



The Mauricio Gastón Institute for
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English Language Learners in Massachusetts: Trends in Enrollments and Outcomes

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English Language Learners in Massachusetts: Trends in Enrollments and Outcomes

In 2002, Massachusetts voters approved a ballot initiative against the continuance of Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) as a method of instruction for English Language Learners. Referendum Question 2 became law as Chapter 386 of the Acts of 2002 in December and was implemented across the state in the Fall of 2003. It replaced a wide-ranging set of bilingual programs with Sheltered English Immersion (SEI), whose main purpose is to expedite the learning of the English language. Unlike TBE, which relies on the English Language Learners' own language to facilitate the learning of academic subjects as they master English, the SEI model is based on the concept that the English language is acquired quickly when taught through meaningful content and effective interaction. SEI programs rely on the use of simple English in the classroom to impart academic content, using students' native languages only to assist students in completing tasks or to answer a question. The law has as a goal that English Language Learners (ELLs) be placed in SEI programs for no longer than one year and then transition into mainstream classrooms. Parents can seek to "waive" the placement of their children in SEI programs and request to have their children placed in general education or in other bilingual education programs.

The change brought about by the new law had broad implications for the instruction offered to English Language Learners: it affected the use of the native language in instruction, the types of instructional materials and books allowed, the content imparted, the teaching skills required, and the organization of programs. There is evidence that models of implementation have varied substantially across the state (DeJong, Gort, & Cobb, 2005; Rennie Center, 2007), but five years after SEI began to be implemented in Massachusetts, there is scant information about the impact of these changes on the outcomes for ELLs in the state.

In April 2009, the Mauricio Gastón Institute at UMass Boston in partnership with the Center for Collaborative Education in Boston released a study of the academic outcomes of students of limited English proficiency in Boston Public Schools over a four-year period (Tung, et al 2009). The study comprised the last year of TBE (school years 2002–2003) and the three subsequent years (school years 2003–2004, 2004–2005, and 2005–2006) which mark the early implementation of SEI. This study revealed that after the implementation of the changes required by Question 2:

- Both the identification of students of limited English proficiency and their participation in programs for English Language Learners declined significantly, due to problems with the assessment of limited English proficiency and with

the information provided to parents about the choices of programs for their children.

- The enrollment of students of limited English proficiency in special education (SPED) programs increased significantly, going from 15.3% in 2003 to 19.5% in 2006.
- The capacity of the district to respond to the diverse needs of English Language Learners was curtailed as the majority of the students were offered only SEI programs. Among high school students, for whom immersion programs are likely to be the least effective, 97% of Boston's English Language Learners were in those programs.
- The annual high school drop-out rate among students in programs for English Language Learners increased substantially, from 6.3% in 2003 to 12.1% in 2006. In addition, the study documented a substantial increase in the drop-out rate among middle school students.
- Large gaps in academic achievement persisted, as measured by the gap in ELA and Math MCAS pass rates between students in programs for English Language Learners and those in regular programs.

These findings from Boston, where the largest number of students of limited English proficiency attend school, prompted this initial assessment of how English Language Learners were faring at the state level and in districts across the Commonwealth with large enrollments of English Language Learners. This informational brief examines public data on students of limited English proficiency available from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MDESE) with regard to:

- (1) trends in enrollment of students of limited English proficiency in Massachusetts school and in the districts with highest density of English Language Learners;*
- (2) the progress of students of limited English proficiency in Massachusetts in learning English; and*
- (3) trends in academic outcomes of students of limited English proficiency in Massachusetts schools and in the districts with highest density of English Language Learners. Both drop-out rates and academic achievement, as measured by MCAS, are presented.*

Key findings:

- 1. LEP enrollments have tended to increase across the state in spite of the slight decrease which followed the implementation of Question 2 in school year 2003–2004. Just under 6% of all Massachusetts students are students of limited English proficiency.*
- 2. There are wide differences among the state's districts in their enrollment trends with some suffering very deep declines in the enrollment of students of limited English proficiency.*

Previous studies point to problems in the implementation of the changes required by the new legislation as factors in the decline.

3. Statewide data show that there have been substantial increases in the percentage of students of limited English proficiency assigned to SPED programs. These increases are reflected strongly across all but one of the districts examined here. In one district, Holyoke, 39.2% of all students of limited English proficiency were in a SPED program in school year 2008-2009.

4. Most students of limited English proficiency (83%) are enrolled in programs for English Language Learners. SEI programs hold the largest proportion of students, 77% of all students of limited English proficiency are in a SEI program.

5. The highest proportion of students who made progress in acquiring English proficiency did so in the early grades: 70.5% of students tested in the Grade 3-4 span made progress compared to 57.5% in the high school span.

6. The highest proportion of students who made progress in attaining English proficiency did so after two or three years in Massachusetts schools.

7. The annual drop-out rates of English Language Learners are two to three times those of their English proficient peers. These rates have experienced a steady growth from 2003 to 2007, when the rates declined.

8. The 2008 annual drop-out rates in some high density districts (such as Lawrence and Holyoke) are more than twice that of that recorded for the state as a whole.

9. MCAS outcomes in both ELA and Math among students of limited English proficiency have improved at all grade levels examined here (4th, 8th and 10th grade).

1. Who are Massachusetts' English Language Learners?

The terms *English Learners*, *English Language Learners*, and *students of limited English proficiency* and their acronyms (ELs, ELLs, and LEPs) are often used interchangeably. But it is helpful to understand how these terms are defined in Massachusetts and how they are represented in many schools in the Commonwealth. The Massachusetts Department of Education defines both English Language Learners and students of limited English proficiency as students “who are native speakers of languages other than English and who are not able to perform school work in English” (MDOE, 2004). Using this definition as guide, Figure 1 uses “native language” as the first divider (light gray cells) and see that out of the 958,910 students enrolled in Massachusetts schools in 2008–2009, 811,238 (or 84.6%) are native English speakers (NES) and 147,672 (or 15.4%) are native speakers of other languages (NSOLs).

Native speakers of other languages represent many of the world’s languages, but the largest language groups in Massachusetts are Spanish, Portuguese, Khmer, Haitian Creole, Vietnamese, and Chinese (several dialects) (MDOE, 2005a). By far, the largest language group is Spanish speakers, who in 2005 accounted for 54.6% of all students of limited English proficiency in Massachusetts.

Native speakers of other languages are divided into those who are proficient in English (EPs) and those who are of limited English proficiency. The majority of native speakers of other languages in Massachusetts schools (61.7%) are proficient in English, although they speak it as a second language. English-proficient native speakers of other languages have been determined to be capable of doing schoolwork in English. They may have entered Massachusetts schools as English speakers or may have attained proficiency in programs for English Language Learners.

Students of limited English proficiency (LEPs) are native speakers of other languages who are not able to conduct regular classroom work in English. In 2008–2009, 56,576 native speakers of other languages (48.3%) were determined by language assessments conducted at the district level to be students requiring language support in their education.

Figure 1. School populations defined by language. Massachusetts. 2008-2009

Total	Total MA Enrollment 958,910		
Native Language	NES	NSOL	
	811,238	147,672	
Language Proficiency	EP	EP	LEP
	811,238	91,096	56,576

Definitions: NES: Native English Speakers; NSOL: Native Speakers of Other Languages (also referred to as First Language is not English or FLINE); EP: Proficient in English; and LEP: of Limited English Proficiency. **Source:** MDESE, 2009a

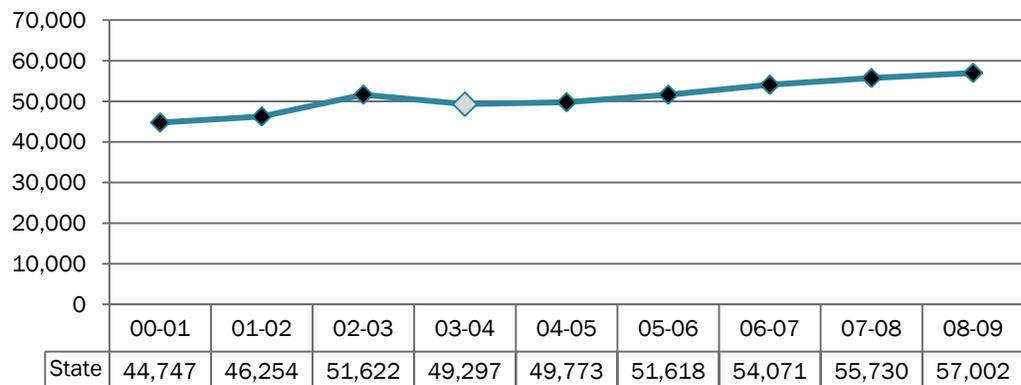
2. What are the trends in the enrollment of students of limited English proficiency in Massachusetts?

Several trends stand out in the enrollment of students of limited English proficiency since 2001: (1) growth in their overall enrollment in Massachusetts, (2) diverse experience in enrollment patterns at the district level following the implementation of Question 2, and (3) increase in the enrollment of students of limited English proficiency in special education (SPED) programs following the implementation of Question 2.

- **Growing enrollment of students of limited English proficiency.**

Between 2001 and 2009, LEP enrollments in Massachusetts have increased by 27.4%. This increase takes place in spite of the slight decline in enrollments observed following the implementation of Chapter 386 (Question 2) in September of 2003. The districts with the highest enrollments and the highest proportions of students of limited English proficiency in their 2009 enrollments appear in Table 1. The districts in this table accounted for 66.4% of all LEP enrollments in the state. Lowell, Lynn, and Worcester have the highest densities of students of limited English proficiency in the state, but Boston has the highest number of these students.

Figure 2. Enrollment. Students of limited English proficiency (LEP), MA, 2001-2009

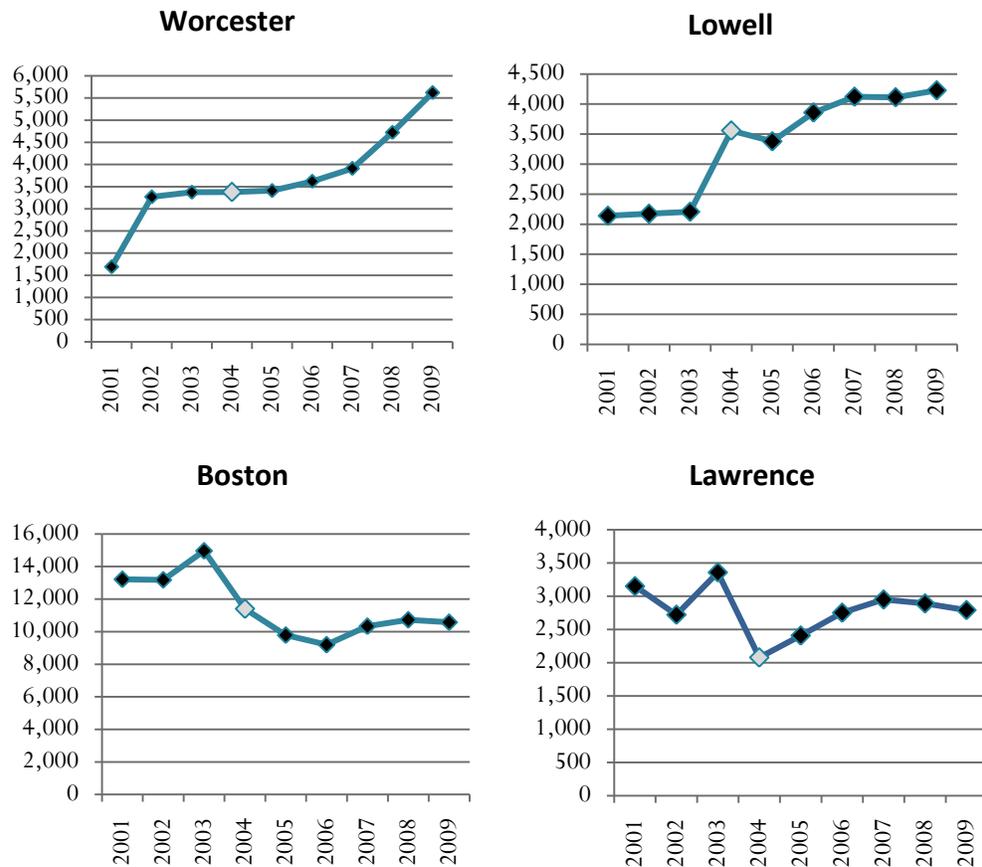


Source for Fig 2 and Table 1: MDESE, 2009a

Table 1. Districts with high LEP enrollments. Massachusetts, 2009

Number Enrolled		Proportion of District Enrollment	
<i>State</i>	57,002		
Boston	10,579	Lowell	31.5%
Worcester	5,621	Lynn	25.8%
Lowell	4,227	Worcester	24.3%
Lynn	3,419	Holyoke	24.2%
Springfield	3,215	Lawrence	22.8%
Lawrence	2,791	Boston	18.9%
Brockton	2,536	Chelsea	17.0%
Holyoke	1,460	Somerville	16.8%
Framingham	1,170	Brockton	16.6%
Quincy	1,072	Framingham	14.3%
Total	36,090	<i>State</i>	5.90%

Figure 3. Trends in enrollments of students of limited English proficiency. Selected Massachusetts districts, 2001 to 2009



Source: MDESE, 2009a

- **Diversity of experience**

Among districts with high-density of enrollment of students of limited English proficiency, the enrollment patterns following the implementation of Question 2 in 2003–2004 varied substantially. Figure 3 shows the enrollment trends in four of the districts with the highest number of students of limited English proficiency. Among these, enrollment of LEPs increased in Worcester and Lowell, for example, while in Boston and Lawrence it decreased.

The study of Boston enrollments in this period showed that there were multiple factors that contributed to the decline in enrollment of students of limited English proficiency in the district. Among these were: lack of understanding of the law, inadequate assessments, and mis-communication to parents about the waivers available under Question 2 (Tung et al, 2009). Careful studies of the processes of assessment and assignment to language support programs have not been conducted in other districts.

- **Increased enrollment in special education programs**

The increase in the proportion of students of limited English proficiency enrolled in special education (SPED) programs raises additional concerns about the process of assessment and program placement for English Language Learners. Between school year 2003–2004, the first year of implementation of Question 2 and school year 2008–2009, the statewide SPED rate among students of limited English proficiency increased from 12.7% to 16%, as is shown in Figure 4. During this period, all but one of the high-density districts had increases in the proportion of students of limited English proficiency assigned to SPED programs; these increases

Figure 4. Proportion of students of limited English proficiency assigned to SPED programs. Massachusetts. 2004-2009

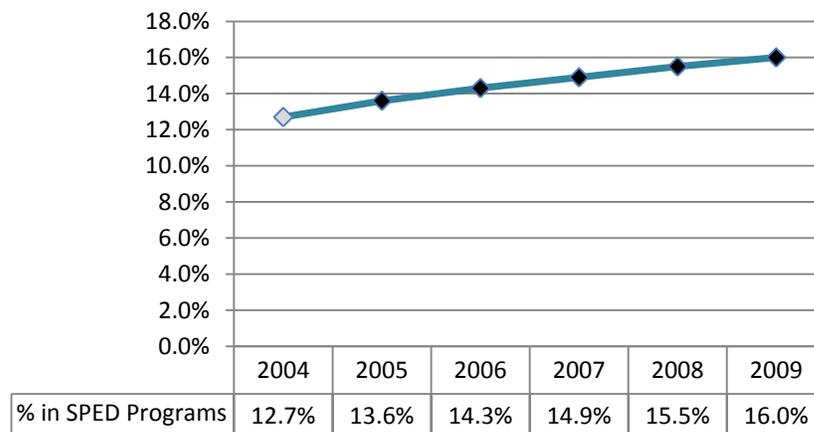


Table 2. Proportion of students of limited English proficiency assigned to SPED programs. Massachusetts and selected districts, 2008-2009.

District	Proportion of LEPs in SPED Programs	Change 04-09 (percentage points)
<i>State</i>	16.0%	+3.3
Lowell	15.0%	+3.5
Lynn	11.6%	-2.3
Worcester	17.5%	+5.1
Holyoke	39.2%	+11.3
Lawrence	15.2%	+5.1
Boston	19.1%	+1.2
Chelsea	8.6%	+4.5
Somerville	19.0%	+8.1
Brockton	10.3%	+6.3
Framingham	10.8%	+3.6
Quincy	4.9%	+1.0
Springfield	29.6%	+10.6

Source Fig 4 and Table 2: MDESE, 2009b

ranged from 1 percentage point in Quincy to a high of 11.3 percentage points in Holyoke. In school year 2008–2009, almost two-fifths (39.2%) of Holyoke students of limited English proficiency were attending a SPED program. Springfield, at 29.6, also had a strikingly high proportion.

- **Most enrolled in the default program, Sheltered English Immersion**

In 2005, the only year for which MDESE provides information on the programs in which students of limited English proficiency are enrolled, 82.7% of all such students were enrolled in programs for English Language Learners. Specifically, 77.1% were enrolled in Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) programs, the default program under the new law (Table 3).

Chapter 386 favors an emphasis on immersion programs in Massachusetts schools, but not exclusively: parents can waive their children’s participation in immersion programs. Such a waiver does not relieve the district from the responsibility of providing language support programs for students of limited English proficiency. However, most of the districts with high density of English Language Learners cluster their students in SEI programs, offering few other alternatives for students. Only Framingham and Brockton, and to a lesser extent Worcester, have developed a broader array of programs. Districts with a broader array of program options can be more responsive in meeting the diverse needs of English Language Learners.

Table 3. Program enrollment. Students of limited English proficiency. Massachusetts and selected districts, 2005.

	Total LEP	In General Education		In Programs for English Learners		
		Not Enrolled	Opt Out	SEI	TBE	2-Way
<i>State</i>	49923	11.8%	5.5%	77.1%	3.9%	1.6%
Lowell	3355	0.0%	0.0%	94.5%	5.5%	0.0%
Lynn	2681	0.6%	3.7%	94.4%	1.3%	0.0%
Worcester	3539	6.8%	0.0%	73.9%	19.4%	0.0%
Holyoke	1939	18.7%	0.0%	81.1%	0.3%	0.0%
Lawrence	2498	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Boston	9042	41.2%	1.4%	53.0%	1.9%	2.5%
Chelsea	1000	0.0%	0.0%	91.7%	0.0%	8.3%
Somerville	786	27.5%	6.7%	53.3%	4.1%	8.4%
Brockton	1454	3.8%	9.6%	59.8%	24.3%	2.5%
Framingham	1298	7.6%	5.8%	37.3%	33.8%	15.6%
Quincy	1112	11.8%	5.5%	77.1%	3.9%	1.6%
Springfield	3612	0.0%	0.0%	94.5%	5.5%	0.0%

Note: 2005 is the only year for which this data is publicly available from MDESE.

Source: MDOE, 2005b.

3. Are students of limited English proficiency making progress in learning English?

Chapter 386 requires that districts assess every year the progress of students of limited English proficiency in Grades 2 through 12 in learning English. The goal (but not the requirement) of the law is that students transition in one year into enough proficiency in English to allow them to perform in a general education classroom. The MDESE uses the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA-R/W) to assess proficiency in reading and writing at grade spans 3–4, 5–6, 7–8, and 9–12, while the MELA-O assesses a student’s proficiency in listening (comprehension) and speaking (production) at grades K-12 (MDESE, 2008a). Up to 2009, these tests determined the student’s proficiency at four performance levels: beginning, early intermediate, intermediate, and transitioning.¹

The Department determines that a student is making progress toward proficiency when (1) he/she advances two or more performance levels when being tested with the same grade span test as the previous year and (2) he/she advances one or more performance levels when being tested with a higher-level grade span test than the previous years. (The Department judges that the level of difficulty increases with each subsequent level of testing.) Students with a baseline MEPA score at “transitioning” who continue to score at that level are also determined to be advancing toward proficiency.

Information on the progress in attaining English proficiency by Massachusetts students who are of limited English proficiency was made available for the first time in 2009, reporting outcomes of MEPA and MELA-O test-takers in the Spring of 2008. The Department reported performance by grade level and by length of time in Massachusetts schools; the results are shown in Table 4. The highest proportion of students who made progress in acquiring English proficiency did so in the early grades: 70.5% of students tested in the Grade 3–4 span made progress compared to 57.5% in the high school span. The highest proportion of students made progress in attaining proficiency in English after two or three years in Massachusetts schools. Among high school students, the proportion who make progress is lowest both in absolute terms and when analyzed by the number of years in Massachusetts schools. Information is not available on the time that it takes students starting at different proficiency levels to attain functional proficiency in English.

Table 4. Proportion of students of limited English proficiency making progress in attaining English proficiency. MEPA and MELA-O Test-takers. Massachusetts, 2007-2008.

	Grade Span 3-4	Grade Span 5-6	Grade Span 7-8	Grade Span 9-12
Percent making progress	70.5%	66.6%	63.2%	57.5%
Making progress after 1 year in MA schools	54.3%	49.1%	47.5%	46.4%
Making progress after 2 years in MA schools	73.5%	78.4%	73.3%	66.5%
Making progress after 3 years in MA schools	77.0%	74.2%	69.7%	62.7%
Making progress after 4 years in MA schools	65.8%	68.8%	66.0%	58.1%
Making progress after 5+ years in MA schools	76.5%	66.1%	61.4%	55.2%

Source: MDESE, 2009c

4. What are the trends in the academic outcomes of students of limited English proficiency in Massachusetts?

In examining the academic outcomes of English Language Learners, we focus on the trends in the drop-out rate among students of limited English proficiency and the academic achievement of these students over time, as measured by the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).

- **Increasing annual high school drop-out rates**

Data provided by the MDESE for this report show that the annual high school drop-out rate among students of limited English proficiency in Massachusetts has

hovered between two and three times that of English-proficient students (Figure 5). Since the implementation of Question 2 during school year 2003–2004, the annual high school drop-out rate has tended to increase among students of limited English proficiency while the drop-out rate of English- proficient students has remained relatively stable. During school year 2007–2008, the annual high school drop-out rate for both groups decreased; the decline was especially salient among students of limited English proficiency. Among the districts with high density of students of limited English proficiency, the annual drop-out rate has also tended to climb; the increases between school years

Figure 5. Annual high school drop-out rate of students proficient and of limited proficiency in English. Massachusetts, 2003-2008

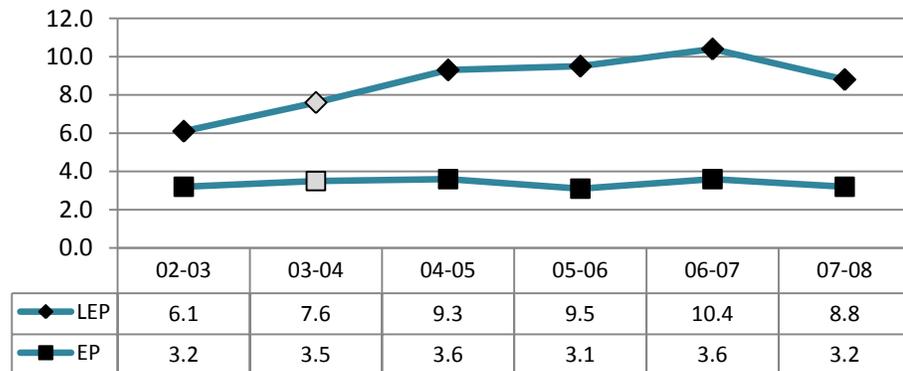


Table 5. Annual high school drop-out rate. LEPs and non-LEPs. Massachusetts and selected districts, 2008

District	High School Drop Out Rate		Change in LEP Drop-out Rate, 03-08 (Percentage Points)
	Non-LEP	LEP	
State	3.2%	8.8%	+2.7
Lowell	2.1%	3.3%	+3.3
Lynn	5.4%	8.2%	+1.1
Worcester	4.5%	6.5%	+1.1
Holyoke	10.6%	18.4%	+5.8
Lawrence	12.1%	16.6%	+9.2
Boston	7.5%	8.3%	+3.2
Chelsea	9.3%	15.3%	+8.1
Somerville	4.4%	10.6%	+10.6
Brockton	4.7%	9.3%	+0.6
Framingham	2.9%	0.0%	-9.6
Quincy	3.0	8.0	+4.8
Springfield	9.3	13.5	+3.6

Source: Data for Figure 5 and Table 5 were provided by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, May 20, 2009.

2002–2003 and 2007–2008 have ranged from a low of 0.6 percentage points in Brockton to a high of 10.6 percentage points in Somerville. Only Framingham shows a decline, a substantial one of 9.6 percentage points for the period. The annual high school drop-out rate among students of limited English proficiency is higher than the state rate in Holyoke, Lawrence, Chelsea, Somerville, Brockton, and Springfield.

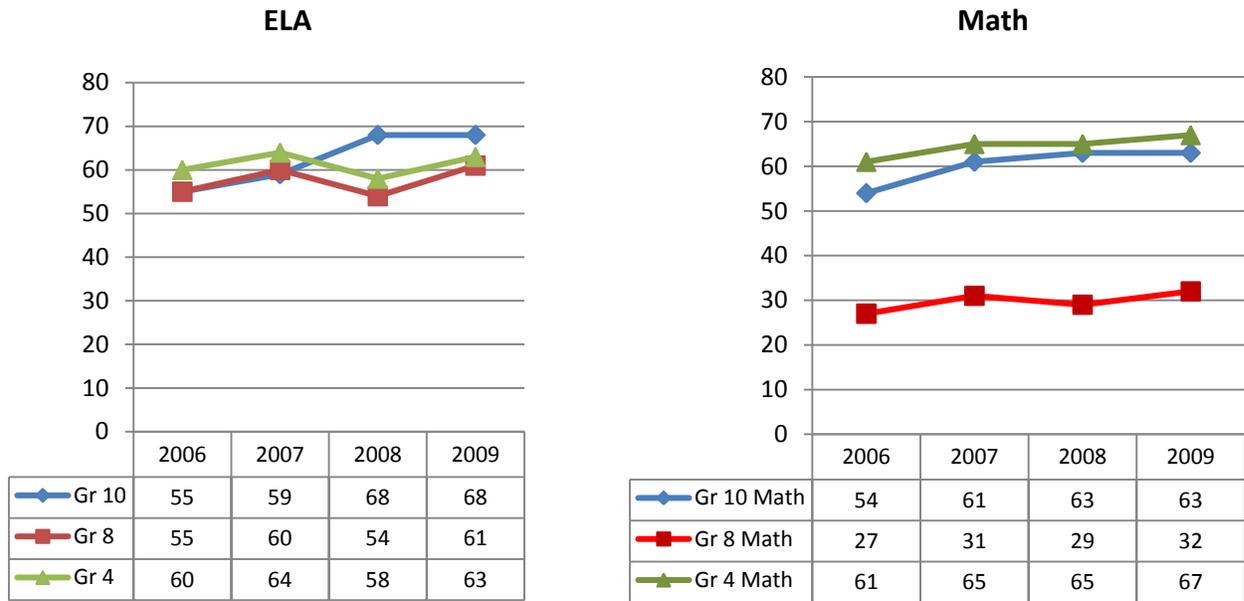
- **Improvement in MCAS outcomes**

Improvement in the academic achievement of students of limited English proficiency was one of the promises of the sponsors of the change in the Massachusetts legislation affecting the education of students of limited English proficiency. The MDESE uses the MCAS tests to measure the mastery of content of students of limited English proficiency in both English Language Arts (ELA) and Math. All English Language Learners are required to take the MCAS tests in Reading (Grade 3), English Language Arts (Grades 4, 7, and 10), Math (Grades 4, 8, and 10), and Science (Grades 5, 8 and 10) (MDESE, 2008b). English Language Learners who have been in U.S. schools for one year are exempt from the ELA test, and Spanish-speaking ELs who have been in U.S. schools for less than three years may take a math test in Spanish in Grade 10 (MDESE, 2008b). Accommodations for limited English proficiency in taking the MCAS tests include the use of dictionaries in the ELA test and the choice of submitting answers in English or Spanish in the Math test.

MDESE uses the MCAS outcomes of all students of limited English proficiency to report on the achievement of these students. But many practitioners familiar with the experience of students of limited English proficiency in Massachusetts believe that the aggregate MCAS results for LEPs do not provide either a true understanding the level of mastery of content of students of limited English proficiency or an accurate base for comparison with other groups. This is because the aggregate includes students with vast differences in their command of the English language (and therefore in their ability to communicate their mastery of content in the test).² Statistically, the inclusion of students in the lower level of MEPA performance would tend to depress the overall outcomes for students of limited English proficiency as a group and exacerbate the gaps between students of limited English proficiency and native speakers of English.

Comparable MCAS results for limited English proficiency students are publicly available only for years 2006 through 2008; they appear in Table 6 below. In this brief, we report MCAS results for the purpose of providing a rough indication of how these outcomes have evolved over time. As is shown in Figures 6 and 7, we find that between 2006 and 2009, there have been improvements in both ELA and Math pass rates for students of limited English proficiency in 4th, 8th and 10th grades.

Figures 6 and 7. ELA and Math MCAS Pass Rates. Students of Limited English Proficiency. MA, 2006-2009



Source: MDESE (MCAS Report) 2006-2009

The most salient improvements have taken place in 10th grade pass rates in both ELA and Math. Tenth grade ELA pass rates have increased from 55% in 2006 to 68% in 2009. There was a similarly substantial improvement in Math in the same period among 10th grade test-takers.

5. Discussion: Key areas for Intervention

This review of statewide enrollment and outcomes, along with as district analyses presented here and in other studies, suggests that the implementation of Chapter 386 has not fulfilled the expectation that it would improve the education of English Language Learners in Massachusetts. Although, overall, enrollments statewide seem to have kept pace with the rising numbers of immigrant students in the state, problems in assessment and assignment have led to steep declines in some districts with large populations of English Language Learners. The increase in the assignment to SPED programs is also worrisome, as this is another possible indication of mis-assessment of the needs of students as limited English language proficiency becomes confused with learning disabilities. Districts show a narrow range of options to address the diversity in age and literacy level of students of limited English proficiency. A broader array of program options can be more

responsive to the diverse needs of English Language Learners. But perhaps the most salient areas of concern are the rise in the drop-out rate for students of limited English proficiency in Massachusetts, the rate at which they are acquiring English at a level that allows them to perform well in MCAS, and the depressed performance of limited English proficiency students in middle school.

In spite of these worrisome observations, there are interventions that would greatly improve the academic outcomes of English Language Learners in Massachusetts.

Recommendations:

- ❖ **Improve the learning environment for English Language Learners**
 - Assert the right to appropriate opportunities to learn for English Language Learners in Massachusetts
 - Assert the value of bilingualism in a global economy
- ❖ **Improve the process of assessment and assignment**
 - Provide stronger guidance to districts regarding the process of assessment
 - Review assignment of students into SPED programs in those districts which surpass the state average
 - Provide education for immigrant parents in their own language regarding their rights before the law and regarding the programs offered in the district
- ❖ **Broaden the array of programs offered to English Language Learners**
 - Develop programs targeted to age, language, educational history and literacy levels
 - Conduct evidence-based program planning at the state and district levels
 - Support professional development for teachers in contact with English Language Learners in ESL, sheltered content delivery to ELs and cultural competence
 - Identify and disseminate successful practices in addressing the needs of English Language Learners
 - Carry out early and appropriate intervention in low achieving districts and schools
- ❖ **Aggressively address priority problem areas**
 - **Drop-out prevention**
 - Prioritize early intervention, as early as elementary school
 - Conduct appropriate assessment and program placement of English Language Learners
 - Address the high rates of grade retention present among English Language Learners
 - Pay special attention to those who enter MA schools as adolescents and to those who arrive with low literacy in their native language
 - **Academic achievement**
 - Support professional development for teachers in contact with English Language Learners in ESL, sheltered content delivery to ELs and cultural competence
 - Conduct appropriate assessment and program placement of English Language Learners
- ❖ **Accountability**
 - Monitor the progress of English Language Learners at district and state levels, taking into account the English proficiency of these students
 - Identify and intervene promptly in low achieving districts and schools
 - Document and disseminate successful initiatives and practices
 - Assess the outcomes of English Language Learners in different types of programs

Notes and References

¹ Beginning in 2009, there are 5 performance levels, 1-5.

² In 2008, students at MEPA performance levels of beginners, early intermediate and intermediate accounted for less than half of the MEPA test-takers at each grade span. MDESE, 2008a p.5-8

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The Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy was established in 1989 at the University of Massachusetts-Boston by the Massachusetts State Legislature at the behest of Latino community leaders and scholars in response to a need for improved understanding of the Latino experience in the Commonwealth. The mission of the Institute is to inform policy makers about issues vital to the state's growing Latino community and to provide this community with the information and analysis necessary for their effective participation in public policy development.

Report Authors: Miren Uriarte PhD and Faye Karp MS

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