

## **Educator Perceptions: Prioritizing Support Systems for English Learners**

**Lara Christoun, EdD**

Assistant Professor

Assistant Chair, Education Department

Coordinator of Language Acquisition

Carthage College

### **Abstract**

---

*The purpose of this study was to determine how national educators perceive English Learner (EL) academic support measures. This investigation included a survey of national educators and examined EL and mainstream staff demographic data. The measures included ambitious instruction, effective leadership, supportive environment, family and community involvement, and collaboration. The following attributes were considered: occupational roles, length in role, region, and setting. The study found that staff member roles, EL or mainstream, influenced how essential supports were perceived. This study's findings have implications for how and where school district leaders should focus their efforts to maximize EL academic outcomes.*

---

**Key Words:** English learners, academic outcomes, ambitious instruction, effective leadership, supportive environment, family and community involvement, mainstream educators, occupational role, region, and setting

### **Introduction**

Approximately 50.4 million students attend American public schools. In 2012-2013, 9.3 percent of American students were English Learners (ELs) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). According to the Migration Policy Institute (2016), in the last three decades, nearly 30 million migrants, documented and undocumented, have come to the United States seeking better futures for themselves and their families.

Learning is different for every student, but it is especially unique for those students who are learning English. Thus, it is important to establish steps schools can take to make this process as easy as possible. School environments may vary from setting to setting but the needs of ELs are typically the same. As such, the unique learning characteristics of ELs should be understood and met regardless of whether a school setting is public, private or situated in an urban, suburban, or rural area.

A list of five essentials most needed for student success, termed the Five Essentials by the University of Chicago Urban Institute, was created as a result of a twenty year longitudinal study of student academic performance in 100 Chicago Public Schools. These five essentials represent the conditions students require of schools to be academically successful. This framework of support addresses administration, teachers, students and parents (UChicago Impact, 2016). The essentials are categorized and defined as follows:

1. *Ambitious Instruction*- This key support is the centerpiece of the organizational framework. It asks the extent to which classes are challenging and engaging.
2. *Effective Leadership*- Measures the extent to which principals and teachers implement a shared vision for success including how well the staff take responsibility for the happenings in their school.
3. *Supportive Environment*- Queries students' feelings about their safety and teachers' attentiveness in the school.

4. *Family and Community Involvement*- Examines the types of communication shared between the teachers and parents as well as the resources in the community.
5. *Collaborative Teachers*- This essential questions the extent to which educators collaborate to promote professional growth (Bryk, A., Sebring P., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J., 2010)

A Five Essentials Survey was created in 2012 by the University of Chicago for the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to evaluate and measure the progress of learning conditions in public schools throughout the state of Illinois. In this way, districts monitor the progression of meeting learning needs in individual schools on a regular basis. The current study uses the Five Essentials framework and its value for school environments because its findings were directly relevant to student learning outcomes. The findings from the University of Chicago's twenty year quantitative research study determined that schools that were strong in at least three of the five essentials were ten times more likely to make substantial gains in reading and mathematics (Okuda-Lim, 2013; Illinois 5Essentials Survey, 2016).

### **Literature Review**

The goal of this research study was to determine if demographics impacted how educator professionals perceive the importance of the Five Essentials developed at the University of Chicago. Further, the current investigator hoped to learn the potential range of views regarding how these essentials affect learning outcomes for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students. To date, the Five Essentials has not focused specifically on essential support measures for EL and CLD students.

Based on the reliability and validity of the University of Chicago's ongoing longitudinal meta-analysis of 200 schools, evidence strongly suggests that these essential supports improve educational outcomes. Specifically, schools that are well organize, safe, and supportive are much more likely to be successful. Schools strong in three or more of the Essentials are ten times more likely to improve student outcomes than schools weak in three of these Essential support measures (Okuda-Lim, 2013, Bryk et al. 2010).

The role of the educator may have a relevant impact on how ELs are supported in the classroom. This finding makes all kinds of sense when considering the perspective or perception of the educator. For example, the EL teacher is trained specifically to support and elevate English literacy skills; whereas, the mainstream teacher is required to support the needs of all students (inclusive of ELs and non-ELs). The goal of all education professionals is to meet the academic needs of the students they serve. However, the population and audience served vary depending upon their role and responsibilities.

ELs have unique learning needs. However, with the ever increasing rise of CLD students, all teachers need to be prepared to support unique cultural and language needs (Lucas and Grinberg, 2008). However, general education teachers often do not feel prepared to teach ELLs in their classrooms or even hold negative attitudes toward ELLs included in their classrooms (Harper & de Jong, 2004; Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008; O'Day, 2009). Unfortunately, too many educators may be ineffectively trained in state licensure programs and career settings to meet the needs of their EL students. In particular, a study published by Samson and Collins, for the Center for American Progress, identified several key findings regarding what mainstream teachers need to effectively instruct ELs. They include the importance of attending to the development of oral language, supporting academic language, and encouraging educators to be sensitive to the cultural background of their students (Samson and Collins, 2012; Brooke, 2016).

In recent years, more mainstream educators are co-teaching at least one academic subject area with an EL teacher as a partial means to overcome the challenges a growing number of educators face in their classrooms. In fact, collaborative teaching has become a growing trend in meeting EL academic needs. EL teachers have often "pushed in" to support individual or small learning groups of ELs and are not strangers to teaching English through content. More recently, school districts have become more interested in this integrative model because they see the benefit of a licensed EL and mainstream teacher instructing ELs and native English speakers collaboratively. The benefits are countless, but the most obvious include lowering the teacher-to-student ratio and combining talents to provide comprehensive instruction for all students in mainstream classrooms (Haynes, 2014).

A study conducted by Samson and Collin's emphasized the need to include key areas of research in educator training, teaching, and evaluation of their performance. In this way, all teachers are consistently held to the same standards from state to state. Unfortunately, many states do not adequately embed these three criteria in their teacher training and accountability measures. The only state that requires formative evaluation rubrics and student outcomes is Florida. This may, at least in part, account for the significant academic gains that many ELs are experiencing in this state. The conclusion of this study recommends that all states value cultural diversity and institute accreditation standards, state requirements for certification, and teacher observation rubrics (Samson and Collins 2012).

A lack in clearly defined language with regard to key criteria and essential supports for ELs may have an impact about how (EL and non-EL staff) view EL student needs. An example of this difference in perspective, is described in an EL support handbook created by Hamann (2008) of the University of Nebraska. His work notes the similarities and differences between how educators, mainstream and ESL/Bilingual, view the needs of students in two school districts with high EL populations. Unfortunately many mainstream educators do not feel adequately prepared to meet the needs of their EL populations and EL instructors often are consumed with testing, translating, counseling, editing college applications, and even health care. Classroom teachers may feel that the EL teacher is better prepared to meet the needs of their EL students (Rance-Roney, 2009).

With regard to the Hamann (2008) study, some mainstream or non EL staff did not believe it was their responsibility to meet the unique needs of their EL students who were the majority enrollment in their classrooms. Many of the mainstream teachers did not see a need to be instructed in second language acquisition or content instruction that includes unique EL needs. Unfortunately, the administrators in these two distinct school districts with high EL populations, also did not reinforce the need for professional development to improve how they instruct ELs. In both cases, standardized tests revealed poor academic outcomes for ELs.

Clearly, all educators and staff should support ELs and recent ELs by continually collaborating and seeking out appropriate professional development strategies in second language academic instruction. As previously noted, school-wide collaborative efforts to support ELs are effective. In addition, effective instructional practice involves curriculum design, well-defined and organized programs, that integrally involve cross-disciplinarian and cross-functional school-wide teams is an effective means for supporting ELs. Inclusive teams can vary but could include bilingual and EL specialists, counselors and content-area teachers, as well as administrators. Creating common planning time that incorporate EL and bilingual teachers as well as other specialists creates a solid support framework involving all key school staff members (Council of the Great City Schools, 2014; Rance-Rooney, 2009).

### **Sample**

Participants included 34 education professionals attending a national English Learner conference. The results are anonymously being shared for the purpose of this study. The conference included a large group of education professionals that work with EL students either directly or in an administrative capacity. In order to remain anonymous, the survey only asked questions including: gender, education, role, length in role, geographic location, and setting.

### **Methods**

Qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in this study. The data was collected and entered into various excel charts grouping the data in categories. A Chi Square test was done for each of the hypotheses to determine if there was a difference in opinions concerning the Five Essentials. The primary chart analyzes which of the five essentials the participant selected.

The purpose of this investigation was to determine how national educators perceive English Learner (EL) academic support measures. This study included a survey of national educators and examined EL and mainstream staff demographic data. The measures included ambitious instruction, effective leadership, supportive environment, family and community involvement, and collaboration. The following attributes were considered: occupational roles, length in role, region, and setting.

For the purposes of this study the educator attributes were defined in the following way. Role: In the realm of this study, role refers to the participants' occupation within the school system. Region: The section of the United States (e.g., East, West, etc.) Setting: This refers to where the participant works in terms of location. Thus, is the school in a rural, suburban, or urban area? Length in Role: This defines how long a participant has worked in their position.

Two primary research questions were of high interest to the researcher and are included as follows: "Is there a significant difference, demographically, in how EL and mainstream educators (non-EL) view the Five Essential strategies?" The second question asked "Which, if any, of the Five Essentials is a high need/s in your current work setting?" The four hypotheses were similar in nature with each focusing on an attribute of staff demographic data. For example, the hypothesis focusing on the "role" of the educator was worded in the following manner. "There is a difference between EL education and mainstream education in how they viewed the Five Essentials strategies." The null of this hypothesis states that, "There is no difference between EL education and mainstream educators regarding how they viewed the Five Essential strategies."

After the survey data was collected, it was sorted into corresponding charts. A Chi Square test was used to determine whether or not there was a difference between the different groups' perceptions of the five essentials. The groups being studied in this analysis were chosen by role, region, urban to rural classification, and length in role. The two roles being compared are EL education and mainstream education. Three regions compared, east, west and central. For the urban to rural classification, the analysis compared rural, suburban, and urban across both ELL education and mainstream education. The length in role comparison was grouped as 1-4 years, 5-10 years, and 11+ years. The values computed were then compared to their respective Chi Square values and the decision was made either to accept or reject the null hypotheses.

## Results

The four hypotheses regarding role, region, urban to rural classification, and length in role were important to this study. Each hypothesis was analyzed using the Chi Squared test. The four hypotheses examined all four different categories of the data to determine if there is a difference in how educators view the Five Essentials.

The results of this section of the study found one area of significance. The data analysis results of this finding are included in Table 1. The analysis suggests that there is a difference between how EL and mainstream educators view the five essential strategies. Note that this finding was found significant at the .10 level due to the exploratory nature of this study and supporting viewpoints in the open-ended responses (Bartlett, J., Kotrlik, J., & Higgins, C., 2001).

Hypothesis	X <sup>2</sup> Critical	X <sup>2</sup> Statistic	P value	Decision
Role	988	8.09	.088336*	Reject H <sub>o</sub>
Region	15.507	4.11	.841065	Accept H <sub>o</sub>
Setting	30.41	13.6	.859108	Accept H <sub>o</sub>
Length in Role	15.507	2.63	.955393	Accept H <sub>o</sub>

\*Significant at the 0.10 level

The remaining hypotheses were not deemed statistically significant with the results reported as follows. The second hypothesis was not significant enough to reject the null hypothesis, with a p value of .84. This means that there is no relative difference in the views of the five essentials between the East, West, and Central regions of the country. The third hypothesis' data analysis was also not significant; thus, the null three was accepted with a p value, from the Chi Square test, of .86. This means that there was no difference in views about the five essentials between participants in rural, suburban, and urban areas. The fourth and final hypothesis' data analysis was insignificant, meaning that null hypothesis four was accepted, with a 95% p value. There was no difference in views in the five essentials between participants in their position for 1-4 years, 5-10 years, and 11+ years.

With the exception of the first hypothesis, the data analysis shows that there is no significant perceptual difference regarding how the national EL conference participants viewed the Five Essential supports in terms of location, settings, or length of time in their positions.

With regard to the two proposed research questions for this study, recall that the first question asked “Is there a significant difference, demographically, in how EL and mainstream educators (non-EL) view the Five Essential strategies?” In response, only the educator’s role (EL or mainstream) impacts how the essential strategies are perceived in their work setting. The geographical or demographic school setting of the educator did not statistically impact how he or she viewed the essential strategies.

The remaining research question was answered in the second stage of analysis in the form of a qualitative open-ended survey question. It addressed the response selections made by EL and mainstream educator survey respondents. The research question asked “Which, if any, of the Five Essentials is a high need/s in your current work setting?” The responses were first read and considered generically. A second review included categorizing the responses in a table. The researcher hoped to learn, generically, how the Five Essentials were being utilized in their educational settings. Specifically, she wanted to learn if there was also a difference in how EL and mainstream (non-EL) educators perceive this high need. Note that respondents could select more than one high need or even no need. Hence, the number of participants (N=34) responses varied depending upon their viewpoint.

Professional Capacity and Quality of Instruction were a high need as perceived by EL educators with ten responses selected for each of the two essentials. Over half, 55%, of the total responses (N=36) focused on these two strategies. The remaining essential responses were fairly evenly divided amongst the three remaining categories (5, 5, and 6). Learning Climate and Family and Community Involvement had a slightly higher response rate, seven responses each, with the remaining categories being almost equal (6, 6, and 5). However, a recurring theme emerged between the roles of educators. (See Appendix A, Tables 2 and 3). English Learner (EL) and mainstream educators generally viewed the essentials differently. In addition, it is important to note that individual work settings also impacted how the respondent perceived the need for each standard. This open-ended collection of responses relate to Research Question 1 regarding the extent to which EL education and mainstream educators agree in how they view the Five Essential strategies. Educator perceptions of the strategies differed depending on their role (EL or mainstream).

While this study included several limitations such as a rather limited number of participants (N=34), educator voice was sought by multiple means. The results reveal quantitatively and qualitatively, that the role of the educator does impact how an educator perceives and prioritizes support systems for ELs. Education professionals that regularly serve the academic and social needs of ELs shared their unique perspectives regarding how their own institutions of learning impact EL educational outcomes. Too often, the authentic voices of those directly serving CLD and EL students are undervalued or misunderstood. A recommendation for further study would be to poll more participants in a range of educational settings nation-wide. School districts in a range of states such as Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, and Indiana have utilized a Five Essentials survey (Okuda-Lim, 2013). Three versions of the survey were administered for parents, teachers, and students. Including a wider audience, in multiple states and district settings may offer additional insights regarding what academic support needs CLD students require to be effectively educated and understood.

## **References**

- Bartlett, J., Kotrlik, J., & Higgins, C. (2001). Organizational research: Determining appropriate sample size in survey research. *Information Technology, Learning, and Performance*, 19(1). Retrieved from <http://www.osra.org/itlpj/bartlettkotrlikhiggins>. Pdf
- Brooke, Elizabeth (2016). Understanding the Unique Instructional Needs of English Language Learners. Lexia Learning and Rosetta Stone. Retrieved on October 30, 2016 from <http://www.lexialearning.com/resources/white-papers/understanding-unique-instructional-needs-english-language-learners>

- Bryk, A., Sebring P., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Council of the Great City Schools (2014). A Framework for Raising Expectations and Instructional Rigor for ELLs. Retrieved on July 3, 2017 from <https://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/4/Framework%20for%20Raising%20Expectations.pdf>
- Hamann, Edmund (2008). *Meeting the Needs of ELLs: Acknowledging the Schism Between ESL/Bilingual and Mainstream Teachers and Illustrating That Problems Remedy*. University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
- Harper, C., & de Jong, E (2004). Misconceptions about Teaching English-Language Learners. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 48(2), 152-162.
- Haynes, Judie (2014). Collaborative Teaching: Addressing ESL Teacher Concerns. Retrieved on October 10, 2016 from <http://blog.tesol.org/collaborative-teaching-addressing-esl-teacher-concerns/>
- Illinois 5Essentials Survey (2016). Organizing Schools for Improvement. Retrieved on November 5, 2016 from <https://illinois.5-essentials.org/2014/>
- Lind, D., Marchal, W., & Wathen, S. (2010). *Statistical techniques in business and economics 14<sup>th</sup> ed.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Lucas, T., Villegas, A. M., & Freedson-Gonzalez, M. (2008). Linguistically responsive teacher education: Preparing classroom teachers to teach English language learners. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 59(4), 361-373.
- Lucas, T., & Grinberg, J. (2008). Responding to the linguistic reality of mainstream classrooms: Preparing all teachers to teach English language learners. In M.Cochran-Smith, S. Feiman-Nemser, D. J. McIntyre, & K. E. Demers (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring questions in changing contexts* (3rd ed., pp. 606–636). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Migrant Policy Center (2016). ELL Information Center. Retrieved on September 5, 2016 from <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/ell-information-center>
- National Center for Education for Education Statistics (2016). Retrieved on October 10, 2016 from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>
- O’Day, J. (January 2009). Good Instruction is Good for Everyone—Or is it? English language learners in a balanced literacy approach. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 14(1), 97-119.
- Okuda-Lim, Zhan (2013). 5Essentials System. Retrieved on July 3, 2017 from <https://secure.ccsd.net/internal/cms/doc-vault/resources/archive/item-7-5essentials-powerpoint-rev.-july-23.pdf>
- Payne, C. (2008). *So much reform so little change: The persistence of failure in urban schools*. Boston, MA: Harvard Education Publishing.
- Rance-Rooney (2009). Best Practices for Adolescent ELLs. *Educational Leadership*, 66(7), 32-37.
- Samson, J and Collins, B (2012). *Preparing Teachers to Meet the Needs of English Language Learners*. Washington DC: Center for American Progress.
- UChicago Impact. (2016) *5Essentials: Background, Predictive Validity, and Reliability* Chicago: IL. Retrieved on September 20, 2015 from <http://uchicagoimpact.org/5essentials/background>
- Williams B., & Montgomery, N. (2012). Illinois 5 Essentials Survey: Organizing schools for improvement. Retrieved from <http://www.isbe.state.il.us/racetothetop/ppt/5essentials-press10102.pdf>

## APPENDIX A

## FIVE ESSENTIAL NEED RESPONSES FOR EL AND NON-EL EDUCATORS

## Five Essential Need Responses for EL Educators

<b>Table 2</b>		
<b>5Essential Strategy Key and Number of EL Responses</b>		
<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
Instructional Leadership	1	5
Professional Capacity	2	10
Learning Climate	3	5
Family and Community Environment	4	6
Quality of Instruction	5	10
<b>Total Responses</b>		<b>36</b>

## Five Essential Need Responses for Non-EL Educators

<b>Table 3</b>		
<b>5Essential Strategy Key and Number of Non-EL Responses</b>		
<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
Instructional Leadership	1	6
Professional Capacity	2	6
Learning Climate	3	7
Family and Community Environment	4	7
Quality of Instruction	5	5
<b>Total Responses</b>		<b>30</b>