

OREGON STUDENTS LOST IN TRANSLATION SCHOOLS IGNORE LAW, NEGLECTING STUDENTS WITH LIMITED ENGLISH

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Summary: The state and most districts can't say how students fare or whether programs work

Oregon ships an extra \$59 million a year to school districts to teach non-English-speaking students, but the state and the districts can't say what they get for the money.

Most school districts don't verify whether programs work, even though state law requires them to. The state doesn't track how the extra money is spent. And neither the state nor most districts document whether students keep up academically or how quickly they learn to read and write English.

The extra money is a small fraction of the state's annual \$2.1 billion school budget. But the lack of oversight is crucial, because limited-English students make up Oregon's fastest-growing student group.

From Russian immigrants in Gresham to Mexican migrants in Ontario to Vietnamese refugees in Beaverton, the number of limited-English students has swelled to more than 35,000 -- 6 percent of the state student population and six times the number of a decade ago.

Growth spreads across the state, with Portland's suburbs seeing the fastest increases; Portland accounts for a sixth of Oregon's limited-English students.

Oregon's eight-year push for accountability, because of the state's education reform act, is getting schools focused on results. But reform has not arrived for most limited-English programs.

The Oregonian researched state and federal records on limited-English programs; examined programs and budgets of the 25 school districts with the most limited-English students; and visited classrooms in those districts.

The newspaper found:

* Weak oversight. Of the 25 districts reviewed, 18 did not evaluate their programs, even though the federal courts require them to. The state also requires districts to draw up plans and evaluations to receive the extra money, but never checks for proof.

* Spotty results. On state math and reading tests -- the main yardstick for Oregon's school reform effort -- the state tracks scores of fewer than half the limited-English students.

* Hodgepodge instruction. Visits to schools found trained and inspired teachers in some classrooms; in others they showed programs with foundering students, and teachers who appeared to have little idea of the best way to teach students.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled 25 years ago that schools must provide students a "meaningful" opportunity to learn, regardless of language barriers. "Sink-or-swim" methods are illegal.

Yet limited-English education isn't a state priority. Many school districts contend they are too busy with issues such as state funding and school reform.

"This is an issue that has gotten lost in the mix," said State Sen. Susan Castillo, D-Eugene, vice chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee.

Oregon schools have improved in recent years, said Merced Flores, the Oregon Department of Education's associate superintendent for student services. But he acknowledged that monitoring is minimal, and said test problems won't be fixed until at least 2001. In the meantime, he said, "these kids are not making it."

No lack of money

School districts can't pin their shortcomings on a lack of money. Since 1992, the Legislature has sent districts extra money for limited-

English students because of the demands of teaching those students, but with no strings attached.

Districts receive 50 percent more state and local dollars per limited-English student. They get about \$4,400 for each student and \$6,600 for each limited-English student.

But the 25 districts reviewed by The Oregonian spend an average of only two-thirds of that extra money on limited-English programs.

Spending varies widely. Nyssa, for example, spent 25 percent of its extra funds on limited-English programs. The remaining dollars, said Superintendent Dennis Savage, helped reduce class sizes for all students and therefore also benefited limited-English students.

The state does not require districts to spend the extra money on limited-English students. To get the dollars, districts need only check boxes on a form indicating they have a comprehensive plan and evaluation.

But no one follows up.

Last year, all but one of the 25 districts checked the boxes, even though only seven had the required evaluations. Only Hood River County admitted that it lacked one, and no one from the state called to ask why, a district official said. The district still received its money.

The state employs just one specialist to monitor programs for limited-English students, and that person has not had the time to follow up.

"Right now," Flores said, "it's more of a hit-and-miss situation, to be honest with you."

Delia Pompa, director of the federal government's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs, said most of the country does a mediocre job of assessing achievement of limited-English students. Now, states such as Oregon are playing catch-up. "We wish they could work faster," Pompa said.

She said that political debate over bilingual education clouds the issue.

"What matters is how accountable the programs are for how the children are doing," Pompa said.

The chief watchdog role falls to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, which has monitored just seven of Oregon's 198 school districts this decade. Portland, Central, Newberg and Woodburn are still being monitored.

U.S. prods districts

A review of Office for Civil Rights' files shows that its oversight forced those districts to focus on limited-English programs. The federal review "moved us along," said Galen Harms, who heads English-as-a-second-language education for Central School District in Independence, southwest of Salem. "I think we were committed before, but we didn't know then as much as we know now."

Seven years of the office's pressure also prompted Portland to begin formally evaluating its limited-English programs at individual schools, identifying problems for schools to fix.

Gary Hargett, one of the region's leading consultants on limited-English education, said many educators weren't aware of the growing challenge.

"There's a certain degree of ignorance, but I also think it's institutional inattention," he said. "Partly it's because these students are still a fairly small minority in most cases. Partly it's because they are from families that are less likely to speak out and advocate."

The Oregon Department of Education lists 26 employees assigned to programs for 69,000 special-education students, compared with one who assists districts with limited-English programs.

"There's a much stronger lobby of parents for special-ed kids, and they have the laws and regulations in place that require excellent service and tools," said Dean Arrasmith, director of assessment and evaluation for the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory. "These kids don't have that."

Without pressure for accountability, it can be hard to persuade districts to evaluate programs, said Susan Haverson, English-as-a-second-language, or ESL, coordinator for Salem schools.

"You should be willing to take a hard look at your services," she said. "We don't have those requirements, so it doesn't get done."

No measuring done

Although they've made strides, the state and districts generally do a haphazard job of measuring limited-English students' progress. What little they do know shows those students struggling.

No. 1 dropout reason Dropout rates for limited-English students aren't tracked. But the latest state survey of dropouts and their teachers, compiled for 1997, found that among Latinos and Asians, the No. 1 reason for dropping out was "does not speak English well or at all." Sixteen percent of Latinos, the majority of the limited-English population, drop out, compared with 6 percent for non-Latino whites.

The state math and reading tests could identify good and bad programs. Last year, students who took the tests and were identified as being in ESL programs scored roughly two grade levels below native English speakers, even though a quarter of them took the math test in Spanish.

But the test numbers are sketchy.

Just one-third of limited-English students whom districts claim for extra money are identified as ESL students on the tests. The remaining two-thirds are either exempted from taking the tests or have their scores lumped in with the general student population.

The missing test information comes from teachers who either forget to mark answer sheets, don't mark them for fear of humiliating students or let students fill out the material themselves -- creating a jumble of responses.

That makes it hard to evaluate how limited-English students are faring as a group and to identify which programs are working.

Yet, when pressed for evidence that they are evaluating programs, districts frequently point to the tests as their main tool.

It's not that districts can't gather data. In their applications to the state for extra money, all obtain detailed enrollment information about limited-English students.

Barbara Wolfe, the Department of Education's assessment coordinator, said the state is developing a system to uniformly track limited-English students. But she doesn't expect reliable results until at least 2001.

Larry Tucker, head of Oregon's federally funded migrant education program, said that until the state and districts produce better numbers, even strong schools are "limited to saying, 'We're using good methods and good materials, but we don't know how they're doing.' "

Texas monitors programs

National experts say Texas, with 13 percent limited-English students, leads in testing and monitoring programs.

Unlike Oregon, Texas breaks out detailed results for the limited-English students it tests. The scores are low, but educators say that being able to analyze them drives improvements.

The state also sends out teams to monitor how districts are doing with limited-English students; they visit 200 schools annually.

"It is extremely important to measure performance if you expect high achievement," said Lucille Housen, director of bilingual education for Ysleta School District in El Paso. The district's bilingual education program gets national acclaim for improving test scores.

Oregon can also learn from individual schools within the state that measure effectiveness.

Grove Elementary School in Milton-Freewater tracked student progress in English language and reading, test scores and grades. The school measured teacher training and efforts to improve instruction of limited-English students.

But it is the only school in the Eastern Oregon district that performs such a self-analysis. It does so because it receives a federal grant, which comes with strings attached.

In other instances, accountability comes from the grass roots.

Steps toward accountability

The Corvallis analysis In Corvallis, ESL teachers last year drew up a no-holds-barred analysis of the district's program.

The report found many limited-English high-schoolers failing English, math, global studies, speech, health and government classes. It also concluded that the district's elementary schools used what the ESL teachers said was the worst method of instruction: pulling students out of regular classes for English instruction.

Jan Byers, an ESL teacher at Garfield Elementary in Corvallis, says the district has improved recently but still has far to go, largely because of money woes.

At Garfield, she said, children spend too much time in regular classrooms without help. Some teachers speak Spanish, but none has been trained in teaching techniques for limited-English students. And Garfield is the district's model program, Byers noted.

Byers hopes the report will bring attention to the needs of limited-English students.

"We're trying to wake people up," she said.

Oregon's problems could begin to be solved by better monitoring of programs and tracking of students.

The state could require districts to send in program plans and evaluations along with requests for extra money. Districts could trace test scores for each child they submit for extra funding, as some are already doing.

Flores has made a budget request for one more employee to help districts, though he concedes that won't be enough. He agrees that the state needs to make limited-English education a priority before the problem gets out of control.

"We're not a big state," Flores said. "We could take care of this issue right now."

Researcher Kathleen Blythe of The Oregonian contributed to this story.

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