

INTRODUCTION

Latinos are the largest and fastest growing population in the United States.¹ In the Southeast, this phenomenon has been particularly acute. Within a ten-year span (2000-2010) the Latino community grew by more than 2.3 million and in Georgia, the population increased by 103 percent, the tenth highest rate during this time span.² Current United States Census reports have Latinos representing 10 percent of the total state population.³ This marks a significant shift in Georgia where politics, culture, and economics have historically derived from two dominant groups, Whites and African Americans. Today, decision makers within the public, private, non-profit, and educational sectors have to account for the needs and concerns of Latinos and other communities of color whose influence is evident, especially within the political sphere.

GROWTH IN GEORGIA LATINO AND ENGLISH LEARNER STUDENTS

As a result of this exponential population growth, the total number of Latinos students has increased significantly. In 2011, Latinos K-12 public school students in Georgia totaled 199,252 or 12.2 percent of the population.⁴ By 2019 their number rose sharply to 276,612 or 16 percent of the total student population.⁵ **Within less than a decade, the overall Latino public school population in Georgia increased by 72 percent.**

The same can be said for students classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP), defined as individuals whose primary language is not English and have limited ability to write, speak or understand English.⁶ In 2011, 83,965 students were classified as LEP, about 5.1 percent of the student population.⁷ Fast forward to 2019, 140,785 students were classified as LEP, representing 8.2 percent of all students.⁸ **Within less than a decade, students classified as Limited English Proficient increased by 60 percent.**

Of students participating in English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs in Georgia public schools, many are Spanish speaking. As an example, in the 2015-16 Consolidated State Performance Report Part I submitted by the Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) to the U.S. Department of Education, 86,297 or 78 percent of all English Learner (EL) students speak Spanish or Castilian at home.⁹ Therefore, it critical for Latino leaders to fully understand this program and its implications as it pertains to attaining English proficiency, graduation, and postsecondary enrollment.

FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY

In 2015, the Obama Administration championed passage of legislation to replace the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) education initiative supported by George W. Bush. NCLB reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESSA) requiring greater accountability through assessments and high standards. Parents and schools were offered greater choice, and for the latter, more flexibility in use of federal dollars.¹⁰

There was also a prioritization to disaggregate assessment results and objectives into subgroups representing poverty, race, class, and Limited English Proficiency.¹¹ Some researchers found this prioritization valuable because it forced policymakers and administrators to address underperforming groups, especially in schools that overall seemed to be operating to standard.¹² The perceived heavy handedness of the federal government, overemphasis on testing, and unattainable outcomes led to abandonment of NCLB once the presidency changed in 2009.

Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) ended strict federal control of public education and shifted authority to the states. As the *U.S. News and World Reports* notes, "State leaders would not only develop solutions tailored to their particular contexts, they'd do so in a way that generates a collective sense of ownership over strategies and results."¹³ ESSA builds on some aspects of NCLB, such as the disaggregation of data and assessments, but unlike its predecessor emphasizes local innovative approaches towards achieving federal and state goals.¹⁴

Although widely celebrated, not all education leaders were ready to embrace the law. Some argued it would not benefit students most in need of better schools.¹⁵ Others were concerned past educational inequities would reemerge where disadvantaged students, especially those of color, would lack federal oversight to hold states accountable.¹⁶

Determining if states act innovatively and equitably to implement ESSA is important to Latino, immigrant, and other communities of color. The law prioritizes English-language proficiency requiring policy and programs to improve language mastery, academic performance, graduation, and entrance into postsecondary institutions.¹⁷ ESSA moves the over five million students classified as English Learners from the periphery to the center of the educational discussion.¹⁸

With the federal government ceding power back to the states and acknowledging the history of education inequity in Georgia, it is important for local organizations and parents to fill the void. We have to become the accountability instrument needed to ensure all children receive the instruction and support required to achieve academically.

As required by ESSA, the Georgia State ESSA Plan was submitted and eventually approved by the U.S. Department of Education in January 2018.¹⁹ According to state superintendent Richard Woods, "Georgians want a K-12 education system that supports the whole child; a system that produces students who are not just college and career-ready, but ready for life."²⁰ To achieve this goal, the new plan would do the following:

- Simplify and streamline Georgia's accountability system;
- Reward schools making significant progress with traditionally underserved subgroups through the Closing Gaps indicator;
- Establish a more proactive, four-tiered system of supports for all schools;
- Affirm Georgia's commitment to pursue the maximum federal flexibility for state tests;
- Strengthen state focus on the whole child;
- Establish ambitious but attainable goals for groups of students; and
- Support the alignment of tools, resources, initiatives, programs and efforts so they work in a more effective and efficient way.²¹

Within the 121-page state plan, titled, *Educating Georgia's Future: Georgia's State Plan for the Every Student Succeeds Act*, GADOE offers a detailed approach on how it will implement ESSA. Critical to the plan is their long-term goal "to close the gap between baseline performance and 100% by 45% over a period of 15 years."²² To achieve this lofty target, GADOE created, for example, a new target structure in which high achievement growth is expected of all schools and subgroups, utilized a continuous improvement model for self-examination in order to systematically use funds to address critical areas that affect the whole child, and apply a tiered approach to offer intensive and tailored interventions when needed.

English learning in Georgia is also guided by state law, [O.G.C.A. §20-2-156](#). Established in 1981, the State Board of Education is required to create a program for limited-English-proficient students. The goal of the program is to assist students on becoming English proficient at their grade level. The state board is also required to develop rules and regulations on eligibility and standards.²³

Programmatically, EL students receive daily language instruction from qualified ESOL teachers in a coherent instruction system. They also receive culturally appropriate wrap-around services while parents are proactively engaged in the educational process.²⁴ The Georgia ESSA plan exists to complement current state law, not supplant it. Together, they form the environment by which EL students are identified, instructed, supported, and evaluated.

Although the state plays a critical role in educating students, the real work occurs in the 180 school districts across Georgia. The superintendents, school board members, administrators, principals, teachers, and staff are responsible for implementing programs to meet the standards set by Congress, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Georgia Department of Education. The purpose of this document is to determine if school districts with large English Learner student populations are meeting the standards articulated by the federal government and state of Georgia.

GEORGIA SCHOOL DISTRICTS

The school districts chosen are in counties with the largest concentration of homes where the primary language spoken is not English. Based on data from the Georgia Department of Community Affairs, the top six counties are:

Table 1 GA Dept. of Community Affairs Language Access Plan 2016-2021

County	Total	Speak only English	Spanish	Chinese	Korean	Vietnamese
Gwinnett	780,613	521,370	65,812	6,732	12,429	9,435
Cobb	660,920	525,711	33,354	1,843	1,397	1,752
DeKalb	655,145	532,072	31,663	3,262	1,697	2,570
Fulton	903,305	753,464	29,283	4,628	3,697	1,212
Hall	171,743	125,405	20,974	273	64	828
Whitfield	95,474	66,272	14,595	54	10	167

Georgia Department of Community Affairs. Georgia department of community affairs language access plan: 2016-2021.

FEDERAL AND STATE ESOL STANDARDS

Local education agencies (LEAs) have some discretion with implementing ESOL programs, but within federal and state guidelines. Some of the guidelines are:

- School districts have to evaluate who constitutes and 'English Learner' based on a federal definition. Federal law states an English learner is between the ages of 3 and 21; enrolled or preparing to enter K-12; foreign born or whose native language is not English; has difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English where it impacts the ability to meet state academic standards; as well as other provisions.²⁵
- Under Title VI of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* and the *Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974*, school system must ensure English Learners can participate equally in educational programs.²⁶ As well, they must have procedures to accurately identify potential EL students.²⁷ Upon identification, school districts have to provide a valid and reliable test to assesses English proficiency.²⁸ Extremely important, EL student must have access to grade-level curricula so they can meet district standards leading to graduation.²⁹
- Each state plan must include assessments for English proficiency standards derived from the four recognized domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing; address the different proficiency levels of ELs; and are aligned with state academic standards.³⁰
- The state has to measure English proficiency progress by the percentage of EL students moving from one state-defined performance band to a higher performance band.³¹ Assessment is obtained from ACCESS scores, a standards-based test administered annually. ACCESS determine English proficiency levels and progress of EL students in the four domains referenced above.³²

ENGLISH LEARNER DATA-SCHOOL DISTRICT

Data from the 2016-17 school year was selected to identify school districts with LEP and ESOL populations larger than the state average, determine if English proficiency rates are on par with state averages, and compare English Learner graduation rates and transition to college with non-English Learners. These metrics align with federal and state priorities for ELs, mastery of the English language, graduation, and postsecondary enrollment.

Gwinnett, DeKalb, Whitfield, and Hall far exceed the state average for both LEP and ESOL students. It should be noted that Limited English Proficient students have the right to refuse ESOL instruction, therefore the two numbers are not expected to be equal. It is also no coincidence the school districts with the highest concentration of LEP and ESOL students also have a significant Latino student population. What needs clarification is the low LEP and ESOL numbers for Cobb County. Are more Latinos in Cobb Schools English proficient or is the testing tool not capturing students who otherwise would be eligible for instruction?
Enrollment

Table 2 SY 2016-17 Enrollment (Percentages)

County	LEP	Hispanic	Asian	ESOL
Gwinnett	17	30	10	11
Cobb	5	15	7	2
DeKalb	17	17	7	12
Atlanta	4	7	1	3
Hall	24	42	1	16
Whitfield	19	42	1	13
Georgia	8	15	4	5

The Governor's Office of Student Achievement. 2016-17 enrollment by subgroup programs.

The goal of ESOL is to improve student mastery of the English language so he/she/they can meet grade level academic standards. Again, students are evaluated by the ACCESS test. ESOL programs offer instruction, monitor progression, and eventually determine if a student is fully conversant (speaking, reading, writing, listening) in English.

As Table 3 shows, the results are mixed at best. Three of the school districts surpass the state average for elementary schools, with DeKalb exceeding the average by almost 10-percentage points. Unfortunately, there is a significant drop off at middle schools. Again, focusing on DeKalb, the school district experiences a 19-percentage point reduction. Cobb has 16-percentage point drop off, and Atlanta a 14-percentage point reduction. Conversely, Whitfield Schools is experiencing success at the middle schools that far outpaces the other districts on the list. This trend is problematic as middle school students transition into high school. More intervention, parent engagement, counseling, and student-specific instruction is necessary to reverse course.

English Proficiency Rates

Table 3 SY 2016-17 Elementary and Middle School English Proficiency Rates (Percentages)

County	Elementary	Middle
Gwinnett	73	62
Cobb	73	57
DeKalb	82	63
Atlanta	63	49
Hall	67	54
Whitfield	66	73
Georgia	74	61

Georgia Department of Education. Archived 2016-17 CCRPI Data Files.

High school graduation rate is the metric that defines LEA effectiveness. Schools are judged by how many students achieving this goal and transition to a postsecondary institution. It is important to increase EL high school graduation rates, many of whom self-identify as Latino, because as a community, the college completion rate is far lower than its racial and ethnic counterparts. According to Excelencia in Education, just 21percent of Latino adults (25 and older) have a postsecondary credential.³³ Furthermore, just 37 percent of Latinos complete their postsecondary program.³⁴ Considering the exponential growth of this population, there needs to be a prioritization EL students and non-EL Latino students to graduate high school.

Statewide, LEP student high school completion rate is 17-percentage points lower than the state average. Other than Atlanta, no school district in this report is less than 10-percentage points apart. In Gwinnett there is a 19 percentage-point difference. Although achieving high academic standards and graduating from high school are priorities from the federal to local level, it is evident neither is happening at a rate acceptable to schools, parents, and students alike.

High School Graduation Rates

Table 4 SY 2016-17 High School Graduation Rate (Percentages) (5-Year Cohort)

County	System	LEP	Hispanic	Asian
Gwinnett	84	65	73	94
Cobb	87	61	75	97
DeKalb	78	61	72	77
Atlanta	80	73	79	88
Hall	89	72	85	95
Whitfield	85	72	84	91
Georgia	83	66	77	93

The Governor's Office of Student Achievement. 2016-17 graduation rate (5-year cohort).

Transitioning to College

Table 5 SY 2016-17 High School Graduates Transitioning to College (Percentages)

County	System	LEP	Hispanic	Asian
Gwinnett	78	58	62	91
Cobb	75	47	51	91
DeKalb	66	41	44	67
Atlanta	69	52	48	90
Hall	64	37	53	86
Whitfield	58	No Data	57	No Data
Georgia	68	43	55	88

The Governor's Office of Student Achievement. 2018-19 post-secondary C11 report.

LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCY ESOL POLICY AND PROGRAMS

The success or failure of ESOL in Georgia is determined by LEAs. *The Every Student Succeeds Act* offers states and local school districts more latitude to address Limited English Proficiency. Systems are empowered to establish policy and develop programs that reflect the uniqueness of their students and their needs. Policy is important because it codifies the goals, objectives, and processes of a program. This allows for greater transparency, accountability, and uniformity in implementation. Of the six school districts examined, only two have adopted legislation specific to ESOL, English Learners, or addressing Limited English Proficiency. Of the two, only Atlanta offers clear goals for establishing its ESOL program. It would seem the other districts are guided by the federal and state statutes as well as federal and state agency guidelines.

On the district websites, the ESOL programs outline their intention to develop EL student proficiency of the four domains-listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Of the six districts in this report, Whitfield County offers a comprehensive goal that represents the whole child model proffered by GADOE. **They value and build upon students' academic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds; provide a supportive learning environment; assist students in reaching their full academic potential; build connections between ESOL and school-wide instructional programs; encourage participation of students and their families within the school and community; and to foster understanding and appreciation of diverse populations within the school and the community.** Of note, the high school graduation rate of Whitfield LEP students exceeds the state average. Without data you cannot draw a correlation, but there is value in fully and clearly articulating program goals.

The Atlanta ESOL webpage is well designed offering federal and state policy, its vision, mission, and program goals. It also offers a calendar, listing of all ESOL teachers, but does not explain the process for entering and exiting the program. Hall County places great emphasis on its literacy services and information classes for parents of EL students. That is in alignment with

ESSA which requires active parental engagement. DeKalb defines each tier and what is expected at said tier to transition out of ESOL.

One challenge is the homogenous lumping together of EL students. In some cases, ESOL programs acknowledge EL student diversity, but do not capture the data. The Latino Community Foundation affirms the importance of identity, especially as it pertains to education. As stated by the U.S Department of Education, disaggregating data can offer valuable information on how different English learner subgroups are performing.³⁵

More information can lead to creating intervention strategies with greater specificity. One recommendation is for the state and local education agencies to capture data on African Americans who are classified as EL. Based on federal figures, 58 percent of foreign-born Black youth aged 5-17 reported speaking a language other than English at home.³⁶ As well, almost 57 percent of foreign-born Black youth, of the same age group, originated from Latin America.³⁷ We encourage counties like Gwinnett, DeKalb, and Cobb, with its large and diverse populations to give this serious consideration.

Gwinnett County Public Schools

ESOL Policy

- Gwinnett County Schools does not have a policy on English Learners, English to Speakers of Other Languages, or any codification of their program goals as it pertains to this student subgroup.

ESOL Program

- Upon enrollment in GCPS, all parents answer Language Background questions.
- Students who are not yet proficient are considered to be English Learners and eligible for language support services until they become proficient.
- GCPS provides EL students with language assistance tailored to their individual English language development needs through a variety of research-based models.
- Priority is given to meeting the needs of students in the regular classroom while ensuring that students develop strong literacy skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English.
- When students attain full proficiency and are prepared for academic language tasks across the content areas of language arts, math, science and social studies, they exit language support services.³⁸

Cobb County District Schools

ESOL Policy

- In Section I, titled Instruction Program, in the Cobb County School District Board Policies and Administrative Rules, the board adopted Rule 160-4-2-.38 in 2008, under Special Programs, to establish an ESOL program. The rules do not specify any goals. The policy was last revised in 2012.³⁹

ESOL Program

- The ESOL Program aims to work with all teachers at all grade levels and administrators of ELs to provide high-quality instructional programs designed to develop proficiency in English, while meeting challenging State academic content and student academic achievement standards.
- Program success is determined by the percentage of children (a) making progress in learning English, (b) attaining English proficiency by the end of each school year, as determined by a valid and reliable assessment of English proficiency, and (c) making

progress toward meeting academic reading and math goals for the English Learner subgroup.

- The ESOL program seek to increase its collaborative network with content area stakeholders to positively impact instructional practices for ELs throughout the district. It uses state and local performance data to support the implementation of differentiated and engaging instruction. Last, the program provides district wide ESOL specific parent and family engagement training opportunities to support academic achievement while building a culturally connected community.
- If a student scores a Composite Proficiency Level (CPL) score of 5.0 or higher, the student will be deemed English proficient.⁴⁰

DeKalb County School District

ESOL Policy

- DeKalb County Schools does not have a policy on English Learners, English to Speakers of Other Languages, or any codification of their program goals as it pertains to this student subgroup.

ESOL Program

- The program offers English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes for over 16,000 EL students who are instructed by over 300 ESOL teachers in the local schools.
- It provides each learner with the academic and social skills necessary to ensure productive life-long learning through a student-centered and differentiated instructional program and a supportive and highly qualified school staff.
- As well, the ESOL program provides services to assist international parents and students with language differences so that students become proficient in academic content and achieve high standards.
- Last, the program promotes parental and community participation in language acquisition activities.⁴¹

Atlanta Public Schools

ESOL Policy

- In Section 5, titled Students and Instructional Programs, of the board policy manual, the board adopted legislation in 1988, titled, English Learner (EL) Services, to establish an ESOL program. Much like the state statute, the goal is to improve EL student English proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing to quickly integrate them into regular classrooms. The policy was last revised in 2013.⁴²

ESOL Program

- The English to Speakers of Other Languages Program of Atlanta Public Schools fosters inclusive schools and classrooms that are responsive to the linguistic and cultural needs of English Learners and their families.
- The program seeks to develop competency in English in all four domains of language: listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- It integrates language, cognitive and academic instruction that enables students to develop English language proficiency and content area knowledge.
- The program supports the curriculum based on the Georgia Standards of Excellence while emphasizing social and academic language proficiency.

- The ESOL program orient students and parents to the American culture and enable them to participate successfully in school and community life
- It ensures grade-level appropriate content for all ELs regardless of English proficiency level and that all staff in the district assume responsibility for the acculturation and instruction of ELs and immigrant students.⁴³

Hall County Schools

ESOL Policy

- Hall County Schools does not have a policy on English Learners, English to Speakers of Other Languages, or any codification of their program goals as it pertains to this student subgroup.

ESOL Program

- The Hall County School District serves over 5,200 English Learners with more than 40 languages represented. The district primarily provides language support through the English Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) program to eligible students.
- ESOL instruction focuses on the development and improvement of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English to increase student academic success.
- The International Center organizes English classes for parents of ESOL identified students. These courses are designed to help parents learn English through conversational English, and collaboration.⁴⁴

Whitfield County Schools

ESOL Policy

- Whitfield County Schools does not have a policy on English Learners, English to Speakers of Other Languages, or any codification of their program goals as it pertains to this student subgroup.

ESOL Program

- The program is designed to help ELs develop academic and social English language proficiency.
- ESOL teachers collaborate with regular education teachers to differentiate standards-based instruction. They provide proficiency-appropriate scaffolding and language supports that will help ELs develop communicative confidence and skills in each of the four language domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
- Regular education teachers also accommodate these student's instructional and assessment needs, providing a culturally responsive classroom environment where ELs first language and culture are valued and where they feel safe to participate in and can take full advantage of all learning opportunities.
- The goals of the ESOL Program are to value and build upon students' academic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds; provide a supportive learning environment; assist students in reaching their full academic potential; build connections between ESOL and school-wide instructional programs; encourage participation of students and their families within the school and community; and to foster understanding and appreciation of diverse populations within the school and the community.⁴⁵

ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE IMPACT

What is evident is EL students are not graduating from high school or transitioning to college at rates comparable to state and school district averages. Regardless of the cause, this trend is not tenable for schools, students, and the state. In Georgia, 78 percent of Latinos, age 25-64, do not have a postsecondary credential.⁴⁶ Carnevale and Smith contend 66 percent of

state workforces must be college educated (certificate, diploma, associate's, bachelor's, professional, graduate) to meet industry demands. Georgia is 189,000 workers short for jobs requiring a certificate, diploma, or an associate degree.⁴⁷ It is also short 129,000 workers for jobs requiring a bachelor's degree.⁴⁸ In total, the state has to produce or bring in almost 320,000 workers who have a postsecondary credential. EL student provides Georgia a bicultural, bilingual workforce for a global economy. Investing in human capital is good public policy.

SUMMARY

This paper reviews the ESOL programs of six Georgia public school districts-Atlanta, Gwinnett, DeKalb, Hall, Cobb, and Whitfield. It then compares English Learner outcomes to non-English Learners, specifically graduation rate and transition to college. Attention is also given to English proficiency rate due to its policy prioritization in *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015* and correlation to academic performance.⁴⁹ Hopefully, this research provides education advocates, community leaders, and parents a better understanding of ESOL programs and EL student performance.

ENDNOTES

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