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How State, District, and School Levers Can Improve the Course Access of Students Classified as English Learners in Secondary Schools

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Nationally, students who are classified as English Learners graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary education at lower rates compared to students who are not classified as English Learners.¹ One important factor that influences high school graduation and postsecondary readiness is course access. Just like any student, students classified as English Learners need to participate in rigorous courses that cover a wide range of content and provide the appropriate credit needed for graduation and postsecondary access. Course access serves two critical purposes. First and most fundamentally, students who cannot access a specific course, subject area, or track level do

not have the opportunity to learn that content in school. Second, and equally as important, courses function as gatekeepers for advanced content, graduation, and college enrollment. Course access is, therefore, a basic element of *opportunity to learn*. Prior literature has found that students classified as English Learners in secondary settings often do not have access to the same courses as students who are not classified as English Learners, creating a critical barrier in opportunity to learn.²

It is important for educators and policymakers to be aware of levers that can increase opportunities to learn for students classified as English

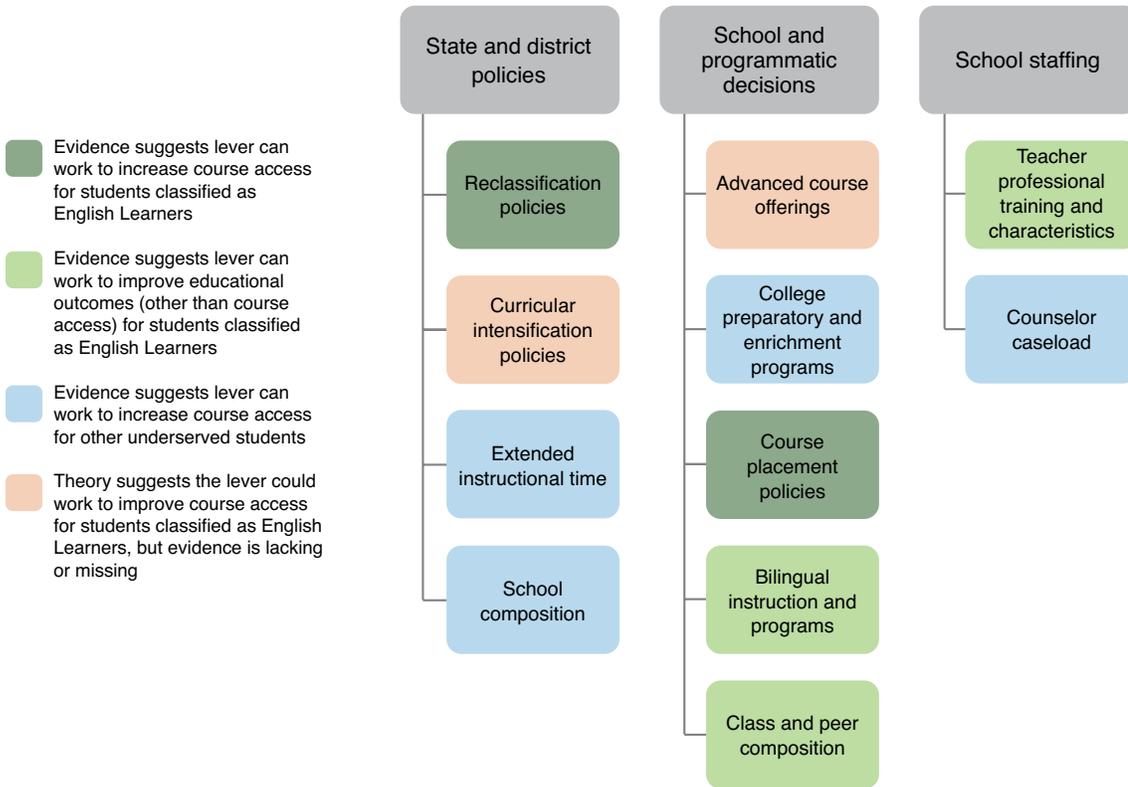
Learners. This research brief synthesizes key findings about levers to increase course access for students classified as English Learners in secondary settings. Specifically, we focus on *malleable levers* that are under the control of educators and policymakers. We reviewed eleven levers under three domains: (1) **state and district policies**, (2) **school programmatic decisions**, and (3) **school staffing**. Our literature scan focused initially on research related specifically to the effect of levers on course access for students classified as English Learners. We then expanded our scan to include research about the effect of levers on related outcomes such as academic achievement or graduation for students classified as English Learners. We also broadened our search to include levers' influence on course access for other historically underserved students, including students of color and economically disadvantaged students.

For each lever, we assigned one of four ratings that best summarized the strength of the relationship between the lever and course access for students classified as English Learners. At one end, we rated some levers as having evidence that they directly influence course access for students classified as English Learners. At the other end, we rated some levers as having a theoretical connection to course access for students classified as English Learners but little or no evidence confirming this link. See Figure 1 for a full description of our four ratings and a synthesis of our findings across levers.

What does the research say about the actions that states, districts, and schools can take to improve course access for students classified as English Learners in secondary settings?

Overall, our brief finds limited research that directly connects individual levers to course access for students classified as English Learners. Among the eleven levers we examined, only two, reclassification policies and course placement policies, had a clear body of prior research that directly linked these levers to course access for students classified as English Learners. However, we found that three additional levers had evidence of impacting other educational outcomes for students classified as English Learners. Meanwhile, we found four levers with research linking the levers to improved course access for other underserved students, but not explicitly students classified as English Learners. Finally, we identified two levers that theory suggests could improve course access for students classified as English Learners, but where there was not empirical research on the topic, or current research has found mixed or limited support for the levers' impact. Importantly, we found that levers within each of the three domains we explored—state and district policies, school and programmatic decisions, and school staffing—were linked to improved course access (or related outcomes) for students classified as English Learners. As such, we conclude that all three domains of policy reform are important for increasing opportunities to learn for students classified as English Learners.

Figure 1. Summary of findings and explanation of rating system



In what follows, we first explain how policies and practices can limit opportunities to learn for secondary students classified as English Learners. We then synthesize key research findings about how each of the eleven malleable levers we identified may alleviate or exacerbate

students’ opportunities to learn. The purpose of this research brief is not to provide an exhaustive synthesis of all related literature. Instead, our goal is to communicate key knowledge in an accessible, useful way for a broad array of educators and policymakers.

Students Classified as English Learners Face Multiple Barriers to Secondary Coursework

Common policies and practices contribute to limiting the opportunities that students classified as English Learners have to enroll and succeed in secondary courses.

First, exposure to and achievement in content area instruction in earlier grades for students classified as English Learners influences their access to coursework in later grades.

Linguistically accessible content instruction is a core right of students classified as English Learners. However, much content area instruction is conducted with insufficient use of modifications that make content accessible to students acquiring English.³ With inaccessible content, academic achievement for students classified as English Learners suffers.⁴ Additionally, at the secondary level, students classified as English Learners may be placed into “sheltered” classes (core content classes specifically designed for students classified as English Learners). While intended to provide accessible core content, sheltered classes have been found to teach both less content overall, and less-rigorous content. Again, this influences achievement patterns and future course access.⁵ With resulting achievement trajectories that tend to lag behind those of their peers, students classified as English Learners are disproportionately less likely to be prepared and eligible for specific subjects or higher-level courses in later grades.⁶

Second, law requires that schools ensure students classified as English Learners have equal access to education. To fulfill this obligation, schools must provide students classified as English Learners with language supports that help them learn subject matter content and develop English proficiency. In secondary settings, schools frequently provide English language support through one or more daily class periods dedicated to English language development (ELD) instruction. Dedicated time to develop English proficiency may support

academic achievement for students classified as English Learners by supporting students’ English development.⁷ However, credits earned through ELD courses typically do not count towards graduation or postsecondary requirements. In addition, unless schools expand learning time for students classified as English Learners, ELD classes displace one or more courses. Consequently, students classified as English Learners may have insufficient time to enroll in key content area courses that meet graduation and postsecondary requirements.⁸

Finally, school staff may believe that students classified as English Learners are not linguistically or academically able to succeed in content-area courses. For example, research has found that teachers are more likely to think that advanced content and instruction is less appropriate for students classified as English Learners than for students who are not classified as English Learners.⁹ Deficit views of the academic skills and potential of students can impact the types of courses into which students are placed. For example, previous qualitative work has described ways in which students perceived that educators limited their course access.¹⁰

With numerous systemic barriers limiting course access for students classified as English Learners, it is of critical importance to understand what levers under the control of educators and policymakers can improve students classified as English Learners’ course access and achievement.

Levers to Improve the Course Access of Students Classified as English Learners

State and District Policies

The first policy domain we explore is policies that are shaped by local education agencies and state departments of education. These policies are created and implemented by educators and are therefore malleable.¹¹ In this section, we review the literature focused on reclassification policies, curricular intensification reforms, policies related to expanding instructional time, and policies related to school composition and desegregation.

Reclassification policies

In our research scan, we found clear evidence that reclassification policies can impact course access for students classified as English Learners. Reclassification policies define how and when students can exit English Learner classification and services. Just as English Learner classification has been found to limit course access, exiting English Learner classification has been found—at times—to expand course access. Likewise, delayed reclassification due to stringent or numerous criteria for reclassification eligibility can delay expanded course access. For example, Umansky found that reclassification increased the likelihood that a student enrolled in a full set of academic courses.¹² A variety of other studies have also found that reclassification positively impacts students' secondary school outcomes.¹³

However, not all research comes to the same conclusion. Other research has found that reclassification has no effect on students'

course access or can even negatively impact student outcomes.¹⁴ These differences in research findings may be due to differences in reclassification policies and criteria by state, as well as differences in the services and supports offered to reclassified and non-reclassified students.¹⁵ Thus, reclassification policies are potentially powerful levers that can impact course access for students classified as English Learners, but their effects vary depending on local context.¹⁶ As prior research emphasizes, reclassification policies should be carefully calibrated so that students do not experience positive or negative effects simply because they are reclassified.¹⁷ Rather, students should experience appropriate supports throughout their educational trajectories, including transitioning out of English Learner services when they no longer benefit from the services offered.

Curricular intensification policies

Policy reforms aimed at intensifying curricular requirements or expanding students' curricular opportunities are, in theory, linked to course access for students classified as English Learners. However, research on these policy changes finds inconclusive results, and some reforms have yet to be studied. Policy reforms such as increasing graduation requirements, implementing high school exit exams, or pushing specific curricula into earlier grades incentivize districts to expand course access for a broad range of students, including students classified as English Learners. One recent study found correlational evidence supporting this

relationship: high-poverty districts and those with large proportions of students of color had higher advanced course enrollment and other positive student outcomes when they had higher math and science graduation requirements.¹⁸ However, other studies found that similar reforms did not increase course access for students classified as English Learners and, in some instances, were associated with negative impacts on students' later achievement and graduation rates.¹⁹ Similarly, a policy change in Pennsylvania's high school accountability framework that required high schools to offer advanced courses in core content areas did not lead to sustained expansion of advanced course offerings at schools that served higher proportions of underserved students.²⁰ In the absence of reforms to improve accessible instruction and curricula and/or students' preparation for more advanced courses, the intended goals of curricular intensification appear to be blunted.²¹

Some states, including Pennsylvania and California, have policies in place that require students classified as English Learners to be given equitable access to courses at the secondary level (e.g., CA A.B. 2735, 2018; 22 PA Code §4.26). However, research has yet to examine whether or how these policies have impacted course access, the quality of courses, or achievement for students classified as English Learners.

In sum, while there is theoretical reason to believe curricular intensification policies could work to improve course access for students classified as English Learners, the current evidence base is mixed or missing.

Extended instructional time

Reforms that focus on increasing students' instructional time show considerable promise for positively impacting students' course access and achievement. These policies take various forms, including "double-doses" of specific curricular content, longer school days, longer school years, and/or summer school or afterschool programs. While little of this research has focused on students classified as English Learners specifically, positive effects or associations have been found for the general population of students, as well as for lower-performing students specifically.²² For example, an impact evaluation of a state-level reform that extended the school day by one hour for elementary schools with low reading indicators demonstrated a significant benefit to student outcomes.²³ Many factors likely influence the effect of extended instructional time on student outcomes such as the quality of the learning opportunities available to students during this additional time.

For students classified as English Learners specifically, extended learning time through summer programs has been shown to help newcomer students complete more courses and increase awareness and enrollment in higher-tracked courses.²⁴ Since students classified as English Learners may have less space in their schedules because of dedicated ELD classes, extended instructional time can provide additional opportunities for students to access courses they may not otherwise be able to access.

Evidence suggests that extended learning opportunities may be an important option to increase course access. However, there is more to learn about the specific programmatic features of quality extended learning opportunities for secondary students classified as English Learners.

School composition

Research on the effect of school composition on student outcomes finds that more integrated schools benefit course access for underserved students.²⁵ Although the Supreme Court ruled against segregation more than 60 years ago, *de facto* school segregation across and within schools continues. District—and state—policies such as student assignment plans that use attendance-zone boundary mechanisms or socioeconomic characteristics of students' families, can have a large impact on school composition.²⁶

Racial and economic segregation across schools is linked to lower course access for underserved students.²⁷ Southworth and Mickelson found that Black students are less likely to be enrolled in college preparatory tracks at schools with higher concentrations of Black students.²⁸ Similarly, Hodara and Pierson found that students were less likely to participate in advanced courses at schools with higher concentration of economically disadvantaged students.²⁹ Racial and economic segregation is also associated with higher dropout rates and lower graduation rates for underserved students.³⁰

Segregation across schools can impact course access in multiple ways. First, schools that serve a higher concentration of students of color

or economically disadvantaged students on average offer fewer advanced courses.³¹ Fewer seats available in advanced courses means that underserved students have fewer opportunities to participate. Second, school segregation is associated with wider achievement gaps for underserved students. This means that the more segregated a school is, the larger the achievement gaps between traditionally served and underserved groups of students.³² As noted earlier, lower achievement in prior years can influence future course access.

However, the influence of school composition on the outcomes of students classified as English Learners may be more nuanced. School and district leaders in communities with higher concentrations of students classified as English Learners (or students who speak the same non-English home language) may be more likely to target resources and services for those students. Likewise, students in schools with high concentrations of students classified as English Learners may benefit from strong social networks among families and community members.³³ For example, Callahan and colleagues found that Mexican-origin students benefited from English Learner classification with regard to math and science course enrollment, but only in schools with higher concentrations of immigrant students and students classified as English Learners.³⁴ On the other hand, students classified as English Learners may, like other historically underserved groups, suffer from segregation due to their concentration in underfunded and underresourced schools.³⁵

Overall, research provides evidence that more integrated schools benefit underserved

students. While more research is needed, limited evidence suggests that school composition can impact course access for students classified as English Learners though potentially in nuanced ways.

School and Programmatic Decisions

Turning to the second policy domain, we explored how school and program-level levers may influence course access for students classified as English Learners. Such levers include changes in course offerings, the presence of college preparatory programs, and reforms that influence class composition.

Advanced course offerings

Initiatives aimed at increasing advanced course offerings are theoretically linked to increased course access for students classified as English Learners because they increase the supply of advanced courses and provide more course options. However, there is no research that explores the relationship between schools' advanced course offerings and course access for students classified as English Learners specifically. The research that does exist finds inconclusive results. Results from a statewide study in Texas found that students completed more advanced courses at schools that offered more advanced courses.³⁶ However, other studies have found that adding more advanced courses does not guarantee that more historically underserved students will enroll in these advanced courses.³⁷ Expansion of course offerings is more likely to result in greater access and enrollment among historically underserved groups when schools prepare teachers to support these students, and when students are adequately prepared to meet the rigors of

advanced courses.³⁸ Increasing the supply of course offerings, therefore, likely needs parallel efforts to ensure students classified as English Learners enroll and succeed in these courses.

College preparatory and academic enrichment programs

Multiple studies of college preparatory and academic enrichment programs provide evidence that these programs can positively impact course access and achievement for a broad group of underserved students. This suggests that such programs may support access to and success in advanced/core courses for students classified as English Learners. College preparatory and enrichment programs may benefit historically underserved students by providing information about the courses students need for college and encouraging students to enroll in more advanced courses. These programs may also provide academic supports such as tutoring that may promote higher achievement, thus opening opportunities for advanced courses. Results from meta-analytic and quasi-experimental studies have found that students who participate in college preparatory programs are more likely to enroll in upper track and advanced placement courses, succeed in science and math courses, graduate from high school, and attend college.³⁹

More research is needed on whether, and under what conditions, these programs impact students classified as English Learners specifically. While one study found positive effects of a college preparatory program for both students classified as English Learners and students who are not classified as English Learners, another found that positive effects were uniquely concentrated among African American students.⁴⁰

While there is more to learn about how this lever influences course access for students classified as English Learners specifically, the current research provides evidence that these programs can positively impact underserved students.

Course placement policies

Research finds that schools have distinct course placement policies for students classified as English Learners and that these policies directly impact course access. Schools can support course access for students classified as English Learners by avoiding practices that track students into lower-level courses or that outright exclude them from core content. For example, Estrada compared the curriculum streams into which students classified as English Learners were placed in four middle schools across two school districts.⁴¹ Findings indicated that the four schools varied widely in the extent to which students classified as English Learners had access to mainstream core content courses.

Two prominent English Learner course placement policies include placement in “sheltered” classes, and placement in lower-track classes. In some schools, students classified as English Learners are placed in separate sheltered content courses until they reach a particular level of English proficiency.⁴² While the intent of these sheltered courses is to ensure that content is accessible to students classified as English Learners, teachers report that these courses are often less rigorous, and students report that the courses are stigmatized spaces.⁴³ In other cases, students classified as English Learners are placed disproportionately or exclusively in lower-level academic courses.⁴⁴ This typically occurs when higher-level academic classes are equated with higher-level English language demands or, relatedly, students with lower

English proficiency levels are assumed to have less academic ability.⁴⁵ This practice or policy may apply to all students classified as English Learners or may be instituted for students classified as English Learners with particular levels of English proficiency.⁴⁶ In one example, Kanno and Kangas document how students classified as English Learners who were reclassified out of English Learner status were automatically transitioned from sheltered content classes into remedial content classes, suggesting that sheltered classes, in that school, were considered lower track than even remedial courses.

Another troubling English Learner course placement policy in some schools relates to exclusion from specific content areas for students classified as English Learners, based either on English Learner status or English proficiency level. Estrada’s study, for example, found that some schools did not enroll students classified as English Learners in core English language arts classes until they reached a specified English proficiency level, a finding that is echoed in other research.⁴⁷ By definition, these restrictive English Learner course placement policies directly limit course access for students classified as English Learners.

A final English Learner course placement policy that is growing in prevalence is co-teaching.⁴⁸ In this model, teachers with specialized training in working with students classified as English Learners work with content teachers to deliver instruction. Typically, the language specialist and content teacher are both present in the classroom, though the roles and responsibilities of each may vary considerably.⁴⁹ In cases where students are able to receive credit for both ELD and for content when enrolled in a co-taught course, then co-teaching may

expand course access for secondary students classified as English Learners by eliminating the need for students to enroll in a separate ELD course. Existing literature about co-teaching for students classified as English Learners primarily draws on qualitative methods, most frequently documenting the foundations needed for this instructional approach and the implementation challenges that teachers encounter.⁵⁰ Two descriptive studies found positive benefits of co-teaching for students classified as English Learners, but both studies were focused on the elementary level.⁵¹

In summary, school-level course placement policies can directly impact course access for students classified as English Learners in both positive and negative ways by directly shaping students' access to specific courses, tracks, and content areas.

Bilingual instruction and programs

Research has documented that bilingual education, on average, has a positive impact on academic and English proficiency outcomes for students classified as English Learners, and a positive impact on students' proficiency in the program partner language.⁵² Bilingual education programs may impact course access for students classified as English Learners in two different ways.

First, both descriptive and quasi-experimental research have shown that by middle school, students classified as English Learners who participated in bilingual programs in elementary grades are more likely to have attained English proficiency and been reclassified compared to their English Learner-classified peers who did not participate in bilingual programs.⁵³ As

discussed above, English Learner status can result in exclusionary tracking and other restrictive course placement practices. The fact that students who participated in bilingual programs are less likely to remain classified as English Learners in middle school suggests that they may have greater course access.⁵⁴

Second, bilingual instruction at the secondary level may allow students classified as English Learners to enroll in rigorous content courses taught in their home language that might otherwise be inaccessible. While most bilingual programs in the United States are at the elementary level, there are a growing number of programs at the secondary level.⁵⁵ In addition to full-fledged two-way immersion programs, some schools offer content courses in newcomer students' home languages. For example, a network of schools in California used curriculum materials developed in Mexico to provide newcomer students access to rigorous science and math content in Spanish.⁵⁶

While the impact of bilingual education on course access for students classified as English Learners is yet unclear, an abundance of research demonstrates positive impacts for students classified as English Learners in a range of other outcomes.

Class and peer composition

Research that explores the effect of classroom-level composition finds that more integrated classrooms improve academic achievement for students classified as English Learners. School decisions regarding English language supports for students classified as English Learners often influence the composition of individual classrooms.⁵⁷ For example,

schools may decide to purposefully concentrate students classified as English Learners into specific classrooms to facilitate content delivery. On the other hand, schools may decide to distribute students classified as English Learners across classes to enable fuller access to English-proficient peers.

Separating students classified as English Learners from English-proficient peers has been found to have a negative impact on English development and academic achievement.⁵⁸ Estrada and colleagues found that higher concentrations of students classified as English Learners in classrooms was associated with lower academic achievement and English development for students classified as English Learners.⁵⁹ Segregating students classified as English Learners into their own classes reinforces the stigma associated with English Learner classification and this may influence teacher and institutional behaviors that limit opportunities for students classified as English Learners.⁶⁰ For example, segregated students classified as English Learners may experience courses that cover less rigorous content instruction.⁶¹ Conversely, students classified as English Learners have been shown to benefit academically when they interact with English-proficient peers.⁶² Interactions with English-proficient peers help students classified as English Learners accelerate their English language development because they have opportunities to engage in more complex oral and written exchanges, as well as receive corrective feedback.⁶³

While research is needed about the effects of class composition on future course enrollment, class composition does directly impact content exposure, peer access, and academic achievement for students classified as English Learners.

School Staffing

The last domain of malleable levers associated with course access that we explored is school staffing. This includes educators' professional training, characteristics, and working conditions. In our review, we focused on how teachers' characteristics and beliefs influence student course access. States, districts, and schools can shape the characteristics of their educator workforce by prioritizing certain professional training and certain linguistic and cultural assets in their hiring practices. They can also mandate or provide specific learning opportunities for their current teachers.

As gatekeepers in the student scheduling process, counselors also play an important role in students' course access, including among students classified as English Learners. States, districts, and schools have the ability to plan and/or alter the way they manage counselor assignments and counselor caseloads.

Teacher professional training and characteristics

Academic outcomes for students classified as English Learners improve when they are taught by teachers who are better prepared to serve students classified as English Learners and/or taught by teachers who share their racial, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds. Several studies have shown that teachers with professional preparation to work with students acquiring English are more effective at improving academic achievement of students classified as English Learners.⁶⁴ For example, Loeb and colleagues showed that students classified as English Learners taught by teachers with a bilingual certification had faster academic growth.⁶⁵ In addition, Tong and colleagues demonstrated that concentrated

professional development changed teacher practices in ways that improved outcomes for students classified as English Learners.⁶⁶ While these studies do not examine the impact of teacher preparation on course access for students classified as English Learners, it is plausible to think that teacher preparation can influence course access. Namely, if students classified as English Learners have higher achievement because of having more highly skilled teachers, they may be more likely to have fuller course access in subsequent years.

A second body of work has explored the impact of having teachers who shared students' racial, ethnic, or linguistic characteristics.⁶⁷ In general, these studies find beneficial effects when teachers and students share these characteristics.⁶⁸ Studies looking specifically at course access have found that underserved students with same-race teachers had higher likelihoods of accessing advanced courses in subsequent years; in addition, the availability of same-race teachers in advanced courses increased the probability that underserved students enrolled in these courses.⁶⁹

Teacher perceptions of students classified as English Learners may also matter for course access. In general, teachers tend to have negative perceptions of their students classified as English Learners. However, teachers with training to work with students classified as English Learners and those who share background characteristics with their students have been shown to have more accurate and favorable perceptions of students classified as English Learners.⁷⁰ Because teachers play a critical role in recommending students to advanced

courses, their beliefs about their students may impact student outcomes, including course access.⁷¹

In sum, teachers who complete professional preparation to work with students classified as English Learners and who share students' linguistic or cultural assets positively impact students classified as English Learners. These positive impacts could translate to greater course access. However, more research is needed to understand if that link exists.

Counselor caseload

Research on counselor caseload finds that smaller counselor caseloads positively influence course access for underserved students. Counselors are key figures because they are often responsible for student course placement, and counselors may use their role to help, or restrict, underserved students' access to advanced courses.⁷² Results from multiple studies conclude that lower counselor caseloads are associated with higher levels of college preparation and postsecondary enrollment for students.⁷³ However, research has not examined students classified as English Learners specifically. If counselors are pressed for time, they may choose to focus their energy on students who they perceive have higher likelihood of success, which, due to both educator bias and patterns of lower achievement, may disproportionately disfavor students classified as English Learners.⁷⁴

Counselor professional development around English Learner education, shared characteristics with students classified as English Learners, and/or the amount of time counselors spend

with individual students classified as English Learners might all be related to course access for students classified as English Learners. With lower caseloads and/or greater understanding

of and connection to students classified as English Learners, counselors may be more likely to place students classified as English Learners in full course loads and higher-track classes.

Conclusion

State- and district-level policies, school and programmatic decisions, and school staffing all likely influence course access in middle and high school for students classified as English Learners. This is of critical importance because course access impacts students' opportunity to learn, as well as their ability to graduate from high school and attend college. This research brief identified specific levers that are within educators' and policymakers' control and that can influence course access for students classified as English Learners. However, this research is limited, with many correlational studies and many studies that do not specifically examine students classified as English Learners.

We classified eleven levers into four ratings: those in which there is evidence that the lever impacts course access for students classified as English Learners; those where the lever impacts academic outcomes more generally for students classified as English Learners; those in which the lever has been shown to impact other historically underserved students' course access; and those levers that, in theory, impact

course access for students classified as English Learners but where either research is scarce or findings are inconclusive. While our scan clearly indicates that more research is needed linking levers directly to course access for students classified as English Learners, we also find that state and district, school and program, and staffing levers all have potential to improve course access for students classified as English Learners in secondary grades. Thus, with regard to course access, individual policymakers, administrators, and teachers all have the ability to remove barriers and open opportunities for students classified as English Learners.

This research brief is the launching point for forthcoming work from the National Research and Development Center to Improve Education for Secondary English Learners. Using longitudinal data from four states, the Center will conduct new studies to expand the existing knowledge base about how malleable levers influence course access, academic achievement, and graduation for students classified as English Learners.

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