

## Challenges Facing Educators of LEP Students

Six challenges that schools and LEP students may face are delineated by James Crawford (1997). They are as follows:

- Language diversity
- Prior education and poverty
- Ethnic segregation
- Improper assessment and placement
- Parents' English skills
- Shortage of quality teachers of LEP students

First, the language diversity within the schools and U.S. society is a challenge for schools to confront. In many schools with recently arrived LEP students, the staff and school community feel inadequately trained to effectively educate language learners. To address this gap, Title III of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act specifically requires districts to certify that all teachers of LEP students in a language instruction educational program are “fluent in English and any other language used for instruction [by that program], including having written and oral communication skills” (NCLB Act, 2002, Title III, Part A, Sec. 3116 [c]).

Second, LEP students' formal educational level and the level of poverty are perceived to influence their academic performance and achievement. Some researchers indicate that students and their families who are limited English proficient are 12 times as likely to have completed less than five years of schooling than English-proficient students; LEP students are also 50 percent more likely to live in poverty (Crawford, 1997). Other researchers, such as Thomas and Collier (2002), argue that “the strongest predictor of L2 [second language] student achievement is [the] amount of formal L1 [native language] schooling. The more L1 grade-level schooling, the higher L2 achievement” (p. 7). In other words, the number of years of native language schooling—four or more years—has more influence than student socioeconomic status, according to the study.

Student segregation is the third obstacle facing LEP students and school principals. Crawford (1997) reports that in 1991–92, 73 percent of Hispanic children attended elementary and secondary schools with overwhelmingly minority student enrollments. This is an increase of 18 percent since 1968–69. “In 2000, 38 percent of Hispanic students were enrolled in schools where minorities accounted for 90 percent or more of the student body, and 77 percent of Hispanic students were enrolled in schools where minorities made up 50 percent or more of the population” (Llagas, 2003, p. 26). Also, primary LEP students are more than twice as likely to attend inner-city schools with high concentrations of poor and minority students (Crawford, 1997).

The fourth obstacle is directly related to the improper assessment and placement of LEP students. Historically, LEP students have been overrepresented in special education classes (Crawford, 1997). One rationale for this overrepresentation is the improper assessment and placement of LEP students. It will be imperative for principals and teachers to assure that the placement of students is appropriate and based on a well-

designed assessment process. According to Crawford (1997), this inappropriate assessment is compounded when there is a lack of guidance from state education agencies on special education referrals and procedures.

The fifth issue relates to the parents' English skills. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, 28 percent of language minority students live in a household in which no one over the age of 14 speaks English very well. In addition, 25 percent to 33 percent of the parents surveyed rated themselves as fully proficient in English, whereas 40 percent never speak English or rarely speak it at home (Crawford, 1997). Schools can confront this fifth issue in a proactive manner. First, as educators integrate the school's LEP student population into its community, they may need to translate materials and meetings into the languages of its students. A number of multilingual Web and computer-based technologies such as online translators can break the barrier to multilingual communication among schools, teachers, and students. This is true, however, only if the families have access to the translators and if the translators are reliable, accurate, and clear. Teachers need to be cautioned that some of such technologies are highly unreliable and using them may be confounding and misleading. Second, schools can offer adult-level ESL classes at the school. Third, they can share with parents the needed sociocultural knowledge about the schools. Finally, they can invite parents to act as volunteers within the school and provide them with meaningful ways to participate (Crawford, 1997).

The final challenge for educators nationwide is the shortage of well-trained bilingual and ESL teachers. Forty percent of U.S. teachers taught LEP students in 1994; however, only 29 percent had received any training (Crawford, 1997). According to Crawford (1997), the national shortage of qualified teachers for LEP students may be as high as 175,000 teachers. Market Data Retrieval has counted 50,000 qualified teachers for bilingual and ESL classes—"or one for every 100 students with limited English skills" (Zhao, 2002, p. A1). To teach LEP students in average national size classes of 17 students per teacher, about 290,000 teachers would be needed (Zhao, 2002). Due to this lack of properly trained and certified bilingual and ESL teachers, districts tend to rely on uncertified aides to provide instruction to LEP students. The aides' only qualification is that they are able to speak the students' language (Crawford, 1997).

## References

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