

**English Learners: How Many Still Left Behind?**

by Don Soifer

For English language learners, perhaps more than any other segment of American public education, The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) fundamentally changed how schools conduct the business of their education. The law, for the first time, required schools to show agreed-upon levels of progress moving English learners toward proficiency in English, and then linked those and other results to federal dollars. NCLB even took the sensible step of requiring bilingual education teachers themselves to be fluent in written and spoken English.

But when it comes to improving the transition rates that ultimately measure such growth, English learners in some states fare much better than others. In Arizona, California, Illinois and elsewhere, the rates at which English learners attain sufficient skills and are fully integrated into mainstream, English classrooms remain well under 10 percent per year. The rest continue in Transitional Bilingual Education programs that, in fact, seem barely transitional at all.

Even though Arizona and California passed laws effectively eliminating bilingual education, these laws have been unevenly applied and in some school districts even ignored. In Illinois and other states, students can remain in segregated bilingual education classes for the vast majority of their public-school careers. Meanwhile by contrast, Florida and New Jersey had transition rates of 29 percent and 31 percent, respectively.

Such cavernous gaps in success rates are indications that this area of NCLB is working better in some places than in others. Some bilingual education advocates argue that it can take up to 6-8 years to teach English fluency, and that schools should first develop proficiency in children’s non-English, native languages. But research shows children can acquire a second language faster and more effectively when taught at a younger age.

Before NCLB, federal funding went directly to local programs that often provided little evidence of success at improving students’ English proficiency. Critics pointed to many such programs as isolated and inferior education tracks more likely to lead students to drop out than to graduate.

Some of the nation’s lowest-transition-rate states, like California, also reported strong gains in English learners’ test scores over the same period. Policymakers would be wise to ask how it can be acceptable to leave some English learners behind, but not others.

<b>English Learner Annual Transition Rates into Mainstream English Classrooms, 2002-2004</b>			
Alaska	5.1 %	Illinois	8.5 %
Arizona	6.0	Nevada	3.4
California	8.0	Tennessee	9.7
Idaho	7.5	Washington	6.6

Source: U.S. Department of Education. Data reflects 2-year average in states where English Language Learners comprise more than 10 percent of all students.