

NEWS RELEASE

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New Study Shows Progress in Reading and Math For English Language Learners in Elementary, Middle, and High School

Stronger Gains in Elementary than in High School But Results Vary Widely Across States and are Difficult to Track

WASHINGTON—April 7, 2010—A new study from the Center on Education Policy (CEP) finds that the percentages of English language learners (ELLs) meeting achievement benchmarks has increased since 2006. According to the study, most achievement trends for ELLs are positive. In the 10 states with the largest number of ELL test-takers, positive trends outnumbered negative trends.

The study, State Test Score Trends Through 2007-08: Has Progress Been Made in Raising Achievement for English Language Learners?, analyzes progress in achievement for ELLs on state tests from 2006—when federal regulations for testing ELLs and determining their progress under No Child Left Behind were finalized—to 2008. The study examines the percentages of ELLs who meet achievement benchmarks in reading and math and the factors that make it difficult to obtain an accurate picture of achievement for this subgroup of students.

These factors include demographic changes, language barriers, and changes in state policies for testing and classifying ELLs. In addition, some states have experienced large fluctuations in the number of ELL test-takers due to many students eventually exiting this subgroup as their English improves, as well as an increase in recent immigrants. As a result, achievement trends may not accurately reflect what students know and can do.

"The test data for ELL students is not as reliable as we hope, but the trend toward higher scores is noteworthy," stated Jack Jennings, CEP's president and CEO. "Even with these data limitations, we can see ELL students doing better."

Overall, the study finds that ELLs have made progress in reaching state proficiency benchmarks in reading and math in elementary, middle, and high school, although more gains were made at the elementary and middle school levels. In grade 4, increasing percentages of ELLs have reached three achievement levels—basic, proficient, and advanced— with the highest proportion of states making gains at the proficient level.

However, according to the study, very large differences in percentages proficient exist between ELLs and non-ELLs. In high school reading, for example, 27 states have differences of more

than 30 percentage points between ELLs and non-ELLs, and 18 states have differences of more than 40 percentage points. Differences in test performance for high school students are smaller, however, in math than in reading.

The percentages of ELL students who achieve the proficient level also vary widely by state. CEP found that the percentages proficient in states for high school reading ranged from 6 percent in one state to 87 percent in another, whereas the comparable range for non-ELLs was a low of 38 percent proficient to a high of 95 percent. In elementary math, the findings were similar. The percentage proficient for ELLs ranged across states from 14 percent to 87 percent, and for non-ELLs from 42 to 94 percent.

"The differences among states in the methods used to identify ELLs account for a portion of the disparities in achievement," Jennings said. "But the very low percentages of ELLs reaching proficient in some states are still a cause for concern."

The full report, State Test Score Trends Through 2007-08: Has Progress Been Made in Raising Achievement for English Language Learners?, is available on CEP's Web site, www.cep-dc.org.

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Based in Washington, D.C. and founded in January 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national, independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent any special interests. Instead the Center helps citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.