The Disappearance of High School English Language Learners from Texas High Schools

Editorial Summary

Overview

As the United States and U.S. schools absorb growing numbers of immigrants, especially from Latin America, it is important to analyze how English language learners (ELLs)—who must learn English simultaneously while mastering subjects such as math and science—fare in Texas public schools. This paper examines the frequency with which ELLs disappear from the public school system before graduating.

The authors prefer to use the term *ELL* rather than *limited English proficient* (LEP) because it characterizes students as facing a challenge rather than being deficient. (However, some data cited in the paper use the classification LEP.) They examine disappearance—defined as the number of students who are captured in TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) records in their ninth grade year but not in the following year—rather than the notoriously difficult-to-compute dropout rate. Although students who disappear have not necessarily dropped out—they may have moved to a different jurisdiction, for instance, or enrolled in private school—the authors argue that disappearance is the least ambiguous and subject to manipulation among available measures of students' progress toward graduation.

The authors review the literature about ELL students, then present two sets of data. One, employing longitudinal data (which tracks the progress of individual students over time) from an unnamed large, urban Texas school district, finds that more than half of ELLs disappear between their 9th and 10th grade years.

The second section describes the disappearance of ELLs statewide and analyzes which characteristics—of both students and schools—appear to either curb or exacerbate disappearance rates. Interestingly, school characteristics appear to have a marked impact. For instance, ELLs who attend predominantly White, suburban schools (where resources and academic expectations are often greater) are significantly less likely to disappear than those in urban schools where the student body is primarily made up of students of color.

Background

The number of ELLs in Texas public schools grew by 158% from the 1980–1981 school year to 1996–1997, far outstripping the 30% growth of the whole student population. Although ELLs are by no means a uniform group—they differ markedly, for instance, in immigration age and amount and quality of schooling received in home countries—it is useful to study how their experience

in the Texas public school system differs from that of children who speak English fluently. This analysis has many implications for public policy, particularly in an era when a student cannot obtain a high school degree without passing a series of tests administered only in English—tests an ELL may fail regardless of how well subject matter is grasped.

A number of researchers have shown ELLs are more likely to drop out of school than English proficient (EP) students. This paper examines that phenomenon in greater detail and suggests how findings might inform both future studies and public policy.

The Case of a Large, Urban Texas District

The authors obtained individual student data covering the years from1995 to 2002 for students enrolled in a large, urban Texas district. In 1995, the oldest student cohort captured by the data was enrolled in the ninth grade; the youngest was in the third. By 2002, three cohorts of students had progressed through high school.

Unique identifying numbers allowed the authors to know with certainty whether students progressed on schedule from grade to grade, if and when they disappeared from the district's rolls, whether they took and passed any or all of the mandated statewide achievement tests (at that time, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or TAAS), and whether they qualified for graduation and actually graduated from the district. Using this data, the authors compared the experiences of ELL students (or LEP, as designated by the educational system) and fluent English speakers.

The district used math and reading TAAS scores to claim that, from 1995 to 2002, both EP and LEP students made sharp gains and the achievement gap between the two groups narrowed significantly. District figures reported more than 75% of LEP as well as EP students passed the TAAS math and reading tests administered in English in 2002.

Using the longitudinal cohort data, the authors discovered a different picture. Focusing on the cohort of 13,000 students who enrolled in the eighth grade in 1996 and progressed to the ninth grade in 1997, the authors found that only 36% of EP students and 18% of LEP students subsequently took and passed all the TAAS exit tests required for graduation. One reason for these surprisingly low numbers is that 45% of LEP students and 41% of EP students did not take the exit exams—in part, because a significant number of them disappeared from the district's rolls during their high school years. Some may have moved to other districts or private schools, but further analysis discounts any suggestion that mobility was the predominant factor.

The district reported a less than 5% dropout rate for both LEP and EP students during the period in question. However, analysis of the cohorts that entered the 9th grade in the 1996–1997, 1997–1998, and 1998–1999 school years, whose students would have been expected to graduate in 2000, 2001, and 2002, does not support these assertions. Instead, the data show that in each cohort, at least 50% of LEP students and 40% of EP students disappeared between their 9th and 10th grade years. They continued to disappear throughout their high school years, albeit at much lower rates—generally, well below 10% per year, and, by the final year, in the range of 1% or 2%.

Even if some of those who disappeared enrolled in private schools or public schools outside the district, the magnitude of the disappearance between the 9th and 10th grades can scarcely be chalked up primarily to student mobility, especially since the rate slowed so dramatically at the higher grade levels. It appears that an alarming number of students simply did not progress on schedule to the 10th grade.

Numerous studies suggest many such students never graduate from high school. That conclusion squares with this study's finding that, of the cohort entering 9th grade in 1997, only 32.7% graduated within 5 years, including just 20.0% of LEP students. Again, even allowing that some students complete their education elsewhere, it is clear, in the authors' words, that the district is "hemorrhaging students between the 9th and 10th grades, and the majority of students not advancing with their cohort—they were being left behind, withdrawing, or disappearing (dropping out)."

A Statewide Perspective

Rounding out the study, the authors analyze the experience of all Texas students identified as ninth graders by records of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in 2004. (The TAKS test is the current assessment tool used, replacing the TAAS test.) By comparing 2004 and 2005 records, the authors determined 12.1% of EP students and 25.4% of ELLs disappeared from Texas public schools in the interval. (ELLs, identified by enrollment in English as a Second Language classes, were 8% of the total cohort.)

Statistical analyses of the demographic characteristics of ELLs and the schools they attended pinpoint several factors significantly correlated with ELL student disappearance:

- Surprisingly, low socioeconomic status appears to make an ELL less likely, rather than more likely, to disappear.
- Female students are less likely to disappear.

- Students in affluent districts were less likely to disappear.
- Students in urban districts were more likely to disappear, while students in predominantly White, suburban districts were far less likely to disappear.
- Students retained in the ninth grade were more than twice as likely to disappear as those not retained.
- Students who took both the reading and math TAKS in ninth grade (regardless of whether they passed) were less likely to disappear than those who did not take it.
- Students in the Houston region were considerably more likely to disappear than those in the Dallas and Fort Worth areas.

Conclusions

Several recommendations flow from the findings:

- Researchers should devote more attention to tracking student cohorts over time.
- The state should collect more information about ELLs, including information about educational experiences prior to entering the United States.
- More resources must go to educating ELLs through efforts such as well-designed bilingual programs.
- Relying on a single test administered in English to measure academic achievement is poor public policy. Other valid measures, including tests administered in Spanish, students' grades, and class rank, are available and should be incorporated into the accountability system.
- Proficiency in Spanish is a valuable intellectual attainment that should be recognized and rewarded.
- The accountability system should take into account educational inputs such as monetary outlays, facilities, and teacher quality, in addition to outputs such as student TAKS scores.

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ABSTRACT

This paper's objective is to analyze how English language learners (ELLs) fare in Texas public schools. Specifically, it examines the frequency with which ELLs disappear from the system before graduating. The authors argue that among available measures of students' progress toward graduation, disappearance is the least ambiguous and subject to manipulation, as opposed to difficult-to-compute dropout rates. Their results show more than half of ELLs disappeared between their 9th and 10th grade years. They also describe the disappearance of ELLs statewide and analyze which characteristics of students and schools appear to either curb or exacerbate disappearance rates. School characteristics appear to have a marked impact. The authors make public policy recommendations based on their findings.

Keywords

English language learners, dropouts, student disappearance rates, limited English proficient, Texas public schools

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Introduction

Our purpose is to explore the status of high school English language learners (ELLs) in the state of Texas with respect to our key variable of interest: disappearance. By "disappearance," we mean students who do not have an answer document for the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) submitted on their behalf from one year to the next. Because they do not appear in the state's accountability dataset, they have, in effect, disappeared. We draw our framework from Lee and Burkam (2003), who maintain that researchers should rely on dropout risk factors related to social background (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, family structure, inner-city residence), academic background (e.g., test scores and grade retention), and academically related behaviors (e.g., engagement, school truancy, grades, and relationships between students and school staff). While state data prevent us from examining family structure and academically related behaviors, they do permit a focused analysis of social and academic backgrounds of ELL students in relationship to the probability of disappearance from school.

Besides case study data from a large urban district in Texas and a logistic regression analysis of English language learners statewide—officially called "limited English proficient" (LEP) youth by Texas law—we review recent literature that situates LEP youth as immigrants with a unique set of circumstances that circumscribe their mobility and life chances. While McDonnell and Hill (1993) argued that the conflation of immigrant status and limited English proficiency (LEP) inhibits the development of more nuanced state and federal policies to address the diversity of needs, it is a misstep to suggest that problems these youth face are reducible to language-related factors, particularly in a historical moment when there is a heightened awareness and concern about immigration reform.

Before addressing our data, methodology, and findings from analyses of state data, we review current sociodemographic shifts involving immigrants in general and Latina/os, in particular.[1] In this review, we will refer to English language learners as "ELLs" rather than "LEP" because of the deficit overtones of the latter term. However, we use the term "LEP" whenever we refer to actual data where this term or indicator is relevant.[2] Current explanations for the

[1] The term, "Latina/o" is used as an umbrella term when no distinction between immigrants and nonimmigrants or between Mexicans and other national origin groups is necessary.

[2] All LEP students are English language learners, but not all ELLs are officially designated as "LEP." That is, many ELLs are not in bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) programs, either because they never received instruction in such a program or because they tested out of the programs. At the high school level, where bilingual education is not offered, "LEP" status therefore means children have been identified as being in an ESL program.

egregiously high disappearance (or dropout) rates of ELLs are also considered. The next major section addresses ELLs in the Brazos City School District (a pseudonym) in Texas. We conclude with policy recommendations we hope will help stem the tide of ELL disappearance from high school.

Sociodemographic Context

Because many ELLs are part of an unprecedented demographic shift in our state and nation (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel & Herwantoro, 2005; Murdock, 2005), it is important to document the changes taking place. Recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2006) showed the number of immigrants living in U.S. households—many from Mexico—rose 16% over the past 5 years. While these immigrants are settling in many new areas across the nation, Texas is one of six states that have traditionally attracted them.

Children of immigrants account for nearly one in five U.S. school-age children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Ruiz de Velasco and Fix (2000) reported that 40% of foreign-born youths attending school nationwide were officially designated as LEP. Moreover, Spanish is the primary language of two thirds to three fourths of children from non-English-speaking homes. Because diversity of immigrant student "types" exists, one-size-fits-all policies are inappropriate. While many of these youth have received uneven or irregular instruction in their own countries, others are long-term ELLs who have attended U.S. schools for many years (Olsen, 2006). Recent arrivals from Mexico and Latin America also vary significantly in levels of schooling attained in their previous countries of residence (Olsen, 2006; Ruiz de Velasco, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999).

In Texas, LEP student enrollment has risen dramatically in recent years. Over a 16-year time frame (between the 1980–1981 and 1996–1997 academic years), LEP enrollment grew 158%, while overall enrollment only grew 30% (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 1998b). The trend has continued in recent years, with a 14% growth in LEP enrollment between the 1997–1998 and 2003–2004 academic years—3 times the overall enrollment growth rate. By the 2003–2004 school year, more than 15% of students enrolled in Texas public schools were identified as LEP (TEA, 2004). In 2000, Texas ranked second only to California in the number of LEP youth enrolled in public schools—nearly 600,000 LEP students (TEA, 2000).

The increase in LEP enrollment reflects broader changes in Texas public school demographics during this time period. Between the 1993–1994 and 2003–2004 school years, the state's school-age population increased by almost 20%, from 3.6 million to nearly 4.3 million (TEA, 2004). While the proportion of African American students remained a little above 14%, the proportion of

non-Hispanic white students declined from 47% to 39%, and the proportion of Hispanic students grew from 36% to 44%. The proportion of low-income students increased from 45% to 53% during this period (TEA, 2004). Such trends point to increasing demands for resources for bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) teachers and classrooms, support for economically disadvantaged at-risk youth, and more gifted and talented program opportunities, as well as career and technology education.

The U.S. General Accounting Office (1994) found that LEP students are nearly twice as likely to live in poverty, tend to be more geographically mobile than their school-age peers, and often have significant health and emotional needs. The study also found that parental involvement in schools was often inhibited due to language issues. Furthermore, low academic achievement, poor performance on standardized exams, and a high dropout rate persist in this population (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Rumberger, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999, 2004).

These national trends on immigrants show up in aggregate Texas data. In a report by the U.S. Census Bureau (2004), Texas ranked 50th in the percentage of high school graduates ages 25 years and older. Thus, dropping out is not only a Latina/o issue, but a Texas problem in general. Accordingly, the next section considers why so many ELL youth underachieve and drop out of school.

ELL Achievement and Dropping Out

ELLs are affected by the same school-related factors many Texas children endure, including inadequate public investment in education; high teacher–pupil ratios in public schools; low teacher salaries relative to other states (National Education Association [NEA], 2005); and high percentages of teachers who do not possess degrees in their subject areas (Fuller, 2005b; Fuller & Brewer, 2005a). For ELLs, this translates into ill-equipped learning environments, a dearth of quality instructional materials, critical shortages of teachers specifically trained to serve them, and as a result, ineffective instruction (Valenzuela 1999, 2004).

These conditions are compounded by low teacher expectations; a lack of cultural sensitivity; and a high-stakes accountability system that frequently places too much emphasis on testing, resulting in narrowed curricula and the abandonment of programs that have proven successful, such as late-exit bilingual education programs (Crawford, 2004; Hampton, 2004; McNeil, 2000a, 2000b; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; Sloan, in press; Valenzuela, 1999, 2004). To students' detriment, the entire enterprise of schooling is based on an assimilation framework, which fails to respect the richness of culture, language, and community-based identity. The enterprise opts instead to subtract these

identifications as part of a failed recipe inscribed in public policy for the ever-elusive goal of high school completion (see Valenzuela, 1999, for elaboration on the assimilation argument).

While some ELLs possess a literacy level higher than that of their U.S.-born counterparts (especially if they have attained middle-school level education in Mexico or Latin America), others are underschooled, and grade-level skill proficiencies cannot be assumed (Valenzuela, 1999; Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996). Assessment tools such as the TAKS test further lack validity and reliability. This is primarily because, in the case of the TAKS, the high-school level test is offered only in English and is, therefore, language dependent, making it impossible to separate language errors from academic ones (Hakuta, 2001; Hakuta & Beatty, 2000). These problems with the TAKS test illustrate well how the Texas accountability system has failed to adequately take the needs of ELLs into account and hold schools directly accountable for their achievement (see Valenzuela, 2004, for in-depth discussion of the shortcomings of the Texas accountability system for both ELLs and Latina/os in general).

To succeed in school, ELLs must perform the dual task of mastering academic knowledge and skills while simultaneously acquiring a second language (Baker, 1993). Although state and federal education policies urge youth to acquire English quickly, ample evidence suggests both teaching and learning English are different from teaching and learning other subjects, such as math and science. That is, while children may learn English grammar rules similarly to how they might learn math principles, they acquire oral and written language skills through exposure to language models—frequently other children—and through a process of trial and error (Gee, 1990). Most estimates of length for acquiring native language fluency are between 5 and 7 years (Cummins 1981; Thomas and Collier, 1996); for secondary youth, this is an even more difficult task than for children in earlier grades. Effective bilingual programs enable students to accomplish the task of mastering academic knowledge and skills while acquiring a second language (Baker, 1993). Critical shortages in staffing, poor program design, weak school and district commitment and leadership, and the absence of bilingual education at the secondary level thwart this goal (Thomas and Collier, 1996).

Tienda and Mitchell (2006) found that immigrant youth ages 16 to 19 are significantly more likely to drop out of high school than those born in the United States. Note that many of these youth were already behind in school before arriving in the United States. Once in the United States, they are more likely than either their Anglo or African American counterparts to attend segregated, large urban schools with high dropout rates and high proportions of youth

from poor families (Fry, 2005; Orfield, 2004). It is therefore not surprising that nationally, 40% of Latina/o students attend high schools with a 60% completion rate among entering freshmen (Carnevale, 1999).

Although only 8% of school-age youth in the United States are immigrants, they account for a full quarter of dropouts (Fry, 2005b). Moreover, those who have arrived in the United States later (from ages 12 to 17) are at greater risk of dropping out than youth who enter the U.S. public school system at younger ages. A number of factors help explain these differences between recent and early arrivals. Combined with a possibly higher quality of public education in the United States relative to other countries, compulsory schooling laws that keep youth in school through age 15 appear to make a difference. Also, because English language acquisition is easier for younger children in a context where both English fluency and bilingualism are positively related to school outcomes, early arrivals are frequently better positioned in this regard (Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006).

Additionally, whether immigrant youth experience continuous or interrupted schooling before migration has significant implications for whether students will become high school dropouts (Valenzuela, 1999). While 9.9% of immigrant youth with continuous schooling experiences eventually drop out of high school, almost 71% of those with interrupted schooling experiences prior to immigration drop out (Fry, 2005b).

Ruiz de Velasco & Fix (2001) found that immigrant children from Mexico were less likely than their U.S.-born counterparts to initially enroll in school past the eighth grade. If they did enroll, they were more likely to be retained in a grade and fail to graduate. It is worth noting that many immigrant youth from Latin America were dropouts in their own countries, failing to ever enroll in the public school system and opting to enter the labor market instead (Fry, 2005b). Similarly, a National Center for Education Statistics (1997) report found that 69.3% of immigrant youth between the ages of 16 and 24 have never enrolled in U.S. schools. This study also found that while Latina/os account for 56% of all foreign-born youth ages 16 through 24, they constitute nearly 90% of the immigrant dropout population.

Large, Urban Texas District Case Study

We will now consider LEP student success in the Brazos City School District (a pseudonym) during the "first generation" of Texas-style accountability (from 1995 to 2002). The forthcoming analyses utilize a longitudinal dataset obtained from a large, urban Texas district. The data include more than 100,000 students and their demographic characteristics and achievement outcomes matched

with teacher and school characteristics from 1995 to 2002. Unique student identifiers allow cross-sectional analyses as well as the ability to follow students throughout their tenure in the Brazos City School District. The dataset includes grades 3 through 8 from 1995 to 2002. For high school progression, only three cohort waves are available because the data included grade 12 only from 1999 to 2002. These unique data allow us to examine longitudinal student progress of individual students by race, class, and language proficiency in the midst of high-stakes testing and TEA accountability.

High School Exit TAAS Testing Trends

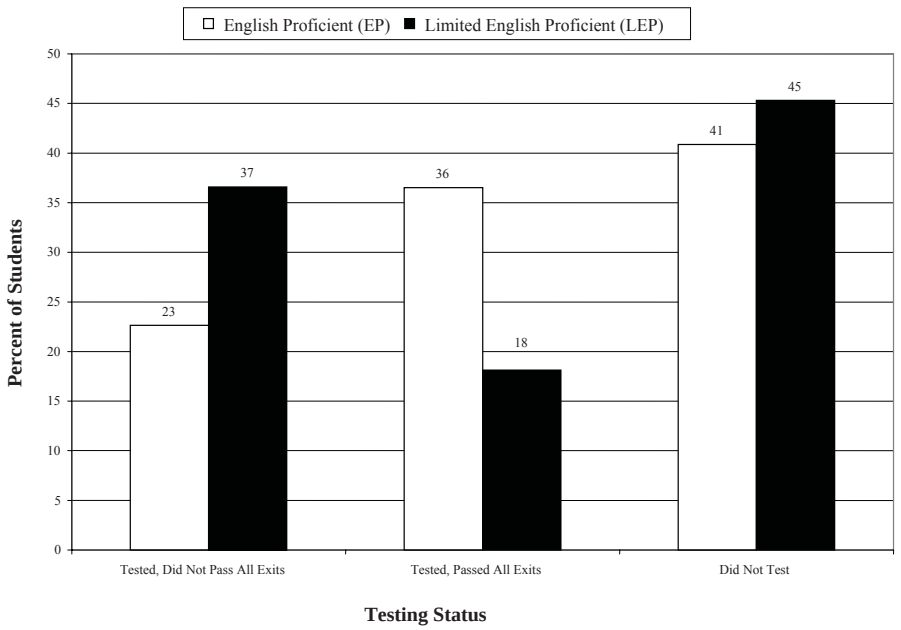
We will first consider high school LEP student achievement. For Texas students who entered high school in the 2000–2001 school year or before, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was utilized as an exit level test in the 10th grade. Haney (2000) related that the TAAS was a test of extremely high stakes for high school students, educators, and schools in Texas. Students were required by state law to pass all sections (Reading, Math, and Writing) of the Exit TAAS tests to receive a high school diploma, regardless of their grades in high school courses (TEA, n.d.). Students typically had as many as seven opportunities to take the TAAS Exit exams and had unlimited additional testing opportunities as out-of-school examinees. Note that this analysis does not consider students who passed the Exit exam during summer administrations or as out-of-school examinees.

In 2002, near the end of the TAAS testing cycle (before the TAKS was used), Texas high school sophomores were passing the Exit exam in record numbers, with 85% of students reportedly passing all portions of the test.[3] Sophomores in the Brazos City School District were scoring below the state average, but the district had apparently made large gains. Local media outlets even trumpeted burgeoning Exit TAAS achievement gains.

To examine which students were taking and passing the spring Exit TAAS during their high school career, we utilized a ninth grade cohort. The cohort contained more than 13,000 students in the eighth grade in Brazos City School District for the 1996–1997 school year and in the ninth grade the following year. Our method excluded retained eighth graders and previously retained ninth graders from the cohort. The analysis focuses on whether students took (perhaps one or more times) and passed the spring Exit TAAS sections during any academic year throughout their high school careers in the Brazos City School District. Figure 1 shows the cumulative testing and passing rates for the 1997 ninth grade cohort by English language proficiency.

[3] Local Newspaper; not identified, as local district is not identified and a pseudonym is used.

Figure 1. **Ninth grade (1996–1997) cohort testing on the spring Exit TAAS by English proficiency status.**



Approximately 36% of English proficient (EP) students passed all TAAS Exit tests during their high school careers, while only 18% of LEP students passed all Exit tests. Approximately the same percentage of LEP students tested on the Exit and did not pass all sections (37%) as EP students who passed all sections of the Exit (36%). Almost one fourth of EP students tested on one or more Exit exams but did not pass all of them. The proportion of LEP students not testing on the Exit exams (45%) was slightly higher than the proportion of EP students not testing on the Exit exams (41%) in the Brazos City School District.

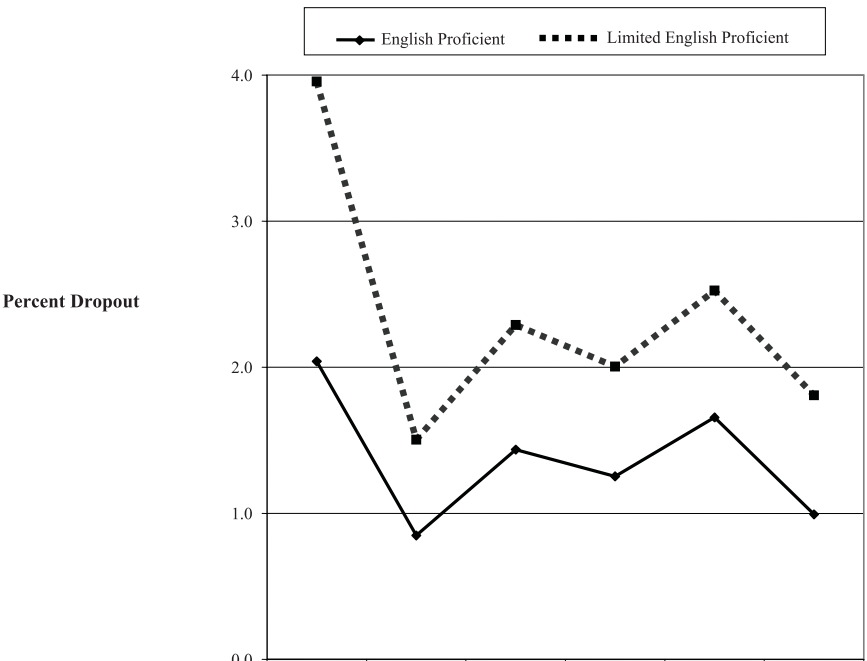
There are a couple of possible explanations why students did not take the spring Exit TAAS during their high school careers. As we will examine later in the paper, the Brazos City School District apparently experienced large numbers of high school students not progressing through school on time or otherwise leaving school. Mobility is another issue to consider as the reason why students did not take the test in the Brazos City School District (see discussion on mobility in the analysis of graduation rates). Nevertheless, what is clear from the analysis is that only 18% of LEP students in the original ninth grade cohort

took and passed all sections of the spring Exit TAAS in Brazos City.

Dropout Rates

We will now turn to an analysis of LEP student enrollment trends in Brazos City School District. Haney (2000) cited TEA reports of decreasing rates of students dropping out of school before high school graduation as more evidence contributing to the perception of dramatic educational gains in Texas during the 1990s. The Brazos City School District was no exception—reported dropout rates steadily declined. Figure 2 shows overall dropout rates from 1995 to 2001 by English proficiency status.

Figure 2. **School-reported dropout by English proficiency status (grades 7 through 12).**



	1995-1996	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001
English Proficient	2.0	0.8	1.4	1.3	1.7	1.0
Limited English Proficient	4.0	1.5	2.3	2.0	2.5	1.8

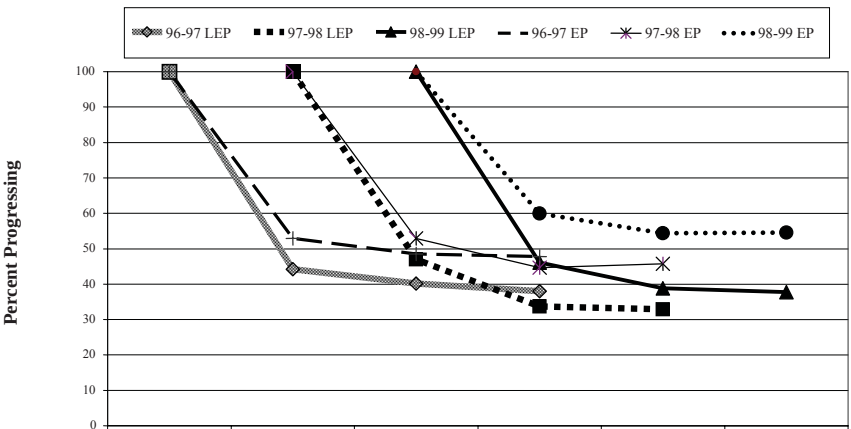
In 1995–1996, the dropout rate for LEP students in grades 7 through 12 (4%) was double the rate for EP students in grades 7 through 12 (2%). Although both LEP and EP students showed decreases in school-reported dropout rates from 1995 to 2002, LEP students continued to exhibit a higher dropout rate than EP students for the same period. However, the gap between LEP and EP student dropout rates narrowed. Thus, the dropout rates reported by the Brazos City

School District appeared to show fewer students were dropping out of school. Considering the school-reported dropout rates from 1995 to 2001, it might be suggested that for most of the period, traditional high schools in Brazos City School District decreased their students' dropout rates, regardless of English proficiency.

High School Grade Progression

TEA audits of dropout data in Texas districts have often revealed that schools have severely underreported dropout data. To better understand student progress through school, we examine here how cohorts progressed through high school in the Brazos City School District. The data allow the study to follow three cohorts, in which all students were entering the ninth grade, over a 4-year period. Figure 3 plots the proportion of students that progressed on time by English proficiency.

Figure 3. **High school cohort progression percentage by English proficiency status (entering ninth grade from 1996–1997 through 1998–1999).**



	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002
96-97 LEP	100	44	40	38		
97-98 LEP		100	47	34	33	
98-99 LEP			100	46	39	38
96-97 EP	100	53	48	48		
97-98 EP		100	53	45	46	
98-99 EP			100	60	54	55

School Year

The data allow us to examine the three high school cohorts by English proficiency status. In each cohort, LEP students showed the greatest loss between the 9th and 10th grades—less than half of LEP students in each freshman class progressed on time. In comparison, more than half of EP students in each of the cohorts progressed to the 10th grade on time. The proportion of LEP students

not progressing from 10th to 11th grade varied from 4% to 13%, while the EP cohorts showed 5% to 8%. By the 11th to 12th grade transition, both EP and LEP cohorts showed fairly level progression trends, with a grade-to-grade loss of less than 2%. Notably, by the 4th year, about a third of the initial LEP students were seniors (12th grade), while approximately half of the initial EP students were seniors.

The cohort method described above provides a stark picture of the state of high school education for LEP students in the Brazos City School District, with only approximately one third of LEP students progressing to the 12th grade on time. Thus, it is apparent that Brazos City School District's high school students were not progressing through school in a traditional 4-year fashion. However, the cohort analysis did not take into account students who took 5 or more years to progress to the 12th grade. In similar fashion to Carnoy, Loeb, and Smith (2001) and Haney (2000), it accounted only for students who progressed to the 12th grade in the traditional 4 years. It may be possible that students remained in school and progressed to the 12th grade in 5 years or that students progressed to the 12th grade in a shorter period. To understand student trajectories through school, we will now examine how a ninth grade cohort progressed through school over a 7-year period by English proficiency (see Table 1).

Table 1

Seven-Year Progression of 1996–1997 9th Grade Cohort Through High School by English Proficiency

Grade	Proficiency	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
8	EP	97%						
	LEP	98%						
9	EP		100%	30%	6%	4%	1%	
	LEP		100%	31%	5%	3%	1%	
10	EP			53%	14%	4%	1%	
	LEP			47%	13%	3%	1%	
11	EP				45%	7%	2%	
	LEP				34%	8%	3%	1%
12	EP			4%	6%	46%	5%	1%
	LEP			3%	6%	33%	6%	1%

Note. Starting with 1997–1998, yearly columns by English proficiency will not add up to 100% due to student disappearance/dropout. Columns with less than 1% are excluded.

Comparing trends for the 1996–1997 ninth grade cohort makes it apparent there were notable differences in the progression through high school by English proficiency. In the 2nd year of high school, 31% of LEP students were retained in the ninth grade. About 3% of LEP students and 4% of EP students skipped directly to the 12th grade. (Conversations with teachers in Brazos City suggested that some schools have skipped students directly to the 12th grade in response to high-stakes testing in the 10th grade. Further research is necessary to understand

skipping as a way to "game the system." By the 2nd year, about a fifth of LEP students were no longer in the Brazos City School District and had dropped out, withdrawn, or disappeared. As a result, only 47% of LEP students arrived in the 10th grade in the 2nd year. By comparison, 30% of EP students were retained in the 9th grade, while 53% advanced to the 10th grade. By the cohort's 3rd year in high school, similar proportions (roughly 20%) had not advanced to the 11th grade; however, a larger proportion of LEP students (42%) were no longer in the district by the 3rd year. In 1999–2000, about 13% more EP students progressed to the 12th grade by the 4th year. Notably, few EP or LEP students remained in high school more than 4 years.

High School Graduation

TEA (2003) reported the state had an overall graduation rate of 81.1% for 2001–2002. The Brazos City School District reported publicly that the district graduation rate had soared more than 20% over 5 years. However, from the cohort analyses, it is apparent that a large number of students were being retained or otherwise not advancing with their peers through school. If students are not progressing through school, then cohort graduation rates should be correspondingly low. This analysis examines the students in the 1997 ninth grade high school cohort, as it included a 4th- and 5th-year student graduation status identifier. There is a wide disparity between the graduation rates reported by the schools and district and the proportion of students identified by the district as graduates in the dataset. Therefore, for comparison purposes, we have calculated an additional graduation variable to consider students who were eligible for graduation based on attaining senior grade status and passing all sections of the spring Exit TAAS. Table 2 details proportions of the ninth grade cohort (first-time 1997–1998 ninth graders and nonretained 1996–1997 eighth graders) coded as graduating and as graduation eligible by student demographic characteristics.

Of the students in the data's 1997 ninth grade cohort, 30% appeared to be graduation eligible within 5 years. Using the district-provided graduation status code, 33% students were coded as having graduated by 2002 (5-year span). The cohort graduation status and eligibility variables show comparable cohort graduation rates. Considering the dataset's graduation status variable, only a fifth of LEP students graduated. This disparity is even greater when considering the graduation eligibility variable. Of concern, only 14% of LEP students in the 1997 ninth grade cohort were eligible to graduate from Brazos City School District by the 5th year. The proportion of LEP student graduation in the cohort is the lowest of all the disaggregated groups except for students who failed either

section of the eighth grade TAAS. It must be noted that the cohort graduation categories overlap. For example, an LEP student may be included in the Latino and/or eighth grade TAAS failure group.

Table 2
Graduation Rate of 1997–2001 Ninth Grade Cohort

Student Characteristics	Graduation Eligible Within 5 Years	Coded Graduated Within 5 Years
Overall	30.1%	32.7%
White	44.9%	43.3%
Latino	26.1%	24.8%
African American	29.3%	39.4%
Asian American	53.1%	49.4%
Econ. Disadvantaged	26.3%	28.3%
LEP	14.1%	20.0%
Not Passing 8th Reading TAAS	7.3%	19.3%
Not Passing 8th Math TAAS	9.7%	22.3%

A primary concern is the low graduation coding and eligibility for LEP students. The cohort progression analysis showed the district hemorrhaging students between the 9th and 10th grades, and the majority of students not advancing with their cohort—they were being left behind, withdrawing, or disappearing (dropping out). It is also apparent that these trends were more acute for LEP students.

Considering the lack of student progress for large numbers of students, the numbers cannot mathematically add up to stellar graduation rates for LEP students in the Brazos City School District. Even if a compounded rate of 3% mobility for a 4-year total of 12% is added to the overall graduation rates (based on mobility between middle school and high school from the 1996–1997 ninth grade cohort analysis), graduation status and eligibility still would not reach 50%. Additionally, it could be argued that LEP students may be more likely to be mobile than others and move to Mexico or Vietnam during high school. Even if the compounding 4-year mobility rate is doubled to 24% for LEP students, both graduation status and eligibility would still be less than 45%.

Summary of Evidence from the Brazos City School District

District-level analyses of LEP student achievement and progress compared with those of their EP peers are rarely encountered in the literature. By examining the high school Exit TAAS, it is apparent that LEP students are lagging behind their peers in the Brazos City School District. It is also apparent from the student progression analysis that publicly reported dropout and graduation rates for

LEP students are likely specious. The cohort analyses show that more than half of LEP students are not progressing in school with their peers on time. Many students are held in their grade or disappear. Furthermore, cohort graduation analyses reveal LEP students are graduating at rates drastically lower than the graduation rate estimates for other demographic groups. Notably, economically disadvantaged students and other racial/ethnic groups are included in the EP comparison group—including English proficient Latinos. Thus, it is apparent that identifying district-level achievement trends by English proficiency status is necessary and important.

Statistical Analysis of ELL Youth in Texas

Data

This analysis relied on testing data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for grade 9 in 2004, and grades 9, 10, and 11 in 2005. We selected these grades and years because only 3 years of data from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) were available when this study was begun. To conduct such a study, we needed 2 consecutive years of TAKS data. This left us two choices: (a) start with grade 9 students in 2003 and follow them to 2004 or (b) start with grade 9 students in 2004 and follow them to 2005. The first option would not allow us to identify students who were retained in the ninth grade, while the second option would allow us to identify such students. Because research on student dropout factors identifies retention in ninth grade as a strong predictor of dropping out, we decided to use the 2004 ninth grade students.

Methodology

For this paper, the disappearance rate was based on data gathered by tracking answer documents submitted by school districts for individual students from the 2004 and 2005 TAKS examinations. All students enrolled in Texas public schools must have an answer document submitted, regardless of whether the student actually took any of the TAKS assessments. We identified all students who had an answer document submitted for the ninth grade TAKS assessment in 2004. We then merged those data with data on students who had an answer document submitted for 2005, regardless of the grade level of the individual. If a student in the 2004 file did not appear in the 2005 file, that individual was designated as having disappeared from the Texas public school system.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that the data do not provide any reason why

a student disappeared from the Texas public school system. A student who disappeared could have chosen to drop out of school. Alternatively, a student could have moved out of state, enrolled in a private school, transferred to a home school setting, or even died. In this way, the disappearance rate likely overstates any approximation of a dropout rate. Another limitation is that only students enrolled after October 2003 must have an answer document submitted for the spring 2004 TAKS. Thus, the disappearance of students leaving Texas public schools between the start of school to October 2004 would not have been captured. This limitation would result in the disappearance rate's underestimating the dropout rate.

Findings

Student Characteristics

Almost 8% of Texas students were ELLs. The disappearance rate for such students was more than twice that for non-ELL students; this difference of more than 13 percentage points is statistically significant.

Table 3
Number of Students Tested and Students Disappearing by Participation in an English as a Second Language Program

	Not ELL	ELL	Difference	Total
Number of Students	338,748	29,190		367,938
Disappearance Rate	12.1%	25.4%	13.3*	

Note. *Statistically significant differences are at the P < .001 level, two-tailed test.

The purpose of this paper is to focus on ELL students; thus, the analyses focus exclusively on ELL students. As shown in Table 4, the disappearance rate for male students was about 4 percentage points greater than for female students; the difference is statistically significant.

Contrary to expectations, students who were not economically disadvantaged and students who were not labeled as at-risk had greater disappearance rates than economically disadvantaged and at-risk students, respectively. The difference was especially large between at-risk and not-at-risk students. These two results may be explained by the length of residency in the United States. Students who are very recent immigrants are probably less likely to enroll in the federal free/reduced-price lunch program. Further, because at-risk status is based primarily on previous test scores, recent immigrants may not be designated as at-risk because there are no previous test scores for them.

Students receiving special education services had a disappearance rate 7 percentage points higher than students not in special education. Given that special education students are more likely to be over age and out of the mainstream of the regular education population, this finding is not surprising.

As supported by a large body of research, students retained in the ninth grade had a far greater disappearance rate than students who were not retained. (In this analysis, a student was determined to be retained in a grade—enrolled in the ninth grade in 2 consecutive years—if the answer document submitted for the student identified them as taking a ninth grade TAKS examination in both 2004 and 2005.) The difference between students retained and students not retained was quite large—almost 16 percentage points. In fact, out of all the subpopulations included in Table 4, students retained in the ninth grade had the greatest disappearance rate.

Students who passed both the reading and mathematics TAKS tests in 9th grade were far less likely to disappear than students who did not pass both tests. The difference of almost 17 percentage points was the second largest in the analysis. Because students must pass TAKS tests in four different subjects in the 11th grade, one would surmise that students not passing both the reading and the mathematics tests in the 9th grade may get discouraged or attempt to obtain a GED. Interestingly, however, 10% of students passing both tests still disappeared.

Finally, students with a valid score for both the reading and mathematics TAKS tests in grade 9 were far less likely to disappear than students with at least one invalid score. Indeed, the difference of almost 21 percentage points between the two groups was the greatest difference in this part of the analysis. A student with invalid scores typically has one of four reasons for this. First, the student may be exempted from taking the test because he is designated as being LEP. Second, the student may be exempted from taking the test because he is designated as being a special education student. Third, the student may have been absent on the day of testing. Finally, the student may have had the score invalidated by the district if the student became sick during testing or the student attempted to cheat on the test.

Because LEP students must eventually pass the English versions of the TAKS tests in four subject areas, it is not surprising that students exempted for any of these reasons would be more likely to disappear than other students. Students absent during testing may have already chosen to drop out or may be apprehensive about their chances of passing the tests. Again, one would surmise such students are far more likely to disappear. Similarly, one can imagine students who become sick during testing or who attempted to cheat on the test are less likely to pass the tests, and are thus more likely to disappear.

Table 4
Number of Students and Student Disappearance Rates by Selected Student Characteristics

Student Population		Student Characteristic: Yes	Student Characteristic: No	Difference in Rate
Male	*n*	17,080	12,895	
	Rate	27.5%	23.3%	4.2*
Econ. Disadvantaged	*n*	23,830	6,145	
	Rate	24.3%	31.2%	-6.9*
At Risk	*n*	27,590	2,338	
	Rate	24.8%	36.2%	-11.4*
Gifted	*n*	71	29,862	
	Rate	21.1%	25.7%	-4.6
Migrant	*n*	2,345	27,567	
	Rate	25.3%	25.7%	-0.4
Special Ed	*n*	4,576	25,358	
	Rate	31.9%	24.6%	7.3*
Retained in Grade 9	*n*	5,781	24,194	
	Rate	38.3%	22.7%	15.6*
Passed Both TAKS	*n*	1,923	28,052	
	Rate	10.0%	26.8%	-16.8*
Valid TAKS Scores	*n*	14,445	15,530	
	Rate	15.1%	35.6%	-20.5*

Note. *Statistically significant differences are at the P < .001 level, two-tailed test.

School Demographics

As shown in Table 5, slightly more than 80% of ELL students were enrolled in schools with 25% or fewer African American students. ELL students enrolled in these schools had the lowest disappearance rate, while ELL students in schools with more than 50% African American students had the greatest disappearance rates. More specifically, the disappearance rate for ELL students enrolled in schools with 25% or fewer African American students was significantly (6 percentage points) lower than the disappearance rate for ELL students enrolled in schools with between 50% and 75% African American students and schools with more than 75% African American students.

As shown in Table 6, nearly 50% of ELL students were enrolled in schools with populations of 75% or more Hispanic students. Students enrolled in such schools had the greatest disappearance rate, while students in schools with 25% or less Hispanic students had the lowest disappearance rate. More specifically, the disappearance rate for ELL students enrolled in schools with 25% or less Hispanic students was 3.6 percentage points lower than the disappearance rate for students enrolled in schools with more than 75% Hispanic students. The disappearance rate for ELL students in schools with 25% or less Hispanic

students was statistically significantly lower than the disappearance rates for the schools with other percentages of Hispanic students.

Table 5
Percentage of Students Tested and Students Disappearing by Percentage of African American Students Enrolled in the School

Quartiles of African American students	*n*	Percentage of total *n*	Percentage Disappearing	Statistical Significance
1 00.0–25.0%	24,072	80.89%	24.8%	2,3
2 25.1–50.0%	4,680	15.73%	27.6%	1
3 50.1–75.0%	732	2.46%	30.1%	1
4 75.1–100%	275	0.92%	30.9%	1
Total	29,759	100.0%	25.4%	

Note. Statistically significant differences are at the $p \leq .05$ level, two-tailed test.

Table 6
Percentage of Students Tested and Students Disappearing by Percentage of Hispanic Students Enrolled in the School

Quartiles of Hispanic Students	*n*	Percentage of total *n*	Percentage Disappearing	Statistical Significance
1 00.0–25.0%	4,286	14.4%	22.6%	2,3,4
2 25.1–50.0%	6,711	22.6%	25.2%	1
3 50.1–75.0%	4,384	14.7%	26.2%	1
4 75.1–100%	14,378	48.3%	26.2%	1
Total	29,759	100.0%	25.4%	

Note. Statistically significant differences are at the $p \leq .05$ level, two-tailed test.

As shown in Table 7, 68% of ELL students were enrolled in schools with 25% or less White students. ELL students enrolled in these schools had the greatest disappearance rate, while students in schools with populations of more than 75% White students had the lowest disappearance rate. More specifically, the disappearance rate for ELL students enrolled in schools with 25% or less White students was about 7 percentage points greater than the disappearance rate for ELL students enrolled in schools with more than 75% White students. The differences in the ELL student disappearance rates between schools with 25% or less White students and the other groups of schools were statistically significant.

As shown in Table 8, 35% of ELL students were enrolled in schools with more than 75% economically disadvantaged students. ELL students enrolled

Table 7
Percentage of Students Tested and Students Disappearing by Percentage of White Students Enrolled in the School

Quartiles of White students	*n*	Percentage of total *n*	Percentage Disappearing	Statistical Significance
1 00.0–25.0%	20,256	68.1%	26.9%	2,3,4
2 25.1–50.0%	5,030	16.9%	22.7%	1
3 50.1–75.0%	3,486	11.7%	22.3%	1
4 75.1–100%	987	3.3%	20.7%	1
Total	29,759	100.0%	25.4%	

Note. Statistically significant differences are at the $p \leq .05$ level, two-tailed test.

Table 8
Percentage of Students Tested and Students Disappearing by Percentage of Economically Disadvantaged Students Enrolled in the School

Quartiles of economically disadvantaged students	*n*	Percentage of total *n*	Percentage Disappearing	Statistical Significance
1 00.0-25.0%	2,792	9.4%	22.0%	3,4
2 25.1-50.0%	7,236	24.3%	23.9%	3,4
3 50.1-75.0%	9,276	31.2%	26.2%	1,2
4 75.1-100%	10,455	35.1%	26.8%	1,2
Total	29,759	100.0%	25.4%	

Note. Statistically significant differences are at the $p \leq .05$ level, two-tailed test.

in schools with 25% or less economically disadvantaged students had the lowest disappearance rate, while students in schools with more than 75% economically disadvantaged students had the greatest disappearance rate. The disappearance rates for ELL students in schools with less than 50% economically disadvantaged students were statistically significantly less than the disappearance rates for ELL students in schools with other percentages of economically disadvantaged students.

As shown in Table 9, nearly 65% of ELL students were enrolled in schools in three Education Service Center regions: Edinburg (Region 1), Houston (Region 4), and Richardson (Region 10). El Paso (Region 19) had a statistically significantly lower disappearance rate than the rates for Austin (Region 13), Houston (Region 4), and Edinburg (Region 1). While other differences were not statistically significant, the rural West Texas regions (14, 15, and 16) had lower disappearance rates for ELL students than the other regions. This holds true for all students as well.

Table 9
Percentage of Students Tested and Students Disappearing by Education Service Center Region

Education Region Service Center	*n*	Percentage of total *n*	Percentage Disappearing	Statistical Significance
1-Edinburg	7,098	23.9%	26.9%	19
2-Corpus Christi	295	1.0%	25.4%	
3-Victoria	140	0.5%	21.4%	
4-Houston	6,406	21.5%	26.4%	19
5-Beaumont	111	0.4%	27.9%	
6-Huntsville	437	1.5%	25.9%	
7-Kilgore	570	1.9%	24.0%	
8-Mt. Pleasant	179	0.6%	25.7%	
9-Wichita Falls	42	0.1%	21.4%	
10-Richardson	5,906	19.8%	24.8%	
11-Fort Worth	2,661	8.9%	24.2%	
12-Waco	324	1.1%	25.9%	
13-Austin	1,413	4.7%	28.9%	19
14-Abilene	65	0.2%	16.9%	
15-San Angelo	208	0.7%	18.8%	
16-Amarillo	351	1.2%	19.9%	
17-Lubbock	136	0.5%	24.3%	
18-Midland	401	1.3%	23.9%	
19-El Paso	1,533	5.2%	21.7%	1, 4, 13
20-San Antonio	1,485	5.0%	23.6%	
Total	29,761	100.0%	25.4%	

Note. The number in the statistically significant column indicates the Region Education Service Center that is statistically significantly different than the Region Education Service Center for that row. Statistically significant differences are at the $p \leq .05$ level, two-tailed test.

Logistic Regression Results

As noted previously, only ELL students were included in the analysis. The dependent variable was "disappeared." If a student disappeared from Texas public schools between the 9th and 10th grades from 2004 through 2005, the student was coded as having disappeared. The variable identified disappeared students with a 1 and those who did not disappear with a 0.

The logistic regression equation employed in this analysis was as follows:

$$Disappear\ (0/1) = b_0(constant) + b_1(student\ demographics) + b_2(special\ program\ participation) + b_3(grade\ retention) + b_4(school\ characteristics) + b_5(region\ service\ center) + b_6(valid\ score) + error$$

Student demographics included gender and economically disadvantaged status. Special program participation included whether the student received special education services, and grade retention identified if the student was retained in the ninth grade in 2005.

The school characteristics included the following variables: affluent schools (the percentage of economically disadvantaged students was less than 25%); predominantly Hispanic schools (the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled in the schools was greater than 75%); schools with fewer than 500 students enrolled; schools with more than 3,000 students enrolled; schools with teacher turnover greater than 25%; schools with more than 30% of teachers not properly qualified to teach courses assigned to teach; schools located in urban districts (districts located in urban areas and with enrollments of greater than 50,000 students); schools located in rural districts (districts located away from urban districts with enrollments of less than 5,000 students); schools located in suburban, White districts (districts within metropolitan statistical areas whose student populations were greater than 50% White), and nonalternative (schools that received a regular state accountability rating of low-performing, acceptable, recognized, or exemplary).

The region service center characteristics included 19 of the 20 regional Education Service Centers to create a district-fixed effects model. The omitted region was Houston (Region 4), and thus that district served as the reference region. Finally, the valid score characteristics included a variable indicating whether or not a student had valid scores for both the reading and mathematics ninth grade TAKS examinations in the spring of 2004.

The results in Table 10 include the statistical significance for the independent variables (p-values) as well as the odds ratios. As shown in the table, most of the results were consistent across the first four models, but the inclusion of the variable indicating whether a student had valid TAKS scores in both reading and mathematics alters the effect a student's race/ethnicity has on the odds of dropping out.

Model 1.

The first model included only the individual student characteristics. Female students and economically disadvantaged students were both approximately 20% less likely to disappear than other students. However, these results did not control for any other factors.

Model 2.

In model 2, we controlled for individual student characteristics as well as program participation and grade retention. In this model, economically disadvantaged students were about 23% less likely to disappear, while female students were about 14% less likely to disappear. Special education students were about 50% more likely to disappear, while students retained in the ninth grade were more than twice as likely to disappear.

Table 10
Logistic Regression Results

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
Variable	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Students Demographics										
Econ Disadv	-.244***	0.784	-.256***	0.774	-.304***	0.738	-.311***	0.733	-.268***	0.765
Female	-.223***	0.800	-.164***	0.849	-.158***	0.854	-.159***	0.853	-.157***	0.855
Program Participation & Grade Retention										
Special Education			.392***	1.481	.395***	1.485	.401***	1.494	-.069^	0.934
Retained in grade 9			.753***	2.123	.723***	2.061	.722***	2.059	.804***	2.234
School Characteristics										
Affluent school					-.119*	0.888	-.117*	0.889	-.133*	0.875
Pred Hispanic school					-.065*	0.937	-.041	0.960	-.061	0.941
Enroll: < 500					-.006	0.994	.012	1.012	-.002	0.998
Enroll: > 3000					-.007	0.993	-.032	0.968	-.030	0.971
High Turnover					.082^	1.086	.067	1.069	.056	1.058
High Unqualified					.080*	1.083	.046	1.047	-.004	0.996
Urban					.126***	1.135	.139***	1.149	.101*	1.106
Rural					.000	1.000	.018	1.019	-.009	0.991
Suburban White					-.133^	0.876	-.154*	0.857	-.261***	0.770
Non-alternative school					-.912***	0.402	-.953***	0.385	-.820***	0.440
Region Education Service Center										
1-Harlingen							-.094^	0.910	-.074	0.929
2-Corpus Christi							-.051	0.951	.093	1.097
3-Victoria							-.367^	0.693	-.191	0.826
5-Beaumont							.234	1.263	.403^	1.497
6-Huntsville							.108	1.114	.019	1.019
7-Kilgore							-.115	0.892	-.167	0.846
8-Mt. Pleasant							.065	1.067	-.084	0.920
9-Wichita Falls							-.151	0.860	-.236	0.790
10-Dallas							-.151***	0.860	-.249***	0.779
11-Ft. Worth							-.232***	0.793	-.268***	0.765
12-Waco							.035	1.036	-.068	0.934
13-Austin							.149*	1.160	.119	1.127
14-Abilene							-.371	0.690	-.624^	0.536
15-San Angelo							-.538**	0.584	-.541**	0.582
16-Amarillo							-.222	0.801	-.142	0.868
17-Lubbock							-.009	0.991	.054	1.055
18-Midland							-.377**	0.686	-.382**	0.683
19-El Paso							-.195**	0.823	-.114	0.892
20-San Antonio							-.214**	0.807	-.178*	0.837
Valid TAKS Scores in Reading & Math										
Both Scores Valid									-1.213***	0.297
Constant	-.818***	0.441	-1.067***	0.344	-.189^	0.828	-.050	0.952	.423***	1.527

Note. Significance levels: ^ ≤.10, * ≤.05, **≤.01 ***≤.001.

Model 3.

In model 3, we controlled for individual student characteristics, special education participation, grade 9 retention, as well as some school and district characteristics. In this model, economically disadvantaged students were about 26% less likely to disappear, while female students were about 15% less likely to disappear. Again, special education students were about 50% more likely to disappear, while students retained in grade 9 were more than twice as likely to disappear than nonretained students. ELL students in affluent schools—those with more than 75% not economically disadvantaged students—were about 10% less likely to disappear than students in other schools. ELL students in predominantly Hispanic schools—schools with greater than 75% Hispanic students—were about 6% less likely to disappear than students in other schools.

There was no statistically significant effect on disappearance rates for ELL students in schools with either fewer than 500 students or more than 3,000 students. ELL students in schools with high levels of teacher turnover—greater than 25% per year—were about 8% more likely to disappear than ELL students in other schools. However, the result was statistically significant at the $p < .10$ level only. ELL students in schools where more than 30% of the teachers were not fully certified to teach the courses to which they were assigned (high unqualified) were also about 8% more likely to disappear than ELL students in other schools.

With respect to district location, ELL students in urban districts were about 14% more likely to disappear than ELL students in other types of districts. ELL students in White suburban districts were about 12% less likely to disappear than students in other districts. However, the White suburban variable was statistically significant at the $p < .10$ level only. ELL students in nonalternative schools were about 60% less likely than ELL students in alternative schools to disappear.

Model 4.

In model 4 we added a control variable for 19 of the 20 regional Education Service Centers to create a district fixed-effects model. In this model, economically disadvantaged students were about 27% less likely to disappear and female students were about 15% less likely to disappear. Again, special education students were about 50% more likely to disappear, and students retained in grade 9 were slightly more than twice as likely to disappear than nonretained students.

ELL students in affluent schools—those with more than 75% not economically disadvantaged students—were about 10% less likely to disappear than students in other schools. Under the district fixed-effects model, there was no difference between the disappearance rate for ELL students in predominantly Hispanic schools and for ELL students in other schools. Again, there was no statistically significant effect on disappearance rates for ELL students in schools with either less than 500 students or more than 3,000 students. There were also no longer any statistically significant differences in the ELL disappearance rate between schools with high levels of teacher turnover or with high percentages of underqualified teachers.

With respect to district location, ELL students in urban districts were about 15% more likely to disappear than ELL students in other types of districts. ELL students in White suburban districts were about 14% less likely to disappear than students in other districts. ELL students in nonalternative schools were about 61% less likely than ELL students in alternative schools to disappear. Of particular interest to those in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex, ELL students in both the Richardson and Fort Worth Education Service Center regions were less likely to disappear than ELL students in the Houston region. Those in the Richardson region were about 14% less likely to disappear, while those in the Fort Worth region were about 21% less likely to disappear.

Model 5.

After including a variable indicating whether students had valid test scores on both the reading and mathematics sections of the TAKS examination, some of the variables were no longer statistically significant. In the final model, economically disadvantaged students were about 24% less likely to disappear, and female students were about 15% less likely to disappear. The difference between ELL students in special education and ELL students not in special education was no longer statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, although it was statistically significant at the $p < .10$ level. In the final model, rather than being more likely to disappear, ELL students in special education were approximately 7% less likely to disappear. ELL students retained in grade 9 were about 2.2 times more likely to disappear than nonretained students.

Again, ELL students in affluent schools were about 12% less likely to disappear than ELL students in other schools. With respect to district location, ELL students in urban districts were about 11% more likely to disappear than ELL students in other types of districts; ELL students in White suburban districts were about 23% less likely to disappear than ELL students in other districts. ELL students in nonalternative schools were about 56% less likely

than ELL students in alternative schools to disappear. ELL students in both the Richardson and Fort Worth Education Service Center regions were about 23% less likely to disappear than ELL students in the Houston region. Finally, ELL students with valid scores for both the reading and mathematics TAKS test in grade 9 were about 70% less likely to disappear than students with no valid scores or only one valid score.

Summary of Evidence from Analyses of State-Level Data

In summary, while 8% of Texas students are ELL, their disappearance rate was more than twice that for non-ELL students (25.4% versus 12.1%, respectively). ELL youth are significantly less likely to disappear if any of the following characteristics are true: they are female; they are economically disadvantaged: attend an affluent school; attend a school in a White suburban district; attend a nonalternative (i.e., regular) high school; or have a valid score on both the reading and mathematics TAKS tests in grade 9. Conversely, ELL students are significantly more likely to disappear if they were retained in the ninth grade or if they attended a school located in an urban district. As noted previously, the effect of being economically disadvantaged conflicts with all other research—including research using all students in Texas. We believe the findings in this area are due to the data on economically disadvantaged status being conflated with length of residency in the United States.

Despite the limitations of state-level data, this analysis effectively demonstrates that disaggregating data for this growing subgroup is important. Trends have surfaced, showing the educational experiences of ELL youth are distinct from those of non-ELL youth, and thus warranting a targeted focus on their needs. For instance, because nearly 65% of all ELL students were enrolled in schools in three Education Service Center regions in the state (Edinburg, Houston, and Richardson), resources could be targeted in these areas.

Conclusion

This analysis renders how the Texas accountability system has failed to adequately take the needs of ELL students into account and directly hold schools accountable for their achievement (Valenzuela, 2004). In order for Texas to be truly accountable, we recommend a number of changes that track back to the linchpin of the accountability system itself—namely, the TAKS test. The properties of the exam, together with how it is used, help account for how ELL students get caught in the crosshairs of education policy. Notably, a system designed with ELL students in mind would not only consider their predicament

in a substantive manner, but would additionally prove beneficial for all Texas youth.

With respect to the language-dependent nature of the exit TAKS, policymakers should consider legislation that accomplishes the following: (1) uses Spanish-language norms assessments to more accurately measure ELL student success; (2) validates Spanish–English bilingualism and promotes it through dual language programs; and (3) utilizes multiple measures (including grades, portfolios, class rank, and alternative forms of assessment in addition to test scores) whenever making high-stakes decisions like retention, promotion, and graduation (Valenzuela, 2004). For discussion purposes, students taking the recommended curriculum with a B or greater average would be candidates for the application of a multiple measures system. At the exit level, lawmakers should also consider an advanced high school diploma for students achieving high levels of bilingualism and biliteracy. These recommendations necessarily require a reorienting of policy, such that it focuses less on what ELL youth cannot do and more on what they can.

Other results reveal the salience of the TAKS test itself with respect to the chances that ELL youth will disappear from school. In other words, the chance that ELL youth will succeed in school through graduation is compromised by policies working at cross-purposes. That is, if an ELL student does not obtain a valid score for both the reading and mathematics TAKS test in grade 9, chances are that he is being exempted from testing because he is designated as being LEP. While this process may help such students compensate for what would otherwise be a poor test performance, given their lack of English language fluency and the language-dependent nature of the exam, a collateral effect of exempting students is depriving them of test exposure and, thus, experience on an examination that will soon become a graduation requirement. Yet, because it still does not make sense for students to take an incomprehensible test, an alternative evaluation system must be pursued as suggested herein (see Valenzuela, 2002).

Future research should track cohorts of ELL students to gauge their long-term academic achievement. Furthermore, current state-level data do not provide sufficient information on Hispanic subgroups in order to identify potential effective interventions for different groups (i.e., immigrant versus nonimmigrant status, generational status, length of residence in the United States, continuous vs. interrupted schooling experiences before migration). Information regarding the academic proficiencies of LEP children based on various personal and parental educational attainment levels from Mexico or Latin America is sorely lacking. We recommend that Texas establish partnerships with the Mexican

government in order to create an international database of students so both countries can educate this highly diverse and mobile community.

The decreased likelihood of ELL youth dropping out in affluent, suburban contexts underscores the salience of resources. To improve accountability, TEA must therefore take additional standards into account. That is, schools should be held accountable for helping ELL youth meet performance standards by providing quality educational facilities, programs, and well-trained teachers. In short, Texas needs accountability on inputs in addition to outputs so policymakers, practitioners, and the public may better understand the state of education and ensure every student has equal access to the same kinds of resources, thereby fostering a more meritocratic system.

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