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Summary

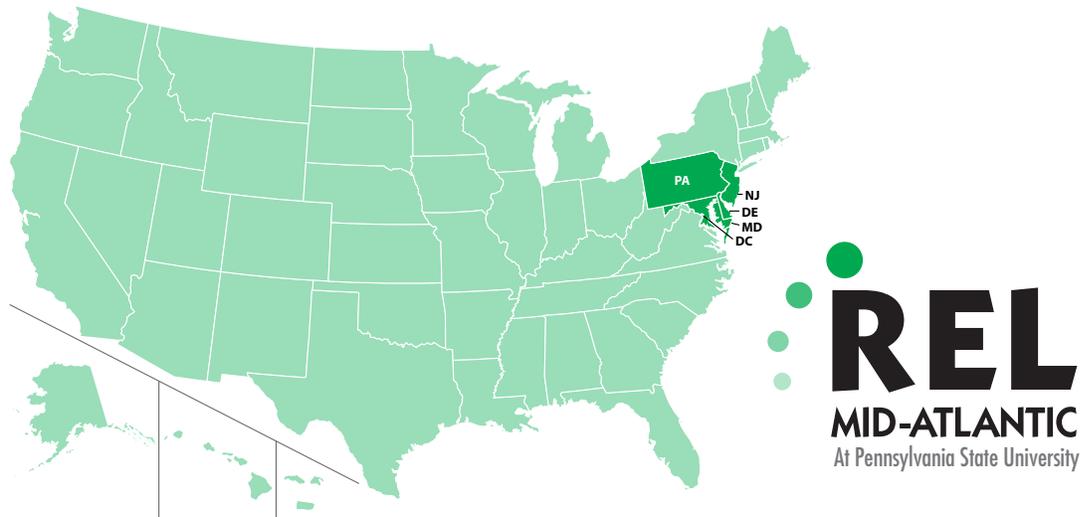
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Issues and Answers is an ongoing series of reports from short-term Fast Response Projects conducted by the regional educational laboratories on education issues of importance at local, state, and regional levels. Fast Response Project topics change to reflect new issues, as identified through lab outreach and requests for assistance from policymakers and educators at state and local levels and from communities, businesses, parents, families, and youth. All Issues and Answers reports meet Institute of Education Sciences standards for scientifically valid research.

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A descriptive analysis of enrollment and achievement among English language learner students in Pennsylvania

This study describes enrollment and achievement trends among English language learner (ELL) students in Pennsylvania public schools between 2002/03 and 2008/09. It documents achievement gaps between ELL and non-ELL students in reading, math, and writing in grades 3–8 and 11. Those gaps widened in all grades except grade 3 reading and math.

English language learner (ELL) students are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. student population. According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (2011), approximately 5.3 million ELL students were enrolled in preK–12 in 2008/09, accounting for about 10.8 percent of public school students in the United States. National enrollment of ELL students in public schools grew 57 percent between 1995 and 2009 (Flannery 2009)—almost six times the 10 percent growth rate in the general education population (students who are not enrolled in a language assistance program or a special education program). In Pennsylvania, the number of ELL students has also been growing, in conjunction with a rise in foreign-born residents in the state.¹ In 2009, people born in other countries accounted for more than 5 percent of Pennsylvania’s population (Migration Policy Institute 2010).

Nationally, an achievement gap exists between ELL and non-ELL students in all subject areas, particularly subjects with high language demands (Strickland and Alvermann 2004). On statewide assessments across the country, the percentage of students who achieve proficiency (as defined by each state) is 20–30 percentage points lower among ELL students than among non-ELL students (Abedi and Dietel 2004). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires states to implement accountability systems to assess the achievement of all students, including students from traditionally underserved populations such as ELL students. The goal is to have all students reach proficiency and to close the achievement gap by 2014 (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001).

This study describes ELL student enrollment and achievement trends in Pennsylvania public schools between 2002/03 and 2008/09. Two research questions guide this study:²

- How did the enrollment of ELL students in Pennsylvania public schools change between 2002/03 and 2008/09?
- How did performance (the percentage scoring at the proficient or advanced level) on state assessments in reading, math, and writing in grades 3–8 and 11 compare between ELL and non-ELL students in

Pennsylvania public schools from 2004/05 to 2008/09?

To report changes in ELL student enrollment and performance, the study uses enrollment and assessment data available through the Pennsylvania Department of Education website. The descriptive analyses of enrollment data track the number of ELL students statewide. The analyses of performance data present the percentage of ELL and non-ELL students who scored at the proficient or advanced level in reading, math, and writing on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment.³

The study's main findings include:

On enrollment trends:

- Although Pennsylvania's total student enrollment fell 2.4 percent between 2002/03 and 2008/09, the enrollment of ELL students rose 24.7 percent. ELL student enrollment increased from 2.1 percent of the student population in 2002/03 to 2.7 percent in 2008/09.
 - ELL students in Pennsylvania spoke 211 languages in 2008/09, up from 138 in 2002/03. In 2008/09, Spanish (spoken by 57.6 percent of ELL students in the state) had the most speakers, followed by English dialects⁴ (7.0 percent), Chinese (3.6 percent), Vietnamese (3.2 percent), Arabic (2.6 percent), and Russian (2.3 percent). ELL students speaking "other" languages (languages other than the 18 most common in the state) accounted for 12.2 percent of the ELL student population in 2008/09.
 - Between 2002/03 and 2008/09, the number and percentage of ELL students speaking Spanish and English dialects increased, while the number and percentage of ELL students speaking Vietnamese, Russian, and "other" languages decreased. The number of ELL students speaking Chinese and Arabic increased, but the percentage decreased.
- On achievement trends:
- Between 2004/05 and 2008/09, ELL students' performance in reading increased 3.6–10.8 percentage points in grades 3, 4, and 8 but decreased 4.1–9.5 percentage points in grades 5, 6, 7, and 11.
 - Between 2004/05 and 2008/09, ELL students' performance in math increased 1.4–3.2 percentage points in grades 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 but decreased 3.0–5.5 percentage points in grades 5 and 11.
 - Between 2005/06 and 2008/09, ELL students' performance in writing decreased 2.5–10.0 percentage points in all grades studied (grades 5, 8, and 11).
 - In every year during the period studied, non-ELL students' performance was 21–55 percentage points higher than that of ELL students in reading, math, and writing.
 - In every year during the period studied, ELL and non-ELL students' performance in reading was closer in grades 3–5 than in grades 6–8 and 11; ELL and non-ELL students' performance in math and

writing was closer in grades 3–5 and grade 11 than in grades 6–8.

- During the period studied, the overall achievement gap in reading, math, and writing between ELL and non-ELL students widened in all grades studied except grade 3, where the achievement gap narrowed in reading and math.
- During the period studied and in all grades studied, the average achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL students was narrower in math than in reading and writing. In all grades studied, the average achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL students was wider in reading than in writing.
- During the period studied, the average achievement gap in reading, writing, and math widened from elementary school (grades 3–5) to middle school (grades 6–8) and high school (grade 11), except in grade 11 math and writing.

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Notes

1. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (2010) defines an ELL student as “one who: (1) was not born in the United States or whose native language is other than English and comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; or (2) is a Native American or Alaska Native who is a native resident of the outlying areas and comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on (the student’s) level of English language proficiency; or (3) is migratory and whose native language is other than English and comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; and (1) has sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing or understanding the English language and (2) has difficulties that may deny (the student) the opportunity to learn successfully in classrooms where the language of instruction is English or to participate fully in our society.” (For definitions of key terms, see box 1 in the main report.)
2. This report is one in a series for jurisdictions in the Mid-Atlantic Region (which also includes Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, and New Jersey). The findings are presented in separate reports because each jurisdiction has different ELL policies and definitions, and so it may be inappropriate to compare ELL student enrollment and achievement across jurisdictions. The available data also varied by jurisdiction.
3. Reading and math assessment results for grades 3, 5, 8, and 11 for 2004/05 and later are not comparable to those before 2004/05 because of new test blueprints, test items, assessment anchors, and item distribution; thus, 2004/05 was selected as the base year for the analyses of performance data. In 2005/06, the Pennsylvania Department of Education added reading and math assessments in grades 4, 6, and 7. The writing assessment was not administered in grades 5 and 8 until 2005/06. The focus, format, and scoring of the writing assessment for grade 11 changed in 2005/06.
4. English dialects are English, Barbados; English, Guyana; English, Jamaican; English, Trinidad; and Liberian English.

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