

## **Introduction**

In recent years, education has become a prominent topic of discussion within local, national, and global platforms. Education has always been regarded as the pathway to achieving greater success and rising in socioeconomic status. Thus, as the world experienced several economic crises and faced increasing poverty, education and educational methods have become greatly contested.

Beyond college costs and the need for mandatory preschool programs, a major issue in the U.S. is the achievement gap between minority and majority groups. Educators, researchers, and policy-makers alike are working to find the reason that some students are succeeding in math and reading assessments while others are left behind in an effort to try and improve the educational system. This paper focuses on the achievement gap that is found between English-speakers and non-English speakers.

## **Problem Definition**

Many students who come to the United States have difficulties learning English. With increasing immigration, increasingly more students are participating in programs for English language learners. The percent of students participating in these programs nationally has increased from 8.7% in Fall 2002 to 9.8% in Fall 2010. In Maryland, the percent increased from 3.2% to 5.3% during this timeframe (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Although the overall percentage of English learners in Maryland is lower than the national percentage of English learners, Maryland is experiencing a steeper incline of students, with a percent increase of 2.1% as compared to the national percent increase of 1.1% during this timeframe.

This language barrier affects not only achievement in language classes, but also overall academic achievement, causing an achievement gap in test scores between English learners and other students. In 2015, the percentage of 4<sup>th</sup> grade English learners in Maryland who scored Below Basic in Reading on the National Assessment of Education Progress was 65%, as compared to the state average of only 32%. The percentage of 8<sup>th</sup> grade English learners who scored Below Basic in Math was 70%, as compared to the state average of 29% (Maryland Report Card, 2016).

2015 National Assessment of Education Progress Results for the State of Maryland				
Percent of students scoring Below Basic				
(Scale: Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, Advanced)				
	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade Reading	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade Math	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Reading	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Math
All Students – Nation	32	19	24	30
All Students – Maryland	32	21	25	29
English Language Learners (MD)	65	45	64	70

*Data from Maryland Report Card: NAEP Results. Accessed July 2016.*

The achievement gap between English learners and English speakers affects not only test scores, but also future achievement, such as graduation rates. In 2013-14, the national percentage of limited English proficient students who graduated on time was 62.6%. In Maryland, only 54% of these students graduated on time (ED Data Express, 2016).

According to the National Education Association (2016), 80% of all English learners in the United States are Hispanic. Because this subpopulation comprises a large majority of the English learner population, the focus of this paper will be on Hispanic English learners.

## **Origin of the Problem**

Students enrolled in English learning programs lack not only the English vocabulary needed for communication and for learning academic content, but also lack the reading comprehension skills needed for content-area instruction (Taboada Barber, *Reading to Learn for ELLs*; Taboada Barber, Personal interview). Much of what is taught in schools is through course readings. Although English learners may receive supplementary English instruction through their English learning programs, they will still have difficulty comprehending readings from their courses that are taught in English. In order for these students to both develop English language skills and succeed in their other courses, either their other courses must be taught in both English and Spanish, or their English learning programs must be improved.

## ***English Learner Programs in Maryland***

In August 2010, Maryland placed sixth in the federal Race to the Top (RTT) program, and was awarded a grant of \$250 million in order to boost student achievement and reduce gaps between subgroups (Maryland Department of Education, 2016). Among other goals, Maryland plans to use this grant to “revise the PreK-12 Maryland State Curriculum, assessments, and accountability system based on the Common Core Standards to assure that all graduates are college- and career-ready.”

In June 2011, Maryland joined the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium, through which it is currently implementing the Consortium’s English language proficiency (ELP) standards and the ACCESS for ELLs® ELP assessment (U.S. Department of Education Maryland ESEA Flexibility Request, 2016). The standards focus on

English language learning within the context of academic content learning, and the assessment focuses on Model Performance Indicators aligned with the Common Core State Curriculum.

### ***Case Study: Prince George's County Schools***

In August 2015, Prince George's County opened two new high schools for English language learners. These schools are designed to pool the resources provided across the county for immigrant students so that teachers with highly specialized training in English as a second language can create a more collaborative and intensive English learning program.

These efforts have not been met without criticism. Many argue that these schools serve mostly Hispanic/Latino students, who represent 29.6% of the County's student population (PGCPS Facts and Figures, 2016). The Prince George's County Branch of the NAACP opposes the idea of putting much of the County's limited resources into one subset of the student population, arguing that it “goes in contrast to *Brown vs. the Board of Education* and the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution” (Johnson, 2014). Opponents argue that while these schools may address the achievement gap between immigrant students and white English-speaking students, they do not address the gap for other minority groups, such as that between black and white students.

Opponents of the schools also argue that while the academic programs may provide students with English skills, the model lacks opportunity for language immersion. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, the United States Supreme Court has ruled against segregation in schools based on race/ethnicity, and over time, language differences. *Mendez vs. Westminster* (1946) and *Delgado vs. The Bastrop Independent School District* (1948) ruled against segregation of Mexican students. *Gonzales vs. Sheely* (1951) also ruled against such segregation,

and further found that “Spanish-speaking children are retarded in learning English by lack of exposure to its use because of segregation” (Gandara & Aldana, 2014). Instead of the international school model that separates English learners from other students, Gandara and Aldana recommend using dual immersion, International Baccalaureate, and magnet programs to “both integrate English speakers with English learners and to provide them with a strong bilingual education together.”

### **Current Efforts**

The solution to the achievement gap between English language learners and the rest of the student population is something that has eluded lawmakers and leaders in education for decades. This problem is not an easy one to solve and it does not have a black and white solution. English language learners are the fastest growing student group in America’s public schools and their achievement levels need to be brought up to par with those that are not English language learners (McBride, 2008). Educators and lawmakers alike have tried several different methods and policies in attempts to reduce the achievement gap. Public schools are now required by law to have programs that ensure equal access to quality education for students who are not proficient in the English language. The decision in the Supreme Court case *Casteñada v. Pickard* in 1981 “established a three-part test to assess the adequacy of a school district’s program for ELL students” (McBride, 2008). The decision mandated that the program be based on a sound educational theory and implemented with adequate resources and personnel. The opinion also outlined the process for the school district to evaluate the program and assess its effectiveness in helping students overcome the language barrier that they are facing. This three-part process set the foundation for implementation and assessment of all of the ELL programs in the country.

Current efforts to close the achievement gap between English language learners and the rest of the student population strive to ensure equity for all students. It has been found that “achievement gaps form early” and this sets a negative trend for the remainder of ELL students’ educations (McBride, 2008). As a result, many current efforts have focused on the importance of literacy training in pre-school. Factoring bilingual training into a student’s early childhood education is essential in order to help the student achieve in all subject areas, not just English. Many current efforts also focus on the professional development of those teachers who are responsible for teaching English language learners. Some State agencies award grants for programs that give these teachers the resources necessary so that they can best cater to the specific needs of this student group (McBride, 2008). The National Education Association has recently launched an “Equity and Language Training Module for Closing Achievement Gaps” (National Education Association, 2015). The National Education Association has made it clear that one of their main priorities is the “closing of achievement gaps”. This training module aims to assist teachers and educators in employing the best “research-based culture and equity practices in their classrooms” to aid in the education of English language learners (National Education Association, 2015). Placing important emphasis on the student as the center of change is a theme that exists in this training module and it has become a common theme of efforts nationwide. The most recent, and possibly most significant, effort to address achievement gaps in education came with President Obama’s signing of the Every Student Succeeds Act in December of 2015. This law opens up new doors for English language learners. No Child Left Behind required the disaggregation of data for English language learners’ performance on standardized tests and this was good for holding schools accountable for the academic achievement of these students (Sargrad, 2016). The Every Student Succeeds Act requires that schools report on the

progress of English language proficiency. The law makes English language proficiency a central accountability measure for States and it forces States to make English language learners a priority (Sargrad, 2016). Other provisions in the law also make available more funds to address the resource inequities faced by certain student groups, such as English language learners.

In the State of Maryland, different practices have been attempted to close the achievement gap. The Maryland State Department of Education has developed the Maryland State Plan to Ensure Equitable Access to Excellent Educators, which outlines the State's plan to afford the same access to resources for all students. One goal within the plan states that the State will "establish cohorts for classroom teachers to take courses and complete English for Speakers of Other Languages and Special Education endorsements and will also explore stipends for courses" (MSDE, 2015). Another goal within the plan states that the State will "ask questions and analyze responses to Title III monitoring to gather information about training of teachers in schools to work with ELLs and Special Education Students" (MSDE, 2015). Montgomery County is addressing the achievement gap through strategic and targeted investment through their budget (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2014). For school year 2014-2015, the Montgomery County Board of Education's budget included an extra \$500,000 to hire 8 new ESOL positions. The board also planned to invest \$1.45 million to hire more ESOL positions to address the achievement gap by "personalizing instruction, analyzing data, and developing lesson plans to engage ESOL students" (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2014).

## **Policy Options**

### ***Policy Option 1: State Support for Local Programs***

Addressing education problems in broad strokes may result in suboptimal solutions; as cookie cutter approaches often fail to take into account the intricacies of individual education populations. According to the Maryland State Department of Planning's 2015 estimates, the overwhelming majority of Maryland's Hispanic population of 572,373 resides in the Baltimore and Suburban Washington regions (MDP Pop\_Estimate, 2015). Approximately 49.8 percent of Maryland's Hispanic population resides in either Prince George's or Montgomery County alone. Garrett, Kent, and Somerset counties are each respectively home to less than 1,000 Hispanic individuals. Providing state support to Maryland's Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to develop targeted solutions designed with local needs in mind has the potential to be both effective and equitable.

Support for county programs could come in a number of forms. Monetary support proportional to the affected student body is likely to be the most direct approach. An infusion of funds for the express purpose of closing the ELL achievement gap in the state will help to spur the development of programs or support existing efforts. State assistance in securing grants, investment, or charitable support presents an alternative avenue for funding such programs. The Prince George's County School System secured a \$3 million grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York in 2014 to construct two schools specifically for ELL students (Trull 2015; Wiggins 2014). Despite this substantial initial investment the Chief of Prince George's county schools predicts a further \$14 million will be required to support the schools in the 2016 fiscal year (Trull 2015; Wiggins 2014). The allocation of some state resources to assist LEAs in navigating such grant processes has the capacity to yield sizeable benefits while mitigating the financial burden taken on by the state.

In order to receive aid, individual counties would be expected to present proposals for state consideration designed to address the respective needs of their jurisdictions. The state would then need to develop an evaluation system in order to determine the ratio of support to need it would be willing to provide. The state would need to either assign the duty of assisting LEAs in searching out and applying for grants to an existing agency or create a new agency in order to fulfill the function.

Although this option would allow the county broad flexibility in designing a program based on the needs of the local Hispanic population, the state should set certain parameters to ensure that any program funded supported will be somewhat effective in reducing the achievement gap. For one, the state should set parameters related to the number of ESOL teachers that are hired and retained through any county program. As stated previously, some of the achievement gap can be attributed to the fact that there are a limited number of ESOL teachers compared to the number of students. Thus, by encouraging a low teacher to student ratio, the state could influence the county to hire more ESOL teachers, and could also influence teachers-in-training to gain experience in teaching non-English speakers.

Beyond the number of teachers, the state should also set parameters on how many hours of English language instruction they are receiving, as well as how many hours of instruction in their native language they are receiving. Since the achievement gap in part stems from non-English speakers ability to perform as well as their peers in reading comprehension, it is important to continue to develop these reading comprehension skills throughout their education. To keep their reading comprehension skills at the same level as their English-speaking peers, some of their coursework should be in their native language. Through this parameter, the state can ensure counties continue to provide some instruction in Spanish, thus positively affecting

students reading assessment scores. Finally, the state can set parameters related to extracurricular opportunities for students to engage with the English language. Many studies have shown that conversations partners and engaging with popular media in the language they are studying. The state can encourage this behavior through mandating that a funded county program must include a plan for extracurricular involvement beyond coursework that will further a non-English speakers education. These extracurricular opportunities could be English-conversation clubs, where English speakers pair with non-English speakers and practice conversations, or even theatre clubs where students can practice reading and understanding English material.

In addition to setting parameters, the state will need to prioritize funding to areas that have more need for English-language instruction than others. For example, Montgomery County, which has a high population of Hispanics, and Baltimore City, may have more of a need for these types of programs and funds compared to Harford County or Alleghany County. In order to rank counties, it is important to consider the number of Hispanics in the area, the number of Hispanic students, the overall population, and the overall number of students. Comparing these statistics and ratios will allow the state to ensure that grants are used to support programs, which will provide the most benefit to the most number of people. Furthermore, these statistics can help to determine different levels of funding so counties are getting adequate support based on the number of students they are serving.

### *Implementation Issues*

Either of the suggested approaches by the state to support the efforts of LEAs to address the achievement gap of ELL students will have some impact on Maryland's budget. The state would need to develop a system by which to evaluate the need of jurisdictions in order to

equitably distribute resources. It must be noted that few jurisdictions have sizeable Hispanic populations; the majority of districts have much smaller Hispanic communities. As such, funds and or effort would likely be devoted to jurisdictions in Central and Southern Maryland where need will likely be greatest. Student populations are a fraction the size of total populations and it's possible that those districts with smaller Hispanic populations may not have any/enough ELL students and would not display an achievement gap. Such districts would likely receive significantly less state support as result. Tensions similar to those surrounding the sizeable expenditures by Prince George's county on a single minority group must be taken into consideration on a state scale (Trull 2015; Wiggins 2014. Finally the state would need to develop a system by which to evaluate the effectiveness of the LEAs programs which would entail the selection of some basic requirements for program structure in order to frame measures of success.

### ***Policy Option 2: Dual Immersion, Integration, and Magnet Schools***

Dual immersion programs create bilingual learning environments for both ELL students and native English speakers for the benefit of both parties. Research has shown that a leading factor determining the achievement of ELL students when compared to non-ELL students was their school's level of segregation; even when compared to such factors as resources, practices, and structure (Gandara 2014). By integrating classrooms to incorporate both English speaking and English learning students the program would aim to break down the isolation barrier ELL students experience in segregated programs. Isolation prevents ELL students from practicing English in practical conversation with native English students, which helps to reinforce their grasp of the language naturally. This classroom structure has shown promising results throughout

the country, helping to reduce the ELL achievement gap and providing native English speakers with a valuable bilingual skill set (Gandara 2014).

The aim would be to maintain as best a possible 50/50 student split between English speakers and English learners, so as to maximize the program's benefit for both parties by preventing either language from becoming the de-facto communication medium, and to reduce the chance of student self-segregation into minority/majority social groups. The program would be rigorous, requiring a great deal of student and educator investment. The implementation of such a program would likely be unfeasible in public schools because of the distribution of pertinent minority populations within the state; many jurisdictions would not find such a program applicable for the general population.

To combat this, the dual language programs can be created in magnet schools. Research that indicates "magnet programs not only provide a more diverse learning experience for students, but also help students perform better on math and reading assessments compared to students in public and private schools" (Gandara 2014). The fact that magnet schools, individually, improve test scores, and dual-language immersion programs, individually, improve test scores, suggests that the creation of magnet programs may prove the best option for addressing the math and reading achievement gap of ELL students.

As is typical of a magnet school, students would be able to apply for the school if they were interested in the program. Individual counties depending on need and interest from the community would determine the number of students selected from each group, English speakers and non-English speakers. For example, if a county has a large Hispanic student population, they could accept more Hispanic students than native English speakers to ensure that they are providing as many opportunities as possible for these students to better their English. Counties

can also adjust their ratios based on the number of non-English speakers that would be interested in attending these schools. Ideally, however, the school would be split 50/50 between the two groups.

Although the classes are taught in dual-languages, it will be important to maintain academic rigor in the coursework. For example, these magnet programs should still offer Advanced Placement courses or International Baccalaureate courses to gain the correct credentials and coursework needed for college and their careers. To address this, there are two options. First, the school can offer two sessions of each advanced course, where one is in Spanish and one is in English. Second, each course can be taught in both Spanish and English, so students can continue to practice both languages regardless of which they are studying. Regardless, dual language instruction should be offered in Reading Comprehension classes.

### *Implementation Issues*

The dual language immersion program is an intensive project that would require significant planning and input costs. First, the state and counties would need to create the dual-language curriculum. Although some elements can be adapted from current curriculums, teachers and policy makers will need to spend considerable time creating a program that promises both academic rigor but also efficient language instruction without sacrificing one or the other. Beyond the curriculum, the counties would need to hire new teachers that are capable of teaching non-English speakers and are bilingual themselves. This process, in addition to being costly, can be difficult because many teachers will not have this experience and may not be able to speak Spanish. It is also possible that a new school site will need to be built, thus further increasing the costs and planning required for a dual language program. Considering that the majority of the

state's Hispanic populations, whom these programs would predominantly serve, are located in Maryland's central corridor it would make the most sense to open such magnet schools in the area that would serve the largest population. Maryland's outlying jurisdictions have considerably smaller Hispanic populations and this program does not represent an economically viable way of serving those individuals. As such there is some question as to whether or not this approach would constitute an equitable distribution of state funds as it may not serve those rural ELL students with less robust existing programs.

### ***Policy Option 3: Stipends for ESL Teachers***

Monetary incentives have long been a tool for attracting and retaining high quality teachers across the nation. Tying monetary compensation to student achievement may help spur innovation in the classroom or at the very least help to invest teachers in a renewed effort to help their students achieve. There has been a growing demand for English as a second language teachers (ESL) across the nation over the past decade (Vandewater 2013). Maryland's passage of Senate Bill 493 the *Teacher Induction, Retention, and Advancement Act of 2016* affirms Maryland's commitment to attracting high quality teachers to all Maryland classrooms. The growing demand for English as second language teachers across the nation may necessitate action on Maryland's part in order to provide a competitive bid to attract competent ESL educators to the state.

### ***Implementation Issues***

Research on the impact of teacher stipends on student achievement over the last decade has produced mixed results, and indicates the individual program implementation is the greatest determining factor of success (Imberman 2015). More innovative models such as loss aversion or

DC's IMPACT program have shown greater degrees of success than conventional pay for performance models (Imberman 2015). If Maryland were to choose a stipend approach to combat the ELL achievement gap it would do well to consider such alternative approaches. However, both the loss aversion model and DC's IMPACT program require significantly more resources from the state both in terms of incentives for teachers and increased oversight (Imberman 2015). Considering the Maryland Legislature's a decision to pass the *Budget Reconciliation and Financing Act of 2015* discontinuing funding for the teacher stipends established in the *Quality Teacher Incentive Act of 1999*, considerable political will would likely be necessary to reinstitute any stipend programs in the state.

### **Policy Recommendations**

While all of the above policy options will help to reduce the achievement gap between English-language speakers and non-English language speakers, each poses individual challenges and opportunities. Policy Option 3, which advocates for providing additional stipends for ESL teachers, requires little interference on behalf of the state beyond providing funding. However, this option poses an impact on the budget and even political backlash, as teacher stipends were previously cut after heavy debate in the state legislature. Furthermore, since current teaching certification program do not stress ESL training, it might be hard to find and attract teachers who have this experience and the qualifications to be effective instructors in the classroom.

Policy Option 2, which advocates for the creation of dual-language immersion magnet programs, presents great opportunity and great challenges. As stated above, dual-language programs are proven to be beneficial to both English-language speakers and non-English language speakers. Furthermore, as the employment opportunities become more globalized and

there is an increased emphasis on foreign language instruction, these immersion programs could better prepare all students for the changing workforce. However, as stated above, the costs are significant. Furthermore, this program will not be able to be implemented within an immediate time frame. Because of the time it will take to build these facilities and re-envision the curriculum, this option serves as more of a long-term solution.

Policy Option 1, which advocates for increased support of county program through state funding, is the most feasible option for Maryland to pursue in the short-term. This program provides flexibility for counties and Board of Education members to identify the specific needs of their population and address them. Although there are budgetary impacts, the state has flexibility to decide how much money to allocate rather than being committed to covering the costs of construction or teachers stipends for a set period of time. Furthermore, since states can set the parameters that county programs must meet in order to qualify for funding, the state can incorporate elements from the other policy options. For example, the state can encourage immersion classes or curriculums that are common in dual language program in other states, and can also mandate that some of state funding be used to compensate ESL teachers. Since this option allows for the incorporation of successful elements from the other two policy options and also allows flexibility in the cost of the grant program, this option is most feasible. Policy Option 3 should be implemented by the Maryland State Government.