

# No Assessment Fits All

*Candace Kelly and Adelina Alegria* question the value of high stakes testing for English Learners



**The number and percent of English learner students in the U.S. and California in particular** is frequently cited in research and professional journals to usher attention to the growing needs of linguistic minority students. This is rightly so because the increase in English learners dwarfs increases in all other student subgroups nationally, and in California since schools began collecting this type of data in 1980. However, there has been a shift in the English learner population. For instance, the number of total English learners has decreased by 46,351 students in California schools over the past five years, with the largest decrease of 21,101 in the 2006-2007 academic year (DataQuest, 2008).

What could be the reason for this decrease in English learners? Several responses to this question have been offered which illustrate the type of perceptions commonly expressed about English learners in our schools. A university teacher-researcher posited that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has increased the rate of redesignations<sup>1</sup>; and therefore, decreased the number of English learners. A district director and an attorney separately posed that perhaps anti-immigration policies have curtailed the number of immigrants thus reducing the number of English learners entering into and remaining in school. The attorney added anecdotal support based on deportation cases in family law.

Although both ideas are posed by reasonable and knowledgeable

professionals, the truth is that these reasoned perceptions have no basis in fact. The explanation that the decrease in EL students was due to a better rate of redesignation under NCLB fails because California English learner redesignation rates have remained constant. According to Linqunti (2008), the annual statewide redesignation rates have stayed around nine percent in recent years.

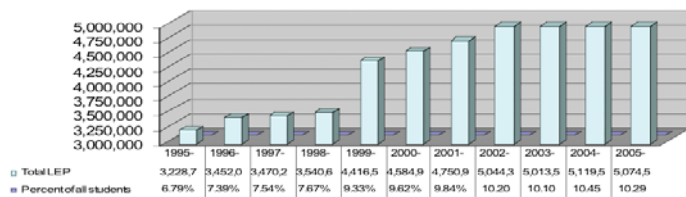
What is troubling about the redesignation rate is the decrease in the number of redesignated students over the last three years. Although a full analysis of redesignation rates is beyond the scope of this article, suffice it to say that since the 2005-2006 and the inception of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), there has been a decrease of 42 percent in the redesignation rate. The average increase in RFEP students was 26,099 across all grades from 2006-2007 and from 2007-2008. In comparison, beginning in 2001-2002 the average increase in number of RFEP students for four consecutive years was 61,454 (DataQuest, 2008). This means that the average number of redesignated students decreased by 42 percent statewide in each of the two years since the inception of the CAHSEE. This equates to a decrease in 35,355 students who were not redesignated after the CAHSEE took effect. Therefore, the decrease in the number of redesignated students in California should be a major topic of concern.

The idea that immigration policies may be the cause for decreased enrollment of English learners also falls flat as three-quarters of the children of immigrants are born in the U.S. and are therefore U.S. citizens (Capps, 2001), and only one in five students has a foreign-born parent (Walqui, 2000)? The reality is that few English learners are themselves immigrants.

Such assumptions are common but mislead because the number of immigrants residing in California has not decreased in the last five years. For example, the California Research Bureau reported that California was home to 73,000 new immigrants (legal and illegal) between 2000 and 2005 with an estimated total of 2.2 million residing in the state (Bugarin, DeBry, & Jones, 2005).

Clearly it is not an easy task to account for a decrease of 46,351 California English learners despite the shifts in English learners reported by the U.S. Department of Education at the National Clearinghouse on English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA).

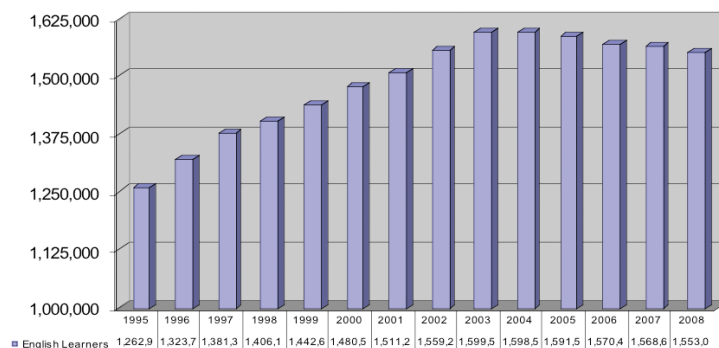
Table 1. Total Number of Limited English Speaking Students in U.S. and its Outlying Territories for Public Schools 1995 - 2006



According to Table 1, there was a decrease of 30,822 English learners in 2003 in the U.S. And a second decrease of 44,989 in 2005. The data source is reliable because NCELA has tracked the number of English learners consistently using the State Education Agency reports (Macias & Kelly, 1996). Despite changes in collection procedures from the NCLB goals approved June 2002 in the Consolidated State Application (US DOE, 2008) these numbers remain consistent.

California's shifts differ considerably from the national statistics. While California continues to experience decreases of English learners; nationally there was an increase of 106,022 in the academic year 2004-2005 flanked by two decreases of 30,822 and 44,989 (in 2003-2004 and 2005-2006 respectively). All together, the U.S. increased 30,211 English learner students between 2002 and 2006; and California decreased 46,351 English learners over a similar period as shown in Table 2 here:

California English Learners in Public Schools. 1995 - 2008



A possible explanation for the decrease in English learners might rest on high stakes testing and the impact of the drop-out rate. Evidence from the 2008 California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) indicates that only 24 percent of English learners passed the math section, and only 21 percent of English learners passed the English language arts section. In comparison, the passing rates for all students were not much higher, 31 percent and 30 percent respectively (DataQuest, 2008). The CAHSEE is relatively new to California and likewise relatively new to states across the nation.

Since 1979, a growing number of states have required students to pass a high school exit examination (HSEEs) before receiving a diploma. Initiated in New York in 1979, there were 23 states with an HSEE in place in 2006, so nearly half of all American high school students face graduating exam requirements today (Warren, Jenkins, & Kulick, 2006). It is an open debate whether these exams pose a greater number of positive or negative consequences (Hong & Youngs, 2008). On the one hand, it has been estimated that approximately 42,000 U.S. students did not receive a diploma who otherwise would have a diploma had there not been an HSEE in place. Of these non-graduating students, 1,600 were estimated to have obtained a General Education Degree who would not have needed one otherwise (Warren et al, 2006).

On the other hand, research has shown that test scores have increased for many across the U.S. One study shows that for African Americans the average percentage of proficient students increased from 28 percent to 78 percent from 1994 to 2002 on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) which contributed to a learner test gap across all tests (Hong & Youngs, 2008). Yet in the end, the outcomes may exact too high a cost based on the disproportionate increase in students not graduating from high school.

In addition to high stakes exit exams, NCLB standards-based tests are reported to unequally impact student progress. According to many