

English learners treated differently depending on where they go to school

February 23 2017, by Madeline Mavrogordato , Nicole Geary , Andy Henion



A study by Michigan State University finds that English-learning students are being reclassified differently from school to school, which could affect their success. Credit: Michigan State University

As the number of English learners continues to grow across the nation,

new research indicates these students are being treated differently depending on where they go to school.

Michigan State University researchers found that schools in Texas - second only to California in total number of English learners - vary widely in how they determine if students should be reclassified as English proficient, affecting their chances of success in school and beyond.

An English learner in the El Paso metropolitan area, for example is nearly twice as likely to be reclassified by the end of seventh grade compared to a student performing at the same level in the Rio Grande Valley. Recent changes in federal law require all states to standardize how they identify and reclassify English learners, but Texas has had policies in place since the 1990s.

"If we are seeing this amount of variation in Texas, imagine what we would see in a state where the population is newer and educators have less experience serving immigrants and English learners," said Madeline Mavrogordato, assistant professor of K-12 educational administration and lead author.

At least one in 10 U.S. students is classified as an English learner, compared to 1 in 20 back in 1990.

Being reclassified is a key turning point in a student's educational trajectory, said Mavrogordato. If it occurs too early, English learners could find themselves struggling without the support services they need. If too late, students may be restricted from taking higher-level courses that would prepare them for college.

Mavrogordato used state data to estimate reclassification rates for English learners throughout Texas over seven years. The study, published

in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, is one of the first to examine how reclassification rates vary - and to document how educators make decisions in schools.

Mavrogordato and Rachel White, a MSU doctoral candidate in education policy, observed eight Texas elementary schools while educators conducted annual meetings required to determine the status of English [learners](#). They found clear differences in what happens during the meetings, how technology is incorporated into the process, what data sources are used and ultimately how individual students were reviewed.

In one school, the meeting entailed committee members filling in assessment scores and signing forms, while another school invited each child's teacher to provide input followed by a discussion of the relative assessment data and how best to serve the student in the coming year.

Focus group interviews showed most educators believe they are approaching the reclassification process in the same way. However, Mavrogordato says the likelihood of reclassification in different parts of the state appears to be linked to how educators understand the purpose of the policy and their role in implementation.

"We need to give educators the background needed to understand the spirit of the law," said Mavrogordato. "Since they are the ones implementing policy on the ground, we need to build their understanding of why these policies are in place. Otherwise, we may end up focusing on demonstrating compliance as opposed to truly expanding educational opportunity."

Provided by Michigan State University

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