be trained to understand the process and stages of second-language acquisition in order to accurately interpret children’s responses.
- Include in assessments of program quality information on instructional practices, including the balance of teaching and interactions in each language, as well as the language abilities of staff members.
- Draw attention, in assessment reporting, to children’s progress in their native languages and English and connections with the type, quality and proportion of instruction provided in each language. Guidance should be provided in interpreting child assessment data, given the stages of developing competence in two languages, children’s variable rates of progress, and the influence of language abilities on other aspects of children’s learning

Source: Taken directly from *Taking Stock: Assessing and Improving Early Childhood Learning and Program Quality, The Report of the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force.*

Principles and guidelines for assessing ELLs should conform to those assessing all children, including the recommendations of the National Academies of Sciences. Additionally, experts make the following recommendations specific to ELLs:<sup>7</sup>

- ELLs should be included in assessment systems, which should use culturally and linguistically appropriate instruments and procedures.

- Assessments of environmental quality should include measures of the extent of home language support in a program.
- Measures of adult: child interactions should provide information on instructional practices in home and English languages.
- ELLs should be assessed in both English and their home language.
- Assessors should be fluent in the home language of the child and knowledgeable about the process and stages of second language acquisition.
- Assessments should collect information on children's home language environment and the language of instruction in early education settings.
- Tools should be culturally validated and normed on a population representative of the ELL population being assessed.
- Early childhood professionals should receive professional development and support on ELL assessment.

## **Professional Development and Workforce Competencies and Knowledge for Working with ELLs**

To most appropriately serve diverse children, it is important not only that the early childhood workforce be representative of the children it serves but also that providers of all backgrounds be trained in second-language acquisition strategies and cultural competency.<sup>8</sup> Studies suggest that the higher education system is ill equipped to appropriately prepare early childhood professionals to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, states may consider strategies for working directly with institutes of higher education to address the lack of coursework concerning the needs of ELLs in early childhood programs. Teacher education programs should include coursework in dual language development and instructional approaches for teaching ELLs.<sup>10</sup>

As states develop and refine expectations for what early childhood educators should know and be able to do, they should consider essential knowledge and policies for preparing the workforce to meet the needs of ELLs. They should ensure that state professional development systems include opportunities for all early childhood educators to improve their knowledge on working with ELLs and pathways for LEP educators to advance. States can:

- Ensure that Core Competencies include provisions around cultural competence and second language acquisition, and that they are written in a way that addresses the specific needs of a multicultural workforce working with diverse children and families.
- Provide research-based training to early childhood professionals on second language acquisition and working with ELLs.
- Align training and professional development with revised early learning standards that include indicators specific to ELLs with training for early childhood professionals, so that the early childhood workforce learns how the development of young ELLs may differ from that of their peers.
- Support career ladders for bilingual early childhood professionals, as well those who speak languages other than English.
- Ensure that health and safety and other basic training is available in multiple languages through community-based providers, child care resource and referral agencies and other providers to reach LEP early childhood providers.
- Award grants or contracts on a competitive basis to community-based organizations with experience and expertise in providing training to child care providers with limited English proficiency.
- Provide supports for teachers and providers who speak languages other than English, including community-based professional development that articulates to higher education, language access support, recognition of degrees earned outside of the United States and peer networking/cohort experiences for providers from diverse language and cultural groups

- Provide supports to teachers and providers on appropriate assessment tools and practices for use with ELLs.

## Access to High Quality Programs for ELL

Research suggests that ELLs are underrepresented among populations accessing early childhood programs, including licensed child care, state pre-kindergarten, and Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Immigrant and LEP families are often unaware of the availability of early childhood programs and/or the rules around program eligibility.<sup>11</sup>

As successful states move forward with implementing their Early Learning Challenge plans, they will need to implement strategies to increase access to high quality programs for ELLs. States should be explicit in their RTT-ELC plans about their intent to adopt strategies to do this.

### Defining Eligibility

As the RTT-ELC is explicit about including ELLs in the definition of high needs children, states too should be explicit about including ELLs in eligibility for high quality programs targeting vulnerable children. Most state pre-kindergarten programs, for example, target at-risk populations, including low-income children and children with special needs. States may include ELLs among their target at-risk populations for state prekindergarten and some subsidy funds, or use ELL status to prioritize enrollment among eligible children. While including ELL children in target populations for early education services does not necessarily result in enrollment of ELL children, it does signal recognition of possible disadvantages some ELL children face at kindergarten entry, such as English language delays, and the importance of including this growing population in targeted interventions. If linked with parent information and outreach efforts, targeting ELLs can be an important way of expanding early childhood education enrollment among this group.

### Title III of ESEA

States will want to use, and encourage local school districts to use, all available funding sources for English Learners. Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides funds for language instruction for limited English proficient (LEP) students, including immigrant children, and may be used for programs at the preschool level. Grants are provided to State Education Agencies, which make subgrants to local education agencies (LEAs). States can use a portion of funds to provide professional development and technical assistance on instruction related to LEP students.

### Adopt Outreach Strategies

Succeeding in moving more English Language Learners into high quality early education will require intentional outreach strategies targeting LEP communities. States should use multiple outreach strategies to convey information about the existence of high quality programs and to inform LEP and immigrant families about eligibility criteria, including correcting any misinformation about immigrant restrictions. Effective outreach strategies include:

- Create and disseminate information packets for new parents in multiple languages that discuss quality child care and early education and help link parents with information, resources, and referral agencies.
- Provide funding to community-based organizations to increase their capacity to engage in and support child care and early education, including through resource and referral to constituent groups, the development of general information about early education in appropriate formats and in the primary languages spoken in their communities, and the development and implementation of effective outreach models to help eligible families learn about and enroll in quality early childhood programs.
- Fund outreach projects that utilize ethnic television, radio, and newspapers, and individual workers who provide face-to-face information sharing with families as trusted messengers.

- Fund bilingual staff and the translation of materials, including informational materials, applications, and recertification notifications, to ensure LEP parents have access to information on child care assistance, state pre-kindergarten and other programs.
- Support child care resource and referral agencies, as well as other child care and early education agencies, to increase their language capacity and more easily facilitate access for ELL families.
- Fund cultural mediators in high quality child care and early education programs to serve as a bridge to services for families. Cultural mediators can help families access early education as well as help connect families to additional comprehensive services and supports.

### Address Affordability

LEP status is associated with lower earnings and increased rates of poverty. To increase the number and percent of ELLs in high quality programs, states will need to consider issues of affordability for this population. For children of immigrants, research suggests that much of the participation gap in enrollment in early education can be explained by economic and demographic characteristics—including poverty, maternal education and parental employment—rather than cultural or other barriers.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, state strategies to expand access to child care subsidies, Head Start, and other low or no-cost quality programs for ELLs are critical. To address affordability barriers, states can:

- Dedicate funding to include ELLs in high quality early education programs.
- Provide funding for bilingual staff and translation and interpretation services at local child care subsidy agencies.
- Issue guidance to local agencies and programs on immigrant eligibility for public programs and on simplifying enrollment in ways that benefit LEP families.
- Implement a language access plan to ensure effective communication with LEP families at all points of contact. This may include, but is not limited to, hiring of bilingual staff, translation of materials, and meaningful cultural competency training.

### Build the Supply of High Quality Programs for ELLs

States can develop and implement strategies to increase the supply of care in low-income language minority communities. States should look for ways to support existing community-based organizations in providing high quality early education services in ELL communities. For example:

- Fund state pre-kindergarten in community-based settings with expertise in serving ELLs or immigrant communities. Georgia, for example, contracts with a refugee service agency to provide state pre-kindergarten services for refugee children.
- Use direct contracts through the subsidy system, state pre-kindergarten, or other funding sources to provide dedicated spaces for ELLs in high quality early education programs.
- Support family, friend and neighbor caregivers in language minority communities to receive training and technical assistance and work toward licensure.

<sup>1</sup> Randy Capps, Michael Fix, Jason Ost, Jane Reardon-Anderson, and Jeffrey S. Passel, *The Health And Well-Being Of Young Children of Immigrants*, Urban Institute, 2004, [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311139\\_Childrenimmigrants.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311139_Childrenimmigrants.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Bronwyn Coltrane, *Working With Young English Language Learners: Some Considerations*, Center For Applied Linguistics, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> National Council of La Raza, *Preschool Education: Delivering on the Promise for Latino Children*, 2011, [http://www.nclr.org/images/uploads/publications/Preschool\\_Education.pdf](http://www.nclr.org/images/uploads/publications/Preschool_Education.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Betty Emarita, *Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care Best Practices: A Report to Ready4 K How Culturally Diverse Families Teach Their Children to Succeed and How Early Education Systems Can Learn from Them*, 2007, <http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/EC3624J65.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> See Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/Dual%20Language%20Learners>.

<sup>6</sup> National Research Council. (2008). *Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How*. Committee on Developmental Outcomes and Assessments for Young

Children, C.E. Snow and S.B. Van Hemel, *Editors*. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Board on Testing and Assessment, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>7</sup> These recommendations are based on the following: *Taking Stock: Assessing and Improving Early Childhood Learning and Program Quality*, *The Report of the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force*; The National Research Council, *Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How*; National Association for the Education of Young Children, *Where We Stand on the Screening and Assessment of Young English Language Learners*; and Linda M. Espinosa & Michael L. López, *Assessment Considerations for Young English Language Learners Across Different Levels of Accountability*, Prepared for The National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force And First 5 LA, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Hedy Chang, *Getting Ready for Quality: The Critical Importance of Developing and Supporting a Skilled, Ethnically and Linguistically Diverse Early Childhood Workforce*, California Tomorrow, 2006,

<http://www.californiatomorrow.org/media/gettingready.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Aisha Ray, Barbara Bowman, and Jean Robbins, *Preparing Early Childhood Teachers to Successfully Educate All Children: The Contribution of State Boards of Higher Education and National Professional Accreditation Organizations*, Erikson Institute, 2006, [http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=463599](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=463599); Diane Early and Pamela Winton, "Preparing the Workforce: Early Childhood Teacher Preparation at 2- and 4-Year Institutions of Higher Education," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 16 no. 3 (2001): 285–306; and Carrie Lobman, Sharon Ryan, Jill McLaughlin, and Debra Ackerman, *Educating Preschool Teachers: Mapping the Teacher Preparation and Professional Development System in New Jersey*, Foundation for Child Development, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Center for Early Care and Education Research Dual Language Learners, *Policy and Practice Issues Related to Serving Dual Language Learners: Summary from Listening Sessions*, 2011, <http://cecerdll.fpg.unc.edu/sites/cecerdll.fpg.unc.edu/files/Research%20Brief%20%232%20-%20Policy%20%26%20Practice%20Needs.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to know that awareness and participation differ by English proficiency of households, parental country of origin and parental education, so states will want to tailor access strategies to meet the needs of particular groups and reach those that have the lowest rates of participation in quality early education.

<sup>12</sup> Donald J. Hernandez and Nancy Denton (forthcoming), Early childhood education programs: Accounting for low enrollment in newcomer and native families, in Waters and Alba (Eds.), *The Next Generation: Immigrant Youth and Families in Comparative Perspective*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.