# The Demographic

*English language learners represent a growing proportion of U.S. students. To meet these students' needs, we must understand who they are.*

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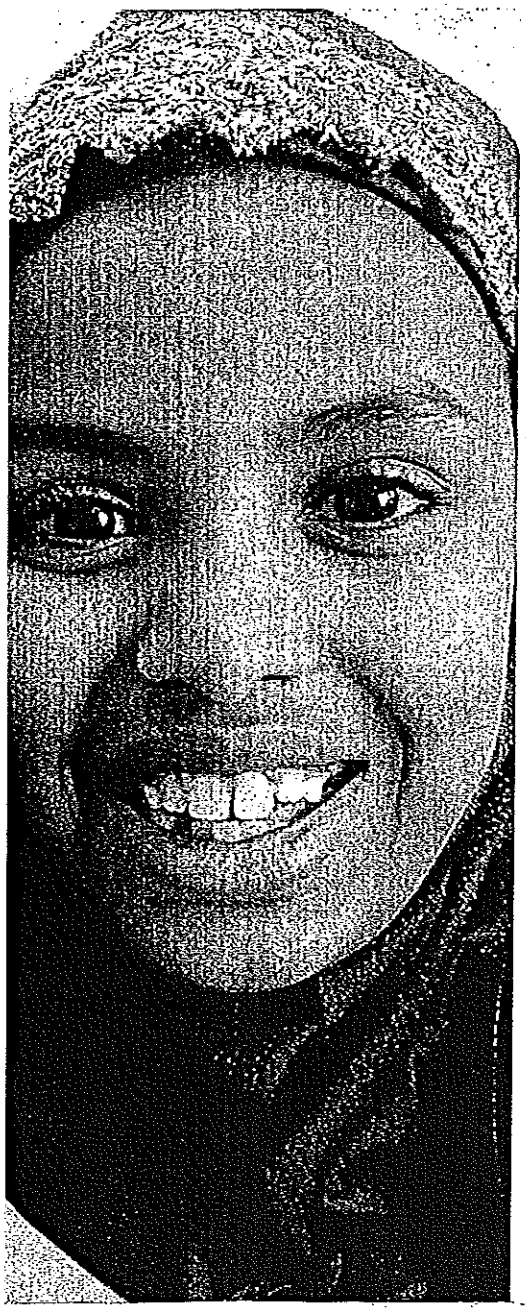
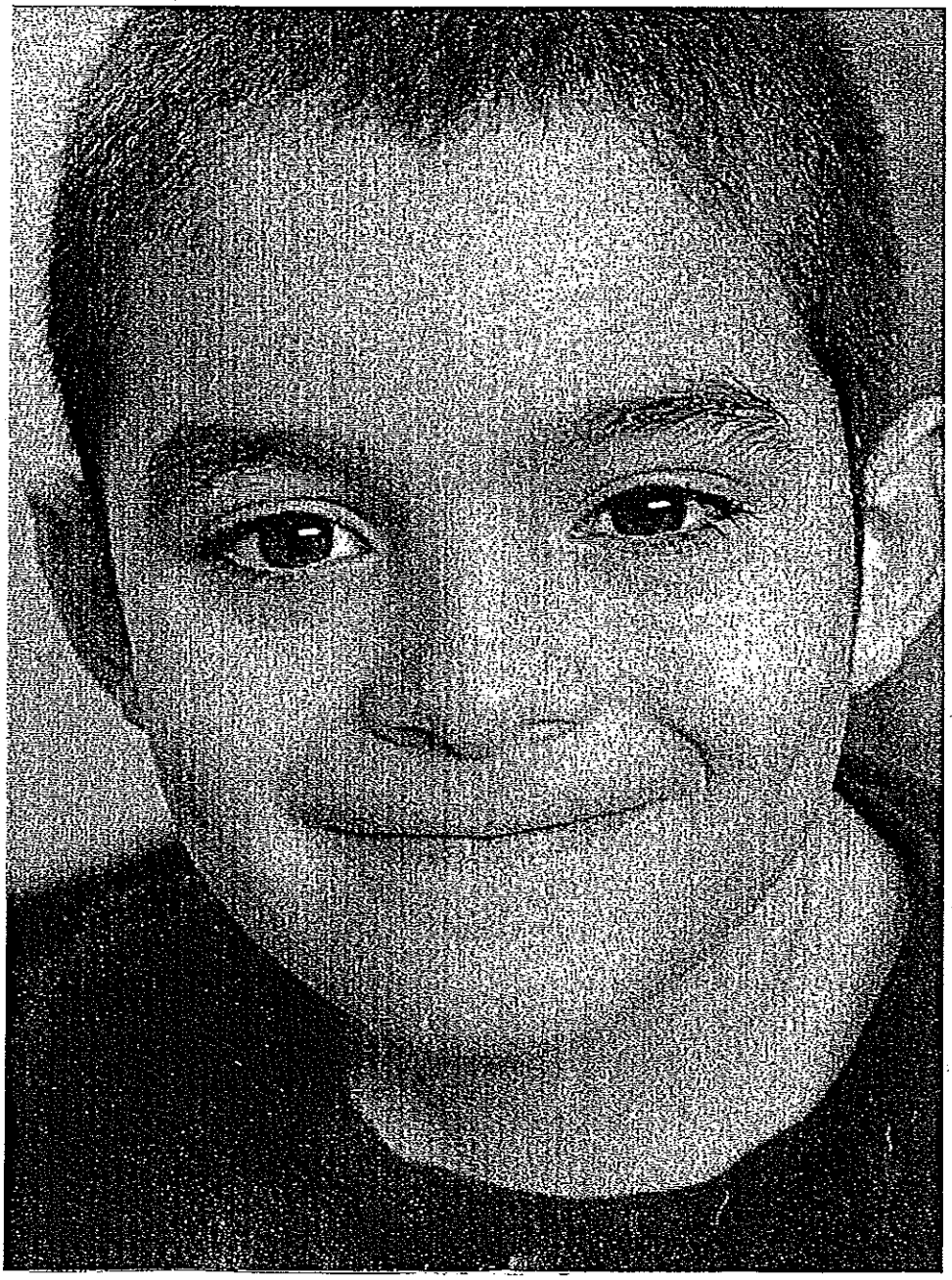
# Imperative

Who are the English language learners who attend U.S. schools? Here, we provide a brief overview of the demography of these students, a discussion of factors influencing their academic performance, and some reflections on the collaboration needed among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to improve the education of English learners in the coming years.

First, let's clarify our terms. *Language minority* is the term commonly used to describe children whose native language is other than English, regardless of their current level of English proficiency. The terms *limited English proficient* (LEP) and





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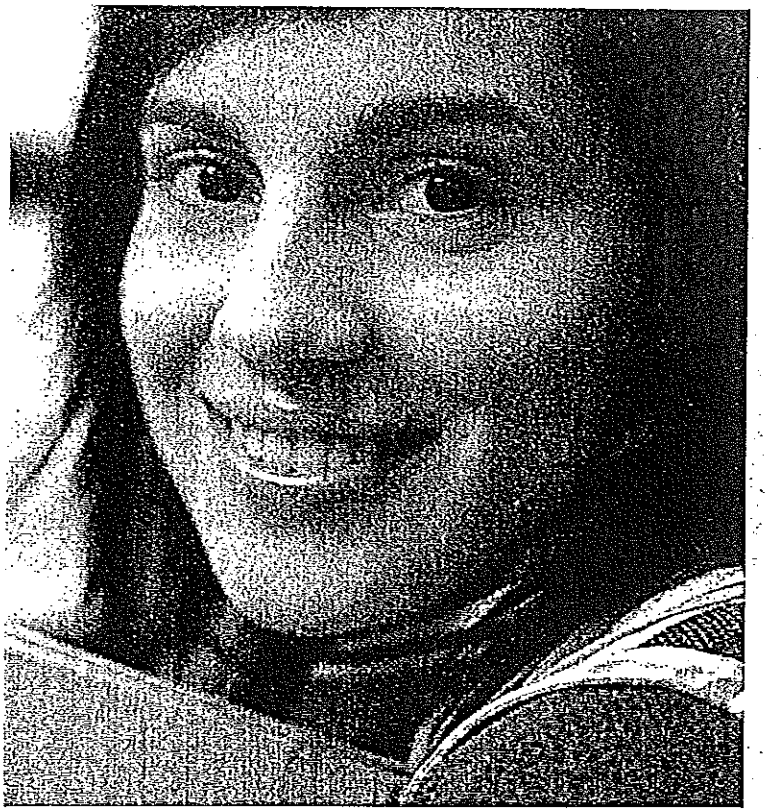

*English language learner* (ELL) are often used interchangeably to refer to students whose English proficiency has not yet developed to a point where they can profit fully from English instruction. Neither of these terms is synonymous with *children from immigrant families*, which the U.S. Census defines as children with at least one foreign-born parent—although all these populations are related.

### How Many English Language Learners Are There?

Recent estimates place the number of language-minority students in K–12 schools at more than 14 million (August & Shanahan, 2006). Keep in mind, however, that not all language-minority students are English language learners or from immigrant families.

According to data from the 2000 U.S. Census,[1] about one in five children ages 5–17 in the United States (approximately 10.8 million children) are from immigrant families (Capps et al., 2005). The population of children in immigrant families is growing faster than any other group of children in the nation (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008). Most of these children, 79 percent, were born in the United States and are therefore U.S. citizens (Hernandez et al., 2008).

Although most children and youth from immigrant households are considered English language learners at some point in their lives, self-reported U.S. Census data indicate that the great majority of children ages 5–17 from immigrant families (74 percent) speak English "exclusively" or "very well" (Hernandez et al., 2008).

To zoom in on English language learners, therefore, we need to narrow our lens even further. Recent estimates by the U.S. Department of Education indicate that more than 5 million school-age children in the United States (more than 10 percent of all K–12 students) are English language learners (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006). The proportion of ELLs is highest in the early years: ELLs comprised 7.4 percent of all students from prekindergarten to grade 5 and 5.5 percent of all students in grades 6–12, according to the 2000 Census, which tends to underestimate the total number of ELLs (Capps et al., 2005). The concentration of ELLs among young children exists partly because children who enter preschool or kindergarten as ELLs tend to develop oral and academic English proficiency by 3rd grade, and also because of increased rates of (legal and illegal) immigration combined with high birth rates among immigrant families (Hernandez et al., 2008).

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### Where Do They Live?

As immigrant families settle in new areas in response to labor demands (Zúñiga & Hernández-León, 2005), districts and states that previously had few or no English language learners must now serve increasing numbers of ELLs. Although immigrant families continue to be concentrated in California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey (Capps et al., 2005), several states with fewer immigrants in absolute numbers experienced rapid increases in their percentages of ELLs from 1990 to 2000. The states with the largest percentage increases in grades preK–8 were Nevada (354 percent); Nebraska (350 percent); South Dakota (364 percent); Georgia (255 percent); Arkansas (243 percent); and Oregon (214 percent). The states with the largest percentage increases in grades 6–12 were Nebraska (233 percent); Nevada (224 percent); Oregon (177 percent); Georgia (175 percent); Colorado (144 percent); and Delaware (137 percent) (Capps et al., 2005).

Schools in these locations are unlikely to have the large numbers of bilingual and ESL teachers and other resources enjoyed by schools in long-standing gateway communities. In many cases, these schools are scrambling to obtain the resources and personnel to adequately serve the newcomers.

### Where Have They Come From?

Immigrants in the United States come from many nations. By far the largest

percentage of children in immigrant families, however, have origins in Mexico (40 percent in 2000). The Caribbean and East Asia each contribute 10–11 percent; Central America, South America, Indochina, and West Asia each contribute 5–7 percent; and the former Soviet Union and Africa each contribute 2–3 percent. Only 10–11 percent come from Europe, Canada, and Australia combined. This is a dramatic change from the early 1900s: In 1910, 97 percent of immigrant children's families had origins in Europe or Canada (Hernandez et al., 2008).

Although English language learners in the United States speak more than 350 languages, Spanish predominates: 77 percent of ELLs spoke Spanish as their native language in the 2000–01 school year (Hopstock & Stephenson, 2003). None of the other most common languages—including Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Hmong/Miao, French, German, Russian, and Arabic—was spoken by more than 3 percent of all English language learners (Capps et al., 2005).

### Factors Influencing Achievement

Several family and school factors work together to shape the academic performance of English language learners. These factors include the language used in the home. Looking at data on immigrant children, we see wide variations in family language use. U.S. Census data show that three-fifths of children in immigrant families have at least one parent at home who speaks English exclusively or very well. However, about one-fourth of immigrant children live in households where no one over age 13 speaks English exclusively or very well (Hernandez et al., 2008).

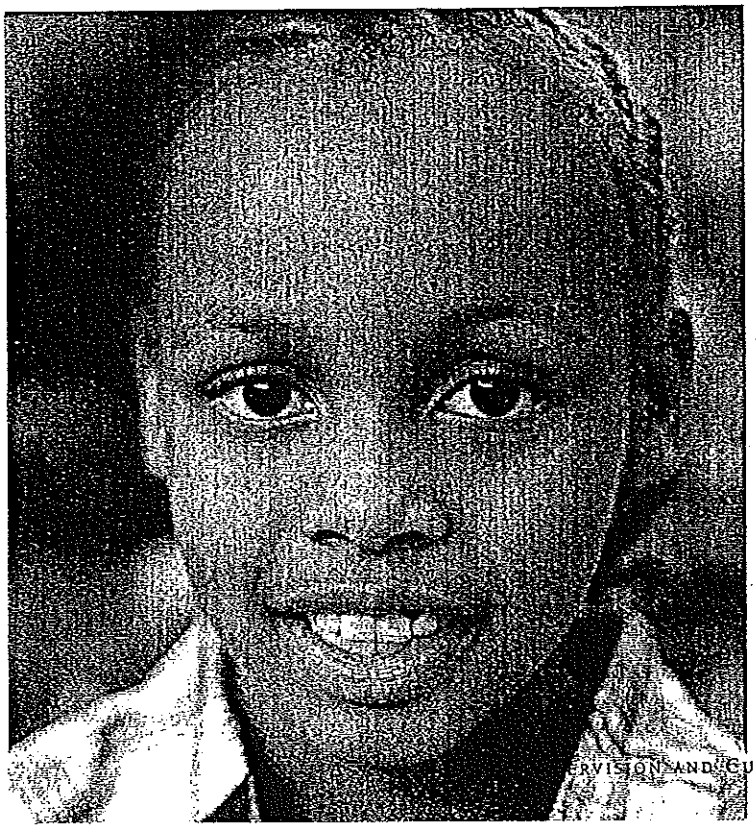
In their analyses of data about academic performance in early elementary school in the United States, Reardon and Galindo (2006) found that reading and mathematics achievement patterns in grades K–3 vary by home language environments among Hispanic students. Those living in homes categorized as *primarily Spanish* or *Spanish only* lagged further behind non-Hispanic white children than did Hispanics who lived in homes categorized as *primarily English* or *English only*.

Language is not the whole picture, however. To understand the achievement gap between ELLs and English-proficient students, we must consider other social and economic characteristics (Jensen, 2008).

Although a great deal of socioeconomic variation exists among ELLs, in general they are more likely than native-English-speaking students to come from low-income families (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006). In 2000, 68 percent of ELLs in grades preK–5 and 60 percent in grades 6–12 lived in low-income families (below 185 percent of the federal poverty level), compared with 36 percent and 32 percent, respectively, of English-proficient students in these age groups (Capps et al., 2005). ELLs are also more likely to have parents with limited formal education: 48 percent in grades preK–5 and 35 percent in the higher grades had a parent with less than a high school education, compared with 11 and 9 percent of English-proficient students in the same grades (Capps et al., 2005). Each of these factors, as well as ethnic/racial minority status, is associated with decreased achievement averages across academic areas, contributing to the relatively low performance of English language learners.

Several other reports have documented the interrelationship of risk variables for ELLs (Collier, 1987; Jensen, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1995). For example, in a separate analysis of the same U.S. data used by Reardon and Galindo, Jensen (2007) compared Spanish-speaking kindergartners with their non-Spanish-speaking peers on a number of factors, including socioeconomic status, parental education, and mathematics achievement. He found that Spanish-speaking kindergartners, on average, fared an entire standard deviation below their peers in terms of socioeconomic status and maternal educational attainment. They also scored four-fifths of a standard deviation lower than other kindergartners in mathematics.

Thus, rather than pointing to one or two student background factors that account for the achievement gap for ELLs, we should understand that



educational risk is attributable to a myriad of interrelated out-of-school factors, including parent education levels, family income, parent English-language proficiency, mother's marital status at the time of birth, and single- versus dual-parent homes (NCES, 1995). The more risk factors a student is subject to, the lower the probability the student will do well in the standard school environment. Because ELLs, on average, exhibit three of the five risk factors at higher rates than native English speakers, they are generally at greater risk for academic underachievement (Hernandez et al., 2008).

In recognizing these educational risks, however, we should not overlook the relative strengths ELLs bring to school (García & Jensen, 2007). Children of immigrants, for example, are more likely than children in native-born families to live with two parents and with siblings who may serve as an asset to their educational success (Hernandez et al., 2008). Particularly for students with origins in Mexico, Central America, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Indochina, and Afghanistan, ELLs are also more likely than their native English-speaking peers to have a grandparent or other relative in the home, which can buffer expenses such as child care. Additional analyses of Census data show that parents of ELLs have a relatively stronger work ethic than U.S.-born parents (Hernandez et al., 2008).

### The Implementation Gap

Why has the educational advancement of students at risk, including English language learners, remained relatively unchanged during the past few decades? Why have decades of research failed to improve the performance of children from immigrant families?

Although school improvement takes time and schools and classrooms alone do not account for variations in student learning, some brief reflections on education research, policy, and practice for ELLs may help answer these questions and provide a path to identify and implement more effective and meaningful practice.

Researchers have identified many evidence-based practices that enhance the academic engagement and learning of ELLs. We know, for example, that culturally knowledgeable teachers who are proficient in English and the language learner's native language are a particular asset and that the strategic inclusion of the student's native language in classroom instruction can increase overall language and academic learning (August & Shanahan, 2006). We also know that screening for and closely monitoring learning problems, intensive small-group interventions, extensive and varied vocabulary instruction, and regular peer-assisted learning opportunities improve the effectiveness of literacy learning for ELLs (Gersten et al., 2007).

In addition, many well-established general principles of teaching and learning apply to improving opportunities for ELLs. Increased academic learning time, lower student-teacher ratios, and meaningful parent involvement are research-supported strategies deserving consideration (Portes, 2005). In addition, all students, including ELLs, will benefit from reforms that improve teachers' domain-specific expertise, pedagogical skills, and abilities to encourage student participation and engage family and community members (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

In spite of the research pointing to effective practices, however, ELLs continue to underperform, and evidence-based strategies are not implemented or are poorly implemented in many schools. The "implementation gap," therefore, is a mismatch between what works and what is commonly done in classrooms across the United States. It might also be referred to as a research-practice gap. In our view, at least part of the reason this gap exists lies in the silos in which researchers, practitioners, and policymakers tend to work.

### The Need for Collaboration

Take, for example, the preparation of bilingual and culturally knowledgeable teachers. Years of data analysis and interpretation indicate that English language learners with fluently bilingual and culturally responsive teachers tend to perform better than those without such teachers (August & Shanahan, 2006; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). Yet most ELLs do not have access to these resources in classrooms. In some cases, the gap is caused by policy initiatives or legislative mandates constraining dual-language education programs (Gándara et al., 2000). In others, it is due to inadequate resources or institutional will.

Closing the implementation gap calls for collaboration among a wide range of stakeholders. The federal government should fund evaluations of programs designed to produce large increases in the number of bilingual and culturally knowledgeable teachers; state governments should fund and experiment with teacher preparation programs and provide incentive pay for teachers with these credentials; local governments should support state initiatives by proposing specific strategies to meet workforce needs; and private and

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nonprofit organizations should serve as liaisons between organizations and provide strategic fiscal support where possible (National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007). At the same time, education researchers should document the sustained effectiveness of implemented practices, using validated measurement techniques to determine the relative benefit of various dual-language curriculums and instructional strategies.

Collaboration among these groups certainly does not come easily. Yet, in our perspective, innovative collaboration among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers is necessary to diminish the implementation gap by applying evidence-based practice at scale while creating new knowledge of best practices.

The demographics demand that schools make more efficient use of the existing knowledge base to meet the challenges of educating English language learners. Only then can we leverage the relative strengths of ELLs to buffer the influence of risk factors and nurture sustained school success for all English language learners. EL

[1]The demographic data in this article come largely from two reports based on the 2000 U.S. Census: *The New Demography of America's Schools* (Capps et al., 2005) and *Children in Immigrant Families* (Hernandez et al., 2008). Although the 2000 Census data are nearly a decade old, they represent the most current, reliable information available. Census 2010 will shed further light and, in some cases, correct misguided projections based on 2000 data.

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