

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: Recommendations for Addressing the Needs of English Language Learners

Executive Summary

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The primary purpose of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) is to stimulate economic recovery. But ARRA also provides an extraordinary opportunity to improve educational outcomes for children most in need. English language learners (ELLs) are a very large, rapidly growing, and currently under-served population who stand to benefit greatly from the attention and resources provided by ARRA.

The challenges ELL students face are many. They are most likely to attend schools with the sparsest of resources, staffed by ill-prepared teachers who are overwhelmed by high concentrations of low-achieving students. Even in schools with access to Title I resources, the attention paid to ELL students may not be appropriately tailored to their unique needs in learning the English language and in gaining academic skills and subject matter knowledge.

The infusion of ARRA funds into states and school districts across the nation can help to improve this situation – *if* those funds are used wisely. This document offers a set of recommendations that target specific opportunities for improving ELL outcomes through ARRA allocations to Title I, IDEA and special education, education technology, statewide data systems, improving teacher quality grants, early childhood education, the National Science Foundation, and state stabilization grants.

The group of researchers making these recommendations has extensive experience in the education of ELL students and a substantial understanding of the research base on effective strategies for this population. The intended audience is the vast national network of administrators and professionals at the federal, state and local levels who will determine how the ARRA funds will be used. The purpose of these recommendations is to generate discussion and guide decision-making when the question is: “How can we use ARRA funds to better serve the English language learners in our program?”

Recommendations

Title I Help for Disadvantaged Students

\$10 billion for grants to help disadvantaged students in nearly every school district and more than half of all public schools reach high academic standards. An additional \$3 billion for school improvement grants for school improvement activities in low-performing schools.

Many opportunities exist within Title I to serve ELLs in a far more appropriate way than is presently done. Stimulus funds will be best invested if they are used to qualitatively change the ways in which curriculum, instruction, assessment, accountability and community relations address the needs of ELLs. Such changes must target *both* the English language proficiency *and* academic content needs of ELLs. Specific recommendations include activities to improve assessment and accountability, instructional materials, support and extended time, dropout prevention, native language support, and parental engagement. The report also highlights the urgent need to address instructional materials and support for ELLs in the secondary grades.

IDEA Special Education

\$12.2 billion for formula grants to increase the federal share of special education costs and prevent these mandatory costs from forcing states to cut other areas of education.

Students with disabilities who are also learners of English are less likely to receive language support services and more likely to be taught in segregated contexts. These problems are exacerbated by a shortage of appropriately qualified teachers. Specific recommendations would target ARRA funds to improve coordination between special education and language support services, to examine placement patterns for ELLs with disabilities, to provide appropriate professional development and student services to educate and support ELLs in the least restrictive environment, and to improve data systems to enable better monitoring of student progress and needs.

Education Technology Grants

\$650 million for 21st century classrooms, including computer and science labs and teacher technology training.

ARRA provides an opportunity to help close the digital divide for ELLs. Technology that enables visualization and simulation is especially beneficial to those with limited proficiency in English. Recommendations include one-time expenditures for hardware such as smart boards and document projectors that would address both the stimulus and educational purposes of ARRA. ARRA Title I and stabilization funds are also resources for this one-time investment in technology.

Statewide Data Systems

\$250 million for competitive grants to states to design and develop data systems that analyze individual student data to find ways to improve student achievement, providing teachers and administrators with effective tools.

Data systems that enable longitudinal tracking of student progress are important for all students, but especially for ELLs, whose designation status often varies by district and changes as they develop their English proficiency. Specific recommendations relevant to state data systems call for developing a common definition of an English-language learner, tracking ELLs after they have been redesignated as English proficient, and collecting data on ELL programming and other relevant background data.

Improving Teacher Quality Grants

\$300 million, including \$200 million for competitive grants to school districts and states to provide financial incentives for teachers and principals who raise student achievement and close the achievement gaps in high-need schools; and \$100 million for competitive grants to states to address teacher shortages and modernize the teaching workforce.

Teachers who are not experienced or prepared to teach ELLs are placed disproportionately in schools and classrooms with large numbers of ELLs. ARRA funds can be used to rapidly expand professional development that explicitly addresses the needs of ELLs and to fund incentives and career ladders for prospective English as a Second Language and bilingual education teachers.

Head Start, Early Head Start and Child Care and Development Block Grant

\$2.1 billion to provide comprehensive development services to help children succeed in school. Funds are distributed based on need. Only about half of all eligible preschoolers and less than 3 percent of eligible infants and toddlers participate in Head Start.

Language and cognitive development that is critically important in the preschool years can be effectively harnessed through appropriate programming for ELLs, such as dual language programming. Recommendations include the development of programs better aligned to the needs of English learners and nascent bilingual children, incentives for prospective and practicing early childhood education teachers who can develop the oral language of language-minority children in their native language, and investment in the development of teachers who can play leadership roles at preschool sites in creating rich language environments.

National Science Foundation

\$100 million to improve instruction in science, math, and engineering

The knowledge base on effective science instruction for ELLs is inadequate. The National Science Foundation should review the state of knowledge regarding effective science practices with ELLs, set an agenda for future research, and target some of its funds to developing and evaluating methods for improving the science education of ELLs.

State Fiscal Stabilization Fund

\$53.6 billion, including \$40.6 billion to local school districts using existing funding formulas.

Decision-makers with flexibility in the use of funds made available by ARRA are urged to address the recruitment, certification and mentoring of teachers of ELLs in a comprehensive and systematic way. In addition, they should take this opportunity to develop adequate and appropriate data and assessment systems to track the long-term educational prospects for ELLs.

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