

How can districts improve newcomer graduation outcomes?



POLICY BRIEF

Exploring Longitudinal Outcomes and Trajectories of English Language Learners (ELOTE)

Steering Committee

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Statement of Issue

High school graduation provides economic and social benefits to individuals. The benefits of graduation extend beyond individuals' higher wages for graduates, because preventing dropouts avoids societal costs in social services, health care, and criminal justice (Belfield and Levin, 2007). Although English Language Learners (ELLs) are a large and growing group within United States high schools, ELLs are much more likely to drop out of school (Rumberger and Lim, 2008). Local school districts must seek new approaches to improve graduation outcomes of ELLs.

This policy brief focuses on a specific subgroup of ELL students: newcomers who enter a school district in the ninth grade knowing little or no English. Many of these immigrant students also have interrupted or limited formal education. In this brief we address two issues within the control of local school districts: 1) how to define and track newcomer graduation rates, 2) how to develop policies at the district level to improve newcomer graduation rates.

The challenges of tracking newcomer graduation outcomes layer on top of the challenges of tracking ELL outcomes. Federal and state accountability systems focus on the graduation rates of cohorts of students defined by the academic year when they were first ninth graders. Each cohort is then adjusted in two ways: 1) additional students are included when they enter the district in later grades; or 2) students are excluded if they exit the district, for reasons such as transferring to another district or moving to their country of birth. ELLs constitute a continually changing subgroup because each year some of them are reclassified as English proficient.

An additional challenge stems from the federal definition of "immigrant" given in *No Child Left Behind* as students who "(A) are aged 3 through 21; (B) were not born in any State; and (C) have not been attending one or more schools in any one or more States for more than 3 full academic years." This definition, used for federal funding allocations, poses a challenge in calculating graduation rates. An unintended consequence is that ninth grade newcomers are not counted among immigrants for four-year graduation rates. This feature means that newcomers can get lost as a separate category of students. Therefore, districts must develop systems to ensure that newcomers are followed through the high school years.

The current policy brief grows out of the Exploring Longitudinal Outcomes and Trajectories of English Language Learners (ELOTE) Researcher-Practitioner Partnership between WestEd and the Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD). The first phase of ELOTE explored the outcomes of a cohort of ninth grade newcomers in FWISD. In FWISD, the articulated program for ninth grade newcomers is distinct from options provided in other districts and states. All new ninth graders attend the International Newcomer Academy (INA) for one year, and some students with limited or interrupted formal education remain there an additional year. After INA, students attend high school campuses based upon their geographical area of residence, or a program at Success High School if they are over-age. Although these programs are designed to provide optimal educational experiences for ELLs, the dispersal of students across campuses makes tracking groups of students more difficult. This policy brief makes recommendations to ameliorate the situation in FWISD, which may also be useful to other school districts around the country.

Overview of Literature

Overall, few studies have focused on newcomers who arrive in the later grades through to graduation. In this section, we summarize what is known about graduation outcomes of newcomers. Although there has been a growing number of longitudinal studies on ELLs, these studies focus mostly on cohorts of students initially classified as ELLs in the elementary grades (e.g., Thompson, in press; Umansky & Reardon, 2014; Valentino & Reardon, 2015; Slama, 2014). Most studies have focused on proximal outcomes, such as English proficiency growth, but one study found that students who are reclassified in earlier grade levels as English proficient are more likely to graduate than students who remain ELLs (Flores, et al., 2012).

Focus on adolescents. A few studies have focused on adolescent ELLs, but these some of these studies focused on cohorts that began before students were in high school age. For example, the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation study (LISA) (Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2008) tracked a cohort of immigrant students over five years through their teenage years, but started at a mean age of 11. LISA's findings emphasized the importance of supportive relationships in sustaining students' academic performance. LISA did not, however, extend to graduation from high school.

Another study examined the English language proficiency growth of ninth grade students (Slama, 2012), comparing foreign-born and United States-born ELL students. This study found that although foreign-born students start out with lower levels of English proficiency, they do catch up to their U.S.-born peers within four years. The findings of this study do not reach to graduation, and because students are identified by nativity, many foreign-born students may not be newcomers in the sense of having only been schooled for three years in the United States.

Short and Boyson (2012) have pointed out the need for better longitudinal tracking of newcomer outcomes in district systems where they attend multiple schools. One of their key considerations was program configuration, including programs-within-a-site, separate-site programs, and whole-school programs for newcomers. Dabney (2015) indicates that teacher placement practices and policies may limit newcomers' access to challenging instruction and coursework in comprehensive high schools. While these results reiterate the importance of opportunities to learn (e.g., Callahan, 2005; Callahan, et al., 2009; Callahan, et al., 2010), they do not reflect our area of concern, the summative outcome of graduation.

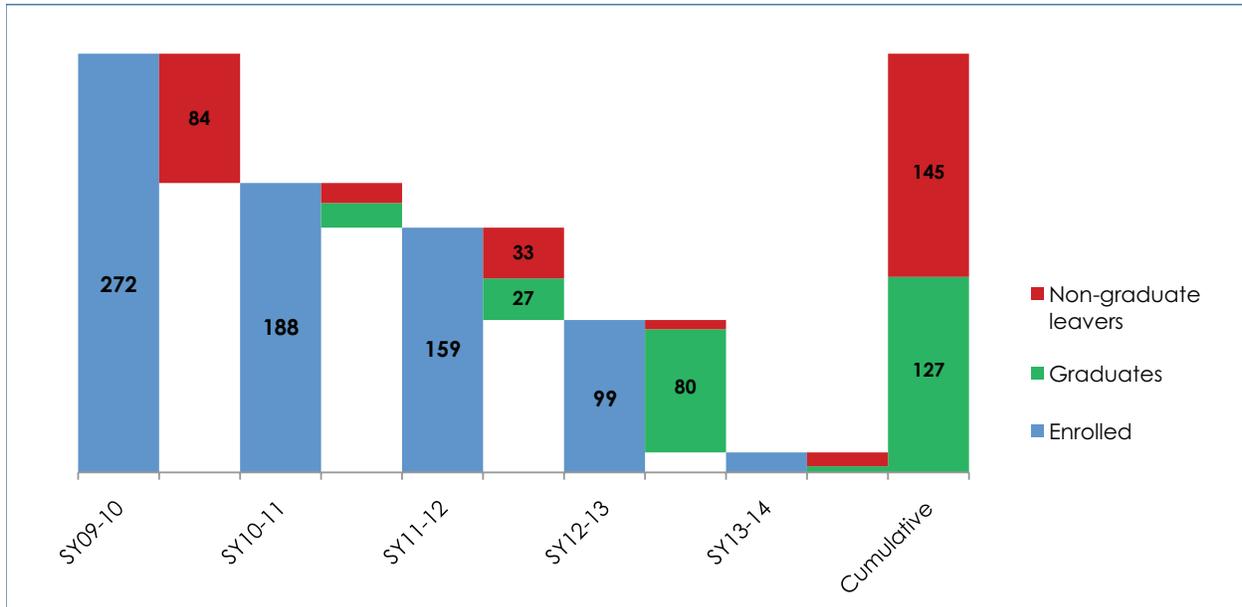
Graduation outcomes for immigrants. Only two published studies have analyzed and compared graduation outcomes for different groups of high school ELLs. Gwynne, et al. (2012) tracked the trajectories and outcomes of a single cohort of ninth graders. They identified multiple subgroups based upon ELL status, including "new ELLs". New ELLs were identified as ELLs after the sixth grade and likely were immigrant newcomers. Although new ELLs had ninth grade performance comparable to their peers, their four-year and five-year graduation rates were significantly lower. This difference suggests new ELLs may face different challenges in achieving high school graduation.

Fine, Stoudt, and Futch (2005) compared graduation rates for schools that were members of the Internationals Network for Public Schools –which serve adolescent newcomers- with graduation rates of ELLs in the rest of New York City. Students attending the Internationals schools graduated at much higher rates than both ELL students and never-ELL counterparts. The admission criteria for these schools, however, require students to be within four years of immigration into the country, meaning that the Internationals schools do not solely enroll students who have just arrived to the United States.

Results from ELOTE Phase One

Phase One of ELOTE tracked one cohort of 275 newcomer students who first enrolled at the International Newcomer Academy as ninth graders in 2009-2010. For each student, an enrollment history at the different campuses was compiled. The rate of attrition after the first year was large (31%). When the total number of newcomer students is used as the cohort, the graduation rate is 47%, but this percentage is difficult to compare with other reported graduation rates because it uses an unadjusted cohort. Specifically, of the 84 newcomer students who left FWISD after one year, approximately one half left for specific reasons that would have caused them to be excluded from the cohort. Figure 1 provides a way of visualizing the outcomes of this cohort over time.

Figure 1. Outcomes of INA Ninth Graders



By comparing patterns of leaving and graduation among newcomers and other ELL subgroups, districts can target interventions to the critical junctures when students are most vulnerable to dropping out. Among the newcomers who left the district after one year (31%), some subgroups left at higher rates, including female students (36%), and students who were born in Somalia (69%), Iraq (50%), Burma (36%), and the United States (35%).

Of the 188 students who remained in the district a second year, some remained at INA while others transferred primarily to five campuses. In order to calculate graduation rates for each of these campuses, we decided to assign students to the cohort at the last school in which they were enrolled in the district (Table 1).

Table 1. School enrollment and graduation outcomes among the study sample

CAMPUS	Graduates	Enrollment	Rate
Success	48	68	71%
Polytechnic	20	30	67%
South Hills	16	23	70%
Arlington Heights	10	14	71%
Carter-Riverside	7	9	78%
Diamond Hill-Jarvis	7	7	100%
North Side	7	11	64%
Eastern Hills	3	4	75%
INA	2	3	67%
Dunbar	1	3	33%
Paschal	1	6	17%
Southwest	1	1	100%
O D Wyatt	1	8	13%
New Lives	0	1	0%
Total	124	188	66%

We consulted data from other large Texas school districts in order to get a better sense of how FWISD newcomers compare in relationship to newcomers in those districts. We used Texas Education Agency reports for the Dallas, Houston, and Austin Independent School Districts (Table 2). The size of cohort for class of 2013 in FWISD is reported as less than 100, which is much smaller than the cohort of 275 newcomer students who entered in 2009-2010. It is likely that this discrepancy is due to the federal definition of “immigrant”, which only considers students to be “immigrant” for three years of enrollment in United States schools. These comparisons reiterate the need for district to develop measures that are different from those required for state and federal accountability.

Table 2. Texas Education Agency Longitudinal Graduation Rates for “Immigrant” Ninth Graders

	Number	Graduation Rate
Fort Worth ISD	<100	58%
Dallas ISD	<150	55%
Houston ISD	<350	31%
Austin ISD	<100	63%

A further challenge of using this data is that the federal category of “immigrant” excluded United States-born students. In FWISD, however, students who may have been born in the United States and then emigrated to another country before re-entering the United States and the district are part of this denominator and thus these students are placed at INA. Indeed, there were 23 such individuals in the 2009-2010 cohort.

Recommendations and Implications: What can districts do?

Track ninth grade newcomers as a specific category. As shown from the reports analyzing ninth grade newcomers in the FWISD, ninth grade newcomers face their own unique educational challenges. For instance, because they are new to the US educational system, they have not received as much instruction in English. Newcomers also have their own unique experiences by first enrolling in the International Newcomer Academy. For these reasons, and to better understand the impacts of attending INA, it would be useful to track the outcomes of ninth grade newcomers as a specific category of English language learners. This category is particularly necessary as it does not appear that the federal “immigrant” category adequately captures this subgroup.

Use the last-school-enrolled method for tracking newcomer outcomes. The district currently does not have any measures for tracking graduation rates of newcomers. Because all ninth graders attend INA, a different measure is needed to track graduation outcomes. Given that newcomer students are mobile and may be enrolled in multiple campuses, using the campus of enrollment in their second year may not make sense. Since a student graduates from the last school he or she is enrolled in, assigning students to campus cohorts where they are last enrolled in the district is a consistent means of constructing cohorts. This method would also be consistent with adjustment methods used federally.

Provide schools with updated information regularly. Given the ubiquity of educational data being collected and stored, including attendance, course enrollment, achievement on standardized testing, receipt of support services, disciplinary data, and so on, it becomes even more imperative that districts are able to transfer that data to the schools and teachers that are best able to use it. An example would be to share with counselors data on ELL students such as how many days of school have been missed over the semester, academic test score data (both standardized testing as well as formative/benchmark/interim assessments), and course trajectory information (such as ELL students who are not enrolling in rigorous academic courses). Counselors, teachers, and other support staff can use this specific data on ELL students to ensure the best possible outcomes for these students.

Attend to heterogeneity across subgroups. High school ELL students (and the different categories of students who were formally and still are considered ELL students) comprise an interesting and important subpopulation of students to examine. An examination across the different groups of ELLs may be worth exploring in future data analyses. For instance, how do ninth grade newcomer ELLs differ academically from ninth grade ELLs who entered the district in elementary school? Similarly, are ninth grade newcomer ELL students more likely to reach proficiency (and do so more quickly) than ninth grade ELL students who were classified in elementary school?

Conclusion

This brief has articulated the need to focus on the outcomes of a particular group of students, those who arrive to the district in the ninth grade and must graduate within four years. Continued attention on the outcomes of this subgroup, combined with ongoing monitoring and targeted interventions can potentially improve graduation outcomes for newcomers and provide society with the benefits of increased graduation rates.

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