

English Language Learners in the State of Maine: *Early Education Policy That Can Make a Difference*

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Erin Oldham, Julie Atkins and Helen Ward discuss the increasing number of Maine children who are English language learners (ELL) or who are limited-English proficient (LEP), noting that insufficient attention has been paid to the preschool education of this group. The authors describe lessons learned from an Early Reading First Program in Portland, which enhanced the school-readiness of preschool ELL children. 

Maine has experienced a large increase in English language learners (ELL) or limited English proficient (LEP) students over the last 15 years. From 1995 to 2006, there was a 25.6 percent increase in LEP students (U.S. Department of Education 2008), which amounts to 3,146 children in Maine schools in the 2006 school year. Portland public schools currently have more than 1,800 ELL students, making up 25 percent of their enrollment. In Maine, the increase in immigration trends is distinguished from many other states by the sheer diversity of nations from which new American families are arriving. This diversity is clearly reflected in the more than 50 languages spoken in the Portland schools system (Marguerite MacDonald personal communication). In the last five to 10 years, the diversity seen in Portland is moving to other parts of the state, increasing the need for statewide attention to the educational needs of ELL students. Because of the potential impact of preschool education on these children's long-term outcomes, the *preschool* educational needs of ELL students are critically important. Thus, this brief article describes crucial elements in ensuring that ELL children arrive in school ready for school, along with ideas for what Maine can do to ensure successful long-term learning for this population of young Mainers. We provide an example of a successful program currently being implemented for preschool-age ELL children and end with recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

KEYS TO SCHOOL READINESS AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS FOR ELL CHILDREN

In large part, the ability to learn in school depends on English proficiency and literacy skills. There are a number of key research findings that can inform our efforts to effectively address the needs of children with limited English proficiency.

- The amount of time it takes to learn English varies widely from person to person.
- Students with strong proficiency in their native language are more likely to develop greater proficiency in English. ELL children who are not proficient in their first language take longer to reach proficiency in English

than children who are proficient (Collier and Thomas 2004).

- Native language instruction boosts the academic success of English language learners (August and Hakuta 1997).

Common characteristics of successful programs for ELL include

- Some native language instruction, especially initially.
- Early phasing in of English instruction.
- Teachers specially trained in instructing ELL.
- Family involvement to build supportive environments at home and home-school connections (August and Hakuta 1997).

WHAT CAN MAINE DO TO ENSURE SUCCESSFUL LEARNING FOR ELL CHILDREN?

To build the connections between families and schools that will enable us to serve ELL children's needs, we must understand the viewpoint of refugee families. A project being conducted by the Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine and Oldham Innovative Research (New Americans: Child Care Choices for Parents of English Language Learners) is seeking to understand how to build bridges between refugee families and schools. This project is funded from 2007 through 2010 through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The study explores the perspectives of parents (using cultural brokers), child care providers, K-2 teachers, and state-level administrators on the topics of parents' beliefs about child rearing, early education, and school readiness and how teachers (preschool through second grade) are prepared for and experience teaching ELL children. Preliminary findings from the study offer insight into potential strategies for more effectively serving this population. One notable finding is that parents' religious and cultural beliefs affect whether they enroll their

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children in any type of preschooling. Teachers at Reiche Elementary in Portland (who were involved in interviews conducted through the study) report that there is a significant difference between children who attend preschool and those who do not in terms of developing the skills necessary for success in school. As a first grade teacher in Portland noted, “there is a lack of scissors, pencils, and crayons in some homes. The children haven’t had exposure and a chance to play with these things. Their parents don’t understand the need to have these things. So I have to do ‘hand-over-hand’ practice with the child. It would be great if they got this exposure in preschool.” Another teacher noted that “their vocabulary is low—their exposure to different things outside the home is lacking. They don’t have people to practice their English with. The classroom is where they practice their English (and it is hard to get them to stop talking during class time!).”

Early Reading First programs are intensive early literacy programs intended to provide research-based instruction to preschool-age children, especially ELL.

An article by Patty Fisher on the MercuryNews.com Web site (www.mercurynews.com/ci_12798780?source=most_email&nclick_check=1) describes a program in San Jose, California, that may hold promise for Maine. It is a Stretch to Kindergarten program in which children who have had no exposure to preschool spend the three weeks before kindergarten in a classroom experiencing the classroom routine and practicing skills such as cutting with scissors and coloring with crayons.

The early care and education (ECE) system, made up of preschool, Head Start, and family child care homes, is both enriched by this diversity and faces many challenges in serving these children. It is well established that high-quality ECE programs can help at-risk children gain the skills they need to be ready for school. However, enrollment in a quality ECE program

can be of particular benefit to refugee children and their parents. Research demonstrates that preschool attendance significantly raises the English-language proficiency of ELL and increases reading and math scores for these children (Magnuson et al. 2006). ECE programs also can link immigrant parents to employment, health and other social services, and help with parenting, ESL, and literacy skills. Good-quality ECE programs also provide a way to track children’s development and emotional well-being and connect them, if needed, with early intervention services. This may be of particular benefit to children of refugee families who may have experienced violence or trauma in their native country. While the ECE system in Maine contains many high-quality programs and some programs with experience and expertise in providing early education to refugee families, too few ECE providers have training in or knowledge of how to serve these families well.

EARLY READING FIRST: AN EXAMPLE OF A PROGRAM SUCCESSFULLY WORKING WITH PRESCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Early Reading First programs are intensive early literacy programs intended to provide research-based instruction to preschool-age children, especially ELL. The University of Southern Maine was funded by the U.S. Department of Education from 2005 to 2008 to implement an early literacy initiative referred to as the “Portland Early Literacy Collaborative.” The program involved a high-quality curriculum (“Opening Worlds of Learning”) that provided research-based activities for the classroom, research-based intensive professional development for teachers (i.e., monthly training), coaching for teachers, and used data to inform instruction. Approximately 125 three- to five-year-old children in nine classrooms in five centers were served each year in Portland, Maine.

This program enhanced the school-readiness skills of preschool ELL children. An evaluation, conducted by Oldham Innovative Research, found that ELL children began the preschool program with a much lower level of pre-reading and writing skills than English-speaking children. Importantly, these same ELL children made huge strides by the end of the program. For instance, before the

2006–2007 school year, only 20 percent of ELL children knew enough uppercase letters to be considered ready for school. However, after two years of Early Reading First implementation, more than 60 percent of children met this standard for school readiness. Another important message from the results (illustrated in Figure 1) is that ELL children have a harder time learning certain skills and need more practice in those areas. One area in which ELL children need more help is “print word awareness,” that is, in knowing how books work (you read them left to right) and how words and sentences work (there is a space between words, punctuation separates sentences). Name writing is another area for extra attention. Many of the children from refugee families have not had much or any exposure to writing tools in the home and are behind in these skills. There are many such practical lessons to be learned from the Early Reading First projects.

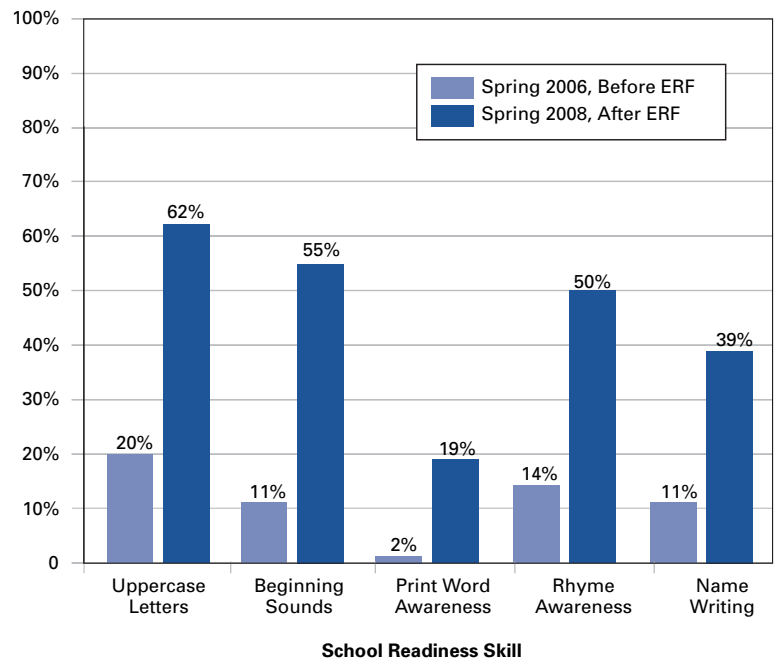
The University of Southern Maine received a second Early Reading First grant in 2008 (funded by the U.S. Department of Education through 2011). This grant will serve almost 300 children through Head Start and child care centers in Biddeford, Lewiston, and Portland and promises to provide critical information about teaching ELL children what they need to know prior to kindergarten.

WHAT NEXT?

Researchers and practitioners in Maine are working hard to better understand and address the needs of ELL children and their families. Training on multiculturalism, diversity, and strategies for teaching kindergarten through 12th grade ELL students are offered and funded through the Department of Education (however, these courses do not focus specifically on preschool and early childhood). The Multilingual and Multicultural Center of the Portland public schools has a Robert Wood Johnson grant to develop a program to deliver mental health services for children and youth that recognizes the cultural norms and values of the target communities.

Our suggestions for moving forward are the following: (1) increase training and higher education opportunities, focused on *preschool* education in particular, as most preschool teachers have no training and little understanding of how children develop a

FIGURE 1: Percentage of ELL Children Ready for School as a Result of Early Reading First (ERF)



second language and what can be done to enhance their literacy, math, and social skills, (2) continue Maine’s tradition of applying for and receiving federal and foundation grants to improve our ability to serve ELL children in multiple ways, and (3) use forums where researchers, policymakers, professionals, and practitioners focused on preschool education can review the findings from ongoing studies in Maine and identify important lessons, policy implications, and action steps. 🦋

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