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ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS FACE TOUGH LITERACY CHALLENGES

New Report Notes ELL Students Must Work Twice as Hard as Native English Speaking Students to Achieve Academic Success

Washington, D.C. – A new report released today by the Alliance for Excellent Education finds that the nation’s growing English language learner (ELL) populations, which increased 65.03 percent between 1994 and 2004, have been largely ignored as policymakers consider ways to improve adolescent reading and writing proficiency levels. If the reading and writing skills of all middle and high schools are to improve, the report urges, the unique needs of ELL students must be identified and addressed with targeted strategies.

Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners, a report to Carnegie Corporation of New York, asserts that ELL students must work twice as hard in order to meet the same accountability standards as their native English-speaking peers, since they are learning the English language while simultaneously studying core content subjects.

Authored by Dr. Deborah J. Short and Shannon Fitzsimmons of the Center for Applied Linguistics, and informed by a distinguished panel of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, *Double the Work* discusses the diversity of the English language learner populations in American secondary schools and recommends techniques to improve the way they are taught, noting that literacy interventions for these students must be designed and implemented differently if they are to be successful. The report includes extensive data drawn from a specially commissioned demographic analysis by the Migration Policy Institute.

“The ELL population is growing rapidly across the country, and these are students at serious risk of dropping out of high school,” says Bob Wise, former governor of West Virginia and president of the Alliance for Excellent Education. “They require support and resources that reflect their language challenges, their diversity, and the fact that they are having to work even harder than native English speakers to achieve a high school diploma. They have unique challenges that call for special solutions. We know how to help them – now we have to do it.”

Three times more ELLs fail to graduate from high school—31 percent—than students who speak English at home. Only four percent of eighth-grade ELLs and 20 percent of students classified as “formerly ELL”

scored at the proficient or advanced levels on the reading portion of the 2005 National Assessment for Educational Progress. And ELL students score poorly on standard measures of academic performance, such as high school exit exams.

Double the Work identifies the major challenges to improving literacy in adolescent ELLs:

- Lack of common criteria for identifying ELLs and tracking their performance
- Lack of appropriate assessments
- Inadequate educator capacity for improving literacy in ELLs
- Lack of appropriate and flexible program options
- Limited use of research-based instructional practices
- Lack of a strong and coherent research agenda for adolescent ELL literacy

The report makes the following recommendations to help meet the literacy needs of ELLs:

- Set common criteria for identifying these learners and tracking their performance.
- Develop new and improved assessments of their native language abilities, English language development, and content-knowledge learning.
- Build capacity among pre-service and current educators to instruct these learners effectively.
- Design appropriate and flexible secondary school programs that offer time and coursework that account for the second language development process.
- Use research-based instructional practices more widely and consistently.
- Fund and conduct more short- and long-term research on new and existing interventions and programs, and on the academic performance of these adolescent ELLs.

Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners is available at:

<http://www.all4ed.org/publications/DoubleWork/DoubleWork.pdf>

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The Alliance for Excellent Education is a Washington-based policy, research, and advocacy organization that works to make every child a graduate, prepared for postsecondary education and success in life.

For more information about the Alliance for Excellent Education, please visit:

www.all4ed.org.