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RESTART & RECOVERY
ACCESS AND EQUITY FOR ENGLISH LEARNER STUDENTS AND FAMILIES DURING COVID-19:
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE LEADERS

COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, Bureau of Indian Education, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Council seeks member consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public.

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INTRODUCTION

As schools across the country shifted to remote learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the experiences of students classified as English learners (EL), who represent approximately 10 percent of the nation's K-12 population, [i] revealed substantial inequities in their educational access and opportunity. [ii] These inequities emanate from a confluence of factors, including disparities in access to electronic devices and high-speed Internet [iii] and fears of surveillance in online spaces, [iv] that coincide with long-standing challenges to EL equity, including limited opportunities for families to engage with school staff in their home languages and assumptions about the capabilities of students from immigrant or language-minority communities. [v]

Since the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), state education agency (SEA) leaders are now key actors in defining accountability policies; outlining expectations for student progress; providing assistance to local education agencies (LEA) to ensure that ELs are afforded high-quality instruction and services; and building shared responsibility across their states. [vi] SEA leaders thus have a unique opportunity to shape EL policy and practice as they work to ensure implementation of civil rights law for English learners in their states. Particularly in light of COVID-related inequities, SEAs should move toward a comprehensive approach to supporting EL students: one that creates the system conditions to afford EL students access to high-quality instruction grounded in an understanding of their diverse assets and strengths. [vii]

Guidance from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) issued in mid-May 2020 emphasized SEA and LEA obligations for upholding ELs' civil rights during the COVID-19 pandemic, including initial identification and exit procedures, the provision of language services and access to content, and meaningful communication with parents. [viii] While these civil rights requirements provide guardrails for state and local education

leaders, more is needed to ensure that English learners are provided instruction that takes their home circumstances and language proficiency into account; affords opportunities to engage in discipline-specific practices that leverage their home language(s), cultural assets, and prior knowledge; and leverages formative assessment practices to monitor their learning and support their autonomy. [ix]

SEAs have developed extensive guidance related to remote learning and school reopening in response to the unprecedented challenges presented by COVID-19. Below, the authors offer a set of recommendations for SEA leaders as they develop, revise, and refine statewide COVID-related guidance to prioritize equity for EL students and families. These recommendations are based on an analysis of more than 150 state guidance documents published through July 2020, including remote learning and school reopening guidance, as well as any guidance specific to English learners.

In consultation with members of CCSSO's English Learners Collaborative, the authors of this paper curated all EL-related information within these documents across five areas: (1) family engagement, (2) instruction, (3) assessment, (4) professional learning, and (5) leadership. This paper also includes guidance on supporting ELs' social-emotional learning (SEL) and serving ELs with disabilities. Note that, although this paper focuses on SEA leaders, district and school leaders also may find these recommendations useful in guiding the development of local plans which center English learners. CCSSO also has released a comprehensive set of resources designed to assist states in making decisions about operations, instruction, and SEL during the pandemic. While many of the issues discussed in that set of resources are similar, the recommendations listed below focus specifically on EL students and their families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE GUIDANCE RELATED TO ENGLISH LEARNER FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

- **Create or identify tools and resources for LEAs to facilitate translation of materials.** Effectively using translation tools often requires drawing upon the expertise of EL educators, paraprofessionals, and support staff, as well staff from community-based organizations, who have already developed relationships with EL families. State leaders can consider leveraging these individuals to help translate COVID-related information and/or to identify resources that support EL families in engaging with any remote learning technologies. Resources can come in multiple forms, such as online webinars, FAQs, videos, and infographics.

- **Encourage and support EL families as partners in learning, while communicating healthy expectations for EL family engagement.** Although parents and caregivers are crucial for supporting student learning during the pandemic, it is important for states to acknowledge that parents should not be expected to take on the role of teachers, especially parents who do not speak English and/or are not familiar with U.S. school norms. States can offer resources that support EL families in becoming active in their children's education and reflect reasonable expectations for their involvement in remote learning. Such resources might include tips related to how EL parents and caregivers can cultivate student agency (e.g., reinforcing students' use of translation apps or graphic organizers, or coaching students to ask their teacher or peers for assistance) and guidance around when EL parent support may be most critical (e.g., keeping track of due dates, urging students to complete culminating assignments, etc.).

- **Provide opportunities for EL students and families to share feedback on COVID-related plans and decisions with state and local leaders.** Consider multiple opportunities and diverse modalities (e.g. text, phone calls, email) that allow EL students and families to provide feedback on remote learning models and to participate in continuous-improvement processes alongside other key stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE GUIDANCE RELATED TO INSTRUCTION FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

- **Offer strategies for monitoring EL attendance and supporting participation in remote learning.** States should disaggregate any data collected on student attendance and participation for both currently identified ELs and students who have recently been reclassified as ELs. Useful data points might include the percentage of students with whom there has been no contact, the percentage of families without electronic devices and/or Internet access, and the percentage of students absent from or not participating in online classes and assignments. [x] States also can offer guidance related to supporting EL participation in remote learning, including the provision of linguistically and culturally responsive instruction and attention to student safety concerns related to immigration enforcement and surveillance in online settings. [xi]

- **Promote continuity of language and content instruction across program models.** Regardless of how instruction is being delivered, ELs must continue to receive English language development (ELD) services and have access to grade-level academic content. It is important for state guidance to make these civil rights obligations clear, explaining how leaders, teachers, and other school staff members can work together to ensure the continuing provision of high-quality language and content instruction for English learners. Sample instructional plans for the delivery of language and content may be particularly useful, with guidance pertaining to student-teacher ratios and associated staffing that is specific to the state's language-instruction educational programs (e.g., English-as-a-second-language [ESL] pull-out or dual language programming). *Note:* It is also important to provide EL-focused instructional guidance that includes accommodations for EL students with disabilities.

- **Provide guidance on supporting English learners' social-emotional learning (SEL).** Given the economic, linguistic, cultural, and immigration-related complexities that many EL students and families are navigating during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering strategies for promoting their well-being and social-emotional development is key.

- For instance, state guidance could support the development of district- or school-based, collaborative task forces that include teachers, counselors, support staff, and EL students and families to gather information on the social-emotional experiences of English learners during the pandemic, and to identify evidence-based, trauma-informed approaches for addressing any issues the group identifies. Some LEAs have purchased curricula to address students' SEL; however, many of these resources do not include distinct considerations for ELs. State leaders are encouraged to offer guidance on selecting materials that are relevant to English learners' experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE GUIDANCE RELATED TO ASSESSMENT FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

- **Identify provisional screening procedures for initial identification during remote learning.** To ensure that potential EL students are assessed in a timely, valid, and reliable manner as required by civil rights law, some states have issued detailed guidance for the provisional identification of English learners in remote contexts. Provisional procedures include remotely administering a home-language survey and engaging in appropriate follow-up, such as conducting interviews with the student and/or family to preliminarily evaluate English language proficiency. Results from this evaluation can be used to determine instructional supports, services, and placement options during remote learning. States should specify how EL families will be involved in the provisional identification process, as well as how initial parent notification will occur. Per ED guidance, upon reopening for in-person instruction, schools must complete formal, in-person screening for all students who were provisionally screened. It is important for states to consider how they will support ongoing communication with parents, once schools reopen and in-person screening results are available. Note that certain provisional processes may need to be modified for ELs with disabilities.

- **Outline best practices for ongoing assessment.** Engaging in ongoing assessment of English learners' language development and mastery of content is integral to providing high-quality EL

instruction. States' guidance could provide tangible strategies for conducting ongoing assessment of remote English learners' progress, including: collaborative assessment practices between general education teachers and EL/bilingual educators; student reflections and self-assessments; and the use of scoring rubrics and different types of assessment.

- **Address challenges related to reclassification.** During the 2019-2020 school year, some EL students were unable to complete English language proficiency (ELP) assessments. Per civil rights law, students cannot be exited from EL status until they have demonstrated proficiency on a valid and reliable assessment that includes the four domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It is important for state guidance to address how to administer such assessments and how the timing and results of these assessments could affect EL services and accountability models during remote learning and school reopening. Such guidance should factor in multiple possible situations (e.g., schools remain remote through the end of 2020, schools remain remote throughout 2021) to help ensure that approaches are proactive, not reactive.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE GUIDANCE RELATED TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS

- **Design or support the development of EL-focused professional learning opportunities for teachers and other staff.** Effectively instructing and supporting ELs in remote and hybrid learning contexts requires teachers, counselors, and support staff to gain or improve their skills in both technology and EL learning. Topics for professional learning might include using digital devices and managing online meetings; utilizing remote interpreting services; making sure ELs have opportunities to engage in standards-based curricula during remote learning; developing collaborative models of instruction between EL and general education teachers; and building positive relationships with EL students and families.

- **Support infrastructures for professional collaboration that center English learners.** Leaders, teachers, counselors, and support staff have a shared responsibility for educating and supporting ELs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Any online collaboration tools a state selects should have functionality that enables users to co-plan lessons, reflect on assessments, and differentiate instruction. Productive collaborative teams can reach beyond language and content teachers to include other experts, including paraprofessionals, family liaisons, and staff members supporting students with disabilities. For remote districts and districts with small EL populations where resources may be limited, SEA leaders might consider creating virtual networks for inter-district collaboration and resource-sharing.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE GUIDANCE RELATED TO LEADERSHIP FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

- **Use asset-based characterizations to describe English learners.** Foregrounding the strengths that EL students and families bring to an educational community not only improves ELs' learning but also promotes a statewide culture that centers equity and inclusivity.

- **Integrate EL-specific guidance and resources into state pandemic guidance documents.** To be most accessible, states are encouraged to integrate EL-focused guidance into their general remote-learning and school reopening guidance. Recognizing that much state guidance is lengthy, however, state leaders also might include a prominent, EL-related section in the Table of Contents. With regard to any outside resources referenced in their COVID-related guidance, states might consider developing criteria for evaluating these resources to ensure that they align with principles of high-quality EL instruction

- **Ensure continuity of funding to local education agencies.** To achieve the recommendations outlined above, states must ensure that their LEAs receive the necessary resources. SEAs are encouraged to consider the ways in which the lack of ELP assessment data from 2019-2020 might affect funding formulas, then maintain or increase funding as needed. States also could allocate

temporary funding for provisionally identified ELs, making adjustments as needed after in-person screenings are completed. Considerations for the use of Title III and CARES Act funds also might include EL-focused professional learning and staffing support to promote EL family engagement (e.g., parent liaisons and/or translators).

- **Gather quantitative and qualitative data to monitor progress and implementation.** Schools and districts are rapidly responding to challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and implementing innovative strategies to instruct and support students. To ensure equity for ELs, states will need to monitor how different instructional models and parent-engagement strategies are being implemented during distance learning. SEA leaders would do well to consider which data they will need to inform making improvements and modifications to current plans—including data pertaining to EL attendance and participation, family engagement, and the methods used to deliver language and content instruction—and whether states have the capacity to analyze and interpret whatever data is collected. States also should encourage collaboration between state research and evaluation teams.

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CONCLUSION

While the pandemic presents many challenges, it also provides an opportunity for SEAs to make innovative and potentially long-term improvements to EL services and programs. The above recommendations, while not exhaustive, can serve as a framework to support state leaders as they work to foster educational access and equity for EL students and their families during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

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