

Debunking the Myths of English Language Learners



Fact Sheet No. 15-16

August 2015

(Replaces December 2010 Fact Sheet 3)

With the growing number of English Language Learners (ELLs) being educated in classrooms throughout New York state (NYS) and the ever-increasing demands for accountability and high academic achievement for all students, New York educators are seeking accurate information about ELLs and how best to support their needs. This fact sheet provides information to correct misconceptions about ELLs and to help educators better understand the needs of this diverse group of learners.

MYTH	FACT
1. <i>Most ELLs are born outside of the United States (US).</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> There are more than 215,000 English Language Learners (ELLs) ages 5 to 18 attending school in NYS. Of those, 61.5% were born in the US, according to the 2013-14 NYS Student Information Repository System (SIRS).
2. <i>All ELLs constitute a homogeneous group coming from the same educational, racial, cultural and socio-economic background.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> ELLs constitute a heterogeneous group with varied linguistic, cultural, ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds, strengths and needs. The more predominant languages spoken by ELLs in NYS include Spanish, Chinese, Haitian-Creole, Korean, and Russian. There are over 174 different languages spoken by ELLs in NYS.
3. <i>In the past, immigrants succeeded without English as a New Language (ENL) and bilingual classes.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Times have changed. Students face a job market which requires greater educational accomplishments than ever before. NYS's adoption of the Common Core ELA standards requires higher level language skills so that graduates will be competitive in our global economy. Since ELLs come with knowledge in their native language, educators must build upon that prior knowledge.
4. <i>Once ELLs can converse socially in English, they are then capable of succeeding academically.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> While ELLs may acquire social language within three years, it may take up to seven years for an ELL to achieve academic proficiency in English. Levels of knowledge and literacy in the native language impact the rate in which students can perform academically in English.
5. <i>Passing an English proficiency test such as the NYS Identification Test for English Language Learners (NYSITELL) or the NYS English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) means that the student is proficient enough in English to succeed in school.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> English proficient students may still need support and assistance and/or instructional scaffolding in the classroom. Part 154 of the Commissioner's Regulations requires school districts to provide students with ENL services for two years after achieving proficiency on the NYSESLAT. In addition, they may continue to receive test accommodations for two years.

MYTH	FACT
6. <i>To succeed in school, ELLs must assimilate culturally, as quickly as possible.</i>	❑ Rather than “give up to gain,” ELLs need to connect what is going on in their classrooms to their own cultural experiences. As for all students, teachers must build on students’ prior knowledge. Acknowledging the varying cultural experiences in a classroom increases the quality of education for all students.
7. <i>If children are exposed to English and their native language at home, it leads to language disorders and delays.</i>	❑ It is very important that parents speak the language in which they are most fluent to their children. The human brain has an extensive capacity to learn multiple languages simultaneously. In fact, acquiring two languages at an early age strengthens cognitive abilities. Being bilingual also gives students academic and economic advantages in our global economy.
8. <i>Students should be discouraged from using their native language in school.</i>	❑ Schools which encourage students to use their native language support student learning by increasing student participation. This practice positively impacts a student’s self-esteem.
9. <i>English immersion results in faster English language acquisition.</i>	❑ Instruction in a student’s native language facilitates the acquisition of English. Children need a strong, fluent foundation in their first language in order to succeed in English. Dual language programs provide an effective instructional approach that supports second language acquisition and content area knowledge, and maintains the child’s native language.
10. <i>ELLs should be taught to read in English from the beginning.</i>	❑ Reading skills transfer from one language to another. Students who first learn to read in their native language, will be more successful readers in English.
11. <i>Parents of ELLs aren’t involved in their children’s education.</i>	❑ While ELL parents value their children’s education, their level of involvement may vary. Active parental involvement in the schools is not typical in some cultures. Some parents’ jobs may not afford them the time to attend school functions, and some parents may also feel intimidated by their own language barriers.
12. <i>Teachers often have lower expectations for ELL students.</i>	❑ Teachers maintain high expectations for all students. Educators build on ELLs’ prior knowledge and find ways to facilitate higher-order thinking skills in their lessons, especially for ELLs at the beginning level. ELLs benefit when ENL teachers collaborate with classroom teachers to help ELLs acquire English academic skills and content at the same time.

Resources on ELLs:

- ❑ NYSUT: <http://www.nysut.org/resources/all-listing/filtered-resources/topic/english-language-learners?topic=English+Language+Learners>
- ❑ NYSED: The NYS Education Department provides a link on their website “Frequently Asked Questions” which provides answers to the most common questions gathered by the Office of Bilingual Education-Foreign Language Services (OBE-FLS) from constituents in the field: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/biling/bilinged/faq.html>
- ❑ Colorín Colorado: A bilingual website for families and educators of English language learners which is a project in partnership with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). It includes information about teaching English language learners. <http://www.colorincolorado.org/>

This document was developed by members of the NYSUT Statewide ELL Committee.

Updated August 6, 2015 NYSUT Research and Educational Services