

Hispanic K-12 Students in the United States Public School System: *Why are they Disproportionately Underachieving in School?*

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Abstract:

Hispanic students account for 22% of all people enrolled in school in the United States and, on average, these students are significantly educationally underachieving compared to their white peers in every academic measure. One of the main reasons that they are falling behind in school is that many of them do not speak English fluently and the U.S. public school system is not adequately accommodating their needs as English Language Learners (ELL). Through increased and more strategic funding at the federal, state, and local level aimed at ELL students, this achievement gap can be shrunk. The issue of Hispanic student underachievement is an issue that demands policy makers' attention in increasing funding and establishing effective funding models that can allow every American school to provide its' Hispanic students the opportunity to attend college and contribute to the United States' educated and diverse work force.

Today, Hispanics are the largest ethnic or racial minority in the United States and make up 17.9% of the United States population.¹ When it comes to the United States student population, the number of Hispanic students has doubled in the past two decades and Hispanic students now make up 22.7% of all people enrolled in school in the United States.² With these statistics, it is clear that the education and achievements of Hispanic students is not only a moral and ethical issue, but it is also important to the United States economy since they will make up a significant portion of the work force and affect the national productivity drastically. Unfortunately, year after year, Hispanic students have underperformed in school compared to their white peers both in terms of high school graduation rates and test scores for reasons such as many of them coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds, restrictive learning environments at school, and most important to this paper, most of them face an English language barrier.³ In this paper, I aim to explore the relationship between Hispanic students and low educational achievement and explain why much of that achievement gap is due to the lack of English proficiency amongst many Hispanic students. Furthermore, I will explain why inadequate funding for English Language Learner (ELL) programs is largely at fault for the academic underachievement and I will provide research on the different sources of funding and how more strategically focused funding could help this growing demographic of students. Some of the reasons that I will focus on, regarding the importance of funding as it relates to closing the achievement gap, are how funding can improve the quality of teachers and curriculums for English Language Learners, enhance early childhood programs, develop better standardized tests, and help create a more welcoming school climate. While there has been increased funding in recent years due to federal programs such as

¹ Kurt Bauman, "School Enrollment of the Hispanic Population: Two Decades of Growth." *The United States Census Bureau* (28 Aug. 2017).

² IBID.

³ "Facts for Features: Hispanic Heritage Month 2017." *The United States Census Bureau*, (31 Aug. 2017).

Title III, it is a complicated problem to fix due to the variety of approaches that different states and districts take towards allocating available funds. Overall, this paper will present an argument for the necessity of increasing funding for ELL programs and explain the long-term benefits of Hispanic student achievement for the growing Hispanic population and for the American economy as a whole.

Hispanic education matters because as the Nation's second largest ethnic group, behind white Americans, their achievements or lack thereof will affect every American.⁴ With over half of the growth in total U.S. population between 2000 and 2010 being attributed to an increase in the Hispanic population, it is a group that cannot be ignored.⁵ More importantly, with Hispanic population annual growth rate being 2% and the U.S. Census Bureau estimating that they could account for 30% of the American population by 2050, their education is a matter that is not going away anytime soon.^{6 7} Andrew Rotherham, a writer who specializes on low-income student education, states the importance of Hispanic education clearly in his *Time* article by writing: "The two tectonic issues—our rocketing Hispanic population and the inadequate education of Hispanic students—are on a collision course that could either end in disaster or another story of successful assimilation in America. The stakes are clear: how we meet this challenge will impact our politics, economy and our society."⁸ This quote sets up this paper well because it summarizes the importance of what he calls, "The education crisis no one is talking about." Although the outcomes of low Hispanic immigration will affect some states more than others, it will inevitable

⁴ "QuickFacts." *U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: UNITED STATES*, (1 July 2016).

⁵ Kurt Bauman, "School Enrollment of the Hispanic Population: Two Decades of Growth." *The United States Census Bureau* (28 Aug. 2017).

⁶ Jens Manuel Krogstad, "U.S. Hispanic Population Growth Has Leveled Off." *Pew Research Center*, (3 Aug. 2017).

⁷ Kayla Webley, "The Achievement Gap: Why Hispanic Students Are Still Behind." *Time*, Time Inc., (23 June 2011).

⁸ Andrew J. Rotherham, "The Education Crisis No One Is Talking About." *Time*, Time Inc., (12 May 2011).

affect everyone. To put it into perspective, In Harrisonburg, Virginia, about an hour away from Washington and Lee’s campus, about 40% of the students in the public-school system are Hispanic English Language Learners and that figure is growing.⁹ This means that the ways in which both the federal and state government act on this crisis will inevitably affect the lifestyles of every resident of the Shenandoah Valley in various ways.

It is a known fact that Hispanics are underachieving and can be examined both through test scores and graduation rates. As will be further explained in this paper, English Language Learner (ELL) achievement will be often used to describe Hispanic achievement not only because 80% of ELL students are Spanish speakers and 10% of all pre-K-12 students are ELLs , but also the ELL students are the category of Hispanics that are the lowest achieving and need the most help.^{10 11} In terms of public high school graduation rates, the Hispanic rate has gone up recently and is at around 78% but still lags behind the 88% graduation rate for their white counterparts.¹² ELL graduation rates are even lower at 63%.¹³ In term of high school dropout rates, Hispanic students drop out twice as much as their white counter parts with a 10% dropout rate compared to 5%.¹⁴ When looking at younger students, the educational achievement gap is also alarmingly wide. While 17% of Hispanic fourth graders in the U.S. scored proficient or better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, their non-Hispanic, white peers scored a 42% on average.¹⁵ Throughout this paper there will be more focus on the Hispanic students who are

⁹ Andrew J. Rotherham, “The Education Crisis No One Is Talking About.” *Time*, Time Inc., (12 May 2011).

¹⁰ Rachel B Slama, “Investigating Whether and When English Learners Are Reclassified Into Mainstream Classrooms in the United States.” *American Educational Research Journal*, (vol. 51, no. 2, Apr. 2014) pp. 221

¹¹ “NAEP - 2015 Mathematics & Reading Assessments.” *The Nation's Report Card* (2015)

¹² “Public High School Graduation Rates.” *The Condition of Education 2017*, National Center for Education Statistics, (2017).

¹³ Claudio Sanchez, “English Language Learners: How Your State Is Doing.” *NPR ED*, NPR, (23 Feb. 2017)

¹⁴ John Gramlich, “Hispanic Dropout Rate Hits New Low, College Enrollment at New High.” *Pew Research Center*, (29 Sept. 2017).

¹⁵ Rotherham, “The Education Crisis No One Is Talking About.”

qualified as English Learners but it is still crucial to understand that Hispanics students as a whole are very clearly underachieving compared to their white peers in every educational measure.

Before exploring the relationship between Hispanic students and educational underachievement due to a lack of English proficiency, it is important to understand some of the other main reason for why Hispanic students underachieve, especially since some of them have a lot of cross over with a why ELLs as a whole lag behind. Some of the reasons worth mentioning are restrictive learning environments, age at which they enter school, family educational culture, family socioeconomic background, and of course, lack of English proficiency. Perhaps the biggest reason is the disproportionate amount of Hispanic students coming from low-income families which is seen by the Hispanic poverty rate (20%) being over twice as high as that of white American's (9%).¹⁶¹⁷ It is known and has been proven in dozens of studies that students from a lower socio-economic status underachieve in school so it sadly makes sense that since many Hispanics students are born into poverty, they are bound for educational under achievement.¹⁸ This correlation is made clear by Rachel Sakma in her fascinating study on ELL education in which she explains why, "Spanish-speaking ELs are at particular risk for academic failure because they live disproportionately in poverty and are likely to attend 'triply segregated' schools with large proportions of other EL students, minorities, and low-income students—risk factors long associated with lagging academic achievement."¹⁹ As is made clear later in this

¹⁶ Paul A. Jargowsky, "Immigrants and Neighborhoods of Concentrated Poverty: Assimilation or Stagnation?" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, (vol. 35, no. 7, 17 June 2009) pp. 1129.

¹⁷ "Poverty Rate by Race/Ethnicity." *Kaiser Family Foundation*, (2016).

¹⁸ Brooks-Gunn, Jeanne, and Greg J. Duncan. "The Effects of Poverty on Children." *The Future of Children*, (vol. 7, no. 2, 1997), pp. 55.

¹⁹ Rachel B Slama, "Investigating Whether and When English Learners Are Reclassified Into Mainstream Classrooms in the United States." *American Educational Research Journal*, (vol. 51, no. 2, Apr. 2014).

paper, educating the low-income students is a huge problem and priority nationwide which is relevant to this paper due to the demographic cross over, but I will focus on ELL funding instead due to how it more directly affects Hispanic students. Another reason that Hispanic students are underachieving is due to their family culture and expectations of school achievement. As found by a Pew research study, when Latinos were asked why Hispanic students don't do as well as others in school, the most common answer was "Parents of Hispanic students don't play an active role," with the second most common answer being "Hispanic students know less English."²⁰ These cultural issues are significant because they affect Latino students from a very young age and as Barbara Schneider, Sylvia Martinez, and Ann Owens found in their study about Hispanic education, "For Hispanics, initial disadvantages often stem from parents' immigrant and socioeconomic status and their lack of knowledge about the U.S. education system."²¹ Now that some of the main reasons besides language have been explained, one can study ELLs while keeping in mind that there is much crossover between them and other factors they cannot control such as family income and culture.

In this paper, I focus on language as a factor of Hispanic students underachieving in school because, as explained earlier, not only do English Language Learners(ELLs) make up for 10% of the American pre-K-12 student body and 80% of ELLs are Spanish speakers (almost all Hispanic), but Hispanic ELL's show further underachievement than the average Hispanic student.^{22 23} Also, in terms of Hispanics as a whole, 72.4% of Hispanics over the age of 5 speak

²⁰ Mark Hugo Lopez, "Latinos and Education: Explaining the Attainment Gap." *Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project*, (7 Oct. 2009).

²¹ Barbara Schneider, et al. "6 Barriers to Educational Opportunities for Hispanics in the United States." *Hispanics and the Future of America*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, (1 Jan. 1970).

²² Rachel B Slama, "Investigating Whether and When English Learners Are Reclassified into Mainstream Classrooms in the United States." *American Educational Research Journal*, (vol. 51, no. 2, Apr. 2014).

²³ "NAEP - 2015 Mathematics & Reading Assessments." *The Nation's Report Card* (2015).

Spanish at home.²⁴ By understanding the magnitude of these numbers, I argue that it makes sense to address English language proficiency as a way to improve Hispanic academic achievement instead of trying to address the huge issue of educating the lower-income families in America or attempting to change cultural aspects of many Hispanic families.²⁵ The evidence of ELLs having the lowest educational achievement compared to non-ELL students, Hispanic students and white students is made clear by the 2015 scores of the National Assessment of Educational Progress exam (NAEP). Here are the scores for the 4th grade math NAEP assessment in order from average white student, average non-ELL student, average Hispanic student, to average ELL students :248, 243, 230, and 218. For same math test this is how 8th graders performed in the same order: 292, 284, 270, and 246. When it comes to the NAEP 2015 reading test, sadly the results don't comparatively change much. In the same order as before, the test scores for 4th graders are: 232, 226, 208, and 189. For 8th graders the reading test results in the same order are: 274, 268, 253, and 223.²⁶ What I think is most important to analyze about these scores in relation to this paper is how, not only do ELL students perform significantly worse than white students in reading and math, but also how the gap widens as the students get older. It is also a sad finding that 4th grade white students perform better on both math and reading tests than 8th grade ELL students. Although this data is for a national standardized test which surveyed a wide variety of students from every state, the same can be observed at a state level as can be seen through the example of Delaware in which through an analysis of it's states standardized test, it was clear that the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs in math, reading and science widens as

²⁴ "Facts for Features: Hispanic Heritage Month 2017." *The United States Census Bureau*, (31 Aug. 2017).

²⁵ Rachel B Slama, "Investigating Whether and When English Learners Are Reclassified Into Mainstream Classrooms in the United States." *American Educational Research Journal*, (vol. 51, no. 2, Apr. 2014).

²⁶ "NAEP - 2015 Mathematics & Reading Assessments." *The Nation's Report Card* (2015).

students go from elementary school, to middle school, and through high school.²⁷ Overall this data further points at the statement made earlier about how clear it is that Hispanic students are underachieving compared to their white peers, but also points at why I think ELL focus is so important since ELLs perform significantly worse than the average Hispanic student.

Furthermore, I have a personal interest in ELL education and how it affects Hispanic students because it was something that deeply impacted my life when I moved to San Antonio, Texas from Mexico City in second grade and was placed in a class where not only was I the only student who didn't speak fluent English, but I was the only person in my class who spoke Spanish. I think back to my seven-year-old self and how I failed most spelling tests but was on par in the math tests and think how my academic track would have changed if instead of being in a small private episcopal school where there was tutoring and support to make sure I caught up to the rest of the students as fast as possible, if I would have been in the local public school and was unable to make significant progress due to a lack of English.

Before going into further detail on how ELLs can be helped through increased funding and how those funding mechanisms work, it is important to provide evidence that funding will in fact help close the achievement gap between Hispanic students and their white peers. On a purely rational basis, it is pretty clear that funding can provide for more trained teachers as well as better developed curriculums and classroom resources that would lead to higher school achievement but through a research conducted by Oscar Hugo Jiménez-Castellanos and David Garcia, one can observe this relationship past a theoretical framework and in a practical, real life

²⁷ Oscar Hugo Jiménez-Castellanos and David Garcia. "School Expenditures and Academic Achievement Differences between High-ELL-Performing and Low-ELL-Performing High Schools." *Bilingual Research Journal*, (vol. 40, no. 3, 24 July 2017) pp. 319.

example.²⁸ As the title of this research article suggests, this study looks at school expenditures and academic achievement differences between high-ELL-performing and low-ELL-performing high schools. This study takes place in Texas which is important considering 19% of Texas high school students are categorized as ELL and of those ELL students, a vast majority of them are Hispanic.²⁹ In short, this study focuses on two main questions: “(a) What are the achievement results and demographic characteristics of Texas’s top- and bottom-performing schools categorized by the academic performance of ELL students? and (b) To what extent do Texas’s top- and bottom-performing schools differ with respect to per-pupil school expenditure by funding category?”³⁰ The research answers these questions through a unique methodology containing comprehensive and reliable data from Texas high schools that compares achievement, demographic characteristics, and financial expenditures of the schools and studies the data with an analytical focus on ELL achievement rather than overall school achievement.³¹ This study’s results are very supportive of the argument in this paper because they find that the schools that have higher per pupil expenditure on their ELL students see much higher achievement from their ELL students than schools spending less per ELL student.³² When it comes to the differences in the backgrounds of the ELL students in high versus low expenditure schools, it is important to note that, “[the findings on the relationship between the academic performance of secondary ELL students and school expenditure] are echoed in the literature that disaggregates students into

²⁸ Oscar Hugo Jiménez-Castellanos and David Garcia. “School Expenditures and Academic Achievement Differences between High-ELL-Performing and Low-ELL-Performing High Schools.” *Bilingual Research Journal*, (vol. 40, no. 3, 24 July 2017)

²⁹ “Enrollment in Texas Public Schools 2016-17.” *Enrollment Trends*, Division of Research and Analysis, (June 2017), pp 23.

³⁰ Jiménez-Castellanos and Garcia. “School Expenditures and Academic Achievement Differences between High-ELL-Performing and Low-ELL-Performing High Schools.” pp. 318.

³¹ *IBID.* pp. 322.

³² *IBID.* pp. 328

groups by socioeconomic status or race/ethnicity.”³³ This conclusion allows us to continue to analyze how exactly increased funding could help and why it is important for policy makers to direct attention towards the issue, because it solidifies the idea that more funding for ELL programs will lead to higher achieving ELL students and a more qualified U.S. workforce.

Now that it has made clear that Hispanic students are academically underachieving largely due to many of them not speaking fluent English and that funding does in fact help, we can look at how additional funds for programs in place at public schools could close this achievement gap. I argue that the biggest factor in increasing ELL academic achievement lies in hiring and training more teachers on the best pedagogical practices to serve the millions of Hispanic ELL students struggling to successfully graduate from high school and attend college. As previously stated, one of the biggest issues with educating ELL students is that a large portion of them come from low-income families which is a huge problem in and of itself when it comes to their teachers. This issue is explained well by Jimenez-Castellanos and Garcia as follows: “Empirical analyses have found that marginalized students often attend schools in areas with a high concentration of African American, Latino, and ELL students and that these schools are more likely to employ teachers with fewer years of experience, lower credentials, less time in actual teaching course work and have more teachers with emergency credentials than their Caucasian middle-class peers.”³⁴ The data on ELL teachers supports this issue accurately since in 2016, 32 states reported not having enough teachers for ELL students and additionally, only about 2.5% of teachers who teach the ELL students have a degree in ESL (English as a second

³³ Oscar Hugo Jiménez-Castellanos and David Garcia. “School Expenditures and Academic Achievement Differences between High-ELL-Performing and Low-ELL-Performing High Schools.” *Bilingual Research Journal*, (vol. 40, no. 3, 24 July 2017) pp. 328

³⁴ *IBID* pp. 321

language) or bilingual education.^{35 36} Cristina Silva provides further insight to this issue in her article for *International Business Times* in which she emphasizes ways to teach Hispanic students by teaching in ways that relate to their culture and backgrounds. She reports on how educational researchers that specialize on the topic of bilingual education believe that Latino students “Should be praised for being bilingual... and teachers should use the student’s unique cultural and linguistic skills to help them gain necessary reading and math skills.”³⁷ Silvia attributes part of the problem to the fact that while Hispanic student population is quickly rising, Latino teachers account for less than 8% of all U.S. educators.³⁸ This is a problem because teachers that don’t speak Spanish or understand the Hispanic culture have a harder time communicating with not only the students but also the parents of the students, and the problem goes as far as some teachers being culturally insensitive and not seeing Latinos as learners.³⁹ Besides the quality of the teachers, another important factor that needs to be improved is the quality of learning materials. As cited by Liana Heitin in her piece for *Education Week*, there is understanding amongst ELL experts that materials for ELL students are, “Often too simple and too disconnected from grade-level goals.”⁴⁰ What often happens is that the material is “watered down” for the ELL students or they are taught material that is meant for much younger students which further holds back the ELL students. This pedagogy error also, “Fails to build the student’s background knowledge, which is crucial to increasing vocabulary and helping language-learners catch up with their native-English-speaking peers.”⁴¹ Overall, it is widely

³⁵ Claudio Sanchez, “English Language Learners: How Your State Is Doing.” *NPR ED*, NPR, (23 Feb. 2017).

³⁶ National Education Association. “Hispanics: Education Issues.” *NEA*, (2008).

³⁷ Cristina Silva, “Immigration Reform 2015: More Hispanics In US Schools, But They're Struggling to Keep Up.” *International Business Times*, (25 Feb. 2015).

³⁸ *IBID.*

³⁹ *IBID.*

⁴⁰ Liana Heitin, “Quality Learning Materials Are Scarce for English-Language Learners.” *Education Week*, EdWeek, (1 Mar. 2018).

⁴¹ *IBID.*

accepted that one of the main reasons that Hispanic students, especially ELL Hispanic students, are academically underachieving is because the system in place to teach them is inadequate and underfunded.

Another way in which increased funding could help Hispanic ELL students have a higher educational achievement is by increasing the availability and quality of early childhood education programs catered to the needs of this growing demographic. As has been explored by renowned economist Janet Currie, the effects of early childhood education programs can be extremely beneficial for children, especially disadvantaged students.⁴² Some of the ways in which these programs have been proven to work are by the development of cognitive skills, school readiness, and social and emotional development.⁴³ For disadvantaged Hispanic students both ELL and non-ELL, these programs could allow them to enter public schooling with an advantage that will help them perform on par, if not better than their white peers, especially if early childhood programs are developed with the specific intentions of either catering to bilingual education. With a few exceptions, most states do not have pre-K programs equipped to help ELL pre-K students and the ones that do, such as Illinois, have seen very positive results.⁴⁴ Research done by the Frank Porter Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill shows how beneficial these ELL pre-K programs can be by providing young children the opportunity to become bilingual in English and Spanish at a young age.⁴⁵ Some of the cited advantages that bilingual preschoolers have include a greater working

⁴² Janet Currie, “Early Childhood Education Programs.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, (vol. 15, no. 2, 2001), pp. 213.

⁴³ *IBID.* pp. 214.

⁴⁴ “English Language Learners A Growing—Yet Underserved—Student Population.” *The Progress of Education Reform*, Education Commission of The States, (Dec. 2013).

⁴⁵ D. C. Castro, et al. “Dual Language Learners: Research Informing Policy.” *Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute*, (May 2013).

memory, an enhanced ability to focus in class, advanced problem solving capabilities, and helpful learning behaviors related to creative thinking and symbolic reasoning.⁴⁶ Overall, whether funding goes towards increasing the number of Hispanic children eligible for proven early education programs, such as Head Start, or it goes towards increasing the availability and quality of ELL preschool programs, one way to close the academic achievement gap between Hispanics and their white peers is to increase the early education opportunities for Hispanics so they start public school more prepared and on par with their white peers.⁴⁷

A third way in which additional funding could help raise Hispanic student's academic achievement is by improving the standardized tests they take, both for testing out of ELL programs and for evaluating the quality of a district as a whole. The first problem is a very serious one especially because of how it affects long term ELLs, which within the ELL population, are the group who need the most attention in terms of helping them succeed academically.⁴⁸ One of the main goals of ELL education is making sure the students are successfully "reclassified" as fluent English proficient as early as possible in their educational careers so they can take classes with the rest of the non-ELL students through the school district's main curriculum. An obstacle many ELLs face is how certain ELL reclassification tests are set up and how they vary from district to district.⁴⁹ Much of this problem lies in the accountability system from district decision makers to reclassify their ELL students out of the program either too soon or too late depending on different incentives. This issue is explained

⁴⁶ D. C. Castro, et al. "Dual Language Learners: Research Informing Policy." *Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute*, (May 2013).

⁴⁷ Barbara Schneider, et al. "6 Barriers to Educational Opportunities for Hispanics in the United States." *Hispanics and the Future of America*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, (1 Jan. 1970).

⁴⁸ Laurie Olsen, "Meeting the Unique Needs of Long Term English Language Learners." *National Education Association*, (Mar. 2014).

⁴⁹ Jessica Chao and Jen Schenkel. "Educating English Language Learners." *Grantmakers for Education*, Grantmakers for Education, (Apr. 2013).

well by Rachel Salma in her discrete-time survival analysis on ELL reclassification. She explains this issue by noting how, “Under Title I funding streams, schools and districts have an accountability-driven incentive to keep their top-performing ELs classified as limited English proficient in order to inflate this subgroup’s performance.”⁵⁰ She then compared this problem of “re-designation dilemma” with how, “. . . Title III incentivizes districts to reclassify students as quickly as possible in order to demonstrate that a greater number of their students have reached proficiency,” which leads to students who are still not English proficient to not advance in the normal school curriculum after they are inappropriately classified non-ELL students.⁵¹ Through problems like these, we see how there needs to be funding designated to creating a model for accurately assessing student’s ability to be enrolled in regular, non-ELL, curriculums once they truly are ready for it, and not before or after. Another problem is how standardized assessments that test for school district’s overall quality negatively affect ELLs because the tests do not sufficiently account for their lack of English proficiency and thus hurt the school districts quality rank because of how poorly ELL students perform. I researched this topic in more detail for an Economics of Social Issues course last year and found that a big part of this problem lies in the assessment and mandates of the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) program.⁵² As is made clear by my previous findings on Kate Manken’s article titled *NCLB and English Language Learners*, the national assessment requires advanced English proficiency, due the use of relatively complex English words and phrases, and has very high stakes so when the ELL students don’t pass it, it

⁵⁰ Rachel B Slama, “Investigating Whether and When English Learners Are Reclassified Into Mainstream Classrooms in the United States.” *American Educational Research Journal*, (vol. 51, no. 2, Apr. 2014). pp. 224.

⁵¹ *IBID.* pp. 225.

⁵² Eduardo Corona Gonzalez, *Why Are Hispanic Immigrant Students Underperforming in School?* Washington and Lee University Economics 235, (2017) pp. 4.

keeps them from graduating high school while giving the school low evaluations.⁵³ As a result, the NCLB assessment hurts ELL students instead of achieving its original goal of helping them which leads to schools not wanting low-performing ELLs which further leads to a whole other issue of discrimination towards these helpless Hispanic students that are not proficient in English. This relates to the issue of funding because often times, when schools do not meet expectations, they receive less funding, creating negative cycle of disproportionate underachieving by ELLs.⁵⁴ As a whole, standardized test that are supposed to fairly measure ELLs progress and ensure that schools are serving them properly are hurting many students due to the lack of specialized assessments for these students.⁵⁵ As observed by Andrew Rotherham in his research on the topic, organizations that look at this issue, such as the Virginia Board of Education, struggle to adopt fair assessments due to the lack of proven models aimed at developing a common test.⁵⁶ I argue that the role of the Federal and State government(s) is to further follow in the footsteps of private grant makers and their partnerships with university researchers to create adequate bilingual assessments for ELL students which have proven positive progress towards giving ELL students opportunities to academically achieve.⁵⁷

As seen throughout this paper, the most effective way to educate English Language Learners and thus close the educational achievement gap between Hispanic and white students is through increased funding for ELL programs. The three main methods of funding are federal funding, state funding, and local funding and it is important to understand these three different

⁵³ Kate Menken, "NCLB and English Language Learners: Challenges and Consequences." *Theory Into Practice*, (vol. 49, no. 2, 2010) pp 121-128.

⁵⁴ American Psychological Association. *Ethnic and Racial Disparities in Education: Psychology's Contributions to Understanding and Reducing Disparities*. APA, (3 Aug. 2012).

⁵⁵ Andrew J. Rotherham, "The Education Crisis No One Is Talking About." *Time*, Time Inc., (12 May 2011).

⁵⁶ IBID.

⁵⁷ Jessica Chao and Jen Schenkel. "Educating English Language Learners." *Grantmakers for Education*, Grantmakers for Education, (Apr. 2013).

ways and their effects on ELL education to come to the conclusion of how policy makers at the local, state and federal levels need to work together to fund an equitable education for English learners in the United States. On the federal level, the majority of the funding comes from Title III of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* which is part of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* and in the past decade has been extremely beneficial to English Language learners through Part A of Title III which specifically focuses on ELL education.⁵⁸ Formally, its purpose is as follows:

“To help ensure that children who are limited English proficient, including immigrant children and youth, attain English proficiency, develop high levels of academic attainment in English, and meet the same challenging State academic content and student academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet...”⁵⁹

Although this program has gotten better and better throughout its existence, the fact remains that the federal government only provides about 11% of the funding for primary and secondary education.⁶⁰ Through Title III, the federal government provided \$737 million for all ELLs in fiscal years 2015 and 2016 and \$800.4 million in 2017 which were distributed to states based on how many limited English proficient students they had and based on U.S. Census Bureau data of recent immigrant population.⁶¹ The states then distribute these funds to separate districts based on more accurate information of student demographics.⁶² These federal funds go mostly to instructional staff (45%), instructional material and technology (24%) and professional

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of Education, “Title III, Part A English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement.” *U.S. Department of Education*, (2015) pp. 6.

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of Education. “Part A — English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act” *U.S. Department of Education*, (19 Dec. 2005) pp. 40

⁶⁰ Julie Sugarman, “Funding an Equitable Education for English Learners in the United States.” *Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute*, (2016), pp. 1.

⁶¹ U.S. Department of Education, “Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Summary and Background Information.” *U.S. Department of Education*, (2017) pp. 27.

⁶² Sugarman, “Funding an Equitable Education for English Learners in the United States.” pp. 1.

development (18%).⁶³ Besides Title III funds, the only other significant source of federal funds that directly impact ELLs are programs under the Department of Education's Office of Migrant Education which annually provides around \$375 million. While there is progress in funding with about \$60 million more dollars provided through Title III from 2016 to 2017, ELLs and immigrants and refugees receive a very small part of the federal budget compared to other types of education funding. To put the ELL federal funds into perspective, Title I, which provides funding for low income students, provides about \$15 billion annually for low income students which affects 21 million students, and the Federal Government also provides around \$12.5 billion annually to students with special needs under the *Individuals with Disabled Education Act* which affects 6.5 million students.⁶⁴ Although the funds for low income students also often times help ELLs due to many ELLs being low income, and students needing special education require more money per individual, the \$800 million provided to ELLs is very little compared to the \$15 or \$12.5 billion allocated to other students in need. Overall, the Federal government has gotten much better about providing additional funds to ELL students over the past couple of decades, but policy makers should push for more funding to this group of students at a federal Level so that ELs in every corner of America can have a greater chance of being high achievers in school.

At the state level, ELL funding becomes more complicated because each state has their own way of allocating funds—if they choose to do so. While the Title III funding has been extremely helpful for English Language learners, most of which are Hispanic students, it does not quite go far enough which is why state funding is so important and why 46 states have allocated more funding to increase educational opportunities for ELL students.⁶⁵ Understanding

⁶³ Julie Sugarman, "Funding an Equitable Education for English Learners in the United States." *Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute*, (2016) pp.14.

⁶⁴ IBID, pp. 15.

⁶⁵ IBID, pp. 1.

the methods that different states use is important to this paper because, even though the mechanisms used by different states are confusing due to the differences across states funding policy's, it provides insight on different ways to finance ELLs and makes it clear that the problem has no easy fix but policy makers have some proof of what works and what does not. There are three main methods that will be explained in this paper: the formula funding mechanism, the categorical funding mechanism, and the reimbursement mechanism.⁶⁶ There are also 4 states who provide no further funding for ELL students: Delaware, Mississippi, Montana, and Rhode Island.⁶⁷

The formula funding mechanism is the most common one, used by 34 states, and it funds ELL programs through each state's primary funding formula. There are three ways in which states account for their ELLs through funding formulas: teacher allocation (5 states), dollar amount (3 states) , and weighted formulas (26 states), with weighted formulas being the most common, and the most complicated.⁶⁸ The Migration Policy Institute summarizes the weighted formula method well as follows:

“In most cases, states fund Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) for instructional and administrative costs based on the number of enrolled students multiplied by weights assigned to a variety of community characteristics like rurality and cost of living and in some cases, student factors like poverty, special education needs, and EL status. This is referred to as the weighted student count and it is then multiplied by a per-pupil dollar amount to arrive at the total foundation grant provided to LEAs to meet the basic educational needs.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Maria Millard, “State Funding Mechanisms for English Language Learners.” *Education Commission of the States*, (Jan. 2015), pp. 1.

⁶⁷ IBID.

⁶⁸ IBID. pp. 2.

⁶⁹ Julie Sugarman, “Funding an Equitable Education for English Learners in the United States.” *Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute*, (2016) pp.14.

More simply put, the states add an additional amount of funding based on their funding policy, so if a state has a ELL weight of 99%, such as Maryland, the ELL student will receive an extra .99 of the general educational amount.⁷⁰ The dollar amount method of the formula funding mechanism is much simpler in that it sets a single amount of extra dollars per ELL. The teacher allocation mechanism is also relatively simple in that it accounts for ELLs through staffing costs in the state's primary funding formula. Through this mechanism, states provide additional teachers and interpreters per a certain amount of students, depending per state.⁷¹ Overall, formula funding is common because funds are more insulated from budget cuts and the Education Commission of the States considers the formula mechanism predictable, reliable, transparent, equitable, and simple while it identifies the drawback that the mechanism does not always guarantee that the additional funds will be used on ELLs.⁷²

The next most common funding mechanism is categorical funding which is used by 9 states and, "funds ELLs programs through a line in the budget that exists outside of the state's primary funding formula."⁷³ Through this mechanism, each district gets a certain amount from the state to spend on its ELL students. Although this mechanism is still used by 9 states, it has lost a lot of popularity in the past decade not only for ELL programs, but for all programs categorically funded. Since 2008, 29 states have decreased their use of this mechanism and ELLs are no longer the most common target for categorical funds.⁷⁴ The biggest advantage of using categorical funds is that it guarantees that state funds allocated for ELLs are being used for the

⁷⁰ Maria Millard, "State Funding Mechanisms for English Language Learners." *Education Commission of the States*, (Jan. 2015), pp.5.

⁷¹ IBID. pp. 2.

⁷² IBID. pp. 2.

⁷³ IBID. pp. 1.

⁷⁴ Joanna Smith, et al, "Categorical Funds: The Intersection of School Finance and Governance." *Center for American Progress*, (18 Nov. 2013).

right purposes in that they support student language acquisition. While that is an important benefit, there are many criticisms of it based around the fact that it doesn't let the individual school districts allocate the funds based on their specific students and limits the districts flexibility.⁷⁵ The Education Commission of the States describes the draw backs of categorical funding as follows: "A challenge faced by districts is that the amount of funding received depends on ever-changing state budgets, thereby creating uncertainty. Categorical funding is considered less transparent, more unstable and unpredictable, more complicated, rule oriented, and involving more paperwork."⁷⁶ Overall this method has many drawbacks and is why less and less states use it every year.

The final type of state funding mechanism is the reimbursement mechanism used by just three states in which the states reimburse districts upon the submission of the costs of educating the ELL students.⁷⁷ This mechanism is separate from the state's primary funding formula and the "pay backs" are given to the districts upon actual costs accrued. The "pay backs" are also only made upon the approval of the state superintendent at the time.⁷⁸ One of the most important positive qualities of this mechanism is that it gives districts the ability to fund specific expenses agreed upon by the state. The Education Commission of the States (ECS) further explains the positive aspects of this mechanism as follows: "Through a reimbursement model, policy makers can account for how state money is being spent. Such a model also ensures higher reporting standards and better tracking of state funds."⁷⁹ While these are very valid advantages, the ECS also draws attention to the mechanism's flaws by explaining the instability it brings due to the

⁷⁵ Maria Millard, "State Funding Mechanisms for English Language Learners." *Education Commission of the States*, (Jan. 2015), pp. 3.

⁷⁶ IBID.

⁷⁷ IBID, pp. 1.

⁷⁸ IBID, pp. 3.

⁷⁹ IBID, pp. 3.

funding being subject to budgetary decisions, the intensive paper work required, the fact that there is no guarantee the every expense gets reimbursed, and the idea that it can be restrictive.⁸⁰ Overall, while it has some clear advantages, it is evident that it causes risk for the districts to provide adequate education and resources for its Ell students.

The final type of main funding that is important to consider in understanding how to give ELLs the best opportunity to succeed is local funding. Once the money is allocated to districts by the federal and state government, it is up to the districts to decide many specific spending decisions, which is a crucial step in ELL funding because 98% of educational funding in the U.S. is dispensed at a local level once funds are allotted for a specific purpose.⁸¹ Besides districts allocating money for teachers based on total enrollment, districts allocate teachers to special programs such as ELL programs using not only the funds provided by the state and federal governments, but also local funds to account for the necessary funding past what the state and federal government provides. More and more every year, districts are giving principals the decision-making power to control how the money is spent which can be good considering the specific districts and principals know best where the funds are needed. Of course, through this system, there is a wide variety in how districts allocate the funds and could cause underfunding if, at the local level, principals over prioritize other programs.⁸²

As has been made clear by the descriptions of the different mechanisms to fund the ELL students, it is an extremely complicated national problem because each state has its own unique mechanism and funds goes through multiple steps before getting to the ELLs. Also, finding the

⁸⁰ Maria Millard, "State Funding Mechanisms for English Language Learners." *Education Commission of the States*, (Jan. 2015), pp. 3.

⁸¹ Julie Sugarman, "Funding an Equitable Education for English Learners in the United States." *Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute*, (2016) pp. 23.

⁸² IBID.

best funding method and applying it to every state is nearly impossible due to that fact that the optimal amount of funding needed per student is still unknown due to the very limited amount of specific studies focused on the costs associated with adequately funding an ELL student.⁸³ To further complicate the problem, there is politics involved in deciding the optimal amount of funding per student in each state since there is a limited amount of funds, thus there is political manipulation and bias involved in the policy makers deciding the amount compared to other programs and how they are prioritized.⁸⁴ These challenges in determining the appropriate amount of funding are crucial to this paper because they explain why the topic needs further attention so that empirical evidence can be found to accommodate the millions of ELL students. Julie Sugarman explains these problems well in her piece for the Migration Policy Institute as follows: “Factors such as inadequate state and local funding, inequitable funding between and within districts and the complications of funding both traditional public schools and charter schools with public money make the evaluation of supplementary funding systems for ELs more urgent.”⁸⁵

The final point I want to make in this paper is to explain the benefits that will come from increasing funding and strategic funding allocation for ELL programs. Not only would millions of Hispanic students benefit from policy implementations, but every American would benefit from the economic growth that would come with a better educated workforce. Before explaining the national impact of increased ELL achievement, I think it is crucial to focus on how the students themselves will see a higher quality of life. As is made clear by Art Goldsmith (Washington and Lee economics Professor), Derrick Hamilton, and William Darity in their paper

⁸³ Julie Sugarman, “Funding an Equitable Education for English Learners in the United States.” *Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute*, (2016) pp. 8.

⁸⁴ *IBID.* pp. 9.

⁸⁵ *IBID.* pp. 12.

titled *Measuring the Wage Costs of Limited English*, poor English proficiency is something that greatly affects Hispanics in the United States past school achievement.⁸⁶ Helping the Hispanic ELL population become fluent in English before they join the workforce would be extremely beneficial for them since, “Poor English fluency has been offered as an explanation for the relatively low wages of Latinos, especially those who are immigrants.” So not only would additional funding help the Hispanic ELL students in schooling, but it would translate into their careers and help eliminate the evident earnings penalty that Latino workers with limited English speaking skills face.⁸⁷ When it comes to the growth of the U.S. economy, it is easy to see how helping Hispanics students, especially those who do not speak fluent English, would lead to a more educated work force since, as mentioned before, 17.9% of the United States population is Hispanic and 1 in 10 pre-k-12 students in the U.S. are English Language Learners.^{88 89} Through a report made by the Morris Institute on the relationship between Latino education and Arizona’s economic future, one can further understand the many factors of this issue that extend past Arizona and into the entire country because, like Arizona, the U.S. is seeing the rapid Hispanic population growth.⁹⁰ In short, as explained by Goldsmith’s article, there is a wage gap between Hispanics and their white peers and one way to shrink that wage gap is through ELL education.⁹¹ As Hispanic population grows, if this wage gap shrinks due to focus on the ELL educational issue, the average national income could rise. More income means more purchasing power,

⁸⁶ Darrick Hamilton, et al. “Measuring the Wage Costs of Limited English.” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, (vol. 30, no. 3, Aug. 2008) pp. 257.

⁸⁷ IBID.

⁸⁸ Kurt Bauman, “School Enrollment of the Hispanic Population: Two Decades of Growth.” *The United States Census Bureau* (28 Aug. 2017).

⁸⁹ Rachel B Slama, “Investigating Whether and When English Learners Are Reclassified Into Mainstream Classrooms in the United States.” *American Educational Research Journal*, (vol. 51, no. 2, Apr. 2014).

⁹⁰ Bill Hart, and C. J. Eisenbarth Hage. “Dropped? Latino Education and Arizona’s Economic Future.” *ASU Morrison Institute for Public Policy*, (Apr. 2012) pp. 8.

⁹¹ Hamilton, et al. “Measuring the Wage Costs of Limited English.” pp. 257.

which drives economic growth and tax revenue. Higher tax revenue means more money available for funding and thus a positive cycle is created for nationwide educational attainment.⁹² One can better conceptualize this idea through a recent study in Arizona that estimates that, "...If Arizona reduced its number of Latino high school dropouts by half, those additional graduates would earn an additional total \$31 million a year, allowing them to spend an additional \$23 million annually."⁹³ Sadly, on a national scale, the problem has gotten to the point in which not acting upon the problem would not only not boost the economy, but would tragically hurt the economy since as Hart and Hager explain in the piece for the Morrison Institute, "below-average educational achievement within a rapidly growing population can lead to: fewer qualified workers to fill increasingly complex positions, lower average incomes, reduced consumer purchasing power, more families living in poverty, fewer [citizens] with health insurance coverage, greater demands on public services and benefits, and lower per-capita tax revenue."⁹⁴ So overall, while Hispanic educational achievement could boost economic performance and create a cycle of positive growth for all Americans, the effects are reversed if the academic gap does not change which is why this issue is so important and needs further national attention.

In conclusion, this problem of a large portion of Americans underachieving in school is extremely complicated and affects millions of Hispanics directly and every American indirectly. Although there are many factors that lead to the educational gap between Hispanic k-12 students and their white peers, it is clear that aiming policy at English language learners can be very beneficial and is achievable with the right leaders and the right focus on education. By implementing more programs such as Title III, the federal government could make a real

⁹² Bill Hart, and C. J. Eisenbarth Hage. "Dropped? Latino Education and Arizona's Economic Future." *ASU Morrison Institute for Public Policy*, (Apr. 2012) pp. 8.

⁹³ IBID.

⁹⁴ IBID, pp. 9.

difference not only in pure funding allocation, but in showing state governments that the United States support every American's education and believes in giving every student the opportunity to succeed. In addressing this issue, policy makers at the district, state, and national level must work together to find effective working models and put responsibility in national and local leadership to provide a necessary investment in the future of America.

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