

Researchers give low marks to California's English proficiency test for kindergarteners

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Most of the thousands of four- and five-year-olds who take California's official test for English language proficiency before they start kindergarten are bound to fail that exam, according to a new University of California, Berkeley, study. It found that only 12 percent of those given the up to two-hour-long exam are deemed English proficient.

Lisa García Bedolla, an associate professor at the Graduate School of Education (GSE), and Rosaisela Rodriguez, an academic coordinator there and a research specialist, report that taking the California English Language Development Test "almost guarantees" that a student will be categorized as an English learner. They also point to strong evidence that California schools are misidentifying large numbers of entering kindergarten students as English learners.

In their report for UC Berkeley's Center for Latino Policy Research, the investigators said their findings indicate that scarce school resources are being misdirected, with students receiving instruction inappropriate for their language skill levels as a result.

The researchers examined the 2009-2010 results of the test, which is administered to new public school students in grades K-12 who are identified through a parental home language survey.

The test is designed to identify students with limited English language proficiency and determine their level of proficiency, as well as to assess progress of students with limited English in learning to listen, speak, read

and write in English.

They found that the 12 percent English proficiency results throughout the state dropped to a stunning 6 percent when the large Los Angeles Unified School District – with a 15 percent English proficiency rate – is excluded from the analysis.

“Although it is true that student populations can vary from year to year, we believe it reasonable to assume that the proportion of incoming kindergarteners that will be EL students should be roughly comparable to the proportion of the district as a whole,” they write in their study.

The researchers fault both a four-question home language survey for parents that generally is part of the paperwork required to enroll a kindergartener in public school, and the exam itself.

The survey asks questions about the child’s first language, the language he or she speaks most often at home, the languages the adults speak at home, and what language the parents speak most often with their child.

For most districts, the mention on the survey of any language other than English – or, in some cases, any language in addition to English – triggered the requirement that a child take the test, the researchers said.

The test drew additional fire from García Bedolla and Rodriguez, who contend that a two-hour test for children entering kindergarten is unrealistic, and that test observers reported children crying, hiding under chairs or tables and generally being unable to participate in the exam that is conducted without parents present. The test was recently expanded to include questions that require these pre-kindergarteners to engage in reading and writing, they added.

García Bedolla suggests that the initial parental survey should include

more appropriate questions to gauge school readiness, such as the presence of books in the home and the amount of time parents read to their child. She also says that languages other than English spoken in the home should not automatically be considered detrimental to a child's English proficiency.

In addition, she recommends that after the initial English proficiency assessments, decisions about whether to designate a kindergartener as an English learner consider other information, including parental opinions and teacher observation of students during the first few weeks of school.

García Bedolla said schools have a built-in incentive to test as well as to classify students as English learners. Schools receive \$5 from the state for each test given, get additional federal Title III funding for these students, and, should a large number of kindergarten English learner students test English proficient in third grade, districts are acknowledged for improving their English skills – even if those students were originally misidentified.

The California English Language Development Test was first administered in California public schools in 2001, when it lasted less than half an hour. Since then, it “has just ballooned,” said García Bedolla. The state Department of Education will review the test next in 2013.

“Meanwhile, if we’re right about this, the number of early grade English learners in [California](#)’s public schools may grow exponentially,” García Bedolla said, adding that once a child is designated an English learner, the classification remains with them through third grade.

More information: The report is available [online](#).

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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