

# RESEARCH BRIEF

Oregon School Readiness Research Consortium

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## ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER STUDENTS ENTERING KINDERGARTEN IN OREGON

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English Language Learners (ELLs) are a culturally and linguistically diverse population in US schools and include about 10% of the nation's K-12 students. In the state of Oregon, ELLs comprised 19% of kindergarten students in the 2013-2014 school year and about 10% of all K-12 students. Of ELLs in kindergarten 74% are identified as Spanish-speaking, 78% identify as Latino, and 83% are classified as low-income children as determined by qualifying for free/reduced-price lunch.

ELLs enter kindergarten with a range of academic, self-regulation, and linguistic skills, but there are clear discrepancies in the achievement of ELLs when compared to non-ELLs. To better understand how to support ELLs as they make the transition to kindergarten, this research brief will:

1. define ELLs under federal laws
2. examine how ELLs are performing on Oregon's Kindergarten Assessment (KA) and
3. examine how English Language Proficiency is related to the performance of ELLs on the Oregon Kindergarten Assessment.

### Who are English Language Learners?

The ELL federal definition has specific policy implications for services provided by schools for these students. According to the federal definition, an ELL is defined as an individual:

*“(A) who is aged 3 through 21...whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; and (D) whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual — (i) the ability to meet the State’s proficient level of achievement on State assessments described in section 1111(b)(3); (ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or (iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society”*(Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 2016).

It is important to note that although the federal definition includes individuals aged 3 through 21, there are no federal regulations that mandate the identification and services for ELLs until entry into K-12 schools.

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### **English Language Learners' Performance on the Oregon Kindergarten Assessment**

The Oregon Kindergarten Assessment is composed of three measures: early math, early literacy (including letter sounds and letter names), and approaches to learning (including self-regulation skills and interpersonal skills). Using data from the 2013-2014 Oregon Kindergarten Assessment, early math skills were assessed using the easyCBM Mathematics available in English and Spanish. Early literacy skills were assessed using easyCBM letter names and letter sounds and were assessed in English. Approaches to learning skills were assessed using a teacher-rated measure the Child Behavior Rating Scale (CBRS).

After controlling for gender and ethnicity we found that:

- In general, ELLs performed significantly lower in early math, early literacy (in English) and self-regulation skills, but not interpersonal skills when compared to non-ELLs.
- When looking specifically at low-income Spanish-speaking ELLs who make up the largest percentage of ELLs in Oregon, low-income Spanish-speaking ELLs performed significantly lower than low-income non-ELLs on early math, and literacy (including both letter names and letter sounds in English), but did not perform significantly lower on teacher-ratings of self-regulation.

These results suggest that although ELLs performed significantly lower on measures of academic achievement, the biggest gaps in achievement were in measures that were language dependent and were only assessed in English, such as the early literacy measure.

These findings highlight the importance of including measures in a child's home languages to obtain a comprehensive picture of the academic and linguistic resources ELLs have as they enter kindergarten.

### **English Language Proficiency and English Language Learners**

When assessing the academic skills of ELLs, it is important to consider English Language proficiency (ELP). ELP is defined as having the English language skills needed to access instruction and meet the language demands of the academic context in classroom settings. Currently there is no consistent national definition of English language proficiency, which can vary by state, district, and school. On average, it takes students 4-7 years to obtain English language proficiency when entering kindergarten as ELLs.

When exploring the relations between ELP and KA in Oregon, children with higher ELP skills scored higher on the Oregon KA. These results highlight the importance of fostering children's language development, both in English and their home languages, to support their academic skills.



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### Implications and Suggestions for Practice:

Because ELLs are entering kindergarten with a range of school readiness and ELP skills it is important to:

- Include measures that assess children's academic skills in English as well as the skills children have in their home languages.
- Promote children's self-regulation and interpersonal skills as they enter kindergarten as a way to support their academic skills.
- Support children's English language development, as well as their home languages development, to capitalize on the linguistic resources of children's home languages.
- Examine the preschool experience of ELLs to understand the services and supports these children receive before entering kindergarten.



### Reference

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