Providing a Quality Education for English Language Learner Students in the United States

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Executive Summary

In today’s education system, English language learner (ELL) students need additional support in receiving a quality education. Specifically, attention should be given to promoting familial academic involvement, providing culturally inclusive and diverse representation in curriculum, and addressing student’s social-emotional and mental health well-being. Currently, the U.S. Department of Education does not provide sufficient holistic resources for K-12 ELL students and families. In fact, according to a study by National Public Radio Education, “only 63 percent of ELLs graduate from high school, compared with the overall national rate of 82 percent.”¹ Therefore, it is evident that this student population requires specialized resources and interventions. The U.S. Department of Education should provide instructional booklets to families at the beginning of each school year available in multiple languages in order for parents or guardians to receive foundational knowledge of the public education system and be able to generate their own opinions or ideas to be accounted for, therefore actively participating and contributing to students’ academic career. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education should promote diversity and inclusion in school curriculum, as well as implement programs dedicated to providing safe spaces for students to express their emotions and personal and academic concerns. As a result, there would be a drastic improvement in learning outcomes for ELL students in the United States.

Problem Statement

English language learner (ELL) students enrolled in nationwide K-12 public schools are not receiving sufficient resources from the U.S. Department of Education to facilitate familial academic involvement, provide diverse and culturally inclusive representation in curriculum and address student’s emotional and mental wellbeing. Therefore, the lack of development in these three areas hinders the student’s academic and social emotional potential. ELL students are committed to education as demonstrated in enrollment rates, however, it should be noted that ELL students also need additional academic assistance. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “in 2013, about 4.6 million public school students participated in English language learner (ELL) programs,” indicating a high demand for academic assistance. In fact, of this group, Latinx students made up 78 percent, which is around 3.6 million students. However, without academic parental or guardian involvement, the current resources available for ELL students are not enough for them to receive and retain quality education. It has been proven that “early parental involvement and parental expectations are key longitudinal predictors of academic achievement.” In 2013 the National Center for Education Statistics reported that in grade 4 reading level, “the White-Hispanic gap in 2013 (25 points) was not measurably different from the gap in 1992” and that the gap in grade 12 also was not measurably different from 1992. This demonstrates that ELL students could greatly benefit from an increase of familial involvement in their education and as a result potentially reach the same level of education as their classmates.

The current resources for parents or guardians to be actively involved in their child’s education are helpful but still contain room for improvement. For example, The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) supports parental or guardian engagement in the student’s academic career by giving schools six critical ways for parents or guardians to be informed and give their input to emerging education initiatives. However, it only

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3 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258189361_The_long-term_effects_of_early_parent_involvement_and_parent_expectation_in_the_USA
supports information being translated to at least one other language than English and only focuses on parental or guardian engagement regarding new initiatives. It still does not account for parents or guardians who need foundational knowledge on the public education system. For instance, ESSA does not aid in understanding the purpose of parent-teacher conferences, how to communicate with teachers, and how the school calendar is composed. Without the basic knowledge being available in multiple languages, parents or guardians will not be able to generate their own opinions or ideas in order to participate in the student’s education journey.

A culturally representative curriculum starting at a young age is another critical element to ensuring ELL students can thrive in K-12 education. From the ages 4 to 6 years old, children begin to develop their self-identity by portraying “their internal lives of self, construct their personal identity, and how these may affect the learning process.”\(^5\) This is also around the time children enter elementary school, and it is imperative for learners to be exposed to various ethnicities and cultures they can identify with. Additionally, evidence shows that “students who attend diverse public schools learn more, exhibit less racial prejudice, and report higher overall self-confident.”\(^6\) Since communities throughout the United States do not have equal amounts or variations of ethnicities, cultures, and socioeconomic levels, all K-12 public schools should implement a culturally inclusive curriculum that teaches cultural competence and respect while promoting diversity. For instance, much like schools provide students with foreign language classes, literacy classes can expose students to numerous cultures through books. In fact, students who are from marginalized communities who do not receive diverse and culturally inclusive education that acknowledges the impact of systemic racism and oppression place these students at a risk of becoming victims of negative psychological patterns such as imposter syndrome. Furthermore, it has been shown in 46 scientific studies that “ethnic identity was connected to positive outcomes for youth of color, including positive psychosocial, academic and health outcomes for

\(^6\) [https://tcf.org/content/commentary/diversity-schools-must-include-curriculum/?session=1](https://tcf.org/content/commentary/diversity-schools-must-include-curriculum/?session=1)
adolescents of color.” This highlights the importance of ELL student’s identities being represented in their curriculum.

Mental health issues are common among ELL students and thus must be addressed. ELL students are more likely to come from low-income families, leading to experiencing financial stressors, face discrimination, and have trauma related to immigration. Such experiences place young children and adolescents at risk for mental health problems. In fact, one in five children living in the United States have symptoms of a mental health disorder yet nearly 80 percent of those who need mental health services do not receive it. A student not receiving emotional and mental care not only increases their failure in current education but also increases future academic failure. It is also important to note that due to the lack of resources directed towards research on the negative psychological effects on ELL students, further details on what occurs internally are not currently available.

Student support groups for ELL students could help them feel heard and cared for, which will increase their school performance. For instance, the U.S. Department of Education does have the Newcomer Tool Kit guide that assists with understanding how to aid an ELL student in their transition into school. However, the existence of the information is not communicated to schools and families adequately. Nonetheless, the educational service website Colorín Colorado, based in Arlington, Virginia, is a great example of a one-stop resource center for schools, students’ families and communities to access free bilingual research-based information, activities, and advice for understanding the life of being an ELL individual within the education system.

7 https://youthcollaboratory.org/resource/culturally-responsive-mentoring-youth-color
Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Congress should amend The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and require U.S. K-12 public schools to provide an instructional booklet to parents or guardians at the beginning of each school year available in multiple languages in order for parents or guardians to receive foundational knowledge of the public education system. Since K-12 public schools across the United States lack resources to facilitate familial engagement, students are negatively impacted since familial involvement has shown to further enhance their social-emotional and academic development. It has been scientifically proven that “early parental involvement and parental expectations are key longitudinal predictors of academic achievement.”9 ESSA should require schools to first evaluate the community they serve and then translate all materials to either all or at least 80 percent, whichever comes first, of the languages found in the community.

Recommendation 2

Congress should require that K-12 public schools implement culturally inclusive curriculum that also acknowledges the impact of systemic racism, oppression and marginalization. Culturally inclusive teaching allows students and staff to understand and create space where people of all cultures can be respected and communicate with each other. Every school in the United States will have the opportunity to make decisions about how to implement the curriculum in order to have a localized and appropriate approach from each community. However, every school district must have a comprehensive strategy for how they plan to create a culturally inclusive and diverse curriculum by reviewing every subject in their current curriculum and creating strategies for new textbooks, literature, and teaching methods that reflect the diversity of the nation.

9 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258189361_The_long-term_effects_of_early_parent_involvement_and_parent_expectation_in_the_USA
**Recommendation 3**

Congress should amend The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to require K-12 public schools to offer programs dedicated to providing a safe space for ELL students to freely express their emotions and concerns. These safe spaces would ideally ensure that ELL students are receiving mental health care and peer and adult supports to ensure that their social-emotional and academic needs are being met. These are important preventative measures to prevent ELL students from academic failure or other risks. School districts should implement programs dedicated to providing safe spaces for students to freely express their emotions and concerns that are localized and provide every community with the flexibility to create spaces that work best for their students.