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Summary

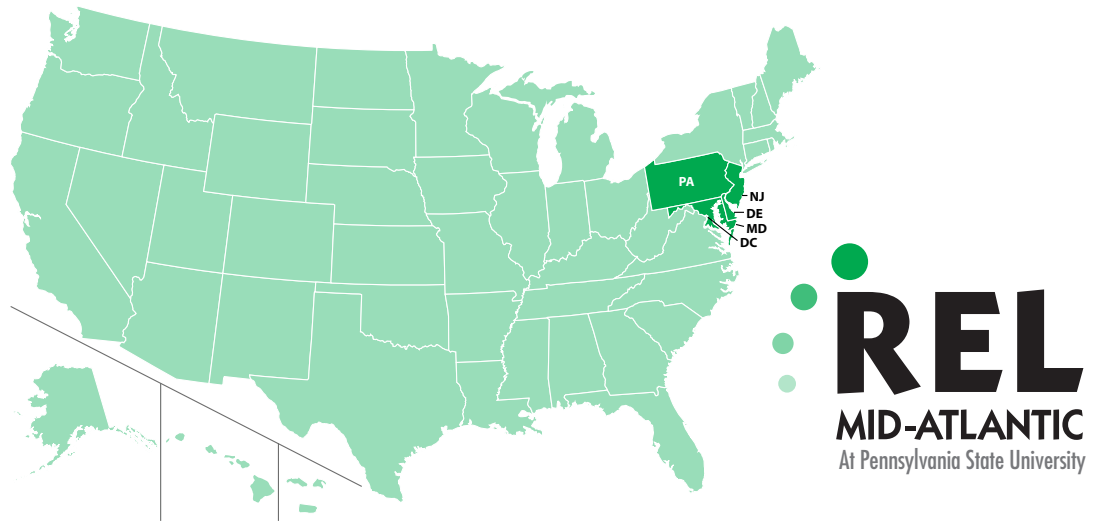
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Issues and Answers is an ongoing series of reports from short-term Fast Response Projects conducted by the regional educational laboratories on education issues of importance at local, state, and regional levels. Fast Response Project topics change 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 the District of Columbia

This study describes enrollment trends between 2002/03 and 2008/09 and achievement trends between 2006/07 and 2008/09 among English language learner (ELL) students in the District of Columbia. It documents growth in ELL student enrollment and finds that in all years and all grades studied, the performance of ELL students relative to that of non-ELL students was stronger in math than in reading; in many instances, ELL students' performance was higher than that of non-ELL students.

English language learner (ELL) students are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. student population.¹ 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).

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 state assessments, 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 trends between 2002/03 and 2008/09 and achievement trends between 2006/07 and 2008/09 in the District of Columbia. Two research questions guide this study:²

- How did the enrollment of ELL students in District of Columbia public schools change between 2002/03 and 2008/09?
- How did performance (the percentage scoring at the proficient or advanced level) on district assessments in reading and math in grades 3–8 and 10 compare between ELL and non-ELL students in District of Columbia public schools from 2006/07 to 2008/09?

To report changes in ELL student enrollment and performance, the study uses enrollment and assessment data from the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education and the U.S. Department of Education websites. The descriptive analyses of enrollment data track the number of ELL students and the languages spoken by ELL students districtwide. The analyses of performance data present the percentage of ELL and non-ELL students who scored at the proficient or advanced level in reading and math in the district.

The study's main findings include:

On enrollment trends:

- From 2002/03 to 2008/09, ELL student enrollment in District of Columbia public schools increased 1.8 percent, while total enrollment decreased 6.3 percent. ELL student enrollment increased from 7.7 percent of total enrollment in 2002/03 to 8.4 percent in 2008/09.
- From 2005/06 to 2008/09, Spanish speakers accounted for the largest percentage of ELL students, peaking at 74.9 percent in 2005/06.³ In 2008/09, Spanish (spoken by 60.4 percent of ELL students in the district) had the most speakers, followed by Amharic (2.4 percent), Chinese (2.2 percent), French (1.9 percent), and Vietnamese (1.7 percent). ELL students speaking “other” languages (languages other than the five most common in the district) accounted for 31.5 percent of ELL students in 2008/09.
- From 2005/06 to 2008/09, the number and percentage of ELL students speaking Amharic, French, and “other” languages increased, whereas the number and percentage of ELL students speaking Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese decreased.

On achievement trends:

- Between 2006/07 and 2008/09, ELL students' performance in reading increased 1.9–20.5 percentage points in all grades studied (grades 3–8 and 10).
- Between 2006/07 and 2008/09, ELL students' performance in math increased 14.8–24.0 percentage points in all grades studied (grades 3–8 and 10).
- ELL students' performance in grade 3 reading was higher than that of non-ELL students in every year studied. ELL students' performance in grade 4 reading was higher than that of non-ELL students in 2006/07. Non-ELL students' performance in grade 4 reading was higher than that of ELL students in 2007/08 and 2008/09, but the achievement gap did not exceed 0.25 percentage point. From 2006/07 to 2008/09, the achievement gap in reading between ELL and non-ELL students widened in grade 8, narrowed in grades 7 and 10, closed in grade 5, and reversed in grade 6 (with ELL students' performance higher than that of non-ELL students).
- ELL students' performance in math was higher than that of non-ELL students in grades 3 and 4 in every year studied. From 2006/07 to 2008/09, the achievement gap in math between ELL and non-ELL students narrowed in grade 7 and reversed in grades 5, 6, 8, and 10. By 2008/09, ELL

students' performance in math was higher than that of non-ELL students in all grades studied except grade 7.

Notes

1. The District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education defines an ELL student as "a linguistically and culturally diverse student with an English language proficiency level that does not allow the student to participate in the general program of the school without alternative language services" (Secretary of the District of Columbia 2002). A linguistically and culturally diverse student is a student who understands or speaks a language other than English that was learned from his or her family background or a student with a

family background where a language other than English is spoken in the home (Secretary of the District of Columbia 2002).

2. This report is one of a series for jurisdictions in the Mid-Atlantic Region (which also includes Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania). 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. Data on language groups with the highest ELL student enrollment were not available for 2002/03–2004/05.

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