

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY SEPTEMBER 2021

English Learners in Chicago Public Schools

An Exploration of the Influence of Pre-K
and Early Grade Years



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Executive Summary

English Learners (ELs) are students from whom much is expected: they are tasked with mastering grade-level content while also learning English, a language in which they are not fully proficient.¹ Mastering academic English—the set of language skills necessary for success in school—is a developmental process that takes at least five to seven years.

Over time, most students who begin school classified as ELs demonstrate English proficiency and their status changes from that of an active EL to a former EL.² Because of this, active ELs are concentrated in the early grades.³ Hence, schools and teachers need to focus educational resources in the early years to support ELs' instructional needs and set them on a path to academic success.

We know that some ELs struggle more in school than others. Previous Consortium work found that ELs who did not demonstrate English proficiency by the end of eighth grade had lower educational outcomes in terms of grades, attendance, and test scores.⁴ Importantly, this study also found that academic differences were visible as early as the first grade, between the ELs who would go on to demonstrate English proficiency and

those who did not. This suggests that ELs who struggle the most academically could be identified early on and provided with additional supports.

To provide new and needed knowledge about what student and school characteristics are associated with EL success in pre-k and the early grades, this study examines attendance, grades, test scores, and English proficiency from two groups of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) ELs (14,058 students in pre-k and 16,651 students in the early grades K-3) to answer the following research questions:

- What are the factors associated with stronger outcomes for ELs in pre-k and the early grades?
- To what extent can schools identify ELs who would benefit from additional support?

1 An EL is a student “whose home language background is a language other than English and whose proficiency in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English is not yet sufficient to provide the student with: 1) The ability to meet the State’s proficient level of achievement on State assessments; 2) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or 3) the opportunity to participate fully in the school setting” (Illinois Admin. Code tit. 23, § 228.10 (2017)). We used the term “English Learner” throughout the report to be consistent with Illinois State Board of Education terminology. However, we acknowledge that this is a controversial term, as it focuses on what students do not know instead of the strengths that they bring with them.

2 An active EL is a student who is currently identified as an EL. These students have not yet reached the state-determined cut score of English proficiency on the English proficiency test. A former EL is a student who was once designated as an EL but demonstrated English proficiency (scored above a certain cut score on the English proficiency test) and exited out of EL status.

3 For the purposes of this study, “the early grades” refers to the academic years spanning from kindergarten to the third grade.

4 de la Torre, Blanchard, Allensworth, & Freire (2019).

Key Findings

Factors Associated with Stronger Outcomes for English Learners

Attending a full-day classroom was associated with stronger EL pre-k attendance and kindergarten readiness in terms of English language development and early literacy. Between 2016 and 2018, only one in five ELs enrolled in a CPS pre-k attended a full-day classroom (19 percent), compared to the district average of 34 percent. ELs who were enrolled in a CPS pre-k full-day classroom attended about 2.5 additional school days, compared to ELs who were enrolled in a half-day class but were alike in all other measured factors. Similarly, we found that ELs in full-day CPS pre-k demonstrated stronger oral English skills and were more likely to demonstrate reading proficiency, relative to similar ELs in half-day classes, by the fall of kindergarten.

Enrolling earlier in CPS pre-k (prior to age four vs. at age four) supported ELs' kindergarten readiness in terms of English language development and early reading skills. In our sample, 54 percent of ELs enrolled before the age of four in a CPS pre-k and most of them (90 percent) stayed in the same pre-k site when they turned four. In terms of their English development, ELs who enrolled in CPS pre-k early scored, on average, almost one level higher on a test of English proficiency, compared to ELs alike in all other measurable factors. We also found that ELs who attended a CPS pre-k before the age of four were more likely to demonstrate reading proficiency in the fall of kindergarten. Attendance in pre-k did not differ significantly among ELs who enrolled before or after they were four years old.

The differences in outcomes were still detectable—even as far as third grade—between students who attended a school-based CPS pre-k and those who did not. By the time ELs reached third grade, ELs who had enrolled in a CPS pre-k still had slightly stronger

performance than similar ELs who did not enroll in a CPS pre-k. Compared to their peers, third-grade ELs who had enrolled in a CPS pre-k had better attendance, reading and math grades, and test scores, and were more likely to demonstrate English proficiency.

ELs who received language supports through their schools' Bilingual Education Services had higher attendance and academic outcomes in the long run than students who refused bilingual services in kindergarten. In kindergarten, ELs who received Bilingual Education Services had lower English proficiency scores in the ACCESS test (particularly in the oral components of speaking and listening) than similar ELs whose parents or guardians refused those services. However, by end of third grade, students who received services were 4 percentage points more likely to demonstrate English proficiency on the ACCESS test, which suggests that ELs who refused services stagnated in their English language development, compared to ELs who received services. ELs who received Bilingual Education Services not only improved in their English development, but also had stronger attendance, grades, and test scores in third grade than similar ELs who refused services.

Attending higher-rated schools, based on CPS' School Quality Rating Policy, was associated with positive outcomes for ELs in terms of standardized test scores in math, reading, and English proficiency. After accounting for student and school differences, we found that the rating a school received was positively associated with the scores ELs obtained in their third-grade math and reading NWEA standardized assessments and their English proficiency levels. For example, an average student enrolled in a Level 1+ school, the highest rating, scored in the 54th national percentile on the math NWEA in third grade while a similar student in a Level 2 school, one of the lowest ratings, scored in the 39th national percentile. It is worth noting that a school rating was not associated with ELs' attendance, grades, or whether students demonstrated English proficiency in third grade.

Identifying ELs Who Would Benefit From Additional Support

Starting school with low levels of English proficiency was related to lower academic performance, measured by standardized test scores and grades; however, screener data were, in general, not related to attendance.

When ELs first enroll in CPS they are screened for English proficiency within 30 days of enrollment.⁵ More than one-half of ELs served in CPS in pre-k and kindergarten started with low levels of oral English proficiency, as measured by the screener tests. Our study found that lower (and higher) scores on screener tests when students entered pre-k and kindergarten were correlated with lower (and higher) later scores of English proficiency and other assessments in reading and math, commonly administered in English. Those differences by incoming English proficiency persisted even after four years in school and were larger in reading than in math assessments. For example, when comparing students alike in all other student characteristics and school factors who only differed in their screener score in kindergarten, ELs at the entering level (lowest level) in kindergarten scored in the 32nd national percentile in reading and in the 42nd national percentile in math in third-grade standardized tests; while ELs in the expanding level (just below the threshold that designates them as English proficient) in kindergarten scored in the 55th national percentile in reading and 57th national percentile in math. ELs with low incoming screener scores also had lower grades, especially in reading, compared to their EL peers but similar attendance.

ELs with identified disabilities made progress, but at a slower pace, toward acquiring English skills and most students with identified disabilities had lower attendance. Among ELs in our two samples, we found 17 percent had an identified disability in pre-k and 12 percent in kindergarten. Most ELs who were identified with a disability were classified as having a developmental delay, followed by students with a speech and language disability, and cognitive disability. ELs with identified

disabilities made progress toward acquiring English skills, but it was slower than the progress of similar ELs with no identified disabilities. These differences emerged very early, even when comparing ELs with similar English proficiency levels upon entering kindergarten.

We also found that ELs with identified disabilities were more likely to miss school, except those with speech and language disabilities. Given the importance of being in school in order to receive services and make progress in learning, this data shows that interventions to improve attendance in the early grades, especially in pre-k and kindergarten, might help ELs with identified disabilities to get the supports they need.

Considerations

Our findings provide valuable information to help practitioners and policymakers strategize ways to better support ELs and help them succeed in the early grades and beyond. Our work also has insights that could help parents and families make decisions about their children's education, but the responsibility for making changes that would support all ELs belongs with the policymakers and educators who serve them.

Considerations for Policymakers

- Policymakers may want to prioritize ELs for access to pre-k programs, particularly subgroups of ELs who seem to need additional support, such as ELs with low incoming English skills and ELs with identified disabilities. As ELs have increased access to pre-k services that will benefit their future academic success, policymakers may need to develop strategies around training and retaining a bilingual workforce qualified to teach ELs in early childhood settings.
- Policymakers might consider providing some schools with additional resources to support them and in turn to ensure the success of ELs these schools serve. Our findings demonstrate that some schools, particularly schools with lower school quality ratings, may need additional support to help ELs achieve academic success.

⁵ For more detail on screener tests see the box titled *Screener Tests in Pre-K and Kindergarten* in Chapter 2.

Considerations for Practitioners

- Once families enroll their ELs in a school, practitioners can help them understand that Bilingual Education Services are beneficial for their students' learning. Without the scaffolding that bilingual services provide, students start falling behind, not only in English skills, but also in mastering the grade level content. Practitioners should ensure that parents who are choosing whether to refuse bilingual services are aware of these potential consequences.
- Practitioners can rely on data from screener tests to support ELs early on. Our findings indicate ELs who start school in the early stages of English development tend to struggle with their academic performance. Practitioners could use interventions that focus on improving reading and listening, as these were two areas in which these students were farther behind, compared to other ELs.
- Practitioners may need to pay particular attention to ELs who are also identified for special education services. Understanding and remedying lower attendance patterns for ELs with disabilities should be a priority for practitioners. In addition, practitioners could help families understand that their children are entitled to both Bilingual Education Services and special education services, as the data shows that students with identified disabilities were more likely to refuse bilingual services.

Considerations for Parents and Families of ELs

- Families may want to prioritize early enrollment in CPS pre-k and enrollment in full-day programs, when possible. Our findings show that attending public school-based pre-k was related to better outcomes for ELs, both in kindergarten and the third grade, even five years after students attended a CPS pre-k.
- Before deciding about whether their children should receive Bilingual Education Services, parents and guardians should be aware of the long-term benefits of participating in such services. Our results suggest that some of the benefits of bilingual services are not immediately apparent but show up later in a students' education.
- Families looking to enroll their children in CPS could consider the rating of a school as a valuable metric to add among other school characteristics. Our findings suggest that a school accountability rating is a good indicator for an EL's academic success on some dimensions that may matter to parents and families as they consider school choices.

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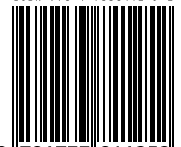
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