

*The Every Student Succeeds Act and Level 5 English Learners: Reflections from an Indiana High School Teacher*

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**ABSTRACT**

English Learners (ELs) who move from being Limited English Proficient (LEP) to Fluent English Proficient (FEP) are regarded as Reclassified Fluent English Proficient students (RFEPs). Once they become RFEP, state and federal funding ceases and formal EL programming usually ends. RFEPs become a part of the general education population, yet their academic performance is often subpar relative to their English-only peers. As we move into the newly authorized Every Student Succeeds Act period (ESSA, 2015), their performance on academic achievement will be included in district and school accountability for the EL subgroup four years following their reclassification. This expanded inclusion of RFEPs within the EL subgroup assumes they will perform at a commensurate level with their English-only peers, but no Indiana studies have confirmed this assertion. This study intends to fill this gap by examining an Indiana high school.

*Keywords: English Learners, Reclassification, Educational policy, Latino students, Every Student Succeeds Act*

**INTRODUCTION**

Under NCLB (2002-2015), accountability for EL reclassification was a policy lever at the district level only. Under ESSA, these measures are now part of Title I Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs) and accountability for English reclassification (reaching

fluent English proficiency) falls to the district *and* building. These changes in policy imply that reclassified ELs (RFEPs) should have academic parity with their English-only peers, but current findings suggest that not all RFEPs are performing commensurately. This study investigates grades, course placement, attendance, standardized test scores, and graduation rates of RFEPs in one Indiana high school to create a student portrait of RFEPs. This portrait provides a roadmap for what we can do as educators to meet the needs of this distinct EL subgroup, *Reclassified Fluent English Proficient Students (RFEPs)*.

### **THE DILEMMA**

Burke, Morita-Mullaney, & Singh (2016) draw attention to the population boom of ELs in Indiana in comparison to other states which have a stable or declining EL population (p. 1321). In the past fifteen years, Indiana's EL population has grown by 493%, which makes it the second fastest growing EL state in the country (Migrant Policy Institute, 2010; Tanenbaum et al., 2012). In addition to the EL population growth, Burke, Morita-Mullaney, & Singh (2016) found that reclassification rates of ELs vary. In particular, Spanish-speaking ELs reclassify at a much slower rate than non-Spanish ELs. An assumption persists in schools that all RFEPs are the same and will perform well academically, equating fluent levels of English proficiency with passing or reaching high levels of academic achievement on standardized tests.

Once ELs are reclassified and exited from the EL program, students will transition into a two-year monitoring period (NCLB) and forthcoming a four-year monitoring period (ESSA), but monitoring practices vary across the state. For example, some districts have a systematic checking of their grades and conferences with their

teachers, whereas other districts merely perform a paper audit. As a high school teacher in an Indiana school district, I have observed RFEPs struggle after exiting from the EL program when their per pupil funding, accommodations and services formally conclude. Their grades are not on par with non-ELs, yet their general education teachers equate their performance as adequate. This notion of adequacy versus expectation is a problematic as it reproduces social inequalities for this quickly expanding population of RFEPs in Indiana.

### **VARYING DEFINITIONS OF RFEPs**

Reclassified Fluent English Proficiency (RFEP) students are formally exited from an EL program when they reach “fluency.” The term fluency is defined differently depending on which English language proficiency (ELP) instrument is used, how English proficiency is defined and what criterion is used for reclassification. In short, the procedures and systems in place vary by state.

**English language proficiency instruments differ.** Nationally, there are nine (9) different ELP instruments used, which include the commonly used WIDA ACCESS, ELPA 21, LAS Links and six other state based tools, such as the CELDT from California (California Department of Education, 2014). Each tool defines the construct of English proficiency differently. Further, a threshold of fluent English proficiency assumes that the RFEP student will perform at or above that of English dominant students on grade level standardized tests. But, most ELP instruments are *not correlated* to each state’s standardized exam, so while we can argue that the more English proficient, the more likely an EL student is to pass a grade level standardized test, it is not a guarantee.

**Fluent English proficiency is not universally defined.** The WIDA ACCESS, the most commonly used ELP instrument throughout the U.S. is currently operating in 39 states. While these 39 states use the same instrument, what fluent and exited means in each state differs. For example, in Illinois, an overall 4.8 on the WIDA ACCESS means fluent and therefore, a student is exited/reclassified. In Indiana, the exact same tool, our established cut score is an overall 5.0. Other states have an expectation of a level 5.0 or higher in each language domain of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Fluent English Proficient has no one unified definition nationally.

**Criterion for exit can be uni- or multi-faceted.** Twenty-nine states, including Indiana use the ELP instrument as the sole criterion for exit (Linguanti & Cook, 2015). The other states use as many as 12 additional criterion for reclassification. For example, the state of New York includes such criterion as teacher and family feedback and performance on standardized exams consistent with using multiple methods over time to create a more holistic view of reclassification (Gottlieb, 2016).

### **A STUDENT PORTRAIT OF THE RFEPs**

EL students with an English language proficiency score on WIDA-ACCESS of 5.0 or higher are exited from EL program services in Indiana; however, with exit also comes the accountability of *monitoring* RFEP students. This monitoring process was in place during NCLB and continues under ESSA. While monitoring for two years following exit continues, RFEPs will be included in EL subgroup performance for four years versus two years.

Monitoring has also been inconsistently understood and implemented within Indiana districts with some districts having a robust semi-annual review of student performance and other districts ignoring their performance unless it becomes a concern. With the doubling of EL subgroup inclusion time, what should we be considering as educators? What information do we need to make well-informed decisions for our ELs? What roles are established in each school to monitor RFEPs? What is the process and steps for monitoring? How involved should we be in their education since we have been with them actively during the time they were EL-eligible (levels 1-4)? As I investigated these questions, I identified enduring challenges for the EL profession. I furnish them here as a roadmap for your consideration in your local circumstances. I examine RFEPs' 1) grades; 2) course placement; 3) attendance; 4) standardized test scores; and 5) high school graduation rates. By examining these five areas, we can better understand the needs of RFEPs.

Locating the information I needed to evaluate my district's RFEPs was challenging. Students' English language proficiency scores, grades, grade point averages, course schedules, attendance, standardized test scores and graduation rates were not all hosted in the same student data warehouse. I inquired with multiple sources, including the guidance counselors and district office administrators to provide such information. After working through multiple individuals, departments and computer programs, I was able to analyze the five different areas of grades, course placement, attendance, standardized test scores (including ISTEP+ and End of Course Assessments) and graduation rates.

**Grades.** The RFEP students have a grade point average (GPA) of 2.5, which does not meet the minimum requirement for attending a local community college. Most RFEPs exited the EL program within the last two years. In those two years, I expected that their grades would improve since they have exited the program with a level of 5.0 or higher. Not only do the students have a less than desirable GPA, they are typically not placed in more challenging or advanced classes, consistent with national patterns for reclassified students (Kanno, 2014). One might assume that grades would improve as the students' English reached higher levels, but this was not the case. The results show RFEPs continue to get lower grades in academic courses including math, language arts, science and social studies.

**Course placements.** RFEPs are not enrolled in advanced courses. Historic EL course placement places EL students in lower leveled reading groups and basic math and English classes, beginning in elementary and middle school. These historic course placements usually create a remedial trajectory for future placement. In high school, they continue in remedial courses: Biology Basic, English 9 Basic, and none of the advanced classes. This reduces their access to college and career ready curriculum and instruction, further restricting their pathway to postsecondary education.

As sophomores or juniors, many of these students have advanced to reach level 5, but they are not on a trajectory to take Advanced Placement (AP) classes or dual credit classes because of the classes they took when they were freshman and sophomores were remedial. When students with an English level 1-4 are placed in remedial classes principally based on their English proficiency, lower levels of English proficiency are

constructed as lower levels of achievement. These students should be placed in classes that reflect their capacity to learn, not their English proficiency.

By not placing these RFEPs in the rigorous classes, we are producing high school graduates that are neither college nor career ready. For example, many EL students take an allowable EL course as a substitution for regular grade level English language arts. Once this two year period of substitution concludes, they are placed in grade level English courses, which are mostly remedial in nature. Most high schools have at least two different levels of English, and many have four: basic, regular, academic, and honors. In my experience, EL students, even level 5s and 6s, are put in remedial classes simply because they are still developing their English proficiency. Inclusion of multiple measures, not just their level or English proficiency or historic performance on ISTEP+ ensures that a rigorous courses are availed to all ELs (Linguanti & Cook, 2016).

The allowable EL courses that substitute for English language arts courses for two years are rarely aligned to English language arts standards. Instead, the EL substitution course follows its own English language development curriculum and standards that focus on levels of language proficiency and do little to focus on the content area standards of English language arts. This is also a systemic issue of the EL program creating low and different expectations for its ELs by under preparing them to matriculate into grade level English language arts courses later.

The role of the counselor has largely been to place students in courses, ensuring there are enough sections and often, negotiating the directions of department chairs who are navigating the teacher demands of how students should be sorted. This management-centric focus diminishes a thoughtful examination of course placements, centered in

student advocacy. Fortunately, I have built a rapport with the counselors and with the administration and therefore, I recommend students for specific classes with specific teachers. The counselors and administration are very appreciative that I spend so much time thoughtfully advocating for students, but being the sole advocate is only a starting place for the types of structural changes we need improve placement processes for our RFEPs. Everyone in the school organization needs to be prepared to advocate for improved placement processes.

**Attendance.** Attendance of RFEPs at my school is actually higher than the average. Overall attendance rates for all students is around 95% while average attendance for Level 5 students is 99%, which is very high. Scholars insist that solid attendance is a predictor of academic attainment (Gottfried, 2009). These students are in school nearly every day, yet their academic achievement remains subpar.

**Standardized test scores.** Less than a third of the RFEPs have passed an End of Course Assessment (ECA), which is required to graduate from an Indiana high school, which is not on par with English only students who pass at a rate of nearly 70 percent. Nearly 25 percent have taken the ECA more than once. Many RFEPs passed or failed the ECA by only a few points. RFEPs are on the edge of the pass/did not pass benchmark, demonstrating that reclassification is not a panacea for academic success.

**Graduation Rates.** The overall graduation rate for students at my school for the 2016-2017 school year was 92%, while the graduation rate for RFEPs students was 80%. About 5% of the RFEPs dropped out and about 5% had to repeat their senior year because of insufficient credits to graduate in the typical four years. The other ten percent transferred to either homeschool or an alternative school where they concentrate on credit



recovery or prepare for the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC), formerly the General Education Diploma (GED). These students' attendance is above average, as mentioned before, so they are putting in the time without reaping an equivalent graduation rate.

While about 80% of RFEPs do graduate within the targeted four years, the number is still less than average (92%) and they are not receiving the more prestigious diplomas, which require classes that would prepare them for college. Like most Indiana high schools, we offer five diplomas, listed here from most basic to most advanced: Minimum Diploma (40 credits), which requires a parental opt-out form, Core 40 Diploma (40 credits), Core 40 with Technical Honors (47 credits), Core 40 with Academic Honors (47 credits), and Honors with Distinction (54 credits). From the Minimum Diploma to the Honors with Distinction Diploma, the diplomas are increasingly more challenging with reference to classes required, number of credits, and a minimum grade point average. While the majority of RFEPs do graduate within a four-year period, the majority of them also receive the Minimum or Core 40 Diploma. These diplomas require remedial classes that do not prepare the student for college, nor do they have strict grade requirements. RFEPs' electives are often easier and not academic. So even when RFEPs do graduate on time, their course portfolio has been remedial.

Of the 20% of RFEPs that do not graduate, most drop out their senior year because they do not think graduation is attainable or they think dropping out will garner future and improved job prospects. Attrition is high during the fourth year of high school, as many students are transitioning to the workforce.

## **LOOKING FORWARD TO ESSA**

The state administration in 2012-2015 eliminated student subgroups, so EL students were no longer looked at separately when standardized test scores came out, which made monitoring RFEPs difficult, but more importantly, it made them easy to ignore. For three full school years, RFEPs were overlooked and ignored as a group by the state, sending the message that their needs were being met in the “overall approaches,” which diminished their language and language learning as material factors in their access and success in schools. By eliminating student subgroups and thus, their identity markers, we essentially evacuated it as a material reason for performance. Educators are not motivated within this model to examine students based on English language proficiency levels.

Now under ESSA, subgroups are monitored by the state. Both districts and individual buildings have to look at growth and reclassification of EL students in their English language proficiency *and* academic achievement. Many of my RFEPs are also Latino, which means they also show up in the Latino student subgroup and many are also in the low socio-economic group. When I monitor my students, I have to look at all of these variables and how it influences their education; we cannot make the mistake of just looking at one characteristic. All of these descriptions are helpful in understanding our students and thereby, framing an equitable education plan for them.

### **INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS**

While we painted a beneficial academic portrait of RFEP students, there are still other practical aspects of their lives that should not be ignored. How do they embody their home, family, and community life and how is that reflected in their school experience? Here I illustrate home culture, college readiness, school communication,

and community events to establish a more comprehensive understanding and approaches for an RFEP student.

**Home Culture.** The majority of my RFEPs are Latino, which follows national trends, and their first/home language is Spanish (IDOE, 2017). Even if your Level 5s are not Latino, being aware of the home culture is vital to helping them with college preparedness. I have observed that schools only examine traditional and fixed ways of explaining the college application process and applications for the FAFSA and other scholarships. Most information is disseminated electronically and only in English, thereby restricting access to RFEP families and students. Schools would be well suited to think about how to differentiate the content, style and language of communication with EL families. This lack of successful communication leads to parents being further distanced from schools. Parent meetings would be an excellent way to not only involve parents in their child's schooling, but provide them with accurate and essential information about their child's education.

**College Readiness.** Many high schools have college readiness courses or even programs that identify youths who might need assistance or her are first generation college students. In my school, students are identified by counselors and teachers. Currently, at my school, there are thirty-two students in our college readiness program and only three of those students are Latino. With such a small representation, examination of inclusion criterion is needed.

**School Communication.** I have observed that schools are moving towards a completely electronic mode of communication including texts, internet, email and automated phone calls and only done in English. Translating all content perceives

schooling as solely transmitting information to parents, reducing opportunities to ask questions. Schools should differentiate how they communicate and move toward models of reciprocity by hosting workshops.

**Community Events.** Our local community college hosts a Hispanic Day on campus each spring, but the four-year university closest to our school does not have something similar. I have attended this Day on Campus many times and it is always a big success. Some past workshops at this event were discussions of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scholars, FAFSA, college applications, GPA requirements, a visit from other Latino students, and one year the keynote speaker was a previously undocumented youth who became a college professor. My Level 5s are always highly motivated after this trip. They can see how they will fit into the community college. As aforementioned, their remedial track often begins in elementary school and continues on through middle and high school, so this is, many times, the first time these Level 5s are encouraged to attend college. This field trip is eye-opening to many students and they are given viable information that they understand and offers them hope.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

The information and data that has been presented should be examined, discussed and shared with people who make decisions about RFEPs. That includes teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, instructional coaches, and administrators. Every conversation you have or email you send is another possible seed planted for the Level 5 EL students. If you can be persistent, you will gain many things from such dialogues, including a better understanding, enhanced instruction, more focus on Level 5 students in the classroom, teacher knowledge about EL students, teacher confidence when it comes

to instructing ELs in the classroom, setting up structures and processes that benefit ELs, and assigning specific roles that exist within and outside of the EL program at your school.

**The Bottom Line.** The bottom line is that RFEPs are not succeeding in school, which we are defining as earning good grades and passing ECAs, even though their attendance is high and they are considered to be English proficient. They no longer receive accommodations, but they should not need these accommodations since they have earned a Level 5 or above on the WIDA assessment.

**Improving teacher practices.** Even without funding, there are many things that can continue to be done within a school to maintain that level of support that level 5 students need to continue augmenting their academic English skills. Severing them quickly from the program is clearly not the answer, and we need to find a way to supplement their learning so they can continue to improve their access and opportunities within schooling.

Several things that can be done in the classroom to help RFEP students succeed and improve their academic mastery and related English proficiency. Teachers can seat Level 5 ELs in the front of the classroom, helping teachers to remember to ask them questions, involve them in classroom discussions, and check for understanding. Teachers can greet them at the door, state objectives clearly, and make their delivery of the material lively by using gestures. From what I have seen in the classroom, these little things teachers do can make a big difference in Level 5 meaningful acquisition of their content.

**Case Conferences.** When students are exited from the EL program, there should be a formal process of letting the child and the family know what this means. This would be called an exit conference. An exit conference could involve the following: the student, parents, at least one mainstream teacher, the EL teacher, a counselor, and an administrator. At the conference, items discussed should be the students' success in class (both motivation and grades), standardized test scores, course placement going forward, and college readiness. We should analyze the student test scores and grades, which include final semester grades, ECA scores and whether they passed or not, and ISTEP+ scores. If we can point out and recognize where they excelled and where they struggled, we can spend more of our monitoring time on areas of struggle. Together with the student, we can try to identify what was difficult and try to identify areas of support for that particular content area within their exit/monitoring plan. Exit conferences and subsequent case conferences are essential for Level 5 students' success, because of their vulnerability since they have just left the safety of being accommodated. Spending more time on Level 5s is needed as they are no longer part of the larger EL structure. They need to continue being part of a network and a process that ensures ongoing advocacy for their course placement and case conferences could be that necessary platform to communicate their needs between advocates, teachers and counselors. The end result of these conferences should be forming a team of advocates for each student so they have multiple experts in their school planning.

**Teacher expectations.** Level 5s are quite vulnerable after leaving the safety of the EL program and the accommodations stipulated in their educational plans. From my observations, if students have an educational plan, many teachers use 'blanket'

accommodations like extra time and dictionaries; things that are easy. Accommodations are normally applied to tests and projects and not to instruction, which means the accommodation is applied at the end of the instructional cycle instead of the beginning and middle of it. This is a pattern that needs to change, as this practice follows the students from LEP to RFEP. Many teachers are nervous or uncomfortable about teaching ELs because of their lack of Spanish or because of their lack of education and preparation to teach them. While many teachers feel comfortable with EL students themselves, they do not feel confident in their ability to teach them. The desire to do the right thing is there, but the knowledge is what is lacking. If teachers want to instruct these students better, there are EL professionals who should be available to mentor them. These professionals can give teachers practical advice and tools so they can feel more confident in the classroom.

## **CONCLUSION**

ELs are not a homogenous population (Roberts et al., 2010; Stevens, Butler, & Castellon-Wellington, 2000), so it is also important to analyze each Level 5 student individually and really consider all factors that could be influencing their performance in school. We can influence and inform students and their parents more about what classes to take, the teachers they have, the accommodations and then instructional supports they receive, and the way teachers are informed about their potential. These are some of the requirements for monitoring Level 5s, and depending on your school and your specific students, you should use let the data from your own building to create your own roadmap for RFEPs.

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