Study says when to identify students who take longer to be English proficient

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Credit: 123rf.com

Students who begin elementary school and haven't become proficient at speaking English after five years in school should be identified as what educators call "long-term English learners" (LTELs), according to a new

paper from Rice University researchers.

The report from the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC), a program of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research, aims to standardize the definition of an LTEL to help educators identify students who may need more help learning English. It is part of a broader study seeking to better understand students classified as LTELs.

HERC researchers Daniel Potter and Lizzy Cashiola make their recommendation in "Long-term English Learners (LTELs): Predictors, Patterns and Outcomes Brief 1: Defining LTEL," the first report from a larger study of LTELs in 10 Houston-area public school districts.

The paper says the number of students learning English as a second language in Texas has doubled in the past 20 years. Many quickly develop the language skills they need to do English-only coursework and succeed in school. But students who take longer to be reclassified as proficient in English are at risk of struggling throughout their school years.

"Identifying students in need of extra English language support at a specific point in their educational process ensures that the districts have enough time to intervene and provide the support these students need to be successful," Potter said.

One major issue the researchers faced was answering a basic question: When should a student trying to learn English be identified as an LTEL? Among practitioners and researchers, as well as in state and federal guidelines, multiple definitions exist that define students as LTEL after three, five or seven years in school.

Potter and Cashiola said prior research had not systematically investigated the effectiveness of the various LTEL definitions. They

used a number of criteria to compare them, including how the term was used in previous research, alignment with state and federal policy, the ability to accurately predict educational outcomes, and input from area school districts.

"After our research and consultation with school district personnel, we determined that the right time for schools to identify students as LTELs and step in with extra support is if they have not reclassified as English proficient after five years," Cashiola said. "Three years proved to be too little time for students to become proficient in the language, and seven years didn't leave enough time for adequate intervention in between middle and high school."

More information: Long-term English Learners (LTELs): Predictors, Patterns, & Outcomes Brief 1: Defining LTEL. herc.rice.edu/research/long-te … rief-1-defining-ltel

Provided by Rice University

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