

CONDITIONS FOR INCREASING ACCESS, OPPORTUNITY AND ACHIEVEMENT FOR  
ENGLISH LEARNERS: PERSPECTIVES FROM A LOCAL CONTEXT

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A Capstone Project

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Education

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by

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## Abstract

English Learners (ELs) are a large part of the shifting demographic in U.S. public schools. Yet, ELs continue to be impacted by gaps in achievement in accountability measures. This study will inform recommendations to Suburban School District to address disparities in achievement outcomes for ELs by examining how instructional leaders describe the successes they experience and the challenges they face in meeting the needs of ELs. By understanding these conditions, school districts can take action to create policy and policy tools to remove barriers of access, opportunity and achievement for ELs.

*Keywords:* English Learner, English Learner policy, access, policy implementation

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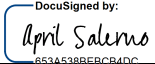

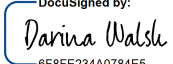
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 Perspectives from a Local Context

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## Dedication

In memory of my father, John Breffni Walsh, whose curiosity and thirst for knowledge fed my own and to my mother, Marie Leclerc Walsh, who continues to model a life of learning, service, compassion, and grace.

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To my committee for their guidance and support throughout this journey: Tonya, for her expertise, ongoing support and understanding, and for pushing me to think and do; April, for her expertise in multilingual learners, for asking thoughtful questions and providing actionable feedback; and Jenn, for coaching me from the start and who I knew, from day one, would find herself on this page.

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## Chapter 1: Problem of Practice

The English Learner (EL) population is rapidly growing and public schools across the United States are becoming increasingly linguistically diverse. In the past two decades, the EL population has increased over 35% (USED, Office of English Language Acquisition, 2022). As of 2019, ELs represented 10% of the US public-school population (NCES, 2022). This demographic shift has called attention to the academic opportunity and achievement gaps that persist between ELs and non-ELs (Callahan, 2005; Goodrich et al., 2021; Kieffer & Thompson, 2018; Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013, Takanishi & Le Menestrel, 2017).

For more than 50 years case law and federal policy have sought to remedy these opportunity disparities to ensure ELs have meaningful and equitable educational experiences (Dabach & Callahan, 2011; Hakuta, 2011; Wright, 2019). United States federal educational policy provides general provisions to ensure ELs <sup>1</sup> have equal educational opportunity and access to the standard curriculum. These policies are reinforced by case law and supplemented by significant guidance at the federal and state level toward ensuring academic achievement for ELs, including ensuring that ELs meet the same academic content and graduation requirements as non-ELs, students who are considered English proficient and have never been identified as ELs (ESSA, 2015).

Ultimately, K-12 school districts and schools are faced with the complex challenge of interpreting and communicating policy as they implement EL programming that meets both

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<sup>1</sup> Policy makers refer to emergent bilingual and multilingual students who are learning English as English learners (Goodrich et.al., 2015). While emergent bilingual and multilingual students are considered more asset based terms (e.g., García & Kleifgen, 2018; Valdés, Menken & Castro, 2015), the term English learner is used in this study to reflect the federal policy language under the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015).

statutory and judicial requirements and the diverse needs of students and schools. The tension between offering language support and timely access to grade-level core content, can in practice, make parity of instruction difficult to achieve (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Dabach & Callahan, 2011; Robinson-Cimpian, et al., 2016).

To ensure equitable educational opportunity and successful outcomes for ELs, school districts must navigate the dual challenge of providing every EL with an educational pathway that provides rigorous content instruction and develops English language proficiency simultaneously (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Callahan et al., 2010). This is not easily achieved, and despite the best intentions, EL program implementation can have the unintended consequence of creating substandard, remedial settings, which do not adequately prepare students to meet academic achievement measures such as high school graduation and post-secondary educational opportunities (Callahan et al., 2010; Callahan & Gándara, 2004; Estrada, 2014). This unintended consequence may reinforce deficit perspectives about ELs' academic potential (Callahan et al., 2009).

### **Problem of Practice**

Suburban School District is a large, diverse, metropolitan school district. Approximately, 50% of the families in the district identify as multilingual and 20% of the students are identified as ELs. ELs are in each of the over 150 schools across the district; however, the number of ELs at each school is equally diverse with some schools having a very small population of ELs (fewer than 10 ELs) and others having very large populations (over 900 ELs). ELs represent over 140 language groups and come to the district with varying educational backgrounds, some with extensive schooling and others with limited or interrupted formal education. Because ELs are not a homogeneous group and school staff have a range of experience in working with ELs, schools

may approach program implementation in different ways to meet their students' needs. And yet, these approaches must meet requirements set forth by federal, state, and local policy.

Districts utilize state guidance to adopt program models that reflect their context (Hopkins, 2016). Toward that end, Suburban School District has published EL programming guidance that draws upon federal and state policy to include both designated and integrated English language development (Suburban School District Language Instruction Educational Program [LIEP], 2017). To realize these goals, the Suburban School District central office has provided a framework for EL programming that includes three core elements: (a) English language development (ELD); (b) content, language & literacy; and (c) systems of support. This framework is grounded in federal and state guidance and in the principles of (a) collective responsibility for EL student learning, (b) integration of language and content instruction, and (c) access to rigor (Suburban School District LIEP, 2017).

And yet, in Suburban School District, ELs underperform non-ELs in all federal accountability indicators measured by the State Department of Education (SDOE): (a) reading, (b) mathematics, (c) science, (d) the federal graduation indicator, and (e) chronic absenteeism (SDOE, 2022). In fact, ELs underperform all subgroups in each indicator, except for students with disabilities, in the areas of reading and mathematics (SDOE, 2022). This is consistent with national trends as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010).

There is an inextricable connection between English language proficiency and academic achievement in U.S. schools demonstrated by the correlation between the level of English language proficiency and performance on standardized achievement measures, such as state content assessments (Hopkins et al., 2013). Saunders and Marcelletti (2013) refer to the EL

achievement gap as “a gap that can’t go away” (p.139). Students who make progress are excluded from the sub-group as they become English proficient (Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013). By definition, students classified as ELs are not proficient in English, and language ability plays a critical role in academic achievement (Kieffer & Francis, 2022; Hopkins et al., 2013). Students who do not make progress towards English proficiency are less likely to have equitable access to the same rigorous instruction as their never EL peers as a result of commitments for English language development instruction (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Dabach & Callahan, 2011; Robinson-Cimpian, et al., 2016).

As students’ English proficiency develops, so does their ability to demonstrate academic success on assessments administered in English (Kieffer & Thomson, 2022). Moreover, ELs who have reached English proficiency outperform their never EL peers on achievement indicators (e.g., content assessments) (Kieffer & Thompson, 2018; Saunders & Marcelletti, 2012). Thus, English language proficiency and progress towards proficiency, are critical factors for ELs in demonstrating success on academic achievement measures (e.g., content assessments, graduation) and achieving equitable outcomes.

In the state in which this study is situated, progress towards English language proficiency is measured by a student’s proficiency level scores from two consecutive year’s administration of the WIDA ACCESS for ELLs assessment (SDOE, 2022). The Consolidated State Plan (2019) under ESSA sets long-term goals and interim progress measures for EL proficiency growth (see Table I). As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic two school years (2019-20 and 2020-21) were waived from accountability (SDOE, 2022). Target percentages were adjusted to reflect the elimination of accountability year 2020-2021 (SDOE, 2022).

**Table 1**

*English Learner Progress Targets*

	Baseline	Year 1 Target	Year 2 Target	Year 3 Target	Year 4 Target
Assessment Year	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2021-2022	2022-2023
Accountability Year	N/A	2018-2019	2019-2020	2022-2023	2023-2024
EL Progress Target	44%	46%	48%	50%	52%

Note. Accountability waiver for assessment years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021

Source: State Department of Education. English Learner Progress.

Despite an accountability waiver, it is important to continue to monitor ELs’ progress towards proficiency, notwithstanding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. As shown in Table 2, the percentage of students making progress towards English language proficiency decreased during the pandemic years and performance in the district, though improving, has not reached pre-pandemic levels (SDOE, 2022). While the district, in the aggregate, has met the state growth target of 50% for the 2021-22 school year, performance across schools is inconsistent ranging from 26% of students making English language proficiency (ELP) growth to 96% of students making ELP growth (SDOE, 2022). Thus, there is the potential for students at different schools to have quite different access, opportunity, and achievement outcomes.

**Table 2**

*Percent of Students Making English Language Proficiency Growth*

Assessment Year	Progress Target	Progress Result
2019	48%	
2020	n/a	58.2%
2021	n/a	34.2%

Assessment Year	Progress Target	Progress Result
2022	50%	51.0%

Program implementation as the instructional choices and practices at the school and classroom level is where policy unfolds. Certain factors, such as the diversity of ELs (e.g., the range of English language proficiency levels, prior educational experience, and length of time in U.S. schools) are outside the locus of control of schools. However, schools control the actions, both incidental and intentional, they take to meet the English language development needs of ELs.

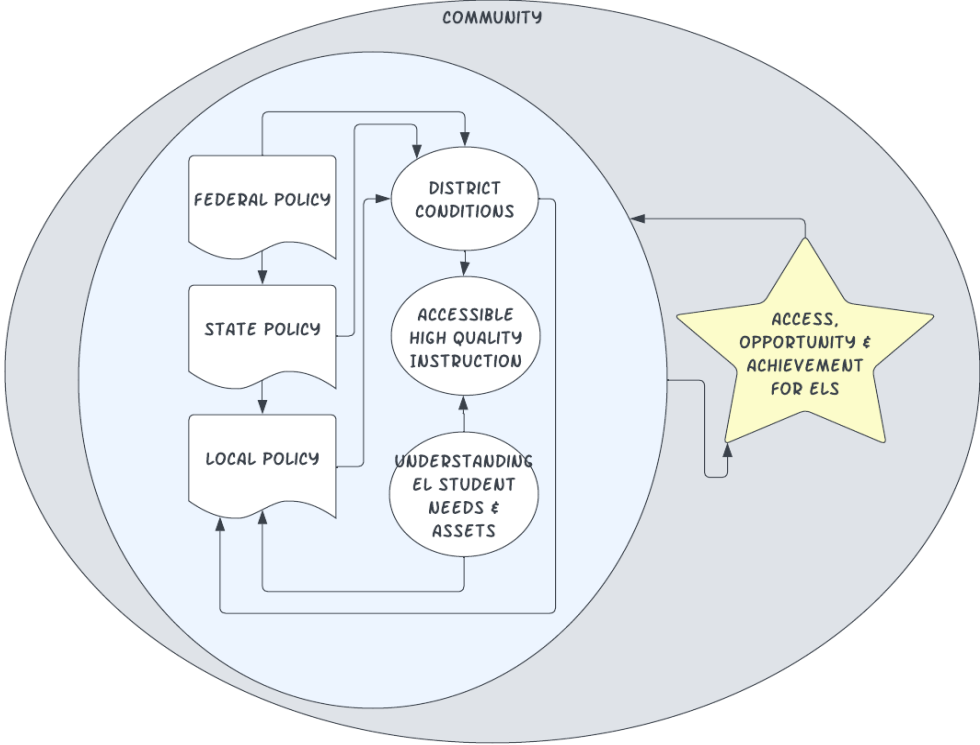
### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework draws upon the work of Umansky and Porter (2020) on state education policy contexts that addresses system barriers to improve ELs’ educational outcomes. In this framework, Umansky and Porter (2020) identify three overarching state principles for education: (a) system conditions, (b) understanding student needs and assets, (c) accessible, high-quality instruction. Within each of these principles are actions that connect policy to these principles. While the actions identified by Umansky and Porter (2020) are meant to inform a comprehensive approach to state EL policy, many of these actions (e.g., EL education funding, teacher preparation and skills, bilingual/ELD instruction, access to core, and addressing diversity in EL skills and needs) can be applied to examine how EL programming goals are understood and realized in the local context. Adapting and applying the three overarching principles of this framework to a local context provide a lens through which to study local education systems and examine the barriers and strengths of local practices and actions in meeting the diverse needs of ELs.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework as applied to the local EL context.



**Figure 1**  
*Conceptual Framework*



The use of this framework in this study will provide a lens to better understand the current state of EL instruction in schools to inform practices to improve access, opportunity and achievement outcomes for ELs. By understanding these conditions, central office administrators may develop policy and policy resources to support implementation in schools (Honig, 2006).

**Research Questions**

This study will examine the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: What areas for consideration do school based instructional leaders identify as contributing to access, opportunity and achievement outcomes for ELs?

- Research Question 2: What do school based EL instructional leaders believe is the district’s role in supporting schools in implementing effective programming to increase access, opportunity, and achievement outcomes for ELs?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will inform recommendations to Suburban School District to address disparities in achievement outcomes for ELs. Understanding the day-to-day realities of program implementation in schools will inform recommendations to address conditions that inhibit access and opportunity for ELs. By gaining a deeper understanding of the post-pandemic conditions in schools (including successes and challenges), recommendations can be made to address system and knowledge gaps to improve achievement outcomes for ELs.

This study is significant in that it can uncover system barriers to improved educational outcomes for ELs. By knowing these conditions, school district leadership can take action to lead the work of removing barriers to access, opportunity and achievement for ELs.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

***English Learner (EL):*** A home language survey is used in each of the fifty states and the District of Columbia to identify potential ELs, students with a primary or home language other than English (Salerno & Andrei, 2021). Federal policy requires that potential ELs are screened for English language proficiency in the four language domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) within 30 days before the start of the school year or 14 days after the school year begins to determine if they are indeed English learners who require language assistance to participate equally in the standard instructional program (DOJ & USED, 2015). Included within the group of students identified as ELs are students who are currently identified as ELs, recently arrived ELs (also referred to as newcomers), students with limited or interrupted formal education

(SLIFE), long-term ELs (LTELs), ELs with disabilities (ELWD) and reclassified ELs. Each of these profiles has different background, skills and experiences and requires instruction that is differentiated to meet those needs (Deussen, Hanson, & Bisht, 2017; Umanksy & Porter, 2020).

***English Learner Programming.*** Federal policy requires school districts to provide ELs programming that is “educationally sound and effective in practice” (USED, Office of Language Acquisition, 2017). Program models, i.e., LIEPs, highlighted by USED in meeting these requirements include (a) English language development (ELD), (b) structured English immersion, (c) transitional bilingual education and (d) dual language programs (USED, Dear Colleague Letter, 2015).

***ELs with Disabilities or Section 504 Plans:*** ELs with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Section 504 Plan, must have access to both EL and special education services. EL teachers and special education teachers collaborate to provide joint services that meet the English language development and instructional needs of all dually identified ELs. Because student goals, services, and supports are defined in the IEP, ESOL teachers should actively participate in the IEP process. (State Department of Education, 2019).

***Long Term English Learners (LTELs):*** Long-Term English Learners (LTELs) is a term that describes ELs who have been enrolled in a U.S. School for six years or more and have not been reclassified as English Proficient (WestEd). Students identified as LTELs may have more developed oral proficiency in English, but do not demonstrate the English language proficiency necessary to meet established state exit criteria on a federally approved annual English language proficiency assessment. In addition, students identified as LTELs may experience academic challenges which contribute to lower graduation rates (Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2011).

Calderón and Minaya-Rowe (2011) contend that to support LTELs, students should receive targeted academic language and literacy instruction based on their individual language goals.

***Recently Arrived ELs:*** ESSA defines recently arrived ELs as ELs who have been enrolled in a U.S. school for less than 12 months. These students are often referred to as Newcomers. Recently arrived ELs are orienting to a new language and a new environment, as well as new ways of academic thinking and learning (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015).

***Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE):*** Students identified as SLIFE are a particularly vulnerable population, a population whose interruption in schooling often sets them up for a delayed pathway to graduation (5-6 years at best). This delay can result in disengagement and poor self-perception (Callahan et al., 2010; Rumberger, 2011). In addition, academic risk for students identified as SLIFE is compounded by transiency and the age at which they enter U.S. (Neild & Farley, 2004). Student mobility may not only impact student behavior but also disrupts student social networks which can decrease student engagement (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Rumberger, 2011). Immigration status and health factors, such as stress, also are risk factors to which this student group is vulnerable (Boden-McGill, et al., 2009; Dupéré, et. al., 2017; Rumberger, 2011).

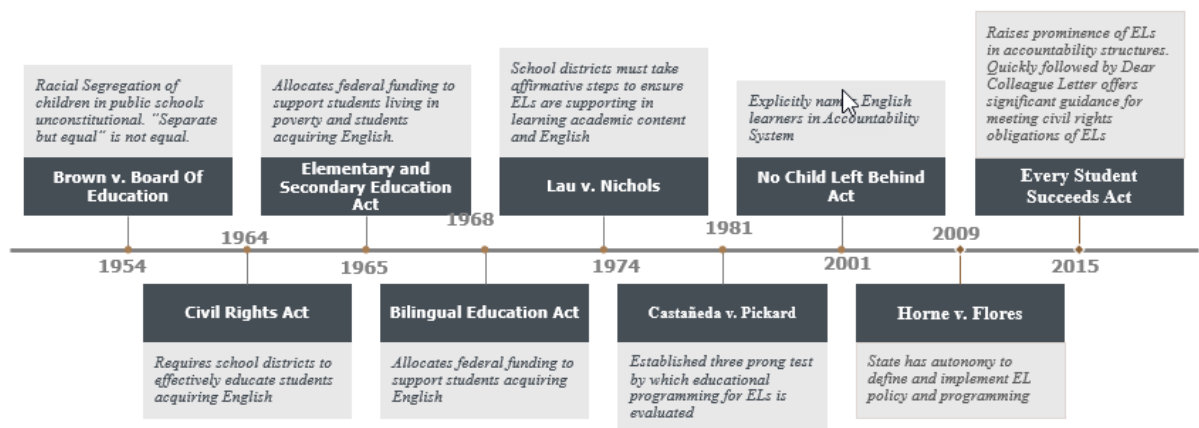
These terms and definitions are reflective of their use in the school context I am studying. The labels we use to describe students have been viewed critically by scholars (e.g., García, 2009; García & Kleifgen, 2018; Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006; Kibler & Valdés, 2016) as the labels used to describe multilingual learners are deficit oriented focusing on what students don't know rather than recognizing the funds of knowledge and linguistic assets that students bring with them to schools.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The civil rights context for ELs has evolved through almost 70 years of education policy. With each amendment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act the responsibility for providing ELs with equal educational opportunities has become more direct and codified into federal legislation (Mavrogordato & White, 2020; Mavrogordato & White 2017; Robinson-Cimpian et al., 2016). Figure 2 shows key federal policy and case law that guides programming and instructional practice for ELs.

**Figure 2**

*EL Policy and Case Law*



While states and localities retain the authority for leading education within their boundaries, federal policy plays a pivotal role both through funding streams and in the protection of constitutionally guaranteed civil rights (*Horne v. Flores*, 2009; Ogletree & Robinson, 2015). While traditionally education policy making was seen as a function of localities, the federal role in education has broadened in the development of policy to ensure equitable services for underrepresented populations (Mavrogordato, 2012).

## **Federal Policy and Case Law**

The following legislative actions and case law provide the historical policy context for underserved populations that have led up to current policy obligations and guidance for EL education.

### ***Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka***

*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* is a landmark decision that held that racial segregation of public-school children as established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) violates the equal protection clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, that separate-but-equal education and services were anything but. This interpretation of the equal protection clause amplified the federal voice in education policy and continues to inform limits to segregated educational settings for students including for students for whom English is a new language.

### ***The Civil Rights Act of 1964***

The *Civil Rights Act of 1964* ushered in equitable educational opportunities for ELs by prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, or national origins and requiring school districts to take affirmative steps to effectively educate students acquiring English in any federally funded program (Robinson-Cimpian, et al., 2016; Gándara, et. al., 2010). The term *national origins* has been interpreted by policymakers and legal authorities to include language discrimination (Gándara, et. al, 2010). However, local sensemaking determines what constitutes affirmative steps (Robinson-Cimpian, et al., 2016; Rodriguez, Carrasquillo & Lee, 2014).

### ***The Elementary and Secondary (ESEA) Act of 1965***

The *Civil Rights Act* (1964) was quickly followed by the *Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) Act* (1965), a Great Society program that allocated federal funding in elementary and secondary schools to support students living in poverty and ELs, among other

vulnerable populations. ESEA increased the federal role in local education and education reform. ESEA focused on correcting language deficits, had limited scope towards advancing bilingualism, and worked toward a primary goal of helping limited English proficient students<sup>2</sup> gain English proficiency (Gándara, et. al., 2010; Robinson-Cimpian, et al., 2016).

### ***Bilingual Education Act of 1968 (Title VII of ESEA)***

The *Bilingual Education Act of 1968* provided funding to support students learning English (Rodriguez, Carrasquillo, & Lee, 2014). Again, the act did not specify the language of instruction, thus leaving the field open for debate. The English-only movement gained momentum at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and successive state mandates and initiatives were instituted that limited or outlawed bilingual education and home-language maintenance programs for ELs in public schools and implemented structured English immersion programs (Gándara, et. al, 2010). As a result, several states have codified English as the language of instruction (Gándara, et al., 2010; Robinson-Cimpian, et al., 2016; Umansky & Porter, 2020). For example, the policy in the state in which this study is conducted does not expressly forbid instruction in a language other than English, it does require that teachers should endeavor to instruct in English with instruction designed to support ELs. Thus, while the state code does not expressly forbid instruction in a language other than English, it certainly privileges English as the language of instruction.

### ***Lau v. Nichols***

The U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) is a landmark case in the provision of services to ELs. The decision held that schools must take affirmative steps to ensure

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<sup>2</sup> Limited English proficient reflects the language of ESEA to describe emergent bilingual or multilingual learners.

that ELs are supported in learning both academic content and English. *Lau* established ELs as a protected class, with guaranteed rights to a meaningful and equitable educational experience as their non-EL peers (Dabach & Callahan, 2011; Hakuta, 2011; Robinson-Cimpian, et al., 2016; Wright, 2019). Callahan & Shifrer (2016) assert that while school districts may comply with the law, they may also limit ELs academically.

Prior to *Lau*, ELs in most schools were placed in general education, or at times, special education classrooms, with no language assistance (Artiles, et al., 2010). *Lau* changed the landscape for EL instruction in the U.S. by communicating that instruction must be adapted for ELs to have meaningful access to the core curriculum (Dabach & Callahan, 2011).

### ***Castañeda v. Pickard***

*Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981) provided additional judicial interpretation of EL instruction establishing a three-prong test by which educational programming for ELs was to be evaluated. The test required instruction for ELs to be: (a) based on sound educational theory; (b) implemented adequately with resources for personnel, instructional materials, and space; and (c) evaluated for its effectiveness in overcoming language barriers (Hakuta, 2011).

The *Castañeda* decision was codified in the Equal Educational Opportunity Act and became the guide for civil rights enforcement regarding the instruction of ELs. In addition, *Castañeda* forged the judicial requirement that ELs attain parity of instruction within a reasonable length of time (Linguanti & Cook, 2013).

### ***The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001***

The reauthorization of *ESEA* as the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001* made strides in explicitly naming English language learners in standards-based instruction, assessment, and accountability systems (Hopkins, et al., 2013; Robinson-Cimpian et al., 2016). Under



NCLB, states were required to monitor and annually assess English learners for English language proficiency (Mavrogordato & White, 2017). States and in some instances, localities retained the authority to determine proficiency criteria (Mavrogordato & White, 2017). Moreover, NCLB failed to recognize the connection between progress towards English proficiency and academic progress – that as English language proficiency increases, so too does EL performance on student achievement measures (Hopkins, et al., 2013).

### ***Horne v. Flores***

The *Horne v. Flores* (2009) decision reinforced that a state has the autonomy to determine educational programming for ELs. Thus, the onus remains on the state (or local district) to define and implement EL programming and policy. While federal policies contain general provisions, state and local educational agencies negotiate meaning using internal and external resources and tools to meet the policy objectives and implement effective programming that meet both students' academic and linguistic needs (Hopkins, 2016; Mavrogordato & White (2020). Although, states are central actors in structuring and monitoring EL programming, they are only in initial stages of developing a cohesive policy approach for ELs (Umansky & Porter, 2020).

### ***The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015***

The subsequent reauthorization as *The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015*, has further highlighted academic opportunity and outcomes for ELs (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016). Under ESSA states are obligated to have a standardized identification process and English proficiency criteria (Mavrogordato & White, 2017). In addition, several requirements of Title III, Part A: Language Instruction for English Learners and Immigrant Students were reassigned to Title I: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged, moving ELs into greater

prominence in accountability structures and into state accountability plans. ELs' inclusion in assessment accountability structures continues to raise issues of ELs' access to and the validity and reliability of standardized academic assessments (Hopkins, et. al., 2013; Robinson-Cimpian, et al., 2016; Umanksy & Porter, 2020). In addition, ESSA reflects a shift in EL assessment by allowing for recently arrived ELs a testing waiver during their first year in U.S. schools and offers opportunity for test accommodations as an attempt to ameliorate concerns of validity and reliability (Umanksy & Porter, 2020). While ESSA brings greater within-state standardization, it still leaves room for local interpretation (Mavrogordato & White, 2017). This is true particularly in the area of program design and instructional practice (Hopkins, 2016).

### ***Dear Colleague Letter***

The U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice issued joint guidance on Jan. 7, 2015, in the form of a *Dear Colleague Letter*. It provided significant guidance to states and districts in how to meet their obligations under ESEA. Additionally, the *Dear Colleague Letter* outlined compliance challenges that school districts continue to experience in meeting the civil rights obligations for the instruction of ELs.

The challenges articulated by the *Dear Colleague Letter* are to:

- (a) identify and assess EL students in need of language assistance in a timely, valid, and reliable manner;
- (b) provide EL students with a language assistance program that is educationally sound and proven successful;
- (c) sufficiently staff and support the language assistance programs for EL students;

- (d) ensure EL students have equal opportunities to meaningfully participate in all curricular and extracurricular activities, including the core curriculum, graduation requirements, specialized and advanced courses and programs, sports, and clubs;
- (e) avoid unnecessary segregation of EL students;
- (f) ensure that EL students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or Section 504 are evaluated in a timely and appropriate manner for special education and disability-related services and that their language needs are considered in evaluations and delivery of services;
- (g) meet the needs of EL students who opt out of language assistance programs;
- (h) monitor and evaluate EL students in language assistance programs to ensure their progress with respect to acquiring English proficiency and grade level core content, exit EL students from language assistance programs when they are proficient in English, and monitor exited students to ensure they were not prematurely exited and that any academic deficits incurred in the language assistance program have been remedied;
- (i) evaluate the effectiveness of a school district's language assistance program(s) to ensure that EL students in each program acquire English proficiency and that each program was reasonably calculated to allow EL students to attain parity of participation in the standard instructional program within a reasonable period of time; and

(j) ensure meaningful communication with LEP (Limited English Proficient) parents (p. 8-9).

Policy evolves through the interplay of policy, policy understanding, and practice (Hopkins, 2016; Wright, 2019). The evolution of the EL policy context illustrates the iterative nature of policy. Beyond legislation and case law policy expands through the negotiated meaning at each layer of the system and their policy implementers, to the tools that are developed and actions that are taken to implement the policy (Fowler, 2013; Spillane, 2004). These tools are crafted by actors throughout the educational system, where sense-making and schema may result in tools, practices or understandings that diverge from the original policy or policy intent (Spillane, 2004; Harklau & Yang, 2020). The tools are then used to inform educators to aid their understanding of policy (White & Mavrogordato, 2019). In a policy as process orientation, the line between policy makers and policy implementers blurs, as policy, people and places interact at the local level (Honig, 2006; Jones, 2013; Spillane, 2004).

Policy implementation continues to be dependent upon local school districts and schools to make sense of and actualize the policy (Hopkins, 2016; Spillane, 2004). Policy interacts with implementers and their context, and through this interaction policy is reinterpreted, reshaped, and reformed (Fowler, 2013; Jones, 2013; Lester et. al., 2016; Spillane, 2008). It is in its implementation that policy may be a perfunctory instrument for accountability or leveraged to transform educational practices (Hopkins, 2016).

### **Understanding EL Student Needs and Assets**

While policy and practice for English learners has historically been approached as instruction for a single group, this population is diverse in their needs and assets (Umansky & Porter, 2020). Context matters in a student's English language proficiency journey and among

the many contextual factors are the diverse profiles of ELs, including a student's length of time in U.S. schools, their English language proficiency level, disability status and prior educational experience (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Umansky & Porter, 2020). Thus, instruction must be differentiated to meet the needs of this diverse group of students.

Because teachers may approach ELs through a deficit-oriented lens, believing ELs should have English proficiency prior to engaging in rigorous content, they may hold a perspective that ELs educational outcomes are a result of a lack of interest in school rather than the quality of the instruction or structural limitations to rigorous instruction and low expectations (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016, Callahan et al., 2010; Callahan et al., 2009; Estrada, 2014, Gándara & Rumberger, 2009, Harklau, 1994). Scholarship has advised against this practice and supports simultaneous language and content learning (e.g., Echevarria & Short, 2006; Lee et al, 2013).

### **English Learner Identification**

The EL subgroup is complex in both its composition and its label. One limitation of the literature pertaining to ELs is the complexity of the term itself. While ESSA (2015) provides general characteristics as a student whose proficiency in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English it is up to state education agencies to refine and operationalize the federal definition (Bailey & Butler, 2007; Kieffer & Thompson, 2022). Thus, who constitutes the EL subgroup shifts from state to state making performance comparisons difficult to accomplish (Bailey & Butler, 2007; Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Callahan et al., 2010; Kieffer & Thompson, 2022; Sheng et al., 2011).

In addition, for federal accountability purposes a student may be included in the EL subgroup for as many as four years after a student is no longer identified as an EL (ESSA, 2015).

Therefore, this group is not only diverse in language and culture but may also include former ELs, long-term ELs, or recently arrived ELs (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Callahan et al., 2010; Kieffer & Thompson, 2022). In addition, the EL subgroup is not stable caused by students exiting the group when designated English proficient, an effect that Hopkins et al. (2013) refer to as a “revolving door” (p.102). The instability of the EL subgroup adds to the complexity of analyzing students’ academic performance outcomes since the students who become English language proficient are no longer calculated as gains in EL student metrics (Kieffer & Thompson, 2022; Sheng et al., 2011; Umansky et al., 2017).

A growing body of literature suggests the use of an ever EL group to examine EL student outcomes (Kieffer & Thompson, 2022; Umansky, Thompson, & Diaz, 2017; Deussen et al., 2017). By using an ever EL framework, a stable group, composed of students who were at any time identified as ELs, is created to measure EL student achievement outcomes (Linquanti, Cook, 2013; Bailey et al., 2016; Umansky et al., 2017). Rather than consistently removing the highest achieving ELs, linguistically and/or academically, from the group the ever EL group is inclusive of current ELs and former ELs (Bailey et al., 2016; Kieffer & Thompson, 2022; Umansky et al., 2017). The current methodology of only including current ELs in the EL subgroup discounts the achievement of reclassified ELs and multilingual learners (Goodrich et al., 2021; Kieffer & Thompson, 2018; Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013).

Umansky, Thompson and Diaz (2017) applied the ever EL group to examine longitudinal data regarding disproportionality in special education. Through a comparison of the current EL and ever EL groups they found that patterns emerged by using a stable group that were otherwise masked. By using the ever EL group, research suggests that the persistent achievement gap for ELs may not be as it seems (Kieffer & Thompson, 2022; Umansky et al., 2017).

Additionally, Kieffer and Thompson (2022) applied the ever EL group concept in a descriptive analysis of NAEP data find that when grouped as a whole multilingual students' (in this case ELs, former ELs and students with a home language other than English) reading and math performance has made greater gains than monolingual students thus narrowing the gap. While it was not possible to apply the ever EL group to this study because of the varying definition of former ELs among states, examining performance by multilingual learners was a close approximation to this group.

Thus, the ever EL group illuminates the possibilities for EL students and highlights the importance of progress towards proficiency in ameliorating disparities in access, opportunity and achievement.

### **High Quality Tier 1 Instruction**

At the heart of civil rights obligations for ELs is access to high quality core (Tier 1) instruction. Leadership attention to and understanding of what constitutes high quality instruction is essential to implementation in schools (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014). ELs have the dual challenge of meeting rigorous academic content standards while simultaneously developing English language proficiency (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016). Successful programs change infrastructure wherein ELs are offered rigorous articulated programming that keeps academic content at the center of instruction and is supported to meet ELs' linguistic needs (Callahan & Gándara, 2004; Callahan et al., 2009). Thus, it is incumbent upon schools to develop instruction for ELs at every level of proficiency that provides access to rigor, and the necessary scaffolds and supports to fully engage in inquiry-based learning, critical thinking, discussion and debate across the curriculum (Callahan et al., 2010).

Instructional models are varied with no guarantees that models for ELs are equal in rigor to the standard curriculum (Callahan et al., 2010). Too frequently, the scaffolds and supports provided to ELs can lead to a reduction in rigor and a simplified curriculum that results in a lack of student engagement and persistent barriers to progress (Callahan, 2005, Callahan et al, 2010, Callahan & Gándara, 2004, Callahan et al., 2010; Robinson-Cimpian et al., 2016; Estrada, 2014).

In addition, ELs may be grouped homogeneously in sheltered courses (Saunders et al., 2013). The impact of homogeneous grouping that occurs in classes or newcomer programming for ELs is significant in that instruction for ELs may be both language and content reduced with limited exposure to language models from English speaking peers, thus limiting access to rich peer-to-peer academic discourse (Callahan, 2005; Short & Boyson, 2012). School teams therefore must balance the need for intensive supports and isolating students from their peers (Short & Boyson, 2012).

Inclusion of ELs in mainstream classrooms, is gaining momentum in the era of accountability and an increasing number of ELs are in mainstream classes (Harper & de Jong, 2009). There is an assumption that the classroom teacher can address ELs achievement through mainstream teaching approaches (Harper & de Jong, 2009). Harper and de Jong (2009), refer to an “idealized norm” of the mainstream classroom and a “one-size-fits-all approach to instruction” (p. 138) that may leave ELs in classrooms that limit opportunity to learn (Harper & de Jong, 2009). Inclusion in classrooms where ELs lack appropriate accommodations results in limited access to the curriculum and opportunity to learn (Robinson-Cimpian et al., 2016).

Because teachers and support staff may perceive ELs from a deficit, *at risk* lens, they may focus on completion goals rather than on academically rigorous coursework (Callahan et al., 2010). Thus, resulting in a lack of student engagement, and persistent barriers to progress and



achievement (Callahan et al., 2010). School staff may equate English proficiency and lack of engagement with limited intelligence and therefore place students in low-track or remedial classes where students have limited access to English proficient peers and rigorous learning experiences and oral discourse (Callahan, 2005; Robinson-Cimpian et al., 2016). Callahan and Shifrer (2016) refer to this phenomenon as *pobrecito syndrome*, as coined by Berzins & Lopez (2001), “wherein educators sympathize, rather than empathize with their students” (p. 468) and lower expectations which lead to equity traps.

Educational programs for ELs that rely on interventions rather than ELD, can limit student access to more advanced curricular streams at the secondary level (Estrada, 2014). However, Callahan and Shifrer (2016) in their study using high school transcript data and student surveys offer evidence of more positive outcomes, access, and opportunity for those students who become English proficient prior to the end of middle school. Placement in these specialized classes or course sequences for ELs, though with the intention of providing valuable linguistic support, can of itself impact opportunity to learn and student achievement both in K-12 and may limit post-secondary options (Callahan et al., 2010; Estrada, 2014). This evidence suggests that a concerted effort to shore up and monitor programming in middle school can mitigate later academic challenges stemming from tracking at high school for re-designated ELs. Thus, schools might-benefit from building learning opportunities which support an integrated approach to EL programming that is intentionally planned to support ELs linguistic needs and the development of content understandings through rigorous, language rich instruction that strengthens the language content connection by developing students’ English and content understandings in tandem (Callahan, 2005).

## **English Language Development**

A variety of curricular and programmatic approaches are used to meet these dual needs, such as content integrated language instruction and courses targeting ELD (Goldenberg, 2013). There is a paucity of research on K-12 ELD instruction – therefore ELD instruction is primarily based on theory and accepted practices (Saunders et al., 2013). That being said, providing ELD is better than not providing it (Saunders et al., 2013).

Two forms of ELD instruction are highlighted in the literature: designated and integrated ELD (Umansky & Porter, 2020). The primary goal of designated ELD instruction is targeted instruction regarding the knowledge and use of English generally with students grouped in classes by English language proficiency level (Saunders et al., 2013). The goal of integrated instruction is to support, through scaffolds and language amplification, ELs' attainment of grade-level content and skills, when English is the medium of instruction (Goldenberg, 2013; Saunders et al., 2013).

Regardless of whether ELD instruction is integrated or designated, ELD should engage students in metalinguistics, the understanding of language use while also focusing on meaning and communication in academic settings (Saunders et al., 2013). In a qualitative study of kindergarten classrooms Saunders, Foorman and Calson (2006) found that ELs in separate ELD blocks with focused oral instruction had significantly higher oral and literacy scores than students who did not. The importance of oral language development is fundamental to the instruction of ELs (Saunders et al., 2006). Students expand their existing linguistic repertoire to meaning make in disciplinary practices and communicate their understandings (Molle & Wilfrid, 2021). Because there is limited time in a school day, there is tension in providing a separate

block of ELD instruction and students may be pulled out of content instruction that would better prepare them to participate in advanced coursework (Callahan et al., 2010).

### **System Conditions and Alignment**

Contemporary education policy aims at large scale systemic improvement with rigorous outcomes for all students and examines the interaction between policy, people, and place (Honig, 2006; Jones, 2013). To implement policy, schools are tasked to simultaneously negotiate competing priorities, the day-to-day reality of schools, and a diversity of implementation tools and instruments (Honig, 2006; Jones, 2013). Because not all states provide ample policy resources districts may face the arduous task of identifying, implementing, and creating EL program models and plans on their own (Hopkins, 2016).

Districts use a variety of programmatic approaches or language instruction educational programs (LIEPs) or models, including (a) transitional bilingual; (b) dual language; (c) newcomer; (d) English language development (ELD); (e) content classes with integrated ELD support (Dear Colleague Letter, 2015). Each LIEP model has distinct features ranging from the student's home language to English as the medium of instruction and from EL only groupings to inclusive settings with EL and non-EL peers. In addition to these sharp contrasts, there are other important distinctions in the goals of each program from supported bilingualism to English proficiency. Even among ELD programs there are distinct goals to either prepare students to meaningfully participate in grade-level curriculum by providing specific language instruction in a EL only setting (ELD) or by providing ELD instruction in either an EL designated or an inclusive setting in tandem with grade-level content and skills (Goldenberg, 2013; Saunders et al., 2013).

## **Alignment of Programming K-12**

Districts need the internal capacity, resources, and tools to negotiate meaning, create structures, and analyze outcomes and effectiveness of EL programming to include equitable access to the standard instructional program (Mavrogordato & White, 2019). Successful programs change infrastructure wherein ELs are offered rigorous articulated programming that is supported to meet their linguistic needs (Callahan and Gándara, 2004).

At the local level educators mediate their understanding of policy to define, operationalize and implement effective programming (Harklau & Yang, 2020; White & Mavrogordato, 2019). Districts utilize state guidance to adopt program models that reflect their context (Hopkins, 2016). Toward that end, Suburban School District has published K-12 LIEP guidance that draws upon federal and state policy to include both designated and integrated English language development (Suburban School District LIEP, 2017). To realize these goals, Suburban School District has flexible programming, to ensure that all ELs, regardless of proficiency level, are provided access and opportunity to participate in grade level instruction with their non-EL peers. As a result, teachers are challenged to meet the instructional needs of a linguistically and culturally diverse EL population, with whom they have little to or no prior teaching experience of training and about whom they may hold deficit views (Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006; Rodriguez, Manner & Darcy, 2010).

## **Teacher Preparation**

Many classroom teachers need to expand their knowledge, strategies and skills to meet ELs' instructional needs (Callahan et al., 2010; Robinson-Cimpian et al., 2016). Classroom teachers are not provided adequate professional learning about teaching ELs and this lack of training, may result in feeling overwhelmed or frustrated by a limited understanding of the

language needs of ELs (Harper & de Jong, 2009; Walker, Shafer & Liam, 2004). Compounded by a lack of efficacy, teachers may approach EL instruction from a deficit lens (O'Brien, 2009; Reeves, 2006; Rodriguez, Manner & Darcy, 2010; Youngs & Youngs, 2001). Because teachers may approach ELs through a deficit lens, believing ELs should have English proficiency prior to engaging in rigorous content they may hold a perspective that ELs educational outcomes are a result of a lack of interest in school rather than the quality of the instruction or structural limitations to rigorous instruction and low expectations (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016, Callahan et al., 2010; Callahan et al., 2009; Estrada, 2014, Gándara & Rumberger, 2009, Harklau, 1994). In contrast, teachers with experience and training in EL instruction have higher efficacy and an assets-based approach to EL instruction (O'Brien, 2009; Walker, Shafer & Liam, 2004). Staffing schools with trained administrators and teachers is a critical issue in EL education (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014). Teacher preparedness in addition to system conditions creates equity challenges (Hakuta, 2011; Elfers & Stritikus, 2014). The same could be said for the preparedness of teacher leaders and administrators (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014).

## **Chapter 3: Methods**

The purpose of this study was to understand the day-to-day realities of schools in implementing policy and programming to deliver high quality instruction to ELs and to uncover system barriers to advancing opportunity, access and achievement for ELs. By uncovering system barriers and system gaps recommendations can be made to advance educational outcomes for English learners. Findings of this study have been used to inform recommendations so that district leaders and school teams can remove barriers and dissolve disparities to access, opportunity, and achievement for ELs.

Findings answering the following research questions informed recommendations to strengthen EL programming:

- Research Question 1: What areas for consideration do school based instructional leaders identify as contributing to access, opportunity and achievement outcomes for ELs?
- Research Question 2: What do school based EL instructional leaders believe is the district's role in supporting schools in implementing effective programming to increase access, opportunity, and achievement outcomes for ELs?

### **Research Design**

A descriptive case study qualitative design using archived data were applied to gain an understanding of school based leaders' experience in meeting the needs of ELs in their schools. By understanding these conditions, recommendations were made to advance access, opportunity and achievement outcomes for ELs. An individual case is focused on a single individual or entity with the purpose of learning about their experience (Cresswell, 2014). The individual case in this study is a school district.

### ***Setting***

This study took place in a large suburban school district in the Southeast U.S. with close to 200 schools. The district serves a diverse student population with almost 50% of the students coming from a home where a language other than, or in addition to, English is spoken and 25% of the students identified as ELs (State Board of Education, 2022).

### ***Schools***

The schools within the district were also diverse each with unique and distinct EL student demographics. The EL population ranged from 1% of the student population at the smallest program to 70% in the largest school based program (State Board of Education, 2022). Because of its size, the district is administratively subdivided to include 2-5 high schools and their feeder middle schools and elementary schools. These groupings were also diverse in their EL enrollment. As of the 2020-2021 accountability year, no schools were identified for support and improvement under ESSA (State Board of Education, n.d.).

***Participants.*** Across four months, over 400 teachers, administrators, and support staff participated in small group interviews at their individual school campuses. Composition of the small group of school based EL leaders that participated in the district's listening tour interview were the result of decision making by the individual school principal or leadership team. Composite membership from the listening tour interviews included (a) EL teacher leaders, (b) classroom and/or special education teacher leaders, (c) instructional coaches, (d) family liaisons, (e) school counselors, and (f) administrators. Because it was a school based decision as to who participated in these small group interviews, composition of the group varied across school campuses and in at least one instance was a single individual.

## **Data Collection**

Archived data that was collected as part of a district-wide listening tour with schools was used as the data source for this study. As part of a district initiative to better serve ELs, the central office staff conducted a listening tour at school campuses throughout the district. Over the course of four months, central office personnel conducted semi-structured interviews in individual schools in the district. At the time of this study, data were collected from 120 of the schools within the district. The district intent was to complete the listening tour in all schools by a given time period, however competing interests and district and school priorities resulted in the delay in completing the listening tour. The remainder of the listening tour visits were postponed until after the annual English language proficiency assessment window.

Information regarding the intent of the district office for EL instruction to conduct a listening tour was first shared with central office leadership and then with school principals through regular central office-school communication channels. School principals used a Google sheet to select a date and time for the listening tour visit. Two timeframes were available each day one in the morning and one in the afternoon. As many as five appointments were available in each time frame. Principals selected a time frame for the listening tour visit, identified a point of contact at the school, and invited school staff to participate in the small group interview. Central office staff then reviewed the Google sheet and signed up to conduct a listening tour visit based on their availability, with a goal of central office staff visiting at least one school per week. Members of the central office listening tour team then followed up with the principal to arrange for a convenient time to start the visit during the time frame that they had selected.

Each listening tour interview was conducted by two to three central office team members in a small group format and ranged between 30 minutes – 1 hour. The listening tour interview



partners had a variety of roles in the central office: (a) district level EL resource teacher; (b) district level instructional coach; (c) curriculum specialists; (d) program coordinator/director. The listening tour also included a no more than 30-minute walk through the school and into classrooms. Any classroom visits were used only as a means for school EL leaders to showcase instructional practices in their schools. Classroom visits were not documented as a part of the listening tour.

**Interview Protocol**

Listening tour data were collected by the interview teams using a Google form. The form collected information about the school including the name, level (elementary, middle, or high) and the administrative area in which the school was located. The form also collected the names of the central office team members conducting the visit and the roles of the school based EL leaders with whom they met (e.g., EL teacher, classroom and/or special education teacher, instructional coach, administrator). Three interview questions were developed by the district’s central office EL team. Each of the interview questions was included in the form with an open text box to capture the responses. Table 3 identifies the semi-structured interview questions aligned with the research questions. An additional field in the form allowed for general or summary comments that were made beyond the three interview questions asked.

**Table 3**

*Interview Questions and Research Questions*

Research questions	Interview Questions
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What areas for consideration do school based instructional leaders identify as contributing to access, opportunity and achievement outcomes for ELs?

1. What are your greatest areas of success with English learners? What are you most proud of?
2. Describe challenges you have been facing this year with meeting the diverse needs of your ELs. How are you navigating those challenges?

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What do school based EL instructional leaders believe is the district's role in supporting schools in implementing effective programming to increase access, opportunity, and achievement outcomes for ELs?

3. How might the central office EL team best support you and EL programming in your school?
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The small group interview was facilitated by one of the interview team members while the other interviewer captured and submitted the notes using the Google form. Responses were paraphrased to ensure understanding of the response. In addition, the response notes were checked by each of the central office interview teams to verify a common understanding of the notes.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the data used an iterative coding process of deductive and inductive coding. A codebook was used to document any codes that emerged as analysis of the data progresses (Cresswell, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). First, deductive coding applying *a priori* codes was used. The *a priori* codes were identified through the literature and through application of the theoretical framework which suggests that among other factors understanding EL student needs and assets, high quality Tier 1 instruction, and system conditions and alignment play critical roles in improving access, opportunity, and achievement outcomes for ELs.

Codes were applied to the interview notes using an Excel Spreadsheet. A separate sheet was used for each of the three interview questions and the additional open text field. The unit of

analysis is a response. Each school's interview data were entered onto one line in the spreadsheet. Multiple columns to the right of the response contained a drop-down menu of the *a priori* codes that allowed for more than one code to be applied to the unit of analysis. Columns were added to allow for multiple codes be applied to the interview notes.

Codes were then collapsed into larger categories based on the analysis and as categories shifted or expanded. These categories were subsequently categorized and synthesized into themes. Emergent coding was used to allow for codes that were not captured by the *a priori* codes and may not have been included in original conceptual framework but which have relevancy to understanding the conditions in schools.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

An important component of qualitative research is to explore and define the researcher's own relevant knowledge and experience (Creswell, 2014). Reflexivity occurred in two ways: through my reflection in my current experience as a central office administrator and in considering how I approach the grouping of data for analysis. I have been a central office administrator engaged in EL programming for more than two decades. As a central office leader in EL instruction, I have collaborated to develop local policy that aligns with federal guidelines and best practice, supervise curriculum specialists, and provide professional learning to district and school staff. Before becoming a central office administrator, I was a teacher in both a bilingual setting and settings in which English is the medium of instruction. It is important that I remained aware of how these experiences have the potential to influence how I experienced and interpreted the data. Keeping a reflective journal provided a mechanism through which I could engage in continuous reflection throughout the research process (Hays & Sing, 2012). Therefore, a reflexive journal was used throughout the study to support this ongoing reflection.

Hays and Singh (2012) outline three conditions in researcher reflexivity: authenticity, positive regard, and empathy. For authenticity it is important for the researcher to question one's own thoughts and feelings about the research, to maintain positive regard by examining one's own reactions and judgments regarding the data; and to practice empathy to accurately capture what the participant meant to convey. In addition to a reflexive journal, critical peer checks supported this process.

To address authenticity, I must expose my core beliefs about ELs and English learner education. I believe that ELs come to school with a wide range of experiences, cultural and linguistic assets, and that by knowing our students we can leverage these assets to engage them in meaningful differentiated instruction. I also believe that public education in the United States is premised upon and privileges English language proficiency both in the instructional models we use, and, in the assessments we deliver to measure student achievement. That being said, I believe that in order for ELs to demonstrate success in school, ELs need English language and literacy practices. Moreover, I believe that policy can be leveraged to drive instructional improvement.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Prior to beginning the study an Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences (IRB-SBS) protocol was submitted for approval to both the university IRB-SBS Board and the participating district. Once the approval was obtained, I adhered to the proposed protocol, federal and district guidelines.

To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the district, data did not include participant, interviewer or school names. Outside of the district, the data were only available to the researcher and committee. Only those identified as the research team in the IRB protocol will

have access to these data. Data were stored on Box, the university's secure cloud-based server. The data management plan is found in (Appendix B).

### **Limitations and Validity**

The most significant limitation anticipated in this study is the data set itself. Data were collected as part of district initiative by central office staff. While central office staff does not have positional authority over school based staff, they may still be viewed as powerful actors in the school system. This power dynamic might have implications as to how respondents participated in the interviews.

An additional limitation is that the data set consists of notes taken by central office staff who have a stake in the outcomes of the listening tour. While data were checked through paraphrasing and between the interviewers to increase validity, the interviews were not recorded, nor transcribed verbatim. Moreover, little is known about the responders' own background and experience as an EL or in working with ELs. In addition, the data set limits the types of comparisons that can be made among respondents since the response was captured holistically and did not consistently capture which respondent gave a particular response.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to understand school leaders' experience in meeting the needs of ELs so that barriers to implementing policy and programming could be identified. Through a qualitative approach of archived data from a district conducted EL listening tour, I explored areas for consideration to advance opportunity and achievement outcomes for ELs. This study sought to uncover how EL policy is actualized in schools by examining the conditions school teams identified as areas of success and the challenges they face in advancing

opportunity, access and achievement for ELs. Findings may inform local policy and improvement efforts to lead to successful outcomes for ELs.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretation

In this study, I examined considerations that school based instructional leaders identify as contributing to access, opportunity, and achievement outcomes for ELs. This study sought to uncover how EL policy is actualized in schools by examining the conditions school teams identified as areas of success and the challenges they face in implementing programming and advancing EL student achievement. Chapter Two described the federal policy context for EL instruction and the conditions for EL student learning: (a) understanding EL student needs and assets, (b) access to high quality core instruction, and (c) system conditions and alignment. In Chapter Three, I described the methodology used in this study including the setting, participants, interview protocol and analysis. In this chapter, findings gleaned from the listening tour conducted in 120 schools are discussed.

As described in Chapter 1, Umansky and Porter's (2020) State English learner policy framework informed the analysis of how EL policy was actualized at the school level. Listening tour interview transcripts as generated by district staff were analyzed through this lens of (a) identifying system conditions; (b) how school teams come to understand student needs and assets; and (c) what was recognized as accessible, high-quality instruction. First, data were analyzed using deductive coding applying *a priori* codes. Then as additional codes emerged, they were applied to the data in subsequent rounds of coding. After coding was complete, I reviewed the codes for patterns and identified common themes that addressed the research questions:

Research Question 1: What areas for consideration do school based instructional leaders identify as contributing to access, opportunity and achievement outcomes for ELs?

Research Question 2: What do school based EL instructional leaders believe is the district's role in supporting schools in implementing effective programming to increase access, opportunity, and achievement outcomes for ELs?

The data were coded first at the macro level K-12 and then were filtered to the elementary and secondary levels to determine any similarities and differences in how these codes manifested across levels. While there was some variation in the degree to which the codes emerged at the elementary level and secondary levels, patterns and trends were consistent across levels. Five universal themes emerged from the data were mapped to the areas of action identified in the conceptual framework. These themes were: (a) data informed decision-making for EL programming and instruction, (b) addressing the diversity of EL student needs, (c) teacher readiness to meet the diverse needs of ELs and the role of the EL teacher, (d) managing competing policy priorities, and (e) instructional staffs' relationships with students and their families. These themes will be further described in this chapter.

### **Theme 1: Data Informed Decision Making**

One theme that emerged across levels towards understanding student needs and assets and providing accessible, high-quality instruction was data informed decision making. Approximately 74% of school teams included in their responses that using data to inform EL programming and instructional decision-making is a strength of their team. Of these, approximately 69% of elementary school teams in the study routinely used data to make programmatic and instructional decisions as contrasted to approximately 89% of secondary school teams who expressed using EL data as a strength in addressing EL student needs.



### *Accessing and Interpreting Data*

School teams used a variety of tools across different data systems to access data regarding EL student achievement. While school teams reported that an abundance of data were available to them, there were differing degrees of data literacy across and among teams related to the nuances of EL student data (e.g., who constitutes the EL subgroup, analysis by proficiency level, current ELs as contrasted to former ELs, and English proficiency). While some school teams were confident in their use of data to address EL student needs, such as the ES28<sup>3</sup> team who holds quarterly data dialogues to monitor student achievement outcomes; other school teams communicated a need for support with data analysis, in knowing what to do with the abundance of available data, and how to use it effectively to support instructional decision making. This highlighted a need to increase instructional staffs' knowledge and skills to support effective data use and to model effective data practices to inform instructional decisions (Schildkamp, 2019).

School teams used a variety of quantitative indicators of EL success including results from (a) large-scale assessments (e.g., WIDA ACCESS for ELLs), (b) statewide standardized assessments (e.g., mathematics, reading and science), and (c) a universal screener (e.g., iReady). Additional metrics beyond assessment data were also used by school teams including (a) attendance, (b) grades, (c) discipline, (d) course enrollment and (e) graduation rates to measure success and inform programmatic decision making. The latter two metrics when used together at the secondary level were defining measures of access, opportunity, and achievement for ELs. As a further means of understanding student needs and assets, school teams benchmarked EL student performance in their school as compared to the overall district performance as well as to

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<sup>3</sup> School codes begin with either ES for elementary schools, MS for middle schools, or HS for high schools.

other schools within the district (e.g., high schools with their feeder elementary schools and middle schools).

School teams approached analysis and interpretation of these data in myriad ways. In general, schools analyzed performance by the EL subgroup as defined by the state's ESSA plan. Thus, demonstrating how state policy and associated metrics influence school team analysis of data. In the aggregate, analysis of EL data was used as a way to evaluate and increase access, opportunity, and achievement of ELs through: (a) the state standards of quality and accreditation, (b) programmatic decision making within the school, (c) understanding the diverse needs of special populations of ELs, and (d) multi-tiered systems of support. Each of these uses is further discussed in this section.

### ***Standards of Quality and School Accreditation***

For school teams, the standards of quality (SOQ) and school accreditation were a driving factor for the analysis of EL subgroup performance on state content assessments and the annual English language proficiency assessment, WIDA ACCESS for ELLs. At a minimum, those school teams who reported using data to inform decision making for ELs, examined EL performance as a subgroup. Other school teams took a deeper dive to analyze EL student performance by English language proficiency (ELP) level, a practice which prompted school teams to analyze how EL subgroup performance may have been influenced by the distribution of students at each ELP level. By pairing this analysis with student growth metrics school teams illustrated how they were making a distinction between content assessment performance and English language proficiency growth. This distinction was exemplified by ES9 who reflected that staff were able to see progress and feel confident that students were making gains in English

language proficiency that might not be reflected in content test scores<sup>4</sup>, a recognition that English language proficiency is a barrier for students to demonstrating what they know and can do in the content area (Wolf & Leon, 2009). By analyzing WIDA test scores alongside state standardized reading assessments teachers made a connection between the work they are doing with students and WIDA growth – and “growth is a morale boost” (MS42 Interview Transcript, 10/31/2022).

In the state in which this study takes place, WIDA ACCESS growth metrics may be used to adjust the percentage pass rate for schools on the state reading assessment for school accreditation purposes. Thus, there is a district focus on using WIDA ACCESS growth as a critical metric for analyzing EL performance and recognizing it as a contributing factor for reading adjustments which impact school state accreditation. The associated growth metrics and school performance towards those goals elevated the status of English language development and highlighted the need to uncover barriers to effective EL program implementation.

To further understand EL student performance in their schools, school teams looked beyond the adjusted statewide assessment pass rates used for the SOQ, to the unadjusted rates. Unadjusted rates did not take into account WIDA ACCESS growth or students who have been in the district fewer than 11 semesters,<sup>5</sup> a state policy that was implemented in acknowledgement of the bias inherent for ELs in state content area assessments provided in English (Wright, 2019). School teams shared a belief that unadjusted rates gave a “true” indication of how ELs were performing without consideration of the assessments bias and privileging of English.

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<sup>4</sup> The state in which the study takes place does not offer standards-based assessments in a language other than English. The state’s ESSA plan explains this by the offering of assessment accommodations for English learners including the use of a bilingual word-to-word dictionary.

<sup>5</sup> Scores for ELs who have been in state schools fewer than 11 semesters may be disaggregated from the calculation used to measure school quality.

For these schools, the unadjusted scores illuminated the current state of EL performance and served as a call to action such as at ES8 who stated: “The urgency is there, because the student scores stand out” (ES8 Interview Transcript, 10/11/2022). While the school team recognized how the current state of achievement for EL learners was hidden in the adjusted rates, it was unclear what actions the school team was taking based on these observations in terms of programming or instructional rigor, nor was it evident that school teams understood the why behind the adjustment – that assessments administered in English might not measure the true content knowledge of the student (Wright, 2019).

Another way that schools measured successful achievement outcomes for ELs was by benchmarking student performance with other schools in the district. “The *WIDA Growth Summary Chart* indicates that our school is exceeding both region and district performance in terms of percent of students making growth” (ES72 Interview Transcript, 11/16/22). Beyond benchmarking, school teams expressed a need to establish collaboration networks among schools to learn from and with each other and to improve practices through working with exemplar schools who were exceeding growth metrics.

At the secondary level, graduation rates were the dominant focus among school teams as the ultimate measure of achievement for ELs. High school teams raised concerns about EL graduation rates and the challenges of recently arrived students at age 17 and 18 have in meeting graduation requirements in four years. This challenge was exacerbated for students identified as SLIFE, who not only needed to meet high school credit requirements but also needed to build literacy and numeracy skills to access high school coursework. Small schools expressed frustration in not being able to offer SLIFE support classes that the students needed because of limited staffing, while large programs expressed frustration in the number of students in need of

SLIFE interventions. “Meeting the needs of SLIFE ... students who are enrolling at close to age 18, and trying to get students who are arriving in high school through in four years to graduation ...when many are arriving with gaps in prior schooling, is a significant challenge” (HS51 Interview Transcript, 11/1/2022). Schools were focused on the four-year graduation rates and did not seem either aware nor supportive of the potential for learning pathways beyond four years, even though state and local policy allows for EL students to remain in school until age 22.

### ***Programmatic Decision Making***

Schools used WIDA ACCESS for ELLs data to inform school improvement and innovation plans, set performance goals and engage in programmatic decision making (e.g., master schedule building and EL service delivery models). For example, a school team reported using trends in student performance in the speaking and listening domains to determine a focus of increasing student talk across the curriculum (ES72 Interview Transcript, 11/16/2022). School teams also used WIDA access data to support individual goal setting for students such as ES118 who reported using WIDA ACCESS writing domain trends to inform an instructional focus on writing to prompts across disciplines (ES118 Interview Transcript, 1/18/2023). Implementation of this strategy not only supported ELD but also content learning. In these cases, the school teams communicated that data were used not only to set goals but to implement strategies to support student progress.

At the secondary level, some schools examined enrollment patterns to attempt to ensure that ELs have equitable access to college preparatory courses and to make informed decisions about course offerings and to determine which courses would be co-taught with an EL teacher. For example, at one school the team noticed that ELs were not enrolled in advanced courses (HS118 Interview Transcript, 1/18/2023). Therefore, the school improvement team included a

goal to increase enrollment of ELs in advanced courses. Beyond goal setting, the interview transcript did not include what actions, if any, were taken in support of this goal.

**Designing the Master Schedule.** Data were also used to inform the design of the master schedule at both the elementary and secondary levels. At the elementary level, school teams were more likely than secondary school teams to report using data to form instructional groups and to determine the frequency and intensity of ELD instruction; however, this may be the result of the ELD service delivery model being small group instruction at the elementary level contrasted with the secondary level where students are placed in ELD courses by English language proficiency level.

At both the elementary and secondary level, school teams referenced scheduling students by name and by need, a practice that suggests scheduling was highly individualized. And yet, school teams expressed barriers to scheduling ELs whether by the master schedule being “already built” (HS75) or by not being able to offer the full range of EL programming (e.g., SLIFE or biliteracy interventions) because of the schools allocated staffing or inability to find or hire a bilingual teacher. Thus, while the will is there to make individualized student placement decisions, it was not evident that master schedules are sufficiently flexible to meet the diverse needs of ELs.

Designing a master schedule that provides flexibility and the space for teacher collaboration is complex, yet some schools have been able to leverage the master schedule to increase access and opportunity for English learners. In the words of one school team, “You can’t be equity centered if you have a population of students that does not have access to choices [in courses...]” (MS31 Interview Transcript, 10/25/2022).

Where school teams did experience success was in utilizing data to inform small group instruction and flexible grouping or to make large scale adjustments to the master schedule. One example of a large-scale change was at ES112 where the school team reported that they adjusted the master schedule to align and stagger the language arts blocks to allow EL teachers greater flexibility to deliver services (as either push-in or pull aside) within language arts across grade levels. This represented a proactive step to increase opportunity for EL teachers to deliver services. But sometimes decisions were made that directly contradicted the data, such as at HS33 where students in a double block mathematics class made gains on the state mathematics assessment, and yet, the following school year the double block was eliminated due to a change in staffing.

Well-designed master schedules promoted access and opportunity by providing the time and space for the EL teachers to collaborate, plan, and analyze data with content collaborative learning teams and with their co-teaching partner. Through common planning time EL teachers were able to support data dialogs and the development of scaffolds and language supports for ELs in the content tasks. Not all schedules included time and dedicated space, for teacher teams to work collaboratively nor could EL teachers be available to all content teams. As a result, school leaders made decisions about which content would have the direct support of an EL teacher. For example, HS75 counted as a success the ability for a single content at a grade level to have collaborative planning time. No school teams spoke to using data to determine which content team the EL teacher would support and instead expressed the need for more EL staffing so that the EL teacher could be everywhere.

**Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) and ELs.** At the individual student level, school teams gathered and used assessment data as well as qualitative information from parent

conferences, *Kid Talks* or team conversations about student learning, and EL Consultations<sup>6</sup> to inform a multi-tiered system of support and differentiation in the classroom.

Some schools' MTSS teams also took a proactive approach to identify students who are not making English language progress and offer more intensive EL services and targeted ELD support. To identify these needs the MTSS team includes the student's EL teacher(s) to provide a cultural and linguistic lens to student classroom performance. As a result of these meetings, the ES28 team finds that classroom teachers "can now speak to what EL students can and cannot yet do." As part of the MTSS process school teams request EL consultations from central office staff to identify home language assets and practices to increase student achievement. MS59 relayed that in addition to MTSS, they used data from EL consultations to create language goals for EL students. School teams leveraged the MTSS process to understand individual student needs and to develop next steps to address students' academic, wellness, and behavioral needs. Through the MTSS process, school teams could pivot from a reliance on high-stakes test scores and focus on more qualitative data including students' prior experiences and learning environment.

Yet, not all schools found the MTSS process helpful in identifying EL student needs such as at ES6 where the school team states "the MTSS process isn't clear, especially regarding what we need to focus on for ELs" (ES6 Interview Transcript, 10/5/2022). The leveraging of the MTSS process was more likely to occur at the elementary and middle school levels than at the

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<sup>6</sup> The EL consultation is a service provided by central office staff that examines individual student's unique needs and assets by examining the sociocultural context for learning through observations, interviews, dialogue, and authentic assessment to harness students' linguistic assets and contextualize EL's academic and linguistic progress within a culturally and linguistic approach response to intervention (WIDA, 2013).



high school level. This once again highlighted how practices and processes differed across schools in the district for determining supports and interventions for EL students.

## **Theme 2: Specialized Programming for Diverse ELs**

A second theme to emerge from the data in alignment to understanding student needs and assets is specialized programming for diverse ELs. Four profiles of ELs were identified by school teams as needing specialized instruction: (a) recently arrived ELs or newcomers, (b) students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), (c) ELs with disabilities (ELWD), and (d) long term ELs (LTELs). These profiles are consistent with English learner profiles found in the literature (e.g., Callahan et al., 2010; Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2011; DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; Umanksy & Porter, 2020).

Intensity and frequency of EL services was also informed by student profile, with students identified as SLIFE or LTELs receiving additional programming or interventions beyond English language development groups or classes. For example, some elementary schools with multilingual teachers offered a Spanish-English biliteracy programming where students met daily for 45 minutes. Some elementary schools without Spanish proficient teachers or with non-Spanish speaking students identified as SLIFE offered small group English literacy programming for students identified as SLIFE. Practices were similar at middle school and high schools, where those schools with larger number of students identified at SLIFE were able to provide targeted numeracy and literacy classes either taught by a bilingual or English speaking teacher while smaller programs were not able to provide dedicated time with an EL teacher beyond that within the students English language development class. In addition, schools with a limited number of students or a single student identified as SLIFE may not have provided any additional targeted programming.

Small programs like ours are struggling to meet the very diverse needs of students within the same class -- we have limited course sections that we are able to offer despite growth in our population. We have enrolled 32 new ELs since the beginning of the year and there is nowhere to place the students because our sections are all full (HS51 Interview Transcript, 11/1/2022).

This highlights inconsistent implementation in programming across the district as not all schools offered distinct programming and supports for diverse student needs. Because not all schools offered similar opportunities, the SLIFE and newcomer student experience is school dependent.

### ***ELs with Disabilities***

ELs with disabilities (ELWD) have unique needs that challenge school teams. School teams engaged in problem solving about how to best meet students' English language development and in the individual education plan (IEP) in the most inclusive setting. To ensure that ELWD's English language development needs were considered in the IEP process, EL teachers participated in IEP meetings. Schools expressed tension in the time devoted to EL teachers attending IEP meetings and the missed instructional time with their other students EL students. School teams continued to engage in problem solving about the best program model to implement to provide ELs with disabilities effective simultaneous services.

### **Theme 3: Teacher Readiness and Role Clarification**

Consistent with other findings in the literature (e.g., Callahan et al., 2010; Callahan and Shifrer, 2016; Harper & de Jong, 2009), school teams expressed a need to build and increase the capacity of classroom teachers to design and deliver high quality instruction to ELs. School leaders placed a premium on the hiring of teachers who held both an EL and content certification and described these teachers as "unicorns" because they were few and far between. As such,

“Classroom teachers need more strategies in their toolbox, [...] there is urgency in student data, staff is invested but unprepared” (ES 8 Interview Transcript, 10/11/2022). Three related sub themes emerged in regard to systems conditions of teacher readiness: (a) job embedded professional learning, (b) clarity about the role of the ELD teacher as a capacity builder and/or teacher of EL students, and (c) inadequate staffing ratios.

### ***Job Embedded Professional Learning***

Job embedded professional learning most often occurred through the collaborative work of teams, co-teaching and through modeling and coaching cycles. As part of the collaborative learning team (CLT) process, ELD teachers built awareness of EL student needs and assets. ELD teachers also expressed that they expanded the capacity of their peers to use EL data tools (e.g., the district data warehouse, district EL databases and dashboards) to identify students’ English language assets and needs. Teachers and teams could then use this understanding to both inform and apply intentional scaffolds and language practices in the classroom.

But not all CLTs were equal, nor high functioning, and not all EL teachers’ voices were valued as part of the CLT. Thus, not all schools were able to leverage the EL teacher to provide job embedded professional learning through the CLT, either because the EL teachers themselves were developing the leadership skills necessary to fully engage in this work or the ELD teachers were not able to attend or consistently attend CLT meetings because of their teaching responsibilities.

School leaders also utilized co-teaching as a capacity building strategy. With effective co-teaching, ELD teachers found that they were able to build capacity through ongoing modeling of strategies and routines to support ELs. However, in less effective co-teaching practice, partner

teachers became dependent on the ELD teacher to provide instruction to ELs or to develop scaffolds and supports and were at a loss when the ELD teacher was not available to do so.

An ongoing need is for all staff to understand the role of the [ELD] teacher and that ELD is something that can occur all throughout the day, even when the teacher is not in the room [...] all teachers can help students develop their language, not just the ELD teacher. We need to help teachers understand [...] the intentionality behind the support ELD teachers are providing (ES11 Interview, 10/11/2022).

While EL teachers with these skills were able to *move the needle* for content and grade-level teachers, in many cases the responsibility for EL student learning, and the provision of instructional scaffolds and language development opportunities remained on the EL teacher. The current state at some schools was the desired state in others and not all EL teachers were equipped for the role as a teacher leader or coach. Some schools such as ES54 found that:

ESOL teachers are very intentional, strategic and thoughtful in their delivery of instruction with our ELs. They are great advocates and focus on academic language. They're strategic about choosing the priority for their learners and communicating that to teachers. (ES54, 11/2/2022)

Other school leaders expressed the need for ELD teachers to develop skills and strategies to better understand their role on the CLT, or in co-teaching partnerships and to amplify their voice as a member of the collaborative team. In those schools, school teams asserted that it was not only classroom teachers who needed professional development in current best practice in meeting the needs of ELs, that ELD teachers did as well so that they could understand shifts in ELD instruction through content based driven ELD standards (e.g., Boals, 2015; Garcia, 2015;

Kibler, 2015). The field has evolved and not all teachers have evolved with it: “there are some old ways of thinking about EL programming” (HS33 Interview, 10/25/2022).

Thus, school staff also participated in district offered professional learning opportunities (e.g., consultations and technical assistance, district supported coaching cycles and modeling, virtual or face to face professional development modules and cohorts). Beyond district level professional learning, EL teachers were also offering workshops to school staff to support scaffolding, language amplification, assessment accommodations, and strategy implementation in their schools. School leaders were utilizing ELD teachers as staff developers – whether for school wide staff meetings, through the CLTs or coaching individual teachers thus impacting the time teachers had available to work directly with students.

### ***Role of ELD Teacher as Capacity Builder or Teacher***

The role of the ELD teacher is multi-faceted in schools. Beyond providing direct services to students, ELD teachers function as capacity builders, consultants, lesson modifiers, test administrators, and advocates among *other duties as assigned*. ELD teachers are called upon to act as instructional coaches, “despite limited or no training in coaching strategies” (ES9 Interview, 10/11/2022). Moreover, ELD teachers expressed a need to advocate for ELs because of negative assumptions or perceptions of EL student learning held by classroom or content teachers. ELD teachers found themselves trying to shift mindsets, such as at ES70 where the ELD teacher stated “I am finding ways to diplomatically change thinking and educate without overstepping” (ES70 Interview, 11/15/2022). This notion of “overstepping” is consistent with findings from Brooks et al. (2010) on the marginalization of EL educators, where the EL educator assumes responsibility for advocacy and the education of ELs in all classrooms.

Reduction of the department chair's teaching load is a common practice at secondary schools. This practice allows the department chair to primarily function as a pseudo-administrator and professional developer. For example, at MS 48 where the department chair:

Builds capacity of other teachers, has no set schedule, is supporting kids all over, does a lot of one-on-one, pushes into small group literacy instruction, helps with WIDA, acts as a resource for teaching strategies for general education teachers, has a strong connection with the school community, and is involved in the after-school program (MS48 Interview, 11/1/2022).

Because of the diverse needs of students, teachers, and teams, school leaders were uncertain of the ELD teacher's role: "Are [ELD] teachers working with kids or coaching? If [coaching is] not their role then we need support in coaching for staff" (ES8 Interview, 10/11/2022). The tension between providing direct instruction and performing these other duties, weighs on ELD teachers and school leaders: "Time is a barrier - time to collaborate with each other, with other teachers ... scheduling small groups ... what we have to do is overwhelming" (ES65 Interview, 11/15/2022). It is interesting to view this practice in connection with the school impressions of inadequate staffing and to recognize this was driven by a perceived two-fold need, the first to expand capacity of all staff in meeting the needs of ELs and second to provide direct instruction to students. I purposefully name direct instruction as second, since school teams often centered more on expanding capacity of classroom and content teachers to provide integrated ELD rather than on the EL teacher, who by state requirements is the only teacher who is recognized as providing EL services. The evidence suggests that schools need guidance on the role of the ESOL teacher and with understanding the state requirements that EL services be provided by a certified EL teacher.

### *Inadequate Staffing Ratios*

More than half the schools participating in the listening tour stated that the staffing model did not meet the current needs for programming in schools; of these the vast majority were elementary schools. One challenge elementary schools faced was that their students were spread across seven grade levels and in multiple classrooms. Because of a desire to have ELs in inclusive settings and to limit pull-out groups, teams struggled with having sufficient time to push into all classrooms. School teams reported that ELD teachers were overwhelmed and were unable to effectively provide services through an integrated ELD model because of their student caseloads. At ES6 the EL teacher described the challenge for her, stating:

Being a singleton and planning for seven grade levels is tricky. I have to understand all of the content to teach them [EL students] the language needed for that content. Planning for instruction and being a singleton is tricky because I can only be in one place at a time. Finding time to see all kids, even if it's a group of 2. There are just not enough hours in a day [...] Staffing is a challenge and how realistic is it? (ES6 Interview Transcript, 10/5/2022)

At the secondary level, the staffing model was also regarded as insufficient for co-teaching. The MS102 team stated:

It's hard with only two EL teachers to spread ourselves – to co-teach in all the places where our students are. There ends up being bubbles of ELs in the team-taught classroom where we are. It's nearly impossible to meet all the needs given our current staffing (MS102 Interview, 12/14/2022).

This was echoed by MS42 who stated, “short staffing also means we have had to sacrifice things that were successful in the past (such as many team-taught classes) [...] it’s a concern that students will not be able to get the attention they need” (MS42 Interview, 10/31/2022).

These statements reflect the current state of reliance on the EL teacher to provide supports in the classroom and content areas and of the readiness of classroom and content teachers to meet the needs of ELs in their classrooms. Therefore, school teams advocated to the central office for additional staffing and have hired additional instructional staff beyond their EL staffing allotment using pandemic related ESSR funds. While this allows flexibility in how school teams schedule and provide co-teaching, it does little to increase the capacity of all teachers to meet the diverse needs of ELs. Nor does it address the current reality, that school leaders were challenged to find qualified candidates for the positions they already had let alone the positions they felt they needed. As ES28 states “we have new teachers, staff members without teaching degrees” (ES28, 10/24/2022). Therefore, schools were not only trying to support certified teachers in providing ELs with access and opportunity they were also challenged to build capacity in novice teachers and/or temporary staff.

#### **Theme 4: Managing Competing Priorities**

The myriad priorities schools face was a significant barrier for schools in implementing EL policy. Two competing priorities in relationship to EL services that weighed most heavily on elementary school staff were navigating policy directives per the state’s Literacy Act and federal and state assessment mandates. The following section further describes the challenges faced by school teams in response to these priorities.



### ***Literacy Act***

At the elementary level, the primary challenge raised by schools was the new structure of the language arts block to accommodate instruction as required by the state’s Literacy Act. The dominant theme from elementary school teams was that the new language arts block makes scheduling time for ELD teachers to provide ELD instruction more complicated. ES6 questions, “How do teachers fit everything in with competing priorities including *Lexia* minutes, phonics interventions, phonemic awareness interventions, ELD lessons?” (ES6 Interview, 10/5/2022). Schools are frustrated with trying to balance priorities, “Everything can't be a priority. There is the ideal and then there is reality” (ES25 Interview, 10/19/2022).

In addition, elementary school teams were struggling with finding sufficient time for teacher planning: "With the new reading guidance it is tricky to collaborate and push in. I want to make impactful lessons but don't have time to collaborate with classroom teachers” (ES40 Interview, 10/26/2022). An additional pressure for ELD teachers was understanding their role in providing literacy instruction and intervention to ELs. School teams expressed a lack of clarity around the role of the classroom teacher, the reading teacher, and the ELD teacher in providing intervention to ELs.

### ***Assessment Demands***

School teams expressed that assessment demands (e.g., English language proficiency screener and Annual English language proficiency assessment) took up a large percentage of their instructional time. Time spent administering required assessments took away time from providing ELD instruction throughout the annual assessments two-month testing window. Additionally, schools found beginning of the year assessments burdensome and a barrier to providing direct instruction to students. Beyond the time taken to administer the assessments

school teams questioned the value of beginning of the year screeners for beginning English learners administered in English. School teams expressed frustration that they spent valuable time administering inaccessible assessments that yielded little to no actionable results for their students.

### **Theme 5: Relationships**

A dominant theme among school teams in providing access, opportunity and achievement for ELs were having strong relationships with students and families. The inclusion of family engagement policy could compliment and support Umansky and Porter's (2020) comprehensive state policy framework for ELs. Scholarship suggests that family engagement can improve EL students' educational outcomes (Flores et al., 2019; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014).

#### ***Family and Community Partnerships***

Schools in which family partnerships were strong took a whole school or team approach and created multiple opportunities for EL families to be involved stakeholders in their child's school experience. These opportunities include: (a) home visits; (b) family literacy events; (c) back to school nights for EL families; and (d) parent coffees where schools provide food, school supplies, clothing and backpacks for students and families. To increase access to these events, some schools provided transportation for families.

An additional way school teams increased access is to bring school events, including kindergarten registration, into the students' neighborhoods. Schools expressed a willingness to think flexibly about how to best engage families and to "try anything" to increase family partnerships (ES10 Interview, 10/11/2022). School teams expressed the importance of a welcoming, culturally responsive, and inclusive environment for ELs and their families to provide access and opportunity for family partnerships.

Like teaching and learning for ELs, much of the responsibility for creating and sustaining these relationships was on the EL staff. Other key personnel involved in family engagement included (a) multilingual staff (if any), (b) EL counselors (for secondary schools who had them), (c) social workers, and (d) multilingual family liaisons (for schools who had them). In addition to multilingual staff, schools had access to district interpretation and translation services and digital tools for two-way communication with families. In schools with a family liaison, the position played an integral part in increasing EL family involvement in the school community. School teams found that these positions were critical to making and sustaining successful parent connections to improved educational outcomes for EL learners.

### ***Student Relationships***

When school teams spoke to their success with EL students, student relationships were paramount. School teams placed the highest value on the relationships and rapport ELD teachers had with their students. Of primary importance to school teams was to create a welcoming environment and sense of belonging for EL students.

School teams used myriad avenues to build relationships (e.g., mentorship programs, newcomer groups, student ambassador programs and advisory periods). Through these dedicated opportunities school teams support ELs in becoming involved in co-curricular activities such as student government, and after school programs and athletics. By engaging ELs in school programs outside of academics, students “take ownership and pride in the school” (ES4 Interview Notes, 10/4/2022).

School teams were sensitive to helping recently arrived students adjust to their new school environment and making connections with their peers through student ambassador programs where students were matched with a home language peer to help them navigate their

new environment. Through newcomer groups, EL teachers and students focused on acclimating students to U.S. schools and building trusting relationships between students and staff. Schools leveraged their advisory period to build in more time to develop teacher-student relationships. An additional structural way that school teams used to build and sustain relationships with students was through looping teachers with the same group of students from year to year to support “continuity of instruction” (ES100, 12/13/2022). Another example of how school teams were building strong relationship foundations was by recognizing the voices of students who may be marginalized. School staff conducted empathy interviews (Safir & Dugan, 2021) to actively listen and gather feedback from ELs about their experience in school.

When speaking to the strengths of the EL team, it was in relationship building that schools found their success with ELs. Some school teams were taking steps to leverage these relationships to create rigorous and engaging learning tasks, and yet for others the connection between relationships and instruction was unclear. Access, opportunity, and achievement of ELs depends not only on the relationships they form with EL teachers but on the collective responsibility of staff within the school (Brooks et. al, 2010).

While relationships and attending to students’ emotional needs are critical to student success, relationships without access to high-quality rigorous instruction do little to move the needle for academic achievement (Dagget & Jones, 2019). Beyond risk taking, little if any, connection was made to the direct relationship between meeting students’ social emotional needs and the rigorous learning environments needed to improve achievement outcomes.

## **Discussion**

In this chapter, I described the findings through the lens of district conditions, accessible, high quality instruction and understanding EL student needs and assets. Through that lens *a*

*priori* codes were established from which five themes emerged: (a) data informed decision-making, (b) addressing the diversity of EL student needs, (c) teacher readiness and roles, (d) managing competing priorities, and (e) relationships. These conditions were influenced by district and in federal, state, and local policy context. By understanding school teams needs and assets local policy can provide guidance to support implementation of state and federal policy requirements.

First, data informed decision making is informed by federal, state, and local metrics and that these metrics in turn inform programming decisions, including programming for special populations of ELs. Although, school teams used data to better understand their EL students' needs and assets, the data and processes through which school teams found and used data was not consistent. School teams were challenged by the abundance of data tools, understanding the definitions of terms, and data elements beyond assessment scores (e.g., length of time in US schools) that could be used to inform program implementation and practice.

Second, while school teams recognized the diverse needs of ELs (e.g., recently arrived, SLIFE, LTELs, ELs with disabilities) they approached programming for these special populations in different ways. Programming was size dependent with schools with larger populations of SLIFE providing specialized instruction and intervention. Students at schools with smaller populations were not able to avail themselves of this programming. Thus, the services for special populations were not consistent across the district. In addition, schools were either working in silos or creating their own informal networks to share what works in program implementation. Structured improvement networks may provide school teams with more opportunity to learn, improve and innovate from each other (Bryk, et al., 2010).

Third, school teams recognized that access, opportunity and achievement for ELs is reliant on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of teachers as well as collective responsibility among all school staff. Not all school teams had pre-service or professional learning to better equip them with the strategies and skills to develop as practitioners of EL instruction. Moreover, ELD teachers may not have had recent exposure to professional learning in current methodology. Teachers were in teacher leadership positions, acting as coaches and mentors without the benefit of professional learning in these areas. This led to question of what is the role of the ELD teacher - staff developer, teacher, and/or teacher leader?

Next, school teams were stretched by competing priorities such as the Literacy Act and assessment practices. These competing priorities also raised questions of the ELD teacher's role in implementing these policies and practices with ELs in conjunction with direct ELD instruction. Thus, the how and where ELD instruction would take place was raised.

Lastly, relationships are the cornerstone for moving the work of school teams forward. While relationships were not an explicit part of the starting conceptual framework, each of the policy, practices and conditions for EL student access, opportunity and achievement were nested within the community. Community support, advocacy, research and individual relationships were pivotal to removing barriers to teaching and learning for ELs. Moreover, through school-central office partnership, school teams expect central office teams to negotiate policy, provide guidance and resources, support capacity building and advocate to district leadership and the state for what schools need.

In the next chapter, I will make recommendations to central office leadership about policy and practice that will support schools in removing barriers to access, opportunity and achievement for ELs.

## Chapter 5: Translation to Practice

The purpose of this study was to understand school leaders' experience in meeting the needs of ELs so that barriers to implementing policy and programming could be identified. Through a qualitative approach of archived data from a district conducted EL listening tour, I explored areas for consideration to advance opportunity and achievement outcomes for ELs. This study sought to uncover how EL policy is actualized in schools by examining the conditions school teams identified as areas of success in meeting the needs of ELs and the challenges they face in advancing opportunity, access and achievement for ELs. By doing so, I wanted to identify areas to transform local practice through the development of local policy, policy resources and tools to support school teams in improving achievement outcomes for ELs.

To inform recommendations, I analyzed archived data that was collected as part of a district-wide listening tour with school teams of leaders in EL instruction. I reviewed and discussed the relevant literature regarding EL policy, policy implementation and practice. In Chapter 4, I discussed the five findings that emerged through the data. In this chapter, I will discuss the recommendations based upon these findings.

### **Recommendation 1: Integrate district data systems and use consistent data formats across tools.**

To understand student needs and assets school teams use a variety of data tools and practices. First, data informed decision making is driven by federal, state, and local metrics and these metrics in turn inform programming decisions, including programming for special populations of ELs. Although, some school teams use data to better understand their EL students' needs and assets, the data platforms and processes through which those school teams find and use data is neither consistent nor cohesive. School teams are challenged by the

abundance of data tools and platforms and the inconsistent data elements found in dashboards within and across platforms (e.g., length of time in US schools, ELs by proficiency level, inconsistencies of which ELs or former ELs were included in the subgroup). The disconnect between each of these systems and tools (e.g., on time graduation, attendance, and course enrollment dashboards) makes it difficult to use these data, let alone use data effectively, to question assumptions, solution seek and engage in targeted improvement of EL programming.

By including consistent data elements, teachers and school based leadership teams will know what to expect in each report or dashboard, know which students are represented within each dashboard, and/or how to filter dashboards to get the information they need to inform instructional improvements and program implementation (Beck & Nunnaley, 2021). In the absence of a fully aligned data system, the central office can support school teams by leveraging various systems, curating and visualizing data so that school teams can locate and comprehend the data available to them to set clear improvement goals (Beck & Nunnaley, 2021).

**Table 3**

*English Learner Data Elements*

Data Element	Description
English language proficiency (ELP) level	ELP levels 1-4, Former EL (Monitoring Year 1-4), and English Proficient (exited EL services/post monitor years)
EL Status	Recently Arrived EL, SLIFE, EL with Disabilities, LTEL
Entry Date US Schools	Date at which student first began in U.S. Schools
Entry Date in District	Date in which student first began in the school district
Home Language	Language used at home as identified on the home language survey



By including these common data elements (Table 3) across dashboards school teams will be better able to analyze and identify specific needs and assets of EL students with different profiles and levels of proficiency as well as be better positioned to recognize disparities of access, opportunity, and achievement between ELs and non-ELs and implement informed improvement efforts.

**Recommendation 2: Model data informed processes and collaborate with school teams to develop a master schedule for each school that supports the diverse needs of ELs.**

Every school has unique demographics, successes and challenges in meeting the diverse needs of ELs. Therefore, school teams need the knowledge and understanding of the strengths and needs of the ELs within their schools to make informed programmatic decisions. School teams expressed barriers in designing a flexible master schedule that would meet the diverse and changing needs of ELs and conditions (e.g., EL staffing and the distribution of ELs across different proficiency levels) that prevented them from offering the full range of EL programming (e.g., SLIFE or biliteracy interventions).

Central office staff should continue to support school teams in designing flexible master schedules and EL program supports by partnering with and engaging school teams in data based EL programming conversations. By engaging school teams in a facilitated process to unpack the current state of EL achievement in their school and understand the diverse profiles and experiences of their ELs, central office staff build school team capacity to make individual programming decisions for each EL and shift away from practices based solely on ELP level. Through this inquiry process, central office staff builds and expands capacity of school teams to analyze their own EL data, make predictions, and check assumptions about their students and

programming (e.g., all our recently arrived ELs are SLIFE, students in team taught classes outperform students in sheltered or general education classes) in order to recognize equitable teaching and learning practices and improve conditions for EL achievement in their schools.

An EL data dashboard in which linguistic, academic, behavior and wellness data is compiled from various data sources can support these conversations and provide a single place for school teams to understand EL student performance in their schools and better position school teams to use their EL data to inform programming, course offerings, staffing decisions, and to build the master schedule. Through these data informed practices school teams identify necessary shifts in practice and make school wide commitments to EL program improvement.

**Recommendation 3: Consider SLIFE centers or central staff support teams for students identified as SLIFE.**

Students with limited home language literacy and numeracy skills are most likely to struggle academically and have poor educational outcomes (Short & Boyson, 2012). Thus, it is important for students identified as SLIFE to receive the supports and services they need to be successful in school. Schools within the district with few students identified as SLIFE were not able to dedicate staffing to provide intensive SLIFE interventions for students with limited home language literacy or numeracy skills. While some schools offered instruction tailored for students identified as SLIFE within the ELD or elementary classroom only schools with larger EL student populations were able to dedicate one or more teaching blocks for the intensive literacy and numeracy instruction that students identified as SLIFE need to develop foundational skills and close educational gaps.

The services for students identified as SLIFE were dependent on the number of students identified as SLIFE at a given campus. Schools with larger EL student populations, especially at

secondary schools, had greater flexibility to staff interventions and provide intensive numeracy and literacy instruction to prepare students to be successful in grade level academic coursework. Schools with small populations of students identified as SLIFE either offered limited support or no additional interventions for students. Thus, services for this special population were not consistent across the district.

In order to provide consistent supports and services, the district's central office EL team should investigate establishing SLIFE centers where students identified as SLIFE who have limited home language literacy and numeracy skills would be provided intensive instruction and social emotional supports to both transition to U.S. schools and be set up for success at their local secondary school. Students at SLIFE centers could either spend a full or partial day at the center depending on their needs. Students who attend for a partial day would spend 3 hours a day at the SLIFE center and be co-enrolled at their local school site to provide students the opportunity to participate in core instructional opportunities with their peers.

Attendance at SLIFE centers would be voluntary and limited to one year after which time students would attend full time at their local school site. While attending a SLIFE center, full and partial day students have the option to participate in extra and co-curricular activities at their local schools. SLIFE centers would afford students across the district supported opportunities to learn about high school pathways and post-secondary options while developing the numeracy, literacy, and school readiness skills they need to actively engage in content learning with their peers. Wrap around services such as social work, psychology services and counseling would be available to students at the centers as they adjust to their new school and broader community.

**Recommendation 4: Leverage existing professional learning structures to equip instructional staff to meet the needs of ELs.**

Access, opportunity and achievement for ELs is reliant on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of instructional staff in schools. Not all instructional staff had pre-service or professional learning to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and strategies to meet the diverse needs of ELs and this may result in teachers feeling overwhelmed or frustrated by a limited understanding of the language needs of ELs (Harper & de Jong, 2009; Walker, Shafer & Liam, 2004). Moreover, ELD teachers were also cast in teacher leadership positions, acting as coaches and mentors without having had the opportunity to learn the skills needed to function effectively in these roles.

Therefore, the district’s EL division should provide professional learning that outlines the teaching, learning, and leading expectations of all instructional staff for EL achievement. The district can leverage existing structures (e.g., teacher induction program, instructional coaching, teacher leader cohorts, new administrator cohorts) to provide professional learning for district staff on the district’s language instruction educational program (LIEP) standards.

**Table 4**

*District EL Professional Learning: Leveraging Existing Structures*

Structure	Description
School Based Administrators Training	Expand capacity of school based administrators to lead LIEP implementation in their schools through facilitated school based data dialogues, student shadowing, and instructional rounds in partnership with EL central office staff.
Central Office Teaching and Learning Teams	Expand capacity of district teaching and learning staff through collaboration with central office EL

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Instructional Coaching Community	<p>team to embed EL instructional practices (language objectives, opportunities for student discourse, scaffolds, and supports) in content planning guides.</p> <p>Leverage instructional coaching community to provide job embedded professional learning through collaborative team and coaching cycles.</p>
New Teacher Induction Program	<p>Leverage teacher induction program to build EL data literacy so that new teachers understand their EL students' assets and needs.</p>
Teacher Leader Cohorts	<p>Leverage teacher leaders to lead inquiry based improvement cycles, model promising practices for teaching and learning for ELs, co-plan with teachers/teams and provide peer feedback.</p>
District Professional Learning and University Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support classroom and content teachers in adding EL endorsement to their teaching license through coursework or district provided professional learning with licensing exam.</li> <li>• Support teacher learning to add content endorsements through coursework or district provided professional learning with licensing exam.</li> </ul>

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In addition to leveraging existing professional learning structures the district central office staff can facilitate and maintain improvement networks across schools, identifying bright spots of practice and policy implementation and connect school teams with one another to learn from and innovate with each other in iterative cycles of improvement to transform practice in schools (Bryk, 2010).

Through partnerships with schools, central office district staff can support communities of practice that expand school teams' capacity by equipping them with the knowledge, skills and

dispositions to meet the diverse needs of ELs, there is a greater opportunity to realize access, opportunity and achievement for ELs (Umansky & Porter, 2020).

**Recommendation 5: Analyze the ELD teacher staffing ratio in relationship to the program model and define the role of the ELD teacher.**

Over half the schools participating in the listening tour stated that the staffing model did not meet the current needs for programming in schools. However, there was also an assumption that more ELD staff would lead to better achievement. To determine how ELD staffing ratios are impacting school leaders' ability to implement EL programming, the central EL team should analyze the staffing formula in relationship to the LEIP models offered in schools. In addition, because school instructional staff did not feel equipped to meet the diverse needs of ELs, school leaders were utilizing EL staff to provide professional learning and coaching in addition to providing direct services to students. Thus, in reviewing staffing models it will be important to define the role of the ELD teacher.

**Recommendation 6: Increase collaboration between the district Teaching and Learning team and the district EL team to align policy and practices.**

To implement policy, schools are tasked to simultaneously negotiate competing priorities, the day-to-day reality of schools, and a diversity of policy tools and instruments (Honig, 2006; Jones, 2013). To support navigation of these competing priorities, central office teams should collaborate with each other, and with school leaders, to align division policy and practices (Honig, 2006).

Central office teams, just like school teams, benefit from networks and collaborative learning to promote aligned policies and practices and to develop effective tools to support schools in policy implementation. By creating learning focused teams across departments,

offices, and schools the central office can create support systems for school improvement and an articulated vision of teaching and learning to advance EL achievement across the district.

### **Limitations**

The most significant limitation in this study is the data set itself. Data were collected as part of district listening tour by central office staff. Although, standardization of format was outlined for interviewers, because this was archived data there was no way to check that the protocol was followed.

Another limitation is that although the response was captured, unless it was included in the notes, it was not clear who said what (e.g., principal, assistant principal, coach, EL teacher, counselor, classroom teacher). Therefore, certain responses could not be attributed to an individual but rather to the team and may have been just the perspective of an individual.

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Appendix A: Codebook

<b>Code</b>	<b>Code Abbreviation</b>	<b>Code Description</b>
Access to High Quality Instruction (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Callahan et. al, 2009; Elfers & Stitikus, 2014; Robinson, Thompson & Umansky, 2016; Umansky & Porter, 2020)		
Access to core instruction	CI-Inclusion	ELs are in inclusive core instructional environments.
Segregated EL settings	CI-Segregated	Refers to specialized and/or remedial instructional environments for ELs
Rigor	CI-Rigor	Knowledge of ELs need for rigorous content
Collaborative Planning	CI-Coll Plan	Refers to collaboration between core and EL teacher to meet the needs of ELs.
Understanding Student Needs and Assets (Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006; Rodriguez, Manner & Darcy, 2010; Umansky & Porter, 2020)		
Addresses unique profiles of ELs	SN-Knows ELs	Refers to the diversity of educational needs of ELs (e.g., ELs with Disabilities, LTELs, Newcomers, SLIFE); connections are made between English language development, proficiency level, and lesson design
Data Informed Decision Making	SN-Data	Refers to use of data to inform instructional decisions (e.g., student goal setting, establishing school improvement goals and metrics; master schedule development)
System Conditions (Callahan, Wilkinson, and Muller, 2010; Harklau & Yang, 2020; Hopkins, 2016; Honig, 2006; Mavrogordato & White, 2019; Robinson-Cimpian. Thompson & Umansky, 2016: Umansky & Porter, 2020; Jones, 21013)		
Staffing	SC-Staffing	Refers to tension between number of staff allotted and the provision of services
Adequate Tools & Curriculum Resources	SC-TR	Refers to district curriculum resources and tools to support EL program implementation
Competing initiatives and priorities	SC-CP	Refers to programs and initiatives that compete with implementation
Teacher/Leader Readiness	SC-R	Refers to readiness (knowledge & skills) to meet the needs of ELs and collective responsibility of school teams to meet the diverse needs of ELs.

## Appendix B: Data Management Plan

This plan describes how I will manage, organize, and store the data collected during the study.

### **Data Types and Storage**

Archived data collected from 120 semi-structured interviews will be used for this study. These notes are saved in an Excel format. Data will be housed on the University's secure, password protected cloud-based server. If any individual identifiers, individuals or school names are included in the data set they will be removed.

### **Data Organization and Documentation**

A single archived data set in the form of an Excel spreadsheet will be used for this study.

### **Data Access and Intellectual Property**

To protect the confidentiality of the participating school district data will not identify the school district, any individual or school by name. The data will be controlled by me, as principal investigator for this Capstone study. Only those identified as the research team in the IRB protocol will have access to these data.

### **Data Preservation and Archiving**

The data will be preserved and archived in the University's secure cloud-based server for 3-5 years in accordance with the standard protocol. Microsoft Word documents will be saved in the .docx format. Excel files will be saved in the .xlsx file format. I will be responsible for maintaining these data.