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# STARTING EARLY WITH ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

First Lessons from Illinois

MAGGIE SEVERNS



EDUCATION POLICY PROGRAM  
*Early Education Initiative*

NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION

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## Glossary

**English Language Learner (ELL):** A student who primarily speaks a language other than English and is in the process of learning English.

**Dual Language Learner (DLL):** A student who is learning English while also developing proficiency in another language. A term that is often used for young children who may be still learning their native languages at the same time they are being exposed to and learning English.

**English as a Second Language (ESL):** Instruction aimed at students who primarily speak a language other than English and are learning English. Also used to describe English Language Learner students: “I have four ESL students in my class.”

**Immigrant children:** Children who are foreign-born or have at least one foreign-born parent. (Most often, these children are not living in the United States illegally—a vast majority of children with one or more immigrant parents are U.S. citizens.)

**Limited English Proficiency (LEP):** Official federal term for English Language Learner.

### Common Program Models for English Language Learners

**Bilingual program:** Programs that support the child’s home language in addition to teaching English. The ratio of home language to English instruction differs by program, as does the length of time students spend in the program.

**Structured English immersion program:** Students are taught intensive English language arts by a teacher with ESL training. Time spent in mainstream classrooms and/or learning other academic content is usually limited in these programs.

**Pull-out program:** A program where students spend part of the school day in a mainstream classroom, and part of the day receiving ESL instruction. The ESL instruction could include a child’s home language, or not.

**Two-way bilingual or developmental bilingual programs:** Students from both a minority- and majority- language background (for example, Spanish and English) learn both languages. Two-way bilingual or developmental bilingual programs aim for all students to become proficient in two languages.

**Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE):** Bilingual education programs in Illinois for schools and early childhood programs serving 20 or more ELL students with a common language background. See sidebar, p. 9, for a complete explanation.

**Transitional Program of Instruction (TPI):** Bilingual education programs in Illinois for schools with ELL populations that are smaller than those in TBE, above. See sidebar, p. 9, for a complete explanation.

## Executive Summary

In recent years, a boom in immigration and high birth rates among the foreign-born population has led to significant growth in the number of children in the United States who speak a language other than English at home. Immigrant youth, defined as children who are either foreign-born or have at least one foreign-born parent, now make up an estimated 25 percent of the population under 18, a higher proportion than any other time during the last 75 years.<sup>1</sup>

This demographic change presents a challenge to the public school system, where English proficiency is central to a child's success. The vast majority of these children are legal citizens,<sup>2</sup> yet as a nation, we have yet to determine how to meet this challenge. Evidence is emerging that children who are enrolled in English Language Learner programs for long periods of time risk not learning other subjects at grade level.<sup>3</sup> By fourth grade, the achievement gap between English Language Learners (ELLs) and their peers is larger than the gap between students on free and reduced price lunch (a common indicator of poverty) and their peers.<sup>4</sup>

State education leaders in Illinois have first-hand experience with these challenges as the immigrant population in the state has grown in recent decades, and has spread to suburban and rural areas where many schools aren't yet accustomed to serving students who are not proficient in English.<sup>5</sup> Between 2000 and 2010, the foreign-born population in Illinois has increased by over 200,000 people.<sup>6</sup> Only five percent of ELL fourth-graders in the state can read at grade level, according to the most recent Nation's Report Card, compared to 33 percent of their peers.<sup>7</sup> The gap is also apparent in math, where only 12 percent of ELL students in Illinois score at grade level in fourth grade, compared to 38 percent of their peers.<sup>8</sup> (See chart, p. 4.)

Illinois is one of the first states to try to tackle this problem as early as possible—before children enroll in kindergarten. While most state programs for ELL students begin when a child is enrolled in kindergarten or first grade, Illinois is in the process of extending its ELL program into state-funded pre-K programs. This will affect a sizeable portion of children in the state-funded Preschool for All program. Recent data shows that 34.2 percent of Preschool for All graduates in Chicago and 13.1 percent of Preschool for All graduates outside Chicago receive bilingual services when they moved on to kindergarten.<sup>9</sup> The change will, the

state hopes, create more continuity between pre-K and the early grades of school when students are developing crucial language skills, and reduce remediation for students in later grades by building important language skills early on.

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This new strategy, initiated with a 2008 law and to be implemented by 2014, will require major changes in Illinois's state-funded pre-K program. New regulations are requiring changes in three main areas:

- developing the pre-K workforce so teachers are equipped with the skills and knowledge to teach ELLs
- building an accurate diagnostic process that identifies young children who aren't proficient in English
- providing schools with curricula for ELLs, as well as research-based models for how to instruct pre-K English Language Learners and track their progress over time

Illinois's strategy is on the cutting edge. Despite the fact that leaders in many states believe that quality early education is a key factor in a child's success later in school, no other state has gone this far in implementing a comprehensive plan for educating English Language Learners in state-funded pre-K. Furthermore, no other state has enacted laws or regulations that advance a PreK-12 approach by including pre-K in the public school systems' strategy for educating ELL students.

This paper takes a deep look at how the state came to see a need for these policies and how it is implementing them on a large scale. It also highlights two parts of Illinois's approach that merit consideration by other states with large or growing ELL populations. First, by expanding into pre-K, the state has created opportunities to align ELL pro-

grams across the early school years, opening the possibilities for districts to adopt a PreK-3rd approach. This avenue ensures that ELL children receive instruction that builds on itself in progression from year to year, without redundancy or gaps at the start of their education and throughout their years in public school.<sup>10</sup> Second, Illinois's teacher training requirements ensure that teachers charged with bilingual or ESL classrooms have adequate training to do so, in K-12 classrooms and in pre-K classrooms. Both of these strategies, if implemented well and adequately funded, could greatly benefit English Language Learners in the state, setting them on a path to academic success with a higher likelihood of graduating from high school and college.

Illinois's experience provides an early model, but the work is not finished. Stakeholders throughout the state stress the challenges of implementing a cohesive, high-quality

system for English Language Learners and they encourage a focus on improvements. This report concludes with three top-level recommendations for Illinois and other states:

- ensure that pre-K providers and schools receive financial support from the state and their local districts for resources they spend on English Language Learners, and that there is an adequate bilingual education budget to cover all eligible children
- track outcomes for ELL students over time and reserve funding for evaluative studies to determine where investment is most (and least) effective
- continue to align the ELL experience in pre-K, kindergarten and the early grades and enable shared professional development opportunities in ELL instruction for teachers and school leaders across the PreK-3rd grade span

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## The story of Illinois exposes a slice of one of the largest problems facing public education: the struggles of children who don't speak English at home, and of the pre-K providers and schools that educate them.

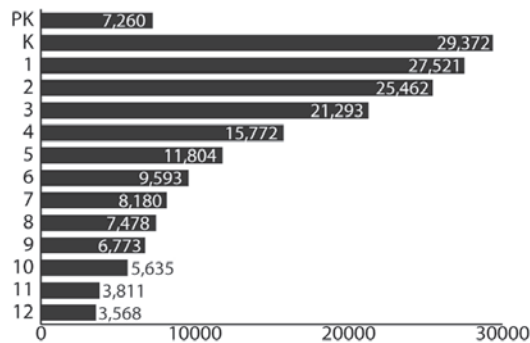
Immigrant parents are enrolling their children in preschools or childcare centers that may not be well-equipped to help them learn English nor augment the development of their home language. The state provides funding for Preschool for All, a pre-K program that began in 1985, but as is typical across the country, providers received little guidance from the state on best practices for educating young English Language Learners. Meanwhile, since the late 1960s, the state has had strict guidelines for how to screen and educate English Language Learners in K-12 public schools, including professional development requirements for teachers who instruct them.

New policies in Illinois are designed to eliminate this disconnect between pre-K and kindergarten and bring pre-K teachers into the fold. These regulations are designed to make it possible for English Language Learners in publicly funded pre-K in Illinois to receive specialized language instruction from the start, with trained teachers and a curriculum that builds and progresses smoothly from year to year. The regulations encompass three main areas: preparing the workforce to teach ELLs, improving the way children are evaluated, and developing models of instruction grounded in recent research on how to improve English proficiency.

Once the regulations are fully implemented in 2014, schools with ELL populations will need pre-K teachers who are both certified to teach pre-K and certified to teach English Language Learners. This change has been met with controversy. Debates are erupting among advocates and opponents of the regulations alike over whether Illinois's bilingual pre-K regulations are developmentally appropriate, whether the state will be able to fund the programs using the existing state bilingual budget, and whether Illinois can successfully recruit a qualified workforce for bilingual/ESL classrooms. ❖

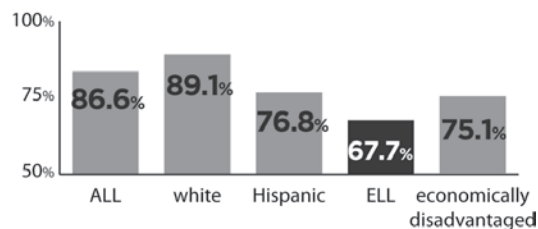
### At a Glance

#### Illinois's 183,522 English Language Learners by Grade



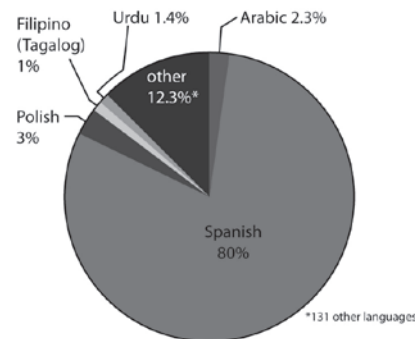
Source: Bilingual Education Programs and English Language Learners in Illinois 2010 Report.

#### High School Graduation Rates



Source: 2011 Illinois State Report Card.

#### Top Non-English Languages Spoken in Illinois K-12 Schools



Source: Bilingual Education Programs and English Language Learners in Illinois 2010 Report.

- 21.7 percent of Illinois's population over age 5 speaks a language other than English at home, according to the American Community Survey.

# The Evolution of Policies Targeting English Language Learners in Illinois

## Federal Legislation from the 1960s to the Present

Many modern-day state education policies for English Language Learners date back to legislation passed by the federal government during the late 1960s. Congress passed the Bilingual Education Act (Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) in 1968 and provided competitive grants to states to help support students with limited English proficiency.<sup>11</sup> At the time, the law did not express a preference for bilingual education over other forms of ESL instruction (such as English-only immersion programs), but later amendments and court decisions related to the act would do so.

In the 1974 case, *Lau v. Nichols*, a class-action suit representing 1,800 Chinese students in California who claimed they were not receiving enough language support, the Supreme Court ruled that states had to take action to overcome language barriers for students.<sup>12</sup> The Equal Opportunity Act, passed later that year, mandated that all states had to provide services for ELL students, regardless of whether they received Title VII funds.

When Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001 (also known as No Child Left

Behind), it replaced Title VII with Title III, the English Language Acquisition Act. Title III of ESEA gave states more flexibility. It requires that states address the needs of students who are not yet proficient in English, but allows them to decide what sort of programs to adopt.<sup>13</sup> For example, one state may create a program, or encourage school districts to create a program, that immerses students in English-only instruction; another state may develop a program that teaches them some of their home language in addition to English; yet another state may create a program that pulls students out of the classroom for small-group tutoring or a program that has full-day ELL programs in classrooms that are separate from mainstream students.

In K-12 education, many states began bilingual programs during the 1960s and '70s, following the passage of the Bilingual Education Act.<sup>14</sup> In the 1990s, there was considerable pushback against bilingual programs in favor of ELL programs that gave children intensive English instruction in lieu of instruction in their home language, called structured English immersion. In 1998, Proposition 227 in California replaced the state's bilingual programs with English-only programs<sup>15</sup> and in 2000, Arizona passed a similar piece of legislation.

A debate continues about whether English proficiency is best achieved through immersing English Language

## Timeline: Evolution of Bilingual Pre-K in Illinois

ILLINOIS EDUCATION POLICY

1969: Illinois begins offering programs for English Language Learners in some areas

1973: Illinois General Assembly mandates assessment and instruction for ELL students

1985: State-funded pre-K begins in Illinois

| 1970

| 1980

| 1990

U.S. EDUCATION POLICY

1968: U.S. Congress passes Bilingual Education Act

1974: *Lau v. Nichols* decision; U.S. Congress passes Equal Opportunity Act



Learners in English, or by supporting their home language in addition to English. Illinois’s approach follows the second theory, which is supported by current research.<sup>16</sup> (See sidebar, p. 10.)

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**Federal flexibility carries the risk that states with significant ELL populations may lag in creating high-quality ELL programs or may not devote sufficient funds toward them.**

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The federal flexibility given to states in formulating their services for ELL students carries the risk that states with significant ELL populations may lag in creating high-quality ELL programs or may not devote sufficient funds towards them. Arizona’s ELL program, for example, is the subject of an ongoing federal court case, *Horne v. Flores*, which revolves around whether the state devotes adequate resources to its ELL programs.<sup>17</sup>

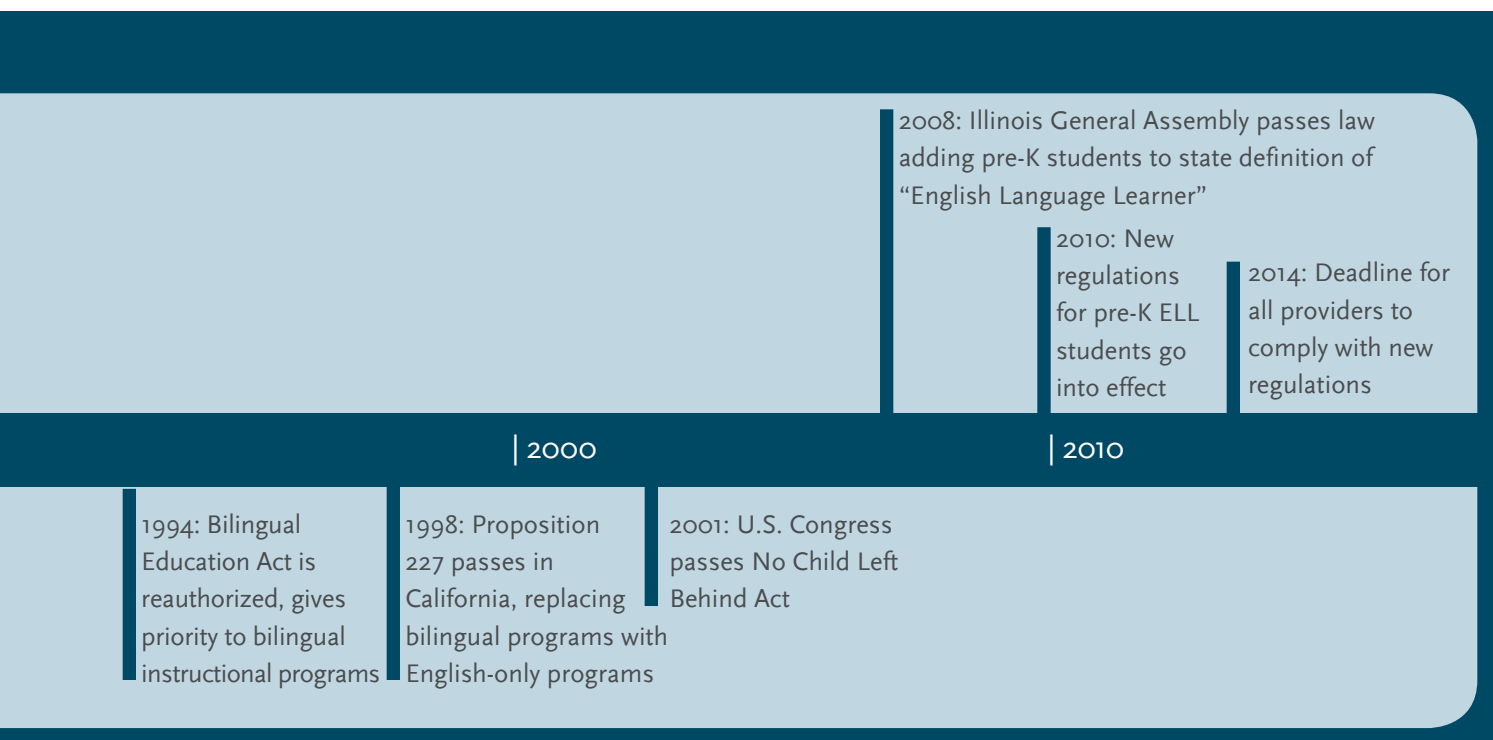
Few states have regulated ELL instruction for pre-K, and Illinois’s model for pre-K ELL education is far more comprehensive than any existing state regulations. For example, New Jersey also has bilingual regulations for preschool,

but these regulations are significantly less structured than those in Illinois and many districts have opted out of the requirements through a waiver system.<sup>18</sup>

**The Beginning of Bilingual Programs in Illinois**

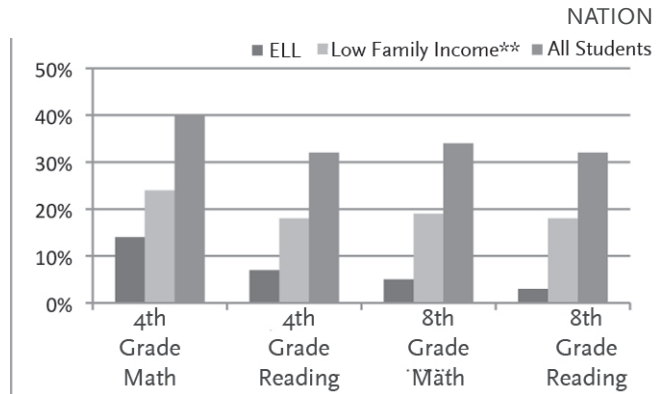
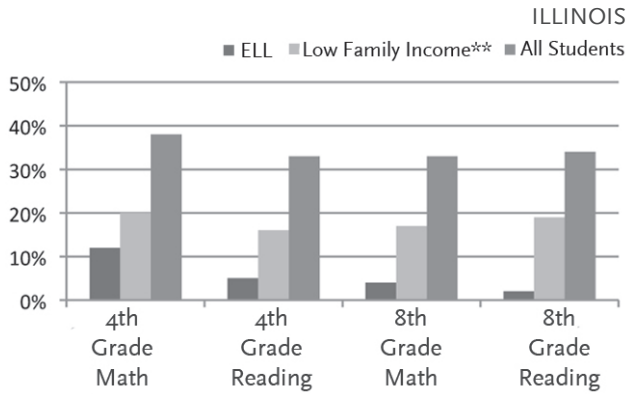
Illinois’s focus on providing instruction to English Language Learners dates back to the late 1960s when bilingual education was emphasized in Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Using the newly available Title VII funds, Chicago Public Schools began its first handful of bilingual programs in the 1969-1970 school year. In 1973, the Illinois General Assembly adopted Article 14(C) of the school code, which requires schools to assess students for English proficiency and place students who are identified as having limited English proficiency in bilingual education programs. These programs must teach English and a child’s home language when possible until that child is proficient in English and is transitioned to a regular classroom.

Though these K-12 bilingual programs have been in place for years, bilingual education accounts for a very small portion of the state’s general funds for education—less than 1 percent in 2012—and districts are not always in compliance. A recent study by *Catalyst Chicago* found that 22 of the 58 suburban Chicago districts visited by state monitors in the last three years failed to provide bilingual programs for all students who qualified for them.<sup>19</sup>

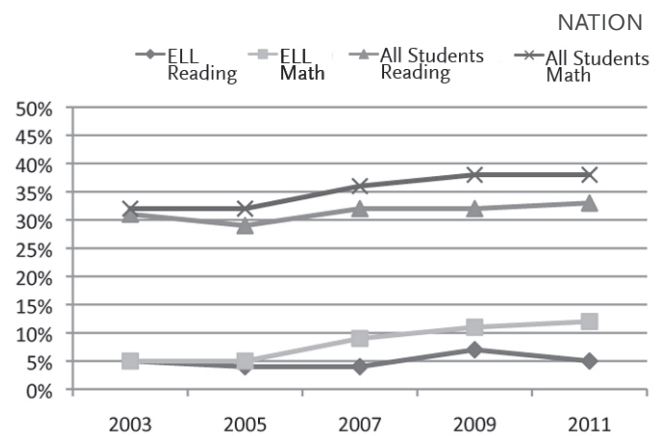
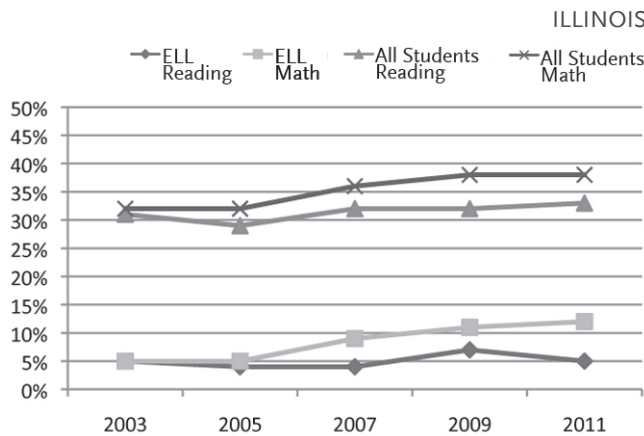


# Achievement Gaps in Illinois and the Nation

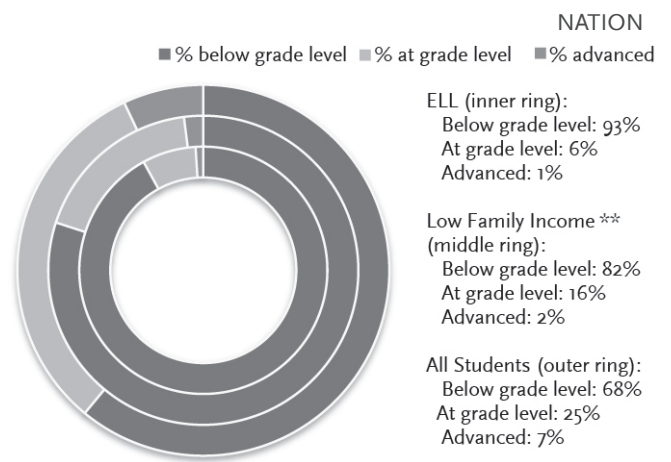
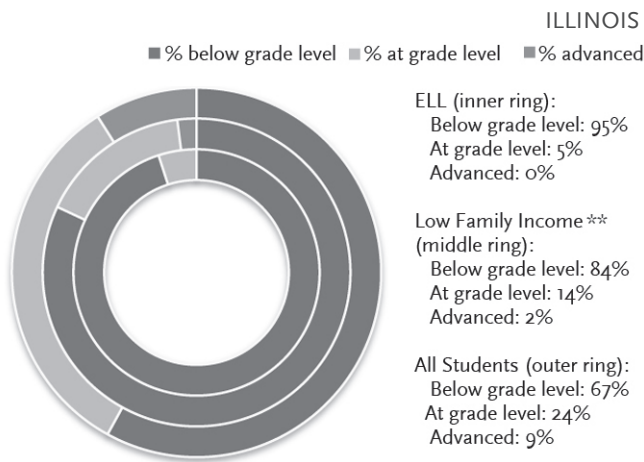
## Percent of Students At or Above Grade Level\* by Demographic Groups



## Percent of 4th Grade Students At or Above Grade Level\* Over Time



## Percent of 4th Grade Students Below, At and Above Grade Level\* in Reading



\* Based on a "Proficient" score on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

\*\* Based on eligibility for the National School Lunch Program.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); 2011 Reading and Math Assessments.

## Changes to the Illinois School Code Include Pre-K in Bilingual Regulations

In 1973, when Article 14(C) was passed, there was no state-funded pre-K in the state. The Latino population in Illinois was an estimated three percent, about 365,000 people<sup>20</sup>—far fewer than the more than two million Latinos who now reside in Illinois and make up over 15 percent of the state’s population.<sup>21</sup> Today, Spanish speakers account for 80 percent of ELL students in Illinois but the other 20 percent is a diverse group, speaking 134 additional languages.

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By 2007, both the state’s demographics and the structure of its public school system were different. Illinois’s Preschool for All program was serving over 85,000 three- and four-year olds in 78 percent of Illinois school districts.<sup>22,23</sup> (As of 2010, Preschool for All had centers in all Illinois school districts and served 87,580 three- and four-year olds.)<sup>24</sup> Around this time, a variety of early education stakeholders as well as the State Board of Education began to think about how to adapt the state’s approach to K-12 bilingual education to include preschoolers.

To many working with pre-K programs at the time, the need for a more structured approach to bilingual pre-K education was evident. K-12-oriented organizations such as the Illinois Resource Center, a state-funded organization that works with schools to meet the needs of their diverse populations, felt that the K-12 approach to bilingual education was both inefficient and insufficient in an age when many children were receiving one or two years of education prior to entering kindergarten. “We would frequently go out to schools and ask about their programs for English Language Learners, and, as in the bulk of the country, the ELL’s would be clustered in kindergarten, first grade, second grade,” said Josie Yanguas, director of the Illinois Resource Center, referring to a common phenomenon where children enter school in kindergarten and are flagged as English Language Learners, then test out of the ELL programs, “clustering” the need for elementary ELL

services in those early grades. This was happening despite the fact that ELL students who had attended Preschool for All had already received their first systematic exposure to the English language at age three or four.

Yanguas noted that pre-K classrooms in the schools were offering “more of an English language immersion program,” while kindergarten classrooms were taking a more bilingual approach. She saw this as nonsensical, since children in pre-K programs are learning language skills just as kindergarteners are. “From a policy point of view and from a program design point of view,” Yanguas said, “it didn’t make a lot of sense.”

In late 2007, two groups that were created to advise the state government, the Illinois Early Learning Council and the Illinois Statewide Advisory Council for Bilingual Education, created a new committee comprised of appointed individuals from the pre-K and bilingual communities in Illinois to look at strategies targeting young English Language Learners. This group, called the Linguistic and Cultural Diversity Committee, was officially charged with developing “strategies for meeting the varied needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families and young children to ensure that they are well-prepared for school.”<sup>25</sup> The committee became a hub for much of the discussion and planning that went into the new regulations. It regularly held meetings at colleges and universities in an effort to bring teacher preparation programs, which the state would need to train bilingual early childhood teachers, to the table.<sup>26</sup> In addition to the state councils, Illinois benefitted from a network of nongovernmental organizations, including the Latino Policy Forum, a Chicago-based advocacy organization, with an interest in improving education for young Latino students.

Changes to Illinois’s bilingual education policies relating to pre-K started in 2008. A bill was introduced in the state senate that February that amended the school code to include pre-K children in the definition of “children of limited English-speaking ability.” Previously, only children in kindergarten through 12th grade fit in this category, so that pre-K children who spoke only limited English didn’t qualify for ELL services and, crucially, pre-K providers didn’t qualify for any extra funding to provide those services. The General Assembly passed the bill that August.<sup>27</sup>

This relatively small regulatory change is having a big impact on pre-K providers and students throughout the

state. Effective January 1, 2009, all state laws governing the public education of English Language Learners must also apply to pre-K programs that are partially or wholly funded through Illinois school districts. (This includes all pre-K programs that use Preschool for All funding, but not programs that use only federal or private funding, including many Head Start programs.)

Prior to changing the regulations, when the State Board of Education released its proposed regulations for the new bilingual policy, it received over 200 public comments. Though the comments were overwhelmingly in favor of the regulations as a whole, there were several points of contention. The tests to determine whether a child is categorized as having limited English proficiency generated the most controversy. In the proposed rules, schools were required to use tests that included questions on topics such as “grammar and syntax” and “verbal expression.” These rules were written by borrowing phrases used in K-12 education—concepts that critics said were not appropriate for children at age three and four. Grammar, for example, is not typically taught until the middle grades of elementary school.

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**Educators in Illinois saw a disconnect, with pre-K classrooms often using an English-immersion approach while kindergarten classrooms were taking a more bilingual approach.**

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These requirements were removed from the final regulations, which were passed in the spring of 2010 and went into effect that July. In place of the original language on assessment, the final regulations give broader guidelines, mandating that programs use any assessment that is developmentally appropriate and meets a basic set of criteria. For example, the tests must “include one or more observations using culturally and linguistically appropriate tools” and “use multiple measures and methods” (that is, various activities and types of interactions).<sup>28</sup> The regulations on assessing young ELLs are adapted from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) position paper on the screening and assessment of young English Language Learners.<sup>29</sup>

Supporters see these changes as a big step forward, but critics point out that they may be too demanding for many pre-K providers, particularly during tight fiscal years.<sup>30</sup> Though the state is supposed to reimburse pre-K providers for the costs associated with providing bilingual/ESL services, no new funds have been appropriated to help pre-K providers, so the state will have to find money in its existing budget for bilingual services to help pre-K staff. Given the findings in the *Catalyst* report on the number of schools struggling to comply with the K-12 requirements, folding in pre-K without additional funds could be difficult.

The professional development requirements for pre-K teachers are particularly challenging. According to the Latino Policy Forum, only .4 percent of teachers in the state of Illinois had both of the credentials they will need to teach bilingual early education in the state in 2010 when the regulations went into effect.<sup>31</sup>

A bachelor’s degree was already required for teachers in the state’s Preschool for All program; now many of these teachers will need an additional certification to teach English as a second language (ESL). Yet many experts also see these requirements as the most important piece of the new regulations.<sup>32</sup> Luisiana Melendez, director of the bilingual/ESL certificate program at the Erikson Institute in Chicago, expressed a cautious-but-optimistic viewpoint when the regulations were first passed:

I am not blind to the shortcomings that some of these changes and some of these regulations may create in the short term, and I do not minimize the potential issues that arise when these changes are approved and implemented. But I think in the long term, they represent a real, important acknowledgment of the existence of DLLs [dual-language learners] and the need to address what their instructional requirements are.<sup>33</sup> ❖

## **Illinois’s Bilingual Pre-K Regulations Explained**

### **Screening for Young English Language Learners**

All children in the Illinois public school system, including pre-K children, must be evaluated in order to determine how well they speak English. There are two stages in the screening process: First a home language survey (HLS) is sent home to parents to determine which chil-

dren have a non-English language background.<sup>34</sup> Then, those children are screened for English proficiency. (Many pre-K providers and all providers with Head Start funding already screened students, but the regulations formalized the process.)

Screening and assessing young English Language Learners is controversial, and there are several issues that drive critics to be skeptical of assessing them. The process of learning a language, as many researchers currently understand it, does not lend itself well to assessment. Children in the early stages often borrow words between languages when they lack the vocabulary to express themselves in a single

language, and are prone to going through “silent phases” when they are taking in vocabulary and grammar but often don’t feel comfortable verbally expressing themselves.<sup>35</sup>

In Illinois, there is no specific screening mechanism written in regulations for pre-K, but Preschool for All programs are using a common tool called the pre-IPT Proficiency Oral English Test (pre-IPT), a 20-minute listening and speaking test that is administered one-on-one by a trained teacher. The test was written in 1988 as a companion to K-12 IPT tests, and is now in its third edition. The pre-IPT assesses vocabulary, comprehension, syntax, and verbal expression.

## Structuring the Classroom: Illinois’s Models of Instruction

There are many ways to structure a classroom for English Language Learners, depending on whether the ELL students will be mostly kept in a classroom with native English speakers and sometimes pulled out for special instruction, or whether they will have a separate (or mostly separate) classroom. The model may also depend on whether the program is intended to give the ELL students proficiency in both English and their home language(s), partial knowledge of their home language and proficiency in English, or strictly English instruction.

On one end of this spectrum, structured immersion programs give ELL children specialized instruction but don’t use the native language at all during instruction. On the other, “maintenance” or “developmental” bilingual education programs build proficiency in English while also building proficiency in the child’s home language, and continue instructing partly in the child’s home language even after the child is proficient in English.

The models used in Illinois fall somewhere in the middle and depend on the number of children at a school who speak a common home language. The state currently has two models: If there are 20 or more students with a common home language in a pre-K program, the program must establish a transitional bilingual education (TBE) program for those students. If there are between one and 19 students with a common home language, the program must provide a transitional program of instruction (TPI) for those students.<sup>37</sup>

TBE programs have more instruction time in a child’s home language than TPI programs. These programs aim to build proficiency in English through instruction in both English and the child’s home language. Educators then transfer the child into a regular classroom once he or she is proficient in English. Instruction for core subjects and language arts must be offered in the child’s home language. Children must receive instruction in English as a second language as well, and additional specialized instruction in the history and culture of the native area where the child or his/her parents are from. Children can be in these programs for all or some of the day, depending on the program and the child’s level of English proficiency.

The TPI model is more flexible. Though TPI programs still require some instruction in a child’s home language by a certified teacher, they mandate less instruction in that language, presumably so that schools with few ELL students don’t have to hire as many bilingual/ESL credentialed teachers. A transitional program of instruction may include instruction in English as a Second Language; language arts in the child’s home language; and some instruction in the history and culture of the child or family’s native area.

The test also measures children’s social and academic language skills, and rates children on a scale of English proficiency that can be used to separate children into different levels of special instruction. Pre-IPT assessments are also available in Spanish.<sup>36</sup>

Currently some districts in Illinois are moving towards models that support bilingualism and bi-literacy in English and another target language (most often Spanish.) Unified District 46 (see sidebar, p. 14) is one such district: it has started two-way immersion classes that teach fluency in both languages in the early grades and plans to build them up into later grades in the coming years.<sup>38</sup>

### Curriculum and Assessment

Pre-K providers decide which curriculum to use for their bilingual programs, as long as it aligns with the regu-

lar state curriculum guidelines. Though many curricula are only written in English, some, such as the Creative Curriculum, are available in English and Spanish.<sup>39</sup> The State of Illinois and the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium received an Enhanced Assessment Grant from the U.S. Department of Education in 2009 to develop Spanish language development standards and assessments, called Spanish Academic Language Standards and Assessment (SALSA). The SALSA project will include Spanish-language assessments for kindergarten through 12th grade, but a Spanish-language assessment for pre-K is not included in the grant.<sup>40,41</sup>

The state regulations do not mandate that pre-K providers administer end-of-year assessments for children in pre-K. Many programs, however, plan to measure prog-

## The Rationale Behind Teaching Children in Their Native Languages First

Much of Illinois’s bilingual policies draw on a theoretical framework for bilingualism in young children articulated by Ontario Institute for Studies in Education Professor Jim Cummins in the late 1970s and early ‘80s. Cummins’s work makes a key distinction between interpersonal communication (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, or BICS), which children use in and out of school, and the academic language (Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency, or CALP) that a student requires in order to succeed in the classroom.<sup>44</sup>

Academic language proficiency includes both the language a child needs in order to speak and understand the things happening in a classroom, and the content knowledge that a child needs in order to understand the subjects being taught. For children in kindergarten and first grade, this might mean knowing the parts of a book—the “cover,” “chapters,” and “pages”—as well as the words in the book that that child might not have heard in English growing up—“house,” “neighborhood,” “stoplight.” In pre-K, academic language proficiency may involve knowing what the colors are in English (“red,” “pink,” “white”) and being able to understand questions in English (“What color are those?” “Can you count how many are there?”)

Cummins’s framework helps to explain a phenomenon where students test out of special English instruction too early and then struggle in mainstream classrooms and have to be returned to special classrooms. These students have developed social language in both their native and second languages and may appear to be proficient, but have yet to develop underlying academic proficiency in the second language (and, sometimes, the first), so without special assistance, they have difficulty learning in the second language, English.

Cummins has argued that underlying proficiency in a child’s native language helps the child develop proficiency in a second language. Known as the linguistic interdependence hypothesis, Cummins’s theory posits that knowing a word in a first language helps facilitate learning and remembering that word in a second language, thereby speeding up the time it takes to become proficient in the second language.<sup>45</sup>

For a child from a Spanish-speaking home who is entering pre-K, the theory predicts that building pre-literacy and other skills in Spanish will, in the long run, better equip that child than if he or she learns only in English.



ress using the Measures of Developing English Language (MODEL) assessment, a 30-minute listening and speaking test administered by a trained teacher that is designed by the WIDA Consortium. The MODEL test is designed for children ages four and a half to seven, though the consortium is in the process of expanding the test for three and four year olds.<sup>42</sup> Because the MODEL test is designed by WIDA, the assessments are aligned from year to year, and with the levels of English proficiency that frame WIDA's standards and assessments. Additionally, WIDA's next generation of K-12 assessments for ELLs will be aligned with the K-12 Common Core standards, which Illinois has adopted.<sup>43</sup>

### Teacher Preparation

Training and hiring enough teachers with bilingual or ESL credentials is the biggest challenge currently facing Illinois. Either a bilingual or ESL credential, which teachers add to their regular teaching credentials by taking extra courses, is now required of pre-K teachers if they are responsible for teaching classes that are part of a Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) or Transitional Program of Instruction (TPI) program. (TBE programs are for pre-K providers with over 20 ELL students with a common language background, while TPI programs are for pre-K providers with between one and 20 ELL students with a common language background. See sidebar, p. 9). Teachers who instruct children in their native lan-

guages must have a bilingual credential, which requires the teacher to be proficient in the language of instruction. Teachers who provide instruction in English as a Second Language classrooms must have an ESL credential, which does not require proficiency in a second language.

Recruiting teachers who have bilingual/ESL credentials or are willing to get them is difficult. Additionally, teacher preparation programs will have to reevaluate their early childhood and their K-12-focused bilingual/ESL course curricula to include bilingual/ESL strategies for children in their earliest years of language development.

Each lead pre-K teacher for the Preschool for All program must have a bachelor's degree and an early childhood teaching certificate; one who instructs a TBE or TPI program now must also obtain either bilingual or English as a Second Language credentials. Teachers must also pass a language proficiency test in the non-English language that they plan to teach if they want to teach a TBE program. The state has given programs until July 1, 2014 to comply with this part of the regulations.

Only about a third of approved four-year teacher preparation programs in Illinois currently offer bilingual/ESL credentials, and a vast majority of those programs are not specifically designed for pre-K teachers. (The credential is offered as a part of 26 of 72 teaching programs state-

### A Pre-K Provider's Perspective

Though the state and districts play a role in supporting schools and providing guidance around the new regulations, pre-K providers will do the most work to bring their programs into compliance by 2014.

Casa Infantil is one such pre-K provider in the Chicago area. The program consists of two centers that serve mostly Latino families. Many of the current teaching aides who help in the classroom but are not certified pre-K teachers speak Spanish. But as of last year, none of Casa Infantil's lead teachers, who have early childhood teaching certificates and are in charge of the classrooms, had a bilingual or an ESL credential. In order to comply with the new regulations, most of the lead teachers in the school will need a bilingual/ESL credential by the 2014 deadline, posing a big challenge even to a program like Casa Infantil that was already trying to meet the needs of its ELL students.

Victoria Gregor, the education coordinator for Casa Infantil, is working to bring the centers into compliance with Illinois's new regulations before the 2014 deadlines. Like others in Illinois, Gregor is looking both in-house and outside to recruit new teachers. A handful of teachers are participating in a cohort program that will take two years of classroom and online courses to complete, and Gregor is working with staffing agencies to find qualified teachers to hire as well. "Basically, if you can't speak Spanish then you aren't in the top tier of being interviewed for a position," she said about hiring new teachers for her centers.

wide).<sup>46</sup> Both the bilingual and ESL credentials require 18 semester hours of credit and 100 hours or three months teaching in a bilingual/ESL program.

English as a Second Language teachers must complete 18 semester hours in the following areas:

- linguistics
- theoretical foundations of teaching ESL
- assessment of the bilingual student
- methods and materials for teaching ESL
- cross-cultural studies for teaching Limited English Proficient students

Bilingual teachers must complete 18 semester hours in the following areas:

- foundations of bilingual education
- assessment of the bilingual student
- methods and materials for teaching Limited English Proficient students in Bilingual Programs
- cross-cultural studies for teaching Limited English Proficient students
- methods and materials for teaching ESL<sup>47</sup>

A Transitional Bilingual Certificate is one option for prospective bilingual teachers that may help ease providers' paths to compliance with the new regulations. This gives pre-K providers the option to retain current staff while they recruit more bilingual/ESL-credentialed teachers. The Transitional Bilingual Certificate offers a temporary certification to teachers who are pursuing the full bilingual/ESL credential. In order to obtain the certificate, a teacher must pass a language proficiency test in the desired home language and hold an early childhood teaching certificate.<sup>48</sup> Transitional Bilingual Certificates are valid for six years with a two-year extension available upon request. With the certificate option, prospective pre-K teachers who speak a second language but have not completed bilingual/ESL coursework can obtain a Transitional Bilingual Certificate. The certificate allows them to teach in pre-K classrooms while they are working on obtaining their permanent bilingual/ESL teaching credentials. Prospective bilingual/ESL teachers can apply for scholarships through Gateways to Opportunity, a state-sponsored professional development fund. The Illinois State Board of Education has earmarked money for bilingual/ESL early childhood teacher training in previous years and would like to continue supporting potential bilingual/ESL pre-K teacher training in the coming years.<sup>49</sup>

## The Role of Higher Education Institutions

Since the regulations were conceived, advocates were aware that support from teacher preparation programs would be essential. Illinois has prior experience with boosting professional qualifications for pre-K teachers: since the late 1980s the state has required that teachers in the state's Preschool for All program have bachelor's degrees as well as teaching certificates. Like the new requirement for bilingual/ESL credentials, requiring a BA for all pre-K teachers was a big change that took years for many pre-K programs to adopt.

"Change is always difficult," said Gayle Mindes, an early childhood professor at DePaul University, of both the new professional development standards and previous pushes for more professional development for preschool teachers. "We've known that it's very important to develop linguistic competency in both languages, so it's important to do and it's important that teachers have the tools to do this."

Prior to the regulations, very few pre-K teachers had formal bilingual/ESL credentials. Now, pre-K providers with English Language Learners must either find new pre-K teachers with the credentials or encourage their existing staff to get the required certifications. Because the state is requiring the same bilingual/ESL training for pre-K teachers as it has for K-12 teachers, no new bilingual or ESL training programs are required to be developed for pre-K teachers. The drawback of this policy is that the bilingual/ESL training programs may not be tailored to the needs of pre-K teachers. Some institutions, however, are opting to create curricula with classes focusing on bilingual/ESL instruction for young children, including National Louis University, some campuses of the University of Illinois, and DePaul University.<sup>50</sup> (See sidebar, p. 13.)

Chicago's Erikson Institute has been offering a graduate level 18-credit Bilingual/ESL Certificate program specifically designed for early childhood educators since 2002. Additionally, Erikson students can specialize in Bilingual/ESL while getting their master's in early childhood education, a program which includes four courses that focus on bilingual/ESL instruction and which gives students the option of graduating with both an early childhood certificate and a bilingual or ESL credential.

The Illinois State Board of Education is also playing an active role in encouraging institutions of higher educa-



tion to adapt their teacher preparation programs so there are more programs offering coursework in bilingual/ESL early childhood education. The state is currently sponsoring ongoing higher education faculty forums to encourage programs to build their capacities for training bilingual/ESL early childhood teachers and to encourage networking among staff from different colleges and universities.<sup>51</sup>

## Discussion

The steps that Illinois took in expanding its bilingual program to pre-K and writing the corresponding regulations could become a model for other states or a cautionary tale. As the first state to target statewide policies towards pre-K English Language Learners, the state took a step that was informed by current research and by smaller-scale models within the state and elsewhere.<sup>54</sup>

Cooperation between bilingual and early education stakeholders within Illinois played a big role in the regulations' development. Since the state didn't have other statewide regulations to borrow from, it was crucial to have both groups invested in writing the regulations. This may seem like an obvious step. Bilingual education specialists, however, usually focus on K-12 education, and the divide between K-12 and early education can be strong, in spite of the fact that both fields focus on building literacy and language proficiency in children.

## Making an Adequate Investment

Appropriating adequate funding, particularly for districts and providers to put teachers through extra training for the bilingual/ESL credentials and to pay teachers who have received them and may expect higher salaries, will no doubt be a challenge in Illinois. As mentioned above, unless the state allots more money to bilingual programs overall, districts will be forced to stretch their existing pools of bilingual funds to serve both the K-12 and the pre-K ELLs.

The role of Illinois's philanthropic organizations, such as the Ounce of Prevention fund, also has yet to be determined. They share an interest with the state in improving the quality of education for young English Language Learners and could play a role in strengthening or evaluating the quality of bilingual programs in the future.

## Using Research and Data

Research on the outcomes of different ESL programs will be crucial in the coming years as ELL populations continue to grow and diversify in Illinois and elsewhere. Currently, there are no state funds set aside for researching and evaluating the effects of the new regulations.

Illinois could benefit greatly from monitoring its new policies closely and determining which parts of them boost student achievement. Currently research focuses mostly

### Building an Undergraduate Program for Future Pre-K Teachers of Young English Language Learners

When the state regulations went into effect last year, DePaul University was already in the process of reforming its early childhood curriculum to better serve prospective teachers who will work with large ELL populations, putting it ahead of other colleges and universities in the state who are currently restructuring their curricula.

The university currently hosts the only undergraduate program in Illinois with courses on bilingual/ESL teaching for prospective early educators. It graduates teachers with early childhood certificates, bilingual/ESL credentials, and special education credentials. DePaul is currently developing a master's program that will graduate teachers with all three credentials as well.<sup>52</sup>

DePaul began including the bilingual/ESL credentials in its undergraduate program two years ago. Faculty from the Early Childhood Program and the Bilingual Bicultural Program, which have different curricula and different professors, worked together to create a curriculum with a focus on bilingual education in the early years. It includes two courses: "Foundations of ESL" and "Foundations of Bilingual Education."<sup>53</sup> Faculty members were able to determine the appropriate course materials for teaching bilingual and ESL education with an early childhood focus, though Gayle Mindes, an early childhood professor at DePaul University, said that teaching materials weren't easy to find. There is still a great need, she said, for more resources and textbooks in the field.

on the method of ESL instruction, such as student achievement in a bilingual versus an English-only classroom (see sidebar, p. 10); research on many other important factors—such as what professional background makes a good bilingual/ESL teacher or whether a PreK-3rd approach boosts ELL student achievement as it does for non-ELL students—is scarce.

### Navigating the Path to Compliance

Different pre-K providers will begin moving into compliance with the state’s new regulations from different starting points. Before the new law, some programs had already been taking steps, on their own, to respond to the growing number of English Language Learner children. The degree to which programs have formally adapted their schools varies. While entire districts—such as the state’s second largest school district, U-46 (see sidebar, below)—have been working to hire bilingual teachers and find curricula that can be taught in English and Spanish for years, less prepared districts and programs are adapting in smaller ways, or not at all. For example, it is common for pre-K programs to hire teachers’ aides who speak Spanish but

lack the credentials needed to be lead pre-K teachers. With the new regulations, many districts and pre-K programs are grappling with how to prioritize often scarce resources to help those aides gain lead teaching credentials.

One of the biggest points of contention in Illinois is whether the state has created regulations that are so high-reaching that they are unachievable for the average pre-K provider.

Critics of the regulations, both in schools and in the policy sector, worry that the regulations set unreasonable standards for pre-K providers that already face an uphill battle in finding qualified teachers, and money to pay them. Karen Nemeth, a specialist in bilingual early education, shares the concern that the regulations might be too demanding of providers and could ultimately make the quality of their instruction worse. “You can go backwards if you try to take a step that’s really unmanageable,” she said.

Barbara Bowman, former chief early childhood education officer for Chicago Public Schools and a professor at the

### Pre-K Regulations in Suburban Districts

ELL instruction is often considered an urban issue, but immigrant populations are increasingly living in suburban or rural areas, and school districts that never needed programs for ELL students must adapt.

From 2001 to 2008, Patricia Chamberlain, currently a professor at the Erikson Institute in Chicago, was the director of early learning in School District U-46, a district of about 41,000 children located in the northwestern suburbs of Chicago. The area is economically and ethnically diverse: In 2009, U-46 was comprised of 58 percent minority students and 26 percent of students were English Language Learners.<sup>55</sup>

Chamberlain was in charge of over 40 pre-K programs that targeted “at risk” and special education students. A former bilingual teacher, she began to transition the programs in her district into bilingual programs. At the time, she estimated there were two early childhood directors with bilingual experience in Illinois outside of Chicago.

Chamberlain had three strategies for recruiting personnel for her schools. She recruited local teachers with transitional teaching certificates and some early childhood experience. These were teachers who had second language skills, but didn’t yet have full teaching credentials. Second, Chamberlain and other district personnel traveled to Spanish-speaking countries to find early childhood professionals to come teach in Illinois schools, through a pre-K-12 exchange program sponsored by the Illinois State Board of Education.<sup>56</sup> Finally, Chamberlain focused on the career ladder for her current hires, a move she said took more time and energy than other recruitment strategies. Chamberlain encouraged professional development for both teachers and teacher’s aides in her programs and looked for bilingual teacher’s aides who were good candidates to earn credentials as full pre-K teachers. Teachers whose careers she helped to build often developed relationships with the district. “I could help them with their coursework, getting visas,” she explained. “Things like that helped us grow our own.”

Erikson Institute, said that many Latino pre-K teachers in the Chicago area will have problems passing a bilingual fluency test. “They’re verbal, but they’re not literate,” Bowman said. “We have teachers who won’t even take the exam.”

Considering that many K-12 school districts have trouble complying with the regulations, the concerns are well founded. But the other side of this debate contends that there is never an easy time to push forward with demanding regulations for pre-K, and that the push is necessary in order for the state to make progress. If providing bilingual instruction for young children is the appropriate thing to do to ensure that they get an equitable start in school, then these regulations should have been in place a long time ago, advocates say. There is no right time to place added demands on pre-K providers, but they need good programs and good standards in order to teach effectively.

Ultimately, time will show whether the regulations were too ambitious to succeed. It is likely that, if pre-K providers are not ready to meet the 2014 deadline for compliance, the state will likely choose to extend that deadline until more programs are able to comply.<sup>37</sup> The state acted similarly when it passed regulations requiring pre-K teachers to have bachelor’s degrees: the deadline was extended several times as programs gradually came into compliance. So long as the state moves toward complying with the new regulations between now and 2014, this track may be a middle ground for those who fear the regulations are too demanding, and those who see a need for progress to begin now.

### Questions Around Braided Funding Programs

The regulations will undoubtedly have an impact on Preschool for All programs across the state, but their reach ends there. Privately funded programs and programs funded by Head Start are outside the state board’s regulatory umbrella, though these programs may choose to hire bilingual/ESL endorsed teachers or voluntarily comply with other parts of the bilingual regulations.

Many pre-K providers, however, braid different funding streams in order to offer better, extended services. Preschool for All is a two-and-a-half hour program five days per week funded through Illinois’s Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG). A pre-K provider that wants to offer a full-day program may combine Preschool for All funds with

Head Start funds, private donations, and/or other additional funding. As the new bilingual regulations currently stand, English Language Learners in such a program only need to be enrolled in a TBE/TPI program for the hours funded by Preschool for All.

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**Critics of the regulations, both in schools and in the policy sector, worry that the regulations set unreasonable standards for pre-K providers that already face an uphill battle in finding qualified teachers, and money to pay them.**

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From a pre-K provider’s vantage point, it might be advantageous to place children in bilingual services for only those two-and-a-half hours (in the morning, for example), then place those children back in the regular classroom and have the bilingual/ESL teacher rotate and teach a second group of ELL children in the afternoon.

### Opportunities for Further Alignment Across the PreK-3rd Spectrum

As is the case with many parts of the education system, there is tension in Illinois between what is and what could be. Though the measures the state has taken may help improve education for young English Language Learners, it is worth considering the potential investments that the state has yet to make. For example, a comprehensive program of professional development on ELL issues for teachers and leaders in pre-K and the early elementary grades—across the PreK-3rd spectrum—could improve communication between teachers in all of these grades. It could enable superintendents and other district leaders to gain a better understanding of the prevalence of ELL instruction and the needs of their changing school populations. It could also lead elementary school principals and preschool center directors to start to share ideas about instructional strategies and coordinate data collection efforts to track the progress of children, both ELL and non-ELL, moving through their schools. Lastly, a professional development program could bring in non-bilingual/ESL teachers so that they can better understand ELL programs and support bilingual/ESL teachers. ■

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Illinois is stepping out in the lead with its plan for educating young English Language Learners. But the plan's impact is yet to be seen. The regulations' success may hinge on whether schools can train and/or recruit enough bilingual/ESL teachers for their programs and whether the state budget for bilingual education is ample enough to help pre-K providers offset their costs. The next steps for the state will be as important as the initial steps it took in adding pre-K to its bilingual education approach.

As Illinois moves forward, and as other states implement policies for addressing the needs of their ELL students, policymakers should:

- ensure that pre-K providers receive financial support from their local districts for resources they spend on English Language Learners, and that there is an adequate bilingual/ESL budget to cover eligible children
- track student outcomes for ELL students over time to determine where investment is most (and least) effective
- continue to align the ELL experience in pre-K, kindergarten and the early grades and enable

shared professional development opportunities in ELL instruction for teachers and school leaders across the PreK-3rd grade span

Illinois may be making a shrewd investment by focusing on ELLs during their early years, gaining savings from students spending fewer years in bilingual/ESL programs, needing less remediation in the later grades, and achieving long-term gains from increased graduation rates in high school and a better-educated workforce. But building a successful ELL education program is challenging to implement on a system-wide scale and does not happen without coordinated, intentional work on behalf of education stakeholders.

The number of English Language Learners in the United States is large, and it is growing. Demographic shifts should be a wake-up call to states and districts, which will be on the frontlines of educating an increasingly diverse and multicultural student population. Whoever can bridge the ELL achievement gap and put ELL students on track with their peers will be solving an important piece of the puzzle for 21st century education and workforce development. ✦

## Interviews Conducted

**Nancy Arredondo**, bilingual coordinator, Velma F. Thomas Early Childhood Center

**Barbara T. Bowman**, Irving B. Harris Professor of Child Development, Erikson Institute

**Patricia Chamberlain**, instructor, Erikson Institute

**Victoria Gregor**, education coordinator, Casa Infantil

**Rebecca Harris**, associate editor, Catalyst Chicago

**Reyna Hernandez**, assistant superintendent for ELL and early childhood, Illinois State Board of Education

**Harriette Herrera**, consultant, DePaul University

**John F. Hilliard**, education specialist, Illinois Resource Center

**Jesse Markow**, director—communication and business development, WIDA Consortium at Wisconsin Center for Education Research

**Karen McCarthy**, principal consultant, Division of Early Childhood, Illinois State Board of Education

**Luisiana Melendez**, director, ESL/bilingual Certificate Program, Erikson Institute

**Elizabeth L. Najera**, principal, Velma F. Thomas Early Childhood Center

**Gayle Mindes**, professor of education, DePaul University

**Karen Nemeth**, director/consultant, Language Castle LLC

**Sarah R. Slaughter**, program director, McCormick Foundation

**Joyce Weiner**, policy associate, Ounce of Prevention Fund

**Carsten Wilmes**, assistant director—assessment, WIDA Consortium at Wisconsin Center for Education Research

**Josie Yanguas**, director, Illinois Resource Center

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