

FOUNDATION FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

**PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>:  
Raising the  
Educational  
Performance  
of English  
Language  
Learners (ELLs)**

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PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>  
*Policy to Action Brief*

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## **PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Policy to Action Briefs**

*PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Policy to Action Briefs* seek to promote the idea of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> and to provide guidance for its implementation. The goal of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Education is the creation of a seamless learning continuum from PreK to Third Grade.

PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> is a national movement of schools, districts, educators and universities seeking to improve how children from ages 3 to 8 learn and develop in schools. While these different efforts use a variety of names, all are working to connect high-quality PreK programs with high-quality elementary schools to create a well-aligned primary education for all our nation's children.

### **What is PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Education?**

- Public responsibility for full-school-day education starting at age three
  - Voluntary, Full-Day PreK for three-year-olds
  - Voluntary, Full-Day PreK for four-year-olds
  - Required, Full-School-Day Kindergarten
- Aligned educational strategies and resources within and across grades
  - Aligned standards, sequenced curriculum, instruction, and assessments
  - Well-rounded and comprehensive curriculum, including arts, physical education, social and emotional learning, science, and history
  - Joint planning and shared professional development among all PreK, Kindergarten, and Grades 1-3 teachers and staff
- Principal leadership to support joint professional development around curriculum and instruction
- Family engagement focused on supporting learning and instruction
- PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> teachers with the same qualifications and compensation as all teachers
  - Lead teachers qualified to teach any grade from PreK through Third Grade
  - Teaching assistants with A.A. degrees.

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## **PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>: Raising the Educational Performance of English Language Learners (ELLs)**

**In 1974, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Lau v. Nichols* that 1,800 Chinese-speaking children in the San Francisco public schools were entitled to English-language instruction or other support to help them understand what was happening in their classrooms.**

“[S]tudents who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education,” the Court found.

Thirty-six years later, state and local responsibilities to public school children who do not speak proficient English fill an entire section of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Title III). But it is a matter of serious national debate whether the vast apparatus born of *Lau* provides a “meaningful education” to the nation’s now five million English Language Learners (ELLs).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) holds every state, district, and school accountable for students’ academic progress. It also revealed the extent to which schools have failed non-English-speaking students by requiring states and districts for the first time to disaggregate their reading and math scores on annual assessments. The large achievement gap has moved educators, scholars, and policymakers to try urgently to reverse decades of neglect, even as the scale of the challenge is growing exponentially. This brief spotlights major issues facing those taking up this challenge and offers them emerging policy solutions. The primary focus will be on the 75 percent of ELLs who speak Spanish, and who are believed by scholars to be at high risk for school failure.

## The Role of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>

English Language Learners (ELLs) are defined as students who do not understand enough English to learn without support in mainstream classrooms. They lag far behind all other students, except those with disabilities, on state reading and math assessments.

- The number of ELLs in U.S. public schools has increased 150 percent since 1990, while the overall student population has grown only 20 percent (Goldenberg, 2010).
- ELLs are projected to comprise 40 percent of the school-age population by 2030 (Thomas & Collier, 2002).
- ELLs speak more than 400 native languages (U.S. Department of Education).
- 75 percent of ELLs speak Spanish (Planty, Hussar, Snyder, Kena, KewalRamani, Kemp, Bianco & Dinkes, 2009).
- More than half of ELLs are in elementary school (U.S. Department of Education).
- 40 percent are between ages 3 and 8 (Liu, Ortiz, Wilkinson, Robertson & Kushner, 2008).
- Nationally, only 6 percent were proficient in reading at the beginning of Fourth Grade (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2009).
- Their parents are unlikely to have a formal education or speak English (Goldenberg 2010).
- They are predominantly living in low-income families (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passell & Hernandez, 2004).

The needs of ELLs make a compelling case for a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> approach to early learning. A significant achievement gap already exists between ELLs and native-English speakers when they enter Kindergarten (National Task Force on Early Education for Hispanics, 2006). High-quality PreKindergarten programs and elementary schools, and teachers trained to teach the English language and academic content simultaneously, are essential to improving students' learning and achievement.

At a time of limited public resources, demography also argues for focusing reforms on the early years. More than half of ELLs are in elementary school, and 40 percent are between ages three and eight. Thus, improvements in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> would reach the largest subset of English learners. They should include high-quality PreKindergarten, beginning at age three, as part of an aligned American education system. Research shows that a coherent, sequenced, and integrated set of learning experiences from PreK through 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade provides the foundation for educational and life success.

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## Challenges

- **There exists a critical shortage of teachers prepared to teach ELLs.** In the last decade, ELLs have moved in large numbers to states and regions with little experience educating them. The vast majority are taught in mainstream, English-speaking classrooms.

**Research also shows that native language instruction along with English in early grades significantly enhances reading achievement in English (Espinosa, 2008).**

However, only 35 percent of teachers of elementary-school ELLs nationally participated in even one hour of related professional development in the last year (U.S. Department of Education proposal for reauthorizing ESEA, 2010). Half of all urban districts reported problems recruiting highly-qualified teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL). States project needing 56,000 new ESL teachers in the next five years (August, O’Day & Hakuta, 2009). Although research shows that native

language instruction along with English in early grades significantly enhances reading achievement in English (Espinosa, 2008), the majority of ELLs receive little or no native language support in school.

- **Most teachers of ELLs are not trained to teach “academic English,” which differs significantly from conversational English.** Non-English speaking children learn conversational English in two to three years, but it can take five to eight years to master the complex language skills required for academic subjects from Fourth and Fifth Grade through high school. Researchers at the University of California, Davis, found that the fastest English-learners in elementary school scored almost as high on reading exams as native English speakers. But after about Fourth Grade, these same ELLs began to lose ground, and by middle and high school, they were on the wrong side of a yawning achievement gap (Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003).

This and similar findings elsewhere have created almost universal agreement that educators must teach ELLs more demanding vocabulary, comprehension, and oral English skills as a foundation for success in school and life. This goes beyond “word-level” skills such as sounding out and spelling individual words to include higher order skills such as comprehension, writing, analyzing scenarios, and justifying conclusions. How to teach academic English is a growing focus of research, but there is insufficient evidence to determine which approaches raise student achievement.

- **National standards do not exist for identifying and placing ELLs in appropriate learning settings.** Inconsistent placement practices pose serious consequences for young children who may not receive needed support to acquire essential foundations in reading and math. Under the current system, a child receiving services in one state could be deemed proficient and ineligible for services in another, depending on which test, criteria, or cutoff score the state uses. There are also variations within some states and even within districts.

### Who Gets Tested

States also have different criteria for whom to test for English proficiency. Most states test students after a home survey shows that a language other than English is spoken in their home. In 2009, Arizona began asking only for the child's dominant language; if parents answer, "English," the child is not tested. Researchers found that this policy would have exempted from services more than 1,100 elementary school children in one district who were tested in previous years and found not to be proficient in English. (Goldenberg and Quach, 2010).

- **When ELLs struggle to understand English, districts often misdiagnose their problems as learning disabilities (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar & Higareda, 2005); in early grades, districts often under-identify disabilities.** (USDOE & National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2003) In either case, ELLs are at particular risk of falling even further behind. A study for the U.S. Department of Education found that once classified for special education, ELLs are more likely than other students to be taught outside mainstream classrooms and unlikely to receive extensive language services (Zehler, 2003). "If at some point they were to come back to the general education classroom, chances are they would be too far behind," said Alba Ortiz, an expert on bilingual and special education at the University of Texas College of Education in Austin.

On the other hand, a range of practices tailored to the needs of individual non-English speakers can lessen and even resolve some reading disabilities (Report of the National Literacy Panel, 2006). "During those formative years, they need intervention to help them move forward on foundational learning," said Janine Bacquie, director of early childhood programs for Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland, where ELLs speak more than 120 different native languages. "It's putting them in a terrible position when they're not identified."

Scholars attribute identification problems to both a shortage of assessors trained in second-language acquisition and the absence of a test for learning disabilities that is scientifically validated for children who do not speak proficient English. These tests do not exist even for the 75 percent of ELLs who speak Spanish, although the U.S. Department of Education is currently funding research to develop them.

**[But] because these tests are almost all in English, it is unclear whether low scores by ELLs in math, science, and social studies reflect language difficulties or lack of knowledge.**

- **As high-quality student performance data and accountability have become drivers of education reform, there are serious problems with the reliability of assessments of ELLs.** Policymakers and advocates believe it is essential for ELLs to take the same high-stakes tests as native English speakers to ensure that schools are accountable for teaching them to high standards. But because these tests are almost all in English, it is unclear whether low scores by ELLs in math, science, and social studies reflect language difficulties or lack of knowledge.
- **Inconsistencies from state to state in achievement standards for ELLs threaten to undermine accountability for their progress.** Under Title III of No Child Left Behind, states must show that their ELLs “make progress” each year, but individual states define progress very differently. A study for the U.S. Department of Education by the American Institutes for Research found that Kansas and New Mexico say that “making progress” means that 20 percent of ELLs per district improve in English fluency each year; Illinois set the bar at 85 percent. In Maine, 33 percent of Eighth Grade ELLs per district must score at the proficient level in math; in Tennessee, 86 percent. In the 2007-2008 school year, only 11 states satisfied Title III accountability requirements, according to the study. That appeared to mark an improvement from 2005-2006, when no state met the mark, but the gain is ambiguous, since states met the standards they set for themselves – not universal ones. (Boyle, Taylor, Hurlburt & Soga, 2010).
- **Similarly, students exit from English language services at different levels of proficiency from one state to the next.** The same study found that all states require a high composite score on a proficiency test that includes the four domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. However, only nine states take the extra step of requiring proficiency in all four areas to ensure that strength in two or three domains doesn’t mask deficiencies in another. And states set different cutoff scores and criteria for what constitutes proficiency, even in some cases when they use the same test.

## Solutions

- **The demographics of ELLs constitute an imperative for directing more resources and attention to the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> years.** With a majority of ELLs in elementary grades – and 40 percent of them ages three to eight – improvements in early learning promise a large payoff as these students move through the grades.

**Thirty-three states set standards for teachers of ELLs, but only Arizona, California, Florida, and New York require all new teachers to demonstrate competence in ELL instruction.**

This argues for concentrating research on instruction and assessment in early grades, along with much-needed training and professional development of classroom teachers, special-education teachers, and multilingual assessment specialists. According to Kenji Hakuta, a Stanford University scholar in bilingualism and second-language acquisition, even in high-performing districts, it is common for 25 percent or more of Seventh Grade ELLs to still need services to learn in a mainstream classroom. These students are at high risk of

dropping out. “The prevention for that 25 percent really has to begin very early on in education,” Hakuta said. “The critical window is early literacy.”



- **States and teacher-preparation programs should require prospective teachers to learn to teach ELLs, and the federal government should define what constitutes a “highly qualified” teacher of ELLs.** According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), only one in five teacher-preparation programs in the U.S. includes a full course on teaching ELLs (GAO, July 2009.), while a majority of programs includes at least one course on teaching students with learning disabilities. (ELLs will soon outnumber students with disabilities nationally.) Thirty-three states set standards for teachers of ELLs, but only Arizona, California, Florida, and New York require all new teachers to demonstrate competence in ELL instruction.
- **Public and private funders should support research in teaching the foundations of academic English for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>.** A research-based curriculum now available for Fourth and Fifth Grade ELLs, developed by scholars at the

### **Non-Language Assessment**

Researchers for the WIDA (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment) consortium, which created an English proficiency test used by 23 states, are developing computerized assessments in science and math that do not rely on language. Instead, they use visual images and video to create laboratory situations or pose questions students can answer by pointing, clicking, or manipulating images on a computer screen.

Center for Applied Linguistics, teaches vocabulary words more commonly used in texts than in conversation. The words are contained in weekly reading assignments that ELLs preview in their native language while learning in a mainstream classroom. Students work in small groups with native English speakers, studying synonyms, antonyms, roots, and multiple contexts for each word. Janet Brown, a researcher at the George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education (CEEE), said teachers of younger children should introduce challenging vocabulary from everyday surroundings. She used as an example the parts of a door. “We tend to teach

them functional words like doorknob, but not the word, threshold,” Brown said. “This would introduce them to the architecture of where they are. And it links up to the notion of academic language, words specific to a particular time and purpose.”

- **States should standardize and improve their accountability systems for ELLs.**

Now that 48 states have come together to develop Common Core Standards in English and in math for all students, it is time to embrace a national standard for who is an English Language Learner and what constitutes progress and proficiency for ELLs. This should include a system to control for language proficiency level when testing content knowledge of ELLs.

Without reliable measures of progress for ELLs, states, districts, and schools cannot identify problems with their instruction – both in English and academic subjects – or determine whether efforts at reform are working.

- **Federal policy should require states and districts to monitor former ELLs through Grade 12, rather than for only two years after they become proficient in English.** Particularly for children deemed proficient early in elementary school, it is essential to ensure that they have language skills to understand increasingly challenging academic content in subsequent years, said Charlene Rivera, a research professor who directs the CEEE at George Washington University.

There is a strong consensus among scholars that the current system of tracking only those students who are, by definition, not proficient in English fails to provide a picture of how well schools serve all students who start out as ELLs.

- **Public and private funders should support the development of a nationally-normed test for learning disabilities in non-English speakers and the training of school assessment specialists in second-language development.**

If no one on a school assessment team speaks a child's native language, Linda Espinosa, associate professor at the University of Missouri, recommends collaborating with people who do, so that children are assessed in their native language as well as English. A language disorder would show up in both. Because no single test is sufficient to diagnose a disability, Damaris Lugo, a bilingual assessment specialist in New Haven, said she uses multiple tests and observations, in Spanish and in English.

The growing use of intensive instructional support programs, like Response to Intervention (RTI), is helping to identify ELLs whose learning problems can be addressed with language instruction in the regular classroom. But for those who do not respond to RTI, the diagnosis issues remain.

Raising the academic performance of the nation’s English Language Learners defies easy fixes. It demands national leadership as well as a sustained commitment from educators and administrators in every state.

The accountability movement spawned by the No Child Left Behind Act has brought much-needed urgency to the task, more than three decades after the nation embarked on it. The recent recession should not cause these efforts to slacken. Rather, given the stakes for non-English speaking students, hard economic times underline the importance of taking action, beginning with the early years. A high-quality PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> education, with aligned standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessments, is the most economical and effective route to the “meaningful education” *Lau* promised English Language Learners almost 40 years ago.

*Dale Russakoff has written for newspapers and magazines for 30 years, the vast majority of that time for The Washington Post, where she specialized in in-depth reporting on national politics and social policy issues.*



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## Online PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Resources

These key resources aim to inform policymakers, educators, researchers, and others about PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> issues. For more in-depth resources, visit our Resource Library web page (<http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/>) which houses all materials published by FCD and our grantees.

This document provides direct links to the materials by accessing the FCD web site at: [http://www.fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>\\_Resources.pdf](http://www.fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>_Resources.pdf).

### The Case for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>

- Kristie Kauerz (2010). [PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle](#)
- Lisa Guernsey & Sara Mead, New America Foundation (2010). [A Next Social Contract for the Primary Years of Education](#)
- New School Foundation & Foundation for Child Development (2010). [PreKindergarten - 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade: A New Beginning for American Education](#) (Eight-minute video)
- New America Foundation (2009). [Fighting Fade-Out Through PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Reform](#) (Seven-minute video)
- Rima Shore (2009). [The Case for Investing in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Education: Challenging Myths about School Reform](#)
- Foundation for Child Development (2008). [America's Vanishing Potential: The Case for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Education](#)
- Ruby Takanishi & Kristie Kauerz (2008). [PK Inclusion: Getting Serious About a P-16 Education System](#), *Phi Delta Kappan*
- Grantmakers for Education (GFE) (2007). [Making the Most of Our Investments: How PK-3 Alignment Can Close the Achievement Gap from the Start](#)

### Financing PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>

- Rima Shore (2009). [PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>: What is the Price Tag?](#)
- Lawrence O. Picus, Allan Odden & Michael Goetz (2009). [An Evidence-Based Approach to Estimating the National and State Costs of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>](#)

### Implementing PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>

- University of Chicago, Urban Education Institute & The Ounce of Prevention Fund (2010). [A Teaching Case Study: Working Together to Build a Birth-to-College Approach to Public Education](#)
- Geoff Marietta (2010). [Lessons for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> from Montgomery County Public Schools](#)
- Linda Sullivan-Dudzic, Donna K. Gearns, & Kelli Leavell (2010). [Making a Difference: 10 Essential Steps to Building a PreK-3 System](#)
- Stacey M. Childress, Denis P. Doyle & David A. Thomas (2009). [Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Montgomery County Public Schools](#)

### Teacher Preparation/Professional Development

- Rima Shore (2010). [PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>: Teacher Quality Matters](#)
- Foundation for Child Development (2007). [Teacher Education and PK Outcomes: Are We Asking the Right Questions?](#), *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*
- Cynthia Rice & Jill McLaughlin, Association for the Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) (2007). [Providing Tools Towards Quality: The Status of P-3 Teacher Preparation Programs in New Jersey](#)
- Foundation for Child Development (2006). [Ready to Teach? Providing Children with the Teachers They Deserve](#)

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## Online PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Resources

### Leadership by Educators

- Geoff Marietta (2010). [PreK-3rd: How Superintendents Lead Change](#)
- Ruby Takanishi (2010). [PreK-Third Grade: A Paradigm Shift](#). *Children of 2020: Creating a Better Tomorrow*
- Stacie G. Goffin & Valora Washington (2007). [Ready or Not: Leadership Choices in Early Care and Education](#)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) (2006). [Principals Lead the Way for PK-3: Early Investment, Strong Alignment, Better Results](#)

### Federal Policy

- New America Foundation (ongoing). [The Early Ed Watch Blog](#)
- New America Foundation (2007). [Ten New Ideas for Early Education in the NCLB Reauthorization](#)
- Danielle Ewen & Hannah Matthews, Center for Law and Social Policy (2007). [Title I and Early Childhood Programs: A Look at Investments in the NCLB Era](#)

### State Policy

- Superintendent of Public Instruction (2010). [Starting Strong in Washington State: Early Learning Lessons and Success Stories](#)
- Sara Mead (2009). [Education Reform Starts Early: Lessons from New Jersey's PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Reform](#)
- Linda Jacobsen (2009). [On the Cusp in California: How PreK-3rd Strategies Could Improve Education in the Golden State](#)
- National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) (2008). [Promoting a Pre-K to Three Vision for Early Learning](#)
- Cynthia Rice, Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) (2008). [Seizing the Opportunity: Building PK3 Systems in New Jersey's School Districts](#)
- Cynthia Rice, Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) (2008). [Inside and Out: Developing an Advocacy Strategy for New Jersey's PK-3 Agenda](#)

### School District Policy

- Geoff Marietta (2010). [Lessons for PreK-3rd from Montgomery County Public Schools](#)
- Cynthia Rice, Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) (2008). [Seizing the Opportunity: Building PK3 Systems in New Jersey's School Districts](#)
- Cynthia Rice, Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) (2007). [Embracing the Big Picture: The State of New Jersey's Road Toward a PK3 Continuum](#)

### Research Basis for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>

- Arthur Reynolds, et al. (2007). [Effects of a Preschool and School-Age Intervention on Adult Health and Well-Being: Evidence from the Chicago Longitudinal Study](#)
- Ruby Takanishi & Kimber Bogard (2007). [Effective Educational Programs for Young Children: What We Need to Know](#), *Child Development Perspectives*



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