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CLASSIFYING CALIFORNIA'S ENGLISH LEARNERS: IS THE CELDT TOO BLUNT AN INSTRUMENT?

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Executive Summary

There are 1.6 million English learners (ELs) in California's K-12 public schools, comprising a quarter of California public school students and thirty percent of EL students in the United States. Our study provides strong evidence that California school districts are misidentifying large numbers of entering kindergarten students as English learners. California's home language survey over identifies children to be administered the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). Because only about 6 percent of kindergarten students taking the CELDT in 2009-10 were classified English language proficient, being identified to take the CELDT almost guarantees a student's classification as EL. Our findings call into question the validity of the home language survey and the CELDT as the tools for identifying EL students in California.¹

EL misidentification is important because it means that these students are not receiving the language support and education that is appropriate to their language skills. In addition, in an era of budget crises, it becomes especially vital that scarce language development resources be targeted as effectively as possible. The wide net currently being cast by California's EL classification system in some ways renders the classification itself meaningless, given its application to such a wide range of students. Part of the problem is that there is no clear definition of what constitutes "an English language learner" (Abedi 2008, Abedi & Gándara 2006). That definition is left to district interpretation, resulting in significant variability in classification criteria and rates across the state.



Introduction

Almost 1.3 million California school children take the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) each year.² According to the California Department of Education (CDE), the CELDT is used to: (1) identify students with limited English proficiency; (2) determine the level of English language proficiency of those students; and (3) assess the progress of limited English-proficient students in acquiring the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. In this study, we focus exclusively on item number one – the use of the CELDT to accurately identify English Learner (EL) students in California’s public schools. In particular, we explore the use of the CELDT for the initial assessment of students entering kindergarten during the 2009-10 school year.³ Focusing on those districts with EL student populations greater than 20 percent, we find wide variation across districts in terms of the proportion of entering students administered the CELDT. This variation is critical because fewer than 10 percent of students taking the CELDT score as English proficient. Thus, being administered the test almost guarantees that a student will be classified as EL. We conclude that this likely over-classification of EL students by the CELDT compromises California public schools’ ability to serve the language development needs of its EL students.

The Study⁴

Using data from the California Department of Education and Educational Data Services, we identified 155 California districts whose populations consist of 20 percent or more EL students. We excluded the districts that tested fewer than 50 students in the 2009-10 academic year, which left 134 districts. For those districts, we calculated the percentage of incoming kindergarteners who were given the CELDT and the proportion of those who reached the CELDT criterion for English language proficiency and therefore were not classified as EL. Next we surveyed these districts. We sent an e-mail survey to each of the districts, asking them to provide us with more detailed information about their particular EL classification processes. We followed up with email reminders and phone calls. A total of thirty-seven districts provided us with this information, a response rate of about 24 percent. Our analysis below is based on our quantitative calculations and the information we received directly from participating school districts.

The Home Language Survey

The EL identification process begins in California when parents fill out a home language survey (HLS), which usually is included as part of the paperwork required by districts in order to register a child for school. Even though districts are allowed to use their own surveys, almost all California districts use the template provided by the CDE, which includes the following four questions:

1. Which language did your child learn when he/she first began to talk?
2. Which language does your child most frequently speak at home?



3. Which language do you (the parents or guardians) most frequently use when speaking with your child?
4. Which language is most often spoken by adults in the home?(parents, guardians, grandparents, or any other adults)

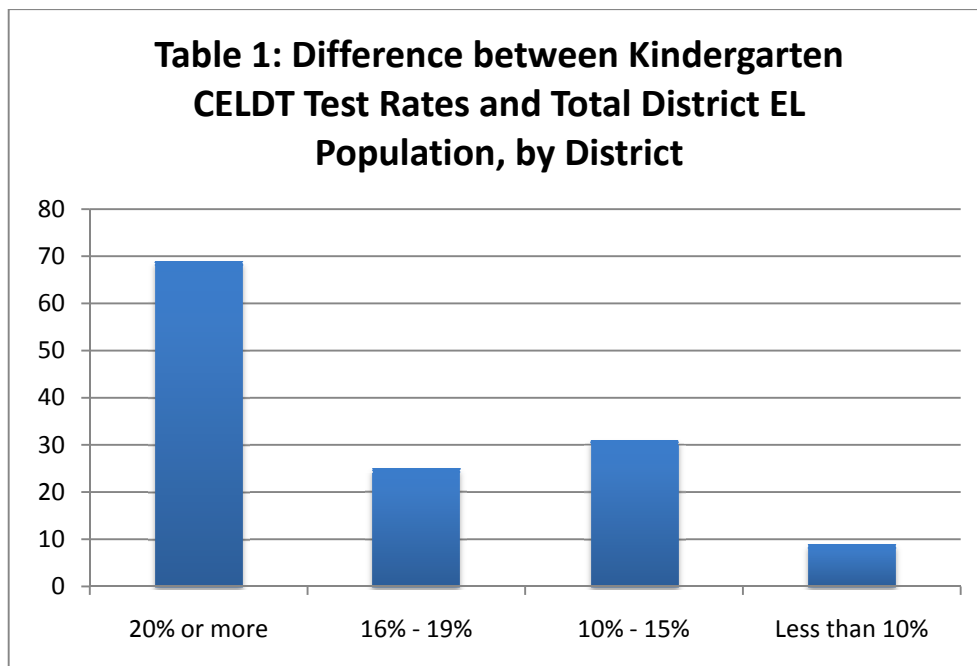
For most districts we surveyed, the inclusion of any language other than English (or in some cases any language in addition to English) in one of the answers triggers administration of the CELDT test to that child. We found that districts vary in terms of which questions they use to trigger testing. Seven of our thirty-seven survey districts used all four questions; most used 1, 2, and 3. Some districts used only 1 and 2, and many used some discretion in interpreting parents' answers. As previous studies have shown, this is a problem for a number of reasons (Bailey and Kelley 2010).

On the parent side, some parents may not understand the questions themselves, given vagueness in the question wording. For example, if a grandparent lives in the home and speaks another language, the parent may write that language down in response to question 4, regardless of whether or not the child in question speaks that language. The probability for parental confusion is high, given only half of the districts we surveyed provided any sort of instruction to parents about the purpose of the questions or the implications of their answers. One also can imagine a situation where a home is bilingual but the child is English dominant. If the other language is mentioned in the answers to questions 1, 3, or 4, the child will be tested, even if the parent answered only "English" to question 2. Our district survey made clear that districts across the state interpret the HLS differently, which likely leads to the misidentification of students for testing.

The quality of the testing trigger is important because parents cannot opt out of having their child take the CELDT. In other words, if the district determines the child must be tested, parents have no choice. Kindergarteners identified as EL cannot be reclassified as English language proficient until third grade because it is at that point that they are able to take the California Standards Test in English-language arts. Thus, a misclassification in kindergarten could lead to the student receiving four years of inappropriate language education and services if the student was actually proficient in English all along.

Not surprisingly, given the problems we discovered in how districts administer and interpret the home language survey, our analysis suggests that districts are testing students at rates much higher than the proportion of EL students already in the district. Although it is true that student populations can vary from year to year, we believe it reasonable to assume that the proportion of incoming kindergarteners that will be EL students should be roughly comparable to the proportion in the district as a whole. In other words, absent dramatic demographic change, the rate of testing should not be more than 10-15 percent higher or lower than the district's current EL population. We found this was not the case. Table 1 summarizes the difference between the proportion of entering kindergarteners taking the CELDT and the district's EL population.





SOURCE: California Department of Education, 2009-10 academic year data, compiled by the authors.

Data accessed at: <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/CELDT/searchnameceldt.aspx?year=2009-2010&level=district&entity=>

We see in Table 1 that in 2009-10 more than half of the districts (69) tested 20 percent or more students than would be expected given their current EL student population. This indicates that the home language survey is over identifying students to be administered the CELDT.

Only about fifteen percent of the districts included in our survey had a system or process in place to address the problem of misidentification from the HLS. Some used informal assessments beyond the home language survey; others used assessments other than the CELDT to classify students. Again, our study showed significant variability across districts. Yet, the fact of the matter is eighty-five percent of the districts surveyed relied on the CELDT exclusively to identify EL students. Given the low probability students have of being classified as English language proficient by the CELDT, which we discuss below, this over identification for CELDT testing, based on the home language survey, likely is leading to a significant number of California kindergarten students being misclassified as English learners.

The CELDT

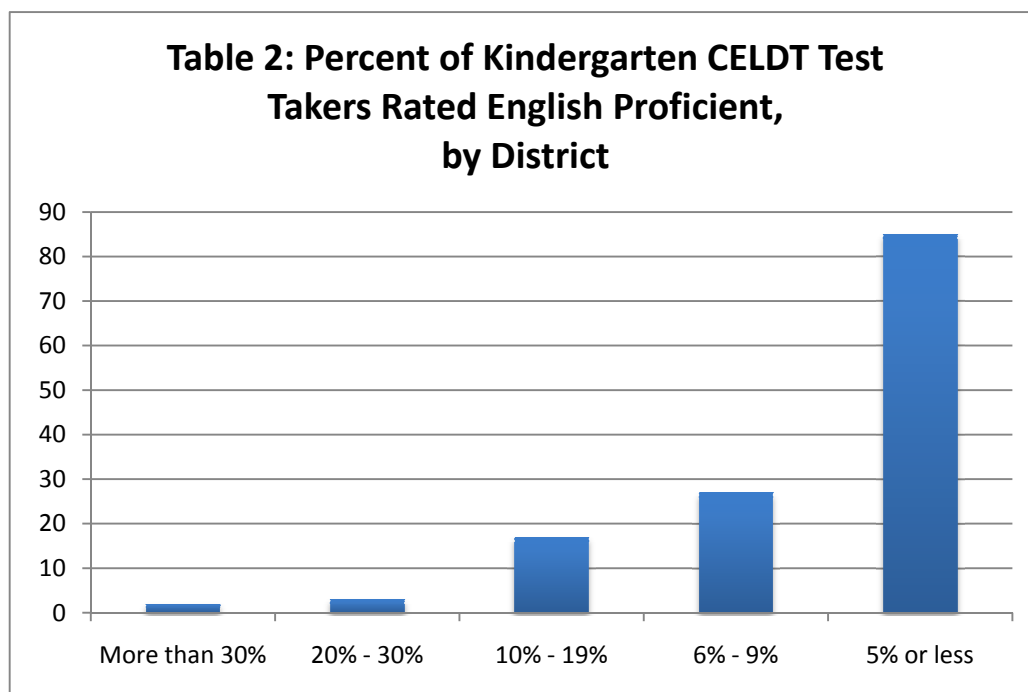
Our examination of the testing data shows that few students taking the CELDT are found to be English language proficient. Only twelve percent of students from these districts in 2009-10 achieved that result; eighty-eight percent were classified as EL. If we remove the Los Angeles Unified School District from the sample, which tested an exceptionally large number of students (30,774) and has one of the higher English language proficiency rates



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(15%), the English language proficiency rate drops to six percent. In other words, excluding the Los Angeles Unified School District, ninety-four percent of students taking the CELDT examination in 2009-10 were classified as EL. Table 2 summarizes these findings by showing English language proficiency rates by the number of districts that fall into each category.



SOURCE: 2009-10 CELDT criterion information compiled by the authors using data from the California Department of Education, accessed at: <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/CELDT/searchnameceldt.aspx?year=2009-2010&level=district&entity=> [last accessed 9 Sept 2011]; 2009-10 kindergarten enrollment information compiled by the authors from Ed-Data accessed at: <http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/Pages/Home.aspx> [last accessed 9 Sept 2011]

The small number of students taking the CELDT who achieve a score of “English proficient” may be due to the length and content of the exam, difficulties with assessing young students’ English language abilities using standardized tests, and who administers the exam (Goldenberg & Quach 2010, Wright 2010, Stokes-Quinan & Goldenberg 2011).

The CELDT’s Validity as an Assessment Tool

The first concern is the length and content of the exam, both of which affect the CELDT’s ability to be a valid English language assessment tool for students just entering school. The CELDT assesses the four domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English and is aligned to the English-language development standards adopted by the State Board of Education. In 2007, California’s Education Code Section 60810 was amended to authorize early literacy assessment of ELs in kindergarten and first grade starting with the 2009-10 school year. In other words, entering kindergartners and first graders are now given the same test, which includes reading and writing requirements. As an example, the



2010-11 test required students to read and write the word “apple,” among other words. As of 2009-10, the test was also expanded, now taking up to two hours for children to complete. As can be imagined, taking such a long test administered by a stranger is challenging for four and five year olds about to enter kindergarten. Parents are not allowed to be in the room with children while taking the test, likely increasing the children’s overall anxiety and making it difficult for children to effectively complete the assessment (Epstein, Schweinhart, DeBruin-Parecki, & Robin, 2004).

The final problem with the structure of the test is that it is administered almost entirely in English. Rumberger and Gándara (2004, p. 2041) cite several research reports and professional organization studies to argue “testing students in a language in which they are not yet proficient is both invalid and unethical.” While there have long been questions about the appropriateness of standardized assessments for English learners in general, for students in this young age group who are still developing their language skills and who have not yet been in school, and therefore are inexperienced in the routines and expectations of school, an exam of this length, administered in English, seems especially inappropriate (Abedi 2004, Abedi & Gándara 2006, Abedi 2008).

Exam Administration

Given the length of the exam and the youth and vulnerability of the target population, who administers the exam for districts becomes critically important. In an ideal world, individuals with strong backgrounds in early child development and with extensive experience dealing with language minority populations would administer the exams, with parents present. In practice, according to the CDE, to administer and score the CELDT, examiners only must: (1) be employed by the district; (2) be proficient in English; and (3) receive specific training. The CDE recommends that districts use examiners who: (1) are classroom teachers; (2) have complete command of English pronunciation, intonation, and fluency; and (3) can correctly pronounce the full range of American English phonemes.⁵ Districts generally provide training for the lead director/ administrator of CELDT and this person then trains the examiners. But it is very difficult to supervise the large number of test administrators who are needed to administer this exam each year. As a result, many test administrators are English-only individuals who may not be familiar with the issues of language testing or working with young children. Thus, the people who administer the CELDT generally are not certificated staff or individuals who have experience with test administration or with English learners. This, of course, affects the quality of the assessment that they can provide (Epstein, Schweinhart, DeBruin-Parecki, & Robin 2004, Wright 2010).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The goal of California’s public education system should be to provide students with a meaningful educational setting that engages them, meets their developmental needs, and fosters their academic growth. For English learners, appropriate language development support is especially important to their educational success. Our findings suggest that California’s current classification system makes it unlikely that districts are targeting their



scarce language resources as effectively as possible. Given the large number of English learners in California schools, it is critical for California to be at the forefront of developing the most accurate and effective systems for identifying and assessing English learners. English learners are one of the most vulnerable sectors of California's student population. It is only through appropriate identification and classification that California public schools can begin to address these students' educational needs.

Recommendations:

1. The California Department of Education, in consultation with school districts, scholars, parents, and community organizations, should revisit the use of the home language survey as *the sole* trigger for CELDT testing and consider alternatives that recognize bilingual households as a benefit for children, rather than a presumed deficit.
2. California school districts need to develop and put into practice formal processes that families can access in the case of an EL misidentification, given the strong likelihood this happens to a non-trivial number of California public school students every year.
3. The structure and administration of the CELDT needs to be examined more deeply, particularly taking into consideration the needs of entering kindergarten students and addressing the variability in the exam's administration across districts.



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ENDNOTES

¹ As we discuss below, this statistic is excluding the test results from the Los Angeles Unified School District.

² In 2009-10, the year in question for this report, 1,292,131 California public school students took this exam. Source: California Department of Education 2009-10 CELDT results, accessed at:

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr10/yr10rel56.asp> [last accessed 9 September 2011].

³ We should note that new students entering the school district at any grade level also can be administered the CELDT. In addition, current EL students must take the CELDT every year until they are reclassified as English proficient. We are therefore focusing on only one sector of students administered the CELDT: entering kindergarten students.

⁴ We would like to thank Sofia Murga, Victoria Laws and Melisa Kortan for their research assistance.

⁵ California Department of Education. 2010. "CELDT 101." Found at www.celdt.org/documents/CELDT_101.pdf [last accessed 9 September 2011].



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