

Similar English Learner Students, Different Results: *Why Do Some Schools Do Better?*



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A follow-up analysis, based upon a large-scale survey of California elementary schools serving high proportions of low-income and EL students.

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The data file for the original Similar Students study is referred to as SSDR, EdSource 2005; for this extended analysis as SSDR-EL, EdSource, 2007.

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This report is available to download for free at: www.edsource.org from the research studies section.

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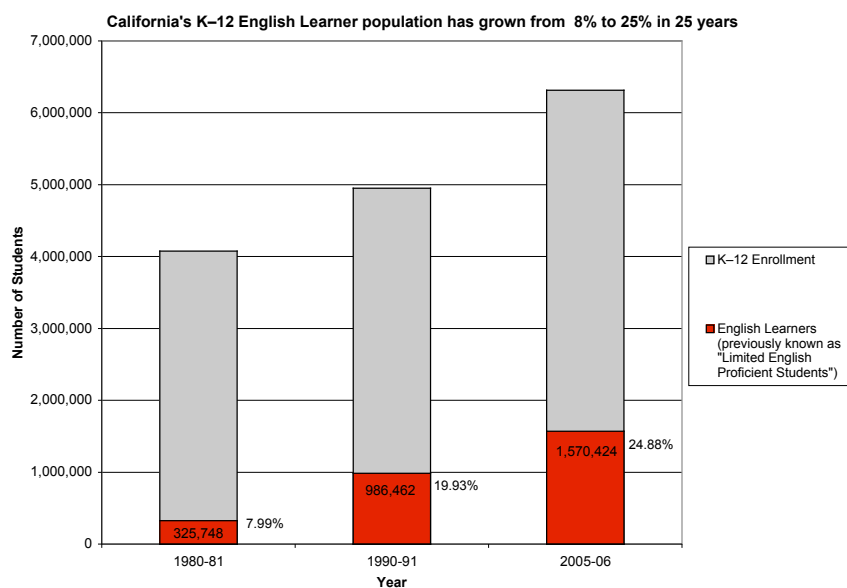
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Similar English Learner Students, Different Results: Why Do Some Schools Do Better?

In Spring 2006 California released its first ever school-level Academic Performance Index (API) scores for English Learners. These EL-API scores were based on California Standards Tests in English language arts and math taken in the spring of 2005. These scores now make it possible to identify how well schools are doing with their English learner student population, in the same way that the school-wide API makes that possible for all of a school's students.

Why is this important? The number of EL students in California schools—and the proportion of all students they represent—has grown dramatically since 1980. Today, nearly 1.6 million pupils in California's kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12) public education system—or one in four—are English learners (ELs). At the elementary level, EL students comprise 33% of the total. In fact, California currently educates close to one-third of all the English learners in the nation.¹ They are enrolled in almost every California district and in the vast majority of schools.



Although almost 100 languages are spoken in the homes of California students, approximately 85% of California's EL students are Spanish speaking. That uniformity in regard to primary language, however, masks important variations in the family background, English language abilities, and academic readiness these students bring to their school experience. All of these influence EL students' performance on state tests, which are given in English. Nevertheless, the EL-API offers the best information available for all regular public schools in California concerning this important student population and their achievement.

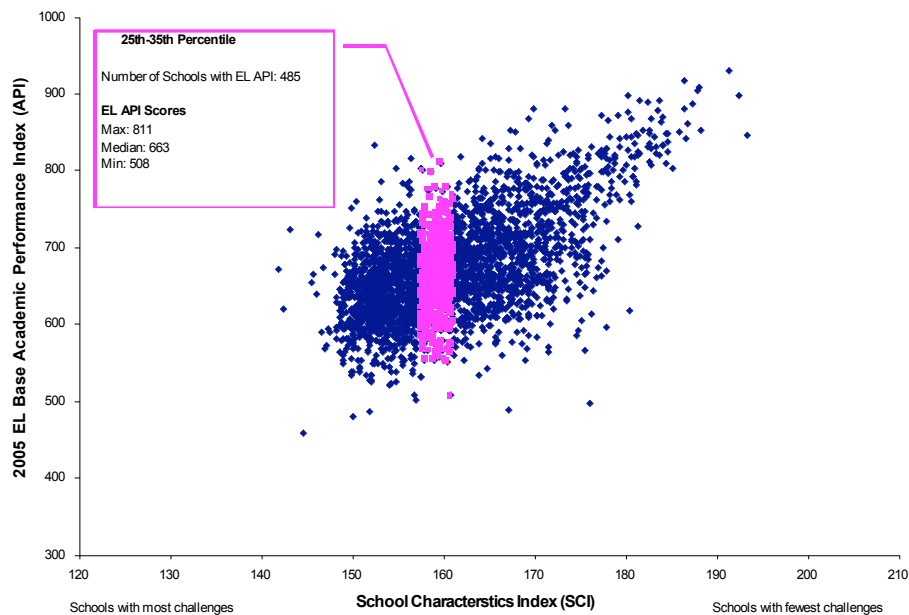
The new EL-API data make it clear that elementary schools vary widely in their ability to get their English learner students to meet the state's academic content standards in English language arts and mathematics. This is true even among schools that are relatively similar in terms of student ethnicity, parent education level, socio-economic level, and concentration of EL students.

¹ 2004-05 national and state data from NCELA (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition) funded by OELA (Office of English Language Acquisition), www.ncela.gwa.edu/stats

A collaborative research team from EdSource, Stanford University, and the American Institutes of Research (AIR), aided by consultation with WestEd, took a look at the first EL–API scores for elementary schools in the 25th to 35th percentile band of California’s School Characteristics Index (SCI).

These schools, all of which have large proportions of low income and Spanish EL students, showed a 303-point difference on their EL–API scores out of 800 possible points.

2005 English Learner Base Academic Performance Index (API) vs. School Characteristics Index (SCI)



Why do these differences in achievement occur among California elementary schools serving similarly high proportions of low-income and EL students? Are the explanations similar or different from those found in a previous study by EdSource and its collaborative research partners of this same set of schools in relation to their schoolwide API? What, if any, specific instructional practices aimed at EL students might also be having an effect?

In an effort to answer these questions, the research team assembled in the fall of 2006 to design and execute an extended analysis of data on these schools originally compiled for the *Similar Students, Different Results* study published by EdSource in October 2006.

This report summarizes what we found, and constitutes the first analysis of its kind of California elementary school practices and their relationship to the school’s English Learner Academic Performance Index.

Background and Context: The Similar Students, Different Results Original Study

The findings in this report on EL student achievement are from an extended analysis of the large data file created in 2005 by EdSource and its collaborative research partners from Stanford University, UC Berkeley, and AIR based on a large scale survey we conducted of California elementary schools. The Initial Findings from this survey— called *Similar Students, Different Results* — were released in October of 2005, and were

drawn from multiple regression analyses to examine relationships between school practices and policies and the school-wide Academic Performance Index (API).²

The 25th – 35th percentile band width of California’s Schools Characteristics Index includes 550 elementary schools that are similar in terms of school challenge related to parent education level, percent of students on Free and Reduced Price Lunch, ethnic diversity, percent English Learners, and other factors.³ The elementary schools in this band varied by 279 points on their schoolwide Academic Performance Index scores.

Our research team randomly selected and obtained the participation of 257 elementary schools from the 550 in this band. We obtained completed comprehensive surveys from all 257 principals and 80% or more of the K-5 classroom teachers in the overwhelming majority of these 257 California elementary schools – a remarkable response rate. The 257 schools in our original study sample varied by 252 points on their school-wide API. One thing that set this study apart from others was that the sample included low, middle, and high performing schools, which enabled an examination of the school practices that differentiate low from high performing schools.

New Analysis (2007): EL Student Outcomes and School Practices

This report is the result of our extended analysis of school level principal and teacher survey responses in relation to their new school level English Learner API scores. The EL-API score was based upon spring 2005 California Standards Tests and includes EL students enrolled in California schools for one year or more, as well as former EL students redesignated as fully English proficient (RFEP). Our survey responses were also collected in the spring of 2005.

We also analyzed our findings using mean scale scores for EL students on both the math and English language arts California Standards Tests, and by percent proficient on each of the CSTs (California's accountability performance standard for the federal No Child Left Behind system), with essentially the same results. A secondary set of outcome measures based on English language proficiency was also included in the analysis.

The EL-API was calculated and released by California for the first time in the spring of 2006. It is an aggregate index of test scores for students beginning in Grade 2, including students designated as English learners and former ELs who were redesignated as RFEP. Thus, this analysis substantially avoids earlier problems with disaggregated data on performance of ELs whereby students who had successfully developed English proficiency were excluded from the category.

Possible Instructional Settings for ELs:

Based in part on the provisions of Proposition 227, the state of California has defined the instructional settings in which English learners can be instructed.

Structured English Immersion (Also referred to as Sheltered English Immersion): Classes where EL students who have not yet met local district criteria for having achieved a "good working knowledge" (or "reasonable fluency") of English are enrolled in an English language acquisition process for young children in which nearly all classroom instruction is in English but with a curriculum and presentation designed for children who are learning the language.

Alternative Course of Study: Classes where EL students are taught English and other subjects through bilingual education techniques or other generally recognized methodologies permitted under limited circumstances in California.

English Language Mainstream Classroom - Students Meeting Criteria: Classes where English learners who have met local district criteria for having achieved a "good working knowledge" of English are enrolled and provided with additional and appropriate services.

English Language Mainstream Classroom - Parental Request: State regulations permit a parent or guardian of an English Learner to request, at any time during the school year, that a child placed in Structured English Immersion be transferred to an English Language Mainstream Classroom and provided with additional and appropriate services.

² Go to www.edsource.org/pub_abs_simstu05.cfm for a copy of that Initial Report of Findings plus all collateral information.

³ SCL variables for 2005 included student mobility, student ethnicity, school socioeconomic status (measured by parental education level or student participation in free/reduced-price lunch), teachers who are fully credentialed, teachers who hold emergency credentials, students who are English learners, average class size, and whether a school operated a multi-track, year-round education program.

The policy context for this large-scale survey and study includes California’s standards-based curriculum, assessment, and accountability systems. Many experts consider this state’s K-12 academic content standards, adopted in the late 1990s, to be among the nation’s most challenging. School API is primarily based on student test scores on the California Standards Tests, which measure how well students at each school are mastering grade-level academic standards. Given this context, in the original *Similar Students, Different Results* study we used each school’s school-wide 2005 API score as the primary performance outcome, although we also looked at performance on the English language arts and math CSTs.

It is important to note that in addition to the larger policy context of standards-based reforms, English learner instruction has its own unique policy context. In California, heated debates about bilingual instruction in the mid-1990s led to the passage of Proposition 227, a statewide ballot initiative intended to curtail the use

STATE POLICY ROLE IN CURRICULUM CHOICE IN CALIFORNIA

According to California’s constitution, “the State Board of Education shall adopt textbooks for use in grades one through eight throughout the state.”

The State Board (SBE) currently approves curriculum program materials on a staggered schedule, every six years for reading/language arts/English language development; math; science; and history/social studies.

For each subject area, the SBE determines and announces the specific criteria it will use to evaluate curriculum program materials submitted for consideration by the different publishers. One criterion in recent years has been the extent and manner in which the proposed curriculum texts and supporting materials align with California’s grade-by-grade academic content standards. Curriculum program materials from different publishers may also differ in the extent to which specific content areas are covered, the number and type of classroom diagnostic tests they provide, the manner in which they address the needs of English Learners, the amount and kind of direction and training they provide for teachers, and more.

After determining which curriculum packages it will adopt for a specific subject area, California’s SBE provides school districts with a menu of approved or state adopted texts and instructional materials in that subject for each grade level. Guided by this list, local school boards and district superintendents then use their own criteria to determine which of the approved materials might best meet their needs. The state expects districts to choose from the list of state-adopted materials and provides categorical funds for that purpose. Districts can request a waiver from the state if they can make a case that non-adopted materials might better serve the academic needs of their students. District choices around subject area curriculum programs are important and complex, and generally take into consideration many local factors.

of bilingual instruction for EL students. As a result—although parents wanting such an instructional setting may request it—only 8% of the state’s English learner students are currently taught in an alternative course of study using bilingual education techniques (compared to 29% before the proposition’s passage). The overwhelming majority of ELs are taught in regular classroom settings with a variety of instructional modifications and strategies intended to provide meaningful access to the core curriculum as well as to accelerate their English language development.⁴ The debates over English language instruction have continued in California, most notably in the summer of 2006 when the State Board of Education developed new criteria for evaluating the next round of textbook materials for English language arts and English language development.

Most of the available reports and recommendations on best instructional practices for English Learner students, the majority of whom in California are low income and Spanish speaking, are based upon case studies and research reviews. This study differs in several ways:

- The sample of districts, schools, teachers, and principals is unusually large and representative

of the overall population of schools with very strong response rates;

- It examines the effects of a broad range of standards-based district, school, and classroom practices and policies on the academic achievement of the school’s English learner students;

⁴ A comprehensive, legislatively-mandated evaluation of Proposition 227 is available at: http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/227Reportb.pdf

- It also examines a small set of survey questions on specific EL instructional practices against those same student outcomes; and
- It analyzes a variety of student outcome measures used for state and federal accountability purposes and for measuring both academic and English language proficiency.

Methodology and Sample

For this extended analysis of school practices and EL student outcomes, the research team restricted the original sample of 257 schools by eliminating those with less than 15% EL student population and with no EL-API score, which left 237 schools.⁵ Within this slightly restricted sample we had completed survey results from 237 principals and 4,700 teachers (for most of the schools, 80% or more of K-5 classroom teachers).⁶ For the restricted sample of elementary schools the median school had 42% EL students, and schools ranged from 17% to 80%.⁷ The 2005 school EL-API scores in this sample ranged from a low of 555 to a high of 811, with a median of 667.

The original sample of schools was randomly drawn from the 25th to 35th percentile band of the state's 2003–04 School Characteristics Index. Among these schools the student demographic challenge factors are substantial, but not the most severe in California. Limiting the school sample to this narrow SCI band helped control for important student demographic variables; however, in the analysis the research team also controlled separately for parent education (percent of students with a parent with a high school degree/ some college, and with a college degree); school size; student ethnicity (percent African American, Asian, and Hispanic); student poverty (percent enrolled in Free/Reduced Price Meals program); percent of students new to the school; student language background (percent English Learners); and percent enrolled in migrant education.

For this new analysis, the research team also controlled for the concentration of EL students in the school using indicators for low (less than 33%); mid-range (33% to 50%); and high concentrations (greater than 50%).⁸ Additionally, we controlled for the stability of the school's EL population by using a measure of the percentage of a school's EL students that are newly enrolled. For this purpose we controlled for the ratio of initial CELDT to EL test takers in grades 2-5. The initial CELDT, the California English Language Development Test, is administered to all students whose home language is not English when they enter a California school in order to identify English learners versus initially fluent English proficient (IFEP) students.

The main focus and objective of this new analysis was to determine what correlations might exist between various broad effective-schools practices and the academic achievement of the English learner students in our sample of schools. To that end, the primary outcome variable we used was California's school level EL-API score. As noted above, this score is calculated using test results of both English learners and former EL students re-designated as fully English proficient (RFEP).

In addition to the EL-API, we conducted regression analyses using the mean scale score at each school for EL and RFEP populations on the English Language Arts and Math California Standards Tests in grades 2-5 to see if the results differed from our findings when using the EL-API.

⁵ In order to assure that findings were not unduly influenced by a small number of schools serving atypical EL populations, all analyses were replicated using a more highly restricted sample of 176 schools serving predominately Spanish-speaking EL student populations. Details are provided in the technical appendix.

⁶ For any given analysis in this report, the number of schools could vary somewhat based on available data.

⁷ A more in-depth discussion of the school characteristics of the sample used in this study and how it compares to that used in the *Similar Students* study as well as to the population of California schools can be found in Appendix B (available online).

⁸ In the prior study, the control for EL percentage used a continuous version of this variable.

Finally, we also wanted to explore the correlation between school practices and EL students' progress in learning English and in attaining English proficiency. For this purpose, we added two additional outcome variables developed by California in response to federal requirements under Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

The two types of Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAOs) for EL students both use year-to-year score results from the CELDT, matched at the individual student level. AMAO 1 measures the percentage of ELs at a school making progress in learning English as a second language, and AMAO 2 measures the percentage of ELs that have attained English proficiency. For federal reporting purposes, AMAOs are only calculated for school districts, but the California Department of Education also calculates and provides school level results for informational purposes. We used these school level results in our study.

**AMAO – Annual Measurable Achievement Objective
(Percent of a School's ELs Making Annual Progress in Learning English)**

In response to federal accountability rules, California has established English language development progress and proficiency goals for school districts called Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAOs). Based on the CELDT test, these measures represent the only clear benchmarks available in California for this purpose. The state provides school-level AMAO data that were used for this analysis.

AMAO 1 calculates the percentage of English learners making annual progress on the CELDT.

There are three ways for ELs to meet the annual growth target on CELDT depending upon what level they were the previous year. Students who began at the Beginning, Early Intermediate, and Intermediate levels are expected to gain one proficiency level. Those originally at the Early Advanced or Advanced level overall, but with some subskills below the intermediate level, are expected to achieve the English proficient level on CELDT (defined as early advanced or advanced overall with all subskills intermediate or above). Those at the English proficient level are expected to maintain that level.

AMAO 2 calculates the percentage of ELs attaining English proficiency on the CELDT.

AMAO 2 defines the cohort of EL students who can reasonably be expected to reach the English proficient level on CELDT at the time of the annual assessment. Both an EL student's level the prior year and the length of time they have been enrolled in school are considered.

Focus of the Study's Teacher and Principal Surveys

The principal and teacher surveys developed by the research team were based upon broad practices that appear repeatedly in research on effective schools, district effectiveness, and standards-based reform. We translated these broad concepts of effectiveness into concrete, actionable practices and policies related to California's contemporary standards-based school reform environment. The questions on the surveys were neutrally phrased and were designed to uncover what practices and policies were in place at the school and how intensely they had been implemented. While under development, the survey questions were extensively vetted by state policymakers, other researchers, and district and school educators. We field tested the principal and teacher surveys in eleven low-, middle-, and high-performing elementary schools across the state—de-briefing principals and teachers afterward—and revised the surveys based upon their feedback.

The principal survey had 46 multi-part questions and the teacher survey had 63 multi-part questions, with the total number of items per survey between 350 and 400. Respondents were asked about their professional credentials, experience, and language backgrounds. The survey questions addressed classroom, school level, and district practices and policies conceptually grouped into seven broad domains.⁹ Each of these broad domains consisted of a dozen or more smaller conceptual groupings of questions we called sub-domains. Although some sub-domains had only one question, the majority included several related questions. These broad school practices domains were as follows.

⁹ See the Technical Appendix regarding methodology for a full description of this process.

Prioritizing Student Achievement (Using Measurable and Monitored Objectives).

This domain examined the importance both the school and district placed on setting clear, high, and measurable expectations for student achievement. Both teachers and principals were asked about the extent to which their school and district communicated high expectations and took responsibility for student achievement. Further, they reported the degree of priority given by teachers, the principal, and the district to meeting API and AYP targets for subgroups of students (such as by race/ethnicity, income level, and EL status).

Implementing a Coherent, Standards-based Curriculum and Instructional Program.

This domain contained those sub-domains that most clearly indicated that a school's curriculum and instruction are coherent and aligned with state standards, including:

- The amount of time spent on mathematics and language arts instruction, and the extent to which they are protected from interruption and integrated with other subjects.
- The proportion of teachers in a school who regularly use the same curriculum packages, and which ones they used.
- The extent to which teachers reported alignment and consistency in curriculum and instruction, planning and materials.
- Teacher, principal, and district use of state standards to guide curriculum and instruction.
- The use of a standards-based report card.
- The extent to which the district had addressed the needs of English learners.

Principals were also asked about the extent to which clear district expectations guided curriculum coherence; whether they saw themselves as knowledgeable about standards and curriculum; and whether the school had implemented a new program for EL students in the last four years.

Using Assessment Data to Improve Student Achievement and Instruction.

Under the general topic of data and assessment, questions addressed the types of assessment data teachers and principals received, as well as how they used these data. We categorized the types of data as follows:

- CST (California Standards Tests) and CAT/6 assessment data, the state's standardized tests administered each spring.
- CELDT (California English Language Development Test), an annual assessment of English learners' English language proficiency.
- Curriculum program assessments.
- District-developed assessments.
- Other commercial assessments.
- Assessments created by individual teachers in a school.

Based primarily on item content—but also on the results of our factor analyses—the sub-domains were organized differently for teachers than for principals. Teachers' responses were organized around the frequency with which they reviewed assessment data generally, and the extent to which they used the specific data types to monitor student performance and inform their instruction.

The analysis of principals' responses reflected different questions, including their use of specific types of assessments and the extent to which they used each type to monitor achievement, address student progress, inform school-wide instructional strategies, and monitor and evaluate the practices and performance of teachers. Principals were also asked about the influence of district expectations for improving student achievement, and about incentives and activities specifically targeted at raising CST and CAT/6 scores.

Both principals and teachers also responded to a set of questions regarding the extent to which they addressed student achievement by subgroup.

Ensuring Availability of Instructional Resources.

Given the absence of school-level financial data in California, the study was limited in its examination of school level resources. Data regarding the credentials and experience of educators was combined with teacher reports related to adequate classroom materials and facilities maintenance, and principals' perceptions of a number of different types of resources, including:

- The skills, knowledge, and attitudes of the teaching staff at the school.
- The school's access to qualified support personnel, supplemental financial resources, and supplemental instructional time for students.
- The extent to which the district provides support for facilities and instructional materials.
- The amount of regular instructional time, including full-day kindergarten and extended school day or year.

Enforcing High Expectations for Student Behavior.

The examination of this domain was limited to questions regarding the school's establishment and enforcement of policies related to student behavior. Both principals and teachers reported on the extent to which the school created an orderly and positive environment for student learning, including such areas as attendance policies, enforcement of rules, and respect for cultural differences.

Encouraging Teacher Collaboration and Providing Professional Development

This domain examined several different areas related to the professional environment in the school, and looked at a wide range of activities by teachers, principals, and districts.

The first area was teacher collaboration and professionalism. The sub-domains examined include:

- The extent to which teachers felt they had influence over schoolwide decisions.
- The extent to which teachers and principals reported opportunities for teacher collaboration around curriculum and instruction, including for EL students.
- The extent to which teachers and principals perceived that teacher professionalism was supported and encouraged within the school and by the district, and the extent to which they experienced a continuous learning environment.

A second strand in this domain related to the development of educator capacity through professional development, with sub-domains focused on:

- The adequacy, influence, and value of a large number of different teacher professional development opportunities, including training linked to standards generally, specific curriculum programs, instructional strategies, the use of data to inform instruction, and non-instructional issues.
- The frequency of teacher participation in coaching and modeling activities.
- The extent to which principals gave their district credit for providing teacher professional development opportunities.
- Principals perceptions on the extent to which their district provided them with professional development, and the value they ascribed to their experiences.

Finally, several other sub-domains explored included:

- The principal's perceptions about the district's success in building and maintaining a strong teaching staff.
- The principal's capacity to evaluate teacher performance.

