



ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

TESTIMONY TO THE U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

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My name is Don Soifer, and I am executive vice president of the Lexington Institute, a nonpartisan policy think tank based in Arlington, Virginia.

English learners need to be considered one of our most critical school populations, and their academic success vital to the economic future of our city, and our region. Last year, 8.3 percent (4,139) of all DCPS students were designated English Language Learners, according to the Office of the State Superintendent of Education's audited numbers. Three-fourths of these are Spanish-speaking. Vietnamese, Amharic and Chinese comprise the majority of other non-English speakers, although in all some 100 languages are represented.

It is important to note that three-fifths of these English learners were born in the United States. The District Office of Latino Affairs reports that one in three Latinos living in the city has difficulty with English. Particularly when it comes to involving parents, these are factors that must be addressed for English learners to have access to the same opportunities as other children.

The foreign-born population of our nation's capital has, however, increased by one-third since 1990. El Salvador is the most common birthplace of non-English-speakers born outside of this country, nearly one-third, followed by Mexico.

English learners stand to benefit substantially from many of the reforms being advanced under the leadership of Mayor Fenty and Chancellor Rhee, but there is much more that needs to be done.

English learners here deserve the same educational opportunities as other students. Chances to exercise parental choice, as the Commission heard about this morning, provide parents with precious opportunities to improve their children's prospects for success. But here in the nation's capital, English learners are missing out on the opportunities available to others.

The District's current out-of-boundary school attendance policies work against English learners. This comes as little surprise to anyone riding a bus or the metro in the middle of a weekday afternoon.

DCPS may have had good reasons for only allowing out-of-boundary applications to be submitted online this year. But as the Joint Advisory Council was quick to point out, delays in making the online application forms available in Spanish made it harder for English learners, many of whose parents are not proficient in English, to participate. That leaves English learners much more dependent on the quality of their neighborhood public school.

English learners are also significantly under-represented in the District's charter schools. The enrollment rate, under 4 percent, is about half of what it is for DCPS. It is my hope that the growth of new and recent charters established with approaches designed to close the language gaps for ELLs, as well as the increased attention of existing high-performing charters to the education needs of this vital population, will continue improve this situation.

ELL involvement in the District's Opportunity Scholarship program has not even been measured in program evaluations to date.

Under the leadership of Mayor Fenty, Chancellor Rhee, and Dr. Hartsock, there have been a number of valuable policy initiatives that are either already benefiting English learners, or can be reasonably expected to in the near future.

Training principals to address the needs of ELLs, and expanding the Parents as Partners program within language-minority communities, are two such elements of the Fenty Administration's reform priorities. The Chancellor has described efforts to improve communication with parents of English learners, with a focus on interpreting and translation and expanding Parent Resource Centers, and progress in these areas can make a difference.

In general, the current emphasis on improving data and monitoring of student progress is essential groundwork toward producing a better education product, for ELLs and all students.

The implementation of quality, dual-language immersion programs in the district has also proven to be of real benefit to ELL students. Oyster Bilingual Elementary School in Ward Three is a nationally-known success story. Bringing English and Spanish speaking students to proficiency in both languages by the end of the third grade, and achieving seamless integration of English and Spanish across all subject matter, are impressive accomplishments any school district would be proud of.

The Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) is among the education leaders to have noted, "Dual-language immersion programs do not encourage cultural or linguistic separatism in ELLs... reflect best instructional practices, and speed ELL's development of English language and academic skills."

Research shows the success of quality dual-immersion programs depends on the presence of certain necessary elements. Oyster's admissions policy maintains a 50-50 balance between native English and Spanish teachers. It is also a school of choice. Each of these factors are essential if the model is to be expanded successfully within DCPS.

The development and implementation of the ACCESS assessment, designed in conjunction with the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment Consortium, represents another important step forward. The District's Master Education Plan commits to the use of formative assessments to help target instruction to individual student needs, and, this and other assessments being used, soundly aligned with content and language acquisition standards, are valuable tools for teachers and administrators.

Lastly, and this is a testament to Dr. Hartsock and her leadership, you rarely, if ever, hear in DCPS that the quality of English-as-a-Second-Language and other teachers working with ELL students is an issue. People seem to feel this staff is across the board at least as good as in the rest of DCPS. In many urban school districts around the country, that is often not the case.

Clearly, there are good things going on here for English learners, that need to be expanded. There are also a number of pressing challenges to be addressed:

- Classroom teachers currently serving ELL students frequently do not have much training meeting their specific needs. Providing them with that training through effective professional development is a critical first step toward improving results districtwide.
- Earlier this year, the federal Department of Education found the District's assessment system to be problematic in its inclusion of English learners, specifically in its use of standard testing accommodations. If English learners' test scores are truly to count as much as those of other children, any problems with testing accommodations need to be resolved.

When the District of Columbia's 4th grade English learners increased their test scores, especially in reading, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the national test known as the Nation's Report Card, the good news was resoundingly noted. In fact, the increase of over 20 points between 2005 and 2007 was among the most impressive increases in the country.

Two factors lend perspective, however. First, the exclusion rate for fourth grade English learners quadrupled between 2005 and 2007, from one to four percent of all students. Exclusions are permitted when students have received less than three years of instruction in the United States. Second, some three-quarters of English learners took the test with accommodations. I am not suggesting that these factors explain the increase entirely, only that they be considered as contributing factors.

- According to the U.S. Department of Education data, only 2.5 percent of English learners in DCPS schools attained proficiency in English in 2005-06, the most recent year for which results are available. That means that English learners in our public schools are currently much more likely to drop out of school than to ever become proficient in English, and that most will never achieve proficiency. Even for those who subscribe to the belief that it takes 6 or 7 years to develop fluency in a second language, a 2.5 percent reclassification rate defies explanation.
- DCPS is also currently operating under a Compliance Agreement for Corrective Action with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, the office formerly headed by the Chairman of the Commission on Civil Rights, Gerald Reynolds. The terms of the agreement

are to ensure that all English learners receive the services to which they are entitled by federal law. It addresses important measures like procedures for identifying English learners using home language surveys, and ensuring that they are taught by teachers with adequate training.

The OCR Compliance Agreement under which we are currently operating is dated October, 1997. It is badly out of date, and does not include any of the standards and assessments currently being used. While there is much progress being made with English learners in our schools, it is impossible to determine the current state of civil rights compliance until this agreement can be brought up to date.

■ Finally, test scores systemwide on the DC Comprehensive Assessment System (DC-CAS) pointed to significant gains in math and reading this year. English learners shared in this good news. I know that you've already heard much discussion on this topic today, but to neglect to mention that progress here would be a regrettable omission.

It would be just as wrong to fail to acknowledge that there is still a great deal of progress that needs to be gained. As the chart at the end of this testimony indicates, the disparity in test scores across our public schools, particularly those with large English learner populations, even including those within close proximity and in the same wards, remains a major cause for concern. And it is with that critical reminder that I will conclude my statement, and look forward to your questions and comments. Thank you.

School Report Card Data for Selected DCPS Schools with Large ELL Populations

School	2007 School Report Card Data - % Proficient and Advanced				ELL %	% Eligible for F/R lunch	Comments
	Reading LEP %	Non-LEP %	Math LEP %	Non-LEP %			
Adams ES 2020 19th Street, NW	13.51	40.63	13.51	28.13	42.86	39.85	L
Bancroft ES 1755 Newton Street, NW	38.89	61.84	46.3	65.79	57.8	76.76	★, SP
Bell Multicultural HS 3101 16th Street, NW	18.6	52.03	34.88	43.91	44.55	0	M
Brightwood ES 1300 Nicholson Street, NW	44.44	51.81	34.26	38.55	53.87	63.54	M, SP
Bruce-Monroe ES 3012 Georgia Avenue, NW	44.29	45.76	42.85	44.06	45.94	64.09	DL
Cooke H.D. ES 300 Bryant Street, NW	30.3	45.59	24.25	30.88	36.99	65.77	DL
Hyde ES 3219 O Street, NW	Not Reported	87.88	Not Reported	78.79	24.43	15.43	★
Lincoln MS 3101 16th Street, NW	9.86	27.59	11.26	22.26	27.09	NA	M
Meyer ES 2501 11th Street, NW	38.1	35.08	28.57	15.79	28.35	58.38	L
Oyster ES 2801 Calvert Street, NW	69.01	87.2	52.11	76.83	25.87	17.97	★, DL
Powell ES 1350 Upshur Street, NW	20	35.71	20	30.36	59.25	61.09	M
Raymond ES 915 Spring Road NW	35.29	53.75	44.12	40	31.65	67.21	M
Ross ES 1730 R Street, NW	53.57	73.22	50	60.72	28.98	53.01	★
Seaton ES 1503 10th Street, NW	29.16	36.36	25	30.3	25.27	74.4	M
Thomson ES 1200 L Street, NW	55.17	58.06	51.73	41.94	42.27	62.64	★
Truesdell ES 800 Ingraham Street, NW	27.66	48.38	21.28	41.13	34.92	77.57	M
Tubman ES 3101 13th Street, NW	29.78	38.88	22.34	28.57	38.81	52.85	M
LEA Average	35.47	34.4	35.07	27.96	8.30%		

Key:

- ★ - High-Results School, 21st Century School Fund
- M - Moderate-Results School, 21st Century School Fund
- L - Low-Results School, 21st Century School Fund
- DL - Dual-Language
- SP - Spanish-Language Instruction for Native Speakers

