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**UChicago Consortium Study Shines New Light on Misconceptions
About English Learners in Chicago Public Schools**

Most students who began kindergarten as English Learners became proficient in English by fifth grade and performed academically as well as or better than peers who began school as native-English speakers

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students who began kindergarten as English Learners (ELs), on average, progressed to eighth grade with academic achievement similar to or better than their peers who began kindergarten proficient in English, finds a new study released today by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

Nearly 80 percent of CPS English Learners achieved English proficiency by eighth grade, with the majority (76 percent) becoming proficient by fifth grade. ELs who demonstrated English proficiency by eighth grade had higher attendance, math test scores, and core course grades than their peers who were never classified as ELs; reading test scores and Freshman OnTrack rates were similar.

For the one in five ELs who did not reach proficiency by the end of eighth grade, school was more challenging—attendance, grades, and test scores were lower than those of their peers who did attain proficiency by the end of eighth grade. More effective supports are needed to serve these students, and the authors suggest there may be an opportunity to identify these students early on—in kindergarten or first grade.

The groundbreaking study, [*English Learners in Chicago Public Schools: A New Perspective*](#), stands in contrast to previous publicly available data that has shown English Learners academically far behind their peers. Previous studies about ELs have reported data on active English Learners—defined as those students who have not yet reached proficiency on a state English test—at a specific moment in time. “The Consortium study is different because for the first time we analyzed the long-term trajectories of 18,000 CPS students who began kindergarten as ELs and followed their progress all the way through eighth grade,” said Marisa de la Torre, Senior Research Associate and Managing Director at the UChicago Consortium. “EL students are making progress, but the growth is not apparent when you’re looking at different groups of students each year.”

The study’s methodology and key findings are important because one-third of CPS students are classified as English Learners at some point in their academic career. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), the proportion of students who are English Learners across the country grew 26 percent from 2000 to 2015. Educators, policymakers, and families must have comprehensive information to understand if schools are fully serving students who are working to attain proficiency in English while simultaneously learning the academic content for their grade level. The report demonstrates that the statistics currently used for accountability overlook how well most ELs are performing in school.

Research Questions and Key Findings

How does the academic performance of CPS students who enter kindergarten as ELs compare, over time, to students who enter kindergarten as proficient or native-English speakers?

- Publicly-reported statistics often appear as though EL students are far behind non-EL students. On average, from kindergarten to eighth grade, students who began as ELs had similar achievement and growth, and higher attendance, compared to students never classified as ELs. They also had similar Freshman OnTrack rates in ninth grade.

How are CPS students who enter kindergarten as English Learners progressing toward English proficiency?

- More than 76 percent of CPS students who began kindergarten as ELs became proficient in English by fifth grade.
- The nearly one-quarter of EL students who did **not** attain English proficiency by the end of fifth grade were unlikely to reach proficiency before high school. Only an additional 2 percent reached proficiency by eighth grade for a total of 78 percent of EL students achieving English proficiency before entering high school. While these students showed substantial growth in English skills through the eighth grade, it was never sufficient to reach the benchmark score for English proficiency.
- Students who began as ELs and demonstrated English proficiency by eighth grade had higher attendance, math test scores, and core course grades than their peers who were never classified as ELs; reading test scores and Freshman OnTrack rates were similar.

What differentiates CPS students who do not demonstrate English proficiency by the end of eighth grade, and how is their academic performance different from EL students who achieved English proficiency by eighth grade?

- About one-fifth of students who began kindergarten as ELs did not reach English proficiency by the end of eighth grade. This group of students was more likely to be male, much more likely to be identified as needing special education services, and they entered kindergarten with much lower scores on the state English proficiency exam (ACCESS).
- EL students who did not achieve English proficiency by eighth grade also struggled with declining attendance by the middle grades, considerably lower grade point averages, and lower Freshman OnTrack rates.
- Future research could develop a method of identifying this group of students early on so that educators could design and implement more effective supports. The study shows that their ACCESS scores are distinctly different from those of other English Learners by the first grade.

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About the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research

The UChicago Consortium conducts research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. The Consortium seeks to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners as we support the search for solutions to the problems of school reform. The UChicago Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action and improvement of practice but does not advocate for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school reform by identifying what matters for student success and school improvement, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.

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