

Fostering Equity and Meaningful Accountability for California’s English Learners (ELs): Utilizing the EL Academic Indicator as a Mechanism to Drive Continuous Improvement and Resource Allocation

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After several years of multi-layered planning, stakeholder engagement and design, California has embarked on a historic and bold effort to implement the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)-- an education finance reform intended to foster equity alongside local flexibility and democratic engagement. The LCFF provides each district with a base grant determined by the size and grade levels of the student population, as well as supplemental and concentration grants based on the number of English language learners, low-income students, and foster youth. Districts must engage parents, teachers, students and community members in developing the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), a document detailing the district’s goals and strategies for using LCFF funds that includes engaging all levels of the system in a commitment to equity and to continuous improvement. Linking processes of local planning and resource allocation through the LCAP to the systems of technical assistance and support within a single accountability system is complex. As a state with large numbers of English Learners (ELs), with noted historically persistent underachievement and inadequate responses to the needs of those students, it has been noteworthy and commendable that the work to create the new accountability system has largely embraced a commitment to equity in creating a system that targets the specific needs of English Learners. While significant progress has been made, and many aspects of the new system appear appropriate for the task of accountability for English Learner access and achievement, the decision the State Board of Education still has to make about the English Learner Academic Indicator is at the heart of whether this new system will adequately and equitably focus attention and trigger needed responses to meet the needs of this diverse subgroup.

There is a dual purpose for the Academic Indicator – for federal and state accountability and decisions to target technical assistance and intervention, and the other for districts to determine goals, set growth targets, and focus program and services and allocation of funds to the students who are in the classrooms now and in need. The definition of the English Learner subgroup used for the Academic Indicator, and the mechanisms of populating the LCAP with English Learner data to guide districts in planning, allocating resources and responding to the needs of English Learners must respond to both of these needs. Thus far, the state’s LCAP guidance and the initiative of LEAs have not been sufficient to result in adequate attention to the needs of English Learners.¹ A revision of the LCAP template this year seeks to increase equity by identifying performance gaps and needs directly linked to subgroups that fall within the Orange or Red bands of achievement (see LCAP template, page 2). At issue for the State Board now is whether the English Learner subgroup definition will illuminate achievement needs with a clear and meaningful English Learner definition or mask those needs by combining English Learners in an average along with RFEPs. As multiple simulations have demonstrated, the combination of EL + RFEP results in the vast majority of districts in the English Learner Academic Indicator falling within the Yellow, Green or Blue bands would not require districts to plan a response. Without clear data alerting districts to English Learner needs, without clear guidance requiring that LEAs plan a response to those needs, the accountability system threatens to miss the mark –with the potential of creating yet another school reform era leaving English Learners (and possibly recently reclassified English Learners) behind.

The English Learner Composite Indicator monitors progress towards English Proficiency. It is well constructed, and meaningful in addressing the sole issue of English language proficiency. English Learners are a class of students for whom the lack of English proficiency creates a barrier to academic access, participation and

¹ Olsen, L, Armas, E., & Lavadenz, M. (2016). *A review of year 2 LCAPs: A weak response to English Learners*. Long Beach, CA: Californians Together.

Armas, E., Lavadenz, M., & Olsen, L. (2015). *Falling Short on the Promise of Increased or Improved Services for English Learners: A Report on Year One LCAPs*. Californian’s Together: CA.

achievement. The responsibility of our schools is to ensure that while English Learners are acquiring English they do not accrue academic gaps (in all the academic content they need to master – social studies, science, math, etc.) that are irreparable (Lau v. Nichols [1974], U.S. 563; Castañeda v. Pickard [1981], 648 F.2d 989 (5th Cir., 1981), and that we get students to the levels of English proficiency needed for meaningful access and participation. Of key importance is the fact that they are to learn English AND master academic content. One of the significant problems for Long Term English Learners is that they have accrued major academic gaps over the years. The English Learner Composite Indicator only answers half of the challenge facing English Learners – whether they are moving towards English proficiency and whether they eventually attain that proficiency. The Composite EL English proficiency indicator does not speak to the challenge of academic gaps and mastery; therefore a strong English Learner Academic Indicator is needed for that purpose. Combining English Learners with RFEPs in such an Academic Indicator will mask English Learners’ academic performance.

Federal accountability provisions allow for a combined EL/RFEP indicator for up to four years of RFEP inclusion. For an overall picture of how a system is doing over time longitudinally with English Learners, this combined indicator makes sense and provides “credit” for eventually getting students to reclassification. However, California’s new accountability system is being designed for more than “big picture” accountability. It is also meant as a vehicle to drive and support continuous improvement, engaging LEAs in attending to the needs of English Learners who are in their classrooms NOW. For example, it is imperative that the system be able to examine the specific growth of a cohort of actual English Learners, and to guide LEAs to generate plans in response to those students and their needs. Additionally, by not having data disaggregated for RFEPs, the state will do a disservice to districts and will discount their success in reclassifying students. And, we cannot afford to mask the very real access and achievement issues facing many English Learners by purging their struggles in an average by combining them with RFEPs for state accountability purposes.

The solution is two separate indicators. Our state is not locked into an either-or choice between an English Learner-only indicator and a combined English Learner/RFEP indicator. It serves the complex needs of this population better, and is more in line with California’s groundbreaking effort to create a flexible and responsive accountability system for multiple levels of accountability, equity and continuous improvement by eschewing a forced choice and adopting instead, two separate indicators. Already, in the currently designed California Accountability System, the specific definition of the English Learner subgroup changes depending on context in order to address the specific meaning of particular measures and indicators. This would follow suit.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We urge the State Board of Education to uphold the promise of LCFF for English Learners by “shining the light”² on equity and adopting the following approach to the English Learner Academic Indicator (see Figure 1 below for illustration)

1). Adopt separate ELs and RFEPs Indicators- To be reported separately and prepopulated on the LCAP with the current directions to districts to identify gaps and areas needing to be addressed in all the LCAP components and/or as Greatest Progress; and,

2) Revise the LCAP Template- The State Board of Education should create an additional box on the LCAP to denote the performance level for federal and state technical assistance and support purposes (accountability) or adopt a policy within the language of State Board Item #2 Addendum to Attachment 1 to describe how the data on ELs plus RFEPs will be used to calculate which districts and/or schools would receive the technical assistance and support with all the accompanying charts and graphs showing the determination of the performance level triggering accountability and continuous improvement efforts.

² Lauen, D. L., & Gaddis, S. M. (2012). Shining a Light or Fumbling in the Dark? The Effects of NCLB’s Subgroup-Specific Accountability on Student Achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 34(2), 185–208.

Figure 1.

PROPOSED APPROACH TO ACADEMIC INDICATOR TO ADDRESS THE DUAL PURPOSES

ACADEMIC INDICATOR PURPOSE	COHORT DEFINITION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification on the LCAP for LEA planning, priority and goal setting, growth target setting, accountability, and focusing resources for increased and improved services and programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ELs and RFEPs (grades 3-8) reported separately as two different and separate cohorts. LCAP would show both an EL Academic Indicator and an RFEP Academic Indicator
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification on the LCAP for state and federal ranking and identification for technical assistance and support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A single cohort of ELs (grades 3-8) PLUS students who are RFEP for four years or less

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