WHAT ABOUT THE ELLs? AN ANALYSIS OF MISSOURI DISTRICT’S STUDENT
ACHIEVEMENT BY LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY POPULATION

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to determine if there exists a significant difference in overall student performance among Missouri’s school districts that contain a high or low population of English Language Learner (ELL) students. This is a unique demographic whose primary language is not English, and therefore requires special accommodation throughout their years of schooling as they acclimate to a new language, culture and life. The mainstream teacher should be aware of the specific needs of an ELL student and be adept in providing tailored language assistance to Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students with the ultimate goal of facilitating fluency in the English language.

In order to carry out a quantifiable test, Missouri’s districts were divided into two distinct categories. The first group was labeled as districts with a low ELL population - the lower 50% of all Missouri districts with low numbers of LEPs - with at least one ELL student in the district. The second group represented districts with a high ELL population - or the upper 50% of ELL populations in Missouri districts, those with larger numbers of LEP students. From there, a t-test was run to determine if there is a difference in student achievement between these two groups. Student performance indicators used in the study were quantified in terms of a district’s four-year traditional graduation rates (excluding students receiving GEDs) and composite ACT scores.

The results of this t-test reveal a significant difference in graduation rates between high and low ELL population districts. However, findings do not indicate any significant difference between the composite ACT scores of the two groups. With these mixed results, there are many nuances worth discussing and further studies recommended to better illuminate this subject. In spite of the varied results found in this study, the focus of all effective schools should remain
constant: to provide all students equal access to an excellent education, including those whose primary language is one other than English.
INTRODUCTION

Background, issues and concerns.

Figure 1 - Rate of LEP Growth from 1994-2005 nationwide

Figure 2 - Number of Missouri LEP Students Projected for 2010
The United States Department of Education projects that by 2015, 30% of children in US public schools will be English Language Learners (ELLs) or Limited English Proficient (LEP) students (French, 2011). The average student needs 5-12 years to acquire full academic proficiency in a new language, yet LEP students are expected to meet the same academic standards as their peers while also continuing to grow in their fluency of the target language.

ELL students are faced with a daunting task of simultaneously adjusting to a new language, embracing a new culture, keeping up with native-speaking peers academically, and understanding/performing in technical classes conducted in the language studied. Because of these unique challenges that confront the ELL learner, it is important as educators to be aware of and attempt to minimize any potential achievement gaps between native speakers and LEP students.

Not only should teachers feel compelled to assist at-risk learners, federal law mandates that we provide services to help non-traditional learners receive optimal educational and assistance in adjusting to a traditional American public school setting. The federal ruling resulting from a 1974 Supreme Court Case *Lau vs. Nichols* established a precedent of the rights of language-minority students in any United States public school. This ruling was codified into federal law through the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) of 1974, which states that “No state shall deny educational opportunities to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex or national origin by ... the failure of an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs” (EEOA, 1703f). One of the basic tenets of public education is that all students should
be granted equal access to learning, regardless of any differences from their mainstream community or societal practices.

Looking at Figure 1 above, we can see that many states in the United States have experienced a radical demographic shift from predominantly English-speaking citizens to an exponential increase in their Limited English Proficient (LEP) demography. From 1994-2005, Missouri experienced a 100-200% increase in LEP population, which has serious implications in the world of education. As schools try to figure out how to accommodate a growing LEP student population, they must remain compliant with federal law. Schools are obligated to provide not only level-appropriate English classes for language minorities, but also must help integrate them in mainstream classrooms. This often means that specific content teachers need to be trained and equipped in the best methods, strategies, and tools to reach out to English language learners to ensure comprehension and engagement.

Figure 2 reiterates the increase in LEP student population in Missouri from the 1980s to present day. While Missouri experienced relatively low levels of ELL students in the state (~3000 students) in 1985, numbers have surged in recent years to ten times that number and now have reached a population of approximately 30,000 ELLs. In light of Missouri’s radical demographic growth in the LEP population, the purpose of this study is to assess if and how larger ELL student populations in Missouri public schools affect a district’s graduation rate and average ACT score.
Practice under investigation.

This practice under investigation seeks to determine if there is a difference in student achievement between larger ELL school district populations and smaller school district ELL populations in Missouri. Data for LEP populations was retrieved from the MODESE ELL website for the 2011-2012 academic year (MODESE, 2012). Achievement levels will be determined by two major district achievement factors: average composite ACT score and average graduation rate. If a significant difference is discovered between the two groups, the results serve as a justification for investing in ELL-certified staff, providing professional development opportunities to mainstream teachers in best practices for ELLs, and also substantiate a district’s investment in expensive technology that can be utilized to differentiate instruction and target struggling students - such as LEP individuals.

School policy to be informed by study.

As the population of LEP students continues to grow, so does the need for qualified teachers in the classroom. Over ten years ago, educators predicted that with the growth of LEP students half of all teachers should expect to teach an LEP student sometime during their career (Menken & Antunez, 2001). This now-conservative figure would mean that of the 67,097 teachers in Missouri in 2011-2012, at least 33,548 teachers should expect to have an LEP student in their classroom at some point. Yet teacher preparation for accommodating these students in their mainstream/content classrooms lags behind the curve. According to a public policy study carried out in 2005, only 372 teachers were ELL certified in Missouri, which accounts for 0.6% of all teachers in the state (Sengsavanh, 2005). If this study does indeed find a disparity between student performance in high and low density ELL districts, then the lack of qualified ELL
instructors may prove to be the missing link between higher-achieving districts and lower-achieving ones with large ELL populations.

Conceptual underpinning.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Title III Program: Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students is a federal initiative that assists immigrant and limited English proficient (LEP) students in achieving grade-level and graduation standards, as well as acquiring the English language. In Missouri Federal Title III funding is given to ELL departments in order to provide a financial supplement to a district’s existing budget. This money, however, is not intended to supplant state and local funding. The purpose of the Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students Title III Program is to assist school districts in teaching English to limited English proficient students. Additionally, the Title III funds are to be used in helping these students meet the same challenging state standards required of all students.

The money from this budget can be used to meet a number of different needs, from hiring ELL-certified staff to investing in student resources and acquiring technologies that can be used in the ELL classroom. This study may also provide insight as to whether or not monies given through Title III funding are impactful in increasing LEP student achievement or if we should re-evaluate how this money could be better spent to improve an English Language Learner’s academic success.

Statement of the problem.

The average ELL student needs 5-12 years to gain sufficient fluency in a new language to be successful in a school setting, where students are exposed to endless sets of content-related
vocabulary and academic terminology. The Webster dictionary logs 450,000 distinct words in the English language and the average native-English-speaking high school graduate commands a 10,000 word-family vocabulary (Hirsh & Nation, 1992). With a wide sea of vocabulary (and countless other language and cultural differences) separating the two groups, ELL students are understandably at a remarkable disadvantage to perform at the same level as their native-English-speaking peers. If this statistical analysis of Missouri student performance by ELL population per district does indicate a discrepancy between the two groups, then we must strive to close this performance gap. In order to expedite LEP students to fluency, educators must heighten the scope and intensity of various interventions that exist to assist this unique demographic in improving their education and increasing their likelihood of

Purpose of the study.

This study is designed to compare student achievement between low ELL population school districts in Missouri with other large ELL population school districts. If there is a significant difference, we will examine further strategies that may serve to boost LEP graduation rates and/or ACT student scores.

Research question(s).

RQ1: Is there a difference in graduation rates between larger ELL school district populations and smaller school district ELL populations?

RQ2: Is there a difference in ACT scores between larger ELL school district populations and smaller school district ELL populations?

Independent variable-ELL population size of the school district.
Dependent variables- Average composite ACT score of district and overall district graduation rates.

*Null Hypothesis 1*

There is no difference in graduation rates between Missouri school districts with large ELL populations and districts with smaller ELL populations.

*Null Hypothesis 2*

There is no difference in composite ACT scores between Missouri school districts with large ELL populations and districts with smaller ELL populations.

*Anticipated benefits of the study.*

Regardless of the study’s outcome, results will encourage districts to maintain best practices and perhaps seek the insight of high-performing, high-density ELL districts. Furthermore, the study may serve as a substantiation for investing in costly, but versatile and effective technologies. The use of iPads, student laptops and SmartBoards can be used as tools for differentiating instruction and personalizing a student’s educational experience.

Another benefit of this study is the justification for the hiring of ELL certified teachers. Although ELL teachers aren’t the only factor in determining gains in LEP populations, they provide focused language instruction and assist a vulnerable demographic with issues within and beyond school. These tasks range from playing the role of counselor, schedule-maker, advocate, cultural liaison, and home social worker. Additionally, small ELL homeroom class sizes help easily isolated students to feel a sense of belonging.
Yet another possible benefit of this study is the emphasis that it will place on adequate mainstream teacher training. By promoting professional development in English language acquisition instruction for content area teachers, ELL students will be guaranteed accommodation and assistance school-wide, not just in their ELL homeroom. These training sessions will help to norm teachers as to general best practices in language instruction. One added benefit of being versed in language instruction is that it benefits all struggling students, not just LEP individuals. The strategies and interventions used in language instruction will help all teachers to differentiate their pedagogy to provide rigor and relevance to different ability levels within a classroom. The main goal of effective language training and professional development is to guide all teachers to implement proven strategies that will bolster student fluency, and ultimately retain students through to graduation and aid all students in achieving higher standardized test scores.

Definition of terms.

AMAO - Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives - expectations for an ELL student’s annual language gains, as determined by the state and required by Title III of the federal initiative No Child Left Behind Act

ASP - A Statistical Package - statistical testing software for use on personal computers

WIDA - World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment - Educational research institution that creates standardized tests for English Language Learners

ACCESS - Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners. A large-scale test that addresses the English language development
standards that form the core of the WIDA's instructing and testing of English language learners. These standards incorporate a set of model performance indicators (PIs) that describe the expectations educators have of ELL students at four different grade level clusters (Kindergarten to Senior year) and in five different content areas (instructional language, English language arts, math, science, and social studies).

ELL - English Language Learner - a general term for a student whose primary language is not English and who is learning English

LEP - Limited English Proficiency - a synonym to ELL, wherein a person is unable to communicate effectively in English because his/her primary language is not English and he/she has not developed fluency in the English language

EEOA - Equal Educational Opportunities Act - federal law that prevents discrimination of students based on race, language, or gender.

NCLB - No Child Left Behind - standards-based education reform to America’s public schools that orders states to set high educational standards for students and establish measurable goals with the aim of improving student achievement over the years.

TITLE III - Federal funding for ELL programs intended to supplement and not supplant district or state level budgets for ELL-focused initiatives. Such supplementary funds can be used for: language training for mainstream teachers, parental involvement activities, language assistance technology, hiring of ELL support staff.

Differentiated Instruction - modifying instructional practices to meet the needs of different student abilities and learning styles to help all students master course objectives.

Summary.
Because the ELL learner is at a unique disadvantage in the mainstream classroom, we will seek to determine if large language-minority districts are effective in bridging the gap between traditional mainstream instruction and targeted, tailored strategies designed to assist the ELL learner. A t-test comparative analysis was carried out to determine if there exists a significant difference in ELL population size and student performance indicators (ACT & Graduation Rate). School districts in the state of Missouri can use the findings of this study to guide professional development initiatives and seek to implement best practices of high-achieving, high-population ELL districts.
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To better understand the present context in which the public school English language learner exists, we can look to several recently published articles and studies that examine a variety of topics pertinent to the limited English proficiency community. From mainstream teacher polls on ELL interventions at high-density ELL districts, to the implementation of different technologies to boost struggling student performance and determined best-practices in teaching the adolescent LEP individual, we can gain insight into current factors that surround ELL achievement.

One such article published in the *Educational Leadership* journal established best practices for teachers to implement when working with language minority students (Rance-Roney 2009). The publication outlines four key practices needed to enhance the learning of the teenage LEP students in public high schools throughout the United States. Firstly, language learners need school-wide, team-based support. It is understood that ESL (English as a second language) teachers wear many hats and end up providing multiple services to their students which include assistance in: testing, translating help, socio-emotional counseling, college applications and health care needs. This model of placing full responsibility on a single ELL teacher should be replaced with a broader support team that includes administrators, counselors and mainstream teachers to address student issues, meet with ELL students and their families and track student growth over time.

The next best practice when working with the teenage ELL is to enact a dual curriculum, which provides both tailored English language development courses as well as a general academic formation. Additionally, Rance-Roney posits that the ideal environment for an English
language student incorporates a global community within the classroom. This structure provides a blend of sheltered instruction for the ELL population and also integrates students in “cluster model” mainstream classes, comprised of one-third ELLs and two-thirds native English speakers. In the cluster model, teachers are specialized in methods of teaching English and knowledgable in the process of foreign-language acquisition. By introducing both groups to cultural diversity, students can benefit culturally and linguistically and foster a greater sense of community.

Another key offering for the ELL adolescent learner is flexibility in their learning plan and timeframe for completing schoolwork. Administrators and teachers should be open to alternate pathways for a student to work through their high school career, which may include extensions to allow more time for a student to acquire the language and build oral/written fluency and academic vocabulary. Several alternatives for the ELL are: night and weekend classes, expanded school day schedule, or extra years attending high school. Rance-Roney concludes that if a school can work together to implement these best practices, adolescent ELLs will be more likely to succeed in their high school career and ultimately, in their continued studies, occupations, and adult lives that lie ahead.

While it is important for educators to be well-versed in proper accommodations and outreach to language minority students, it is also beneficial to examine mainstream teacher attitudes towards ELL modifications in core classes. A 2006 report published in The Social Studies journal details the findings of a high-school-teacher survey carried out in regard to teacher opinions/attitudes of ELL students and instruction of this demographic in the mainstream classroom (Cho & Reich 2006). Six ESL-rich high schools were chosen to participate in a study
in the spring of 2006. Two hundred and eleven teachers were surveyed and asked fourteen questions and one open-ended question. The questions focused on how teachers should accommodate ELLs in the core classes, the challenges that a teacher faces in working with ELLs and the support needed to enhance instruction to this demographic.

The results of this survey revealed that the main challenge facing mainstream content classes with ESL students is the student’s lack of background knowledge of content area. The next most significant challenge was listed as language barriers between the mainstream teacher and the ELL student. Another component of the survey asked teachers what their current practices were to accommodate ELLs. 65.6% of teachers reported that they never provide different instructional materials for ELLs, and 78.1% claimed that they never provide different tasks and assignments for ELLs. These findings indicate that teachers remain recalcitrant in adapting curriculum to accommodate this struggling demographic in spite of federal mandates that students should be given equal access to an education, regardless of race, origin or language. The results of this poll also indicate a broader mainstream teacher attitude that it’s not their responsibility to assist language minority students in comprehending the content of their course.

The final component of Cho & Reich’s questionnaire sought to elicit what teachers need in order to provide better support for ELLs in the mainstream classroom. On a scale of Not Important, Important and Critical/Very Important, 54.5% of the individuals polled responded that knowledge of ESL instructional strategies was highly important, and 44.1% concluded that understanding of second language development was critical.

Based on the results of the survey, the researchers suggest several practices to enhance instruction and integration of ELLs in core classes. A few of these simple tips included
Encouraging teachers to adjust their speech rate and enunciation and also provide directions in oral and written forms. Additionally, instructors should try to “think like an outsider” and anticipate what a learner’s needs might be based on cultural and linguistic differences. The final tip given to mainstream teachers is to stay connected with ESL teachers to discuss student progress and provide a broader network of support for the ELL student.

In addition to findings published on mainstream teacher attitudes toward ELL accommodations and proven best practices for language minority students, we can also examine ways in which technology can be implemented within the classroom to target struggling learners and connect them to comprehensible input that will help them to succeed in school and boost student achievement. A 2007 publication in the Technological Horizons in Education journal focused on computerized multimedia programs that are designed to provide self-directed, leveled learning modules to alienated students, such as English language learners (Waters 2007).

The demographic of the student landscape in the United States has shifted greatly over the past decade. The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition states that between 1990 and 2005, enrollment of ELL students in public schools in America increased 150 percent, from 2 million to over 5 million.

This rapid growth coupled with the permeation of technology in the field of education makes it easy to see why there has been a marked increase in the number of programs and technological tools marketed to ELL teachers and students. The use of computer technology in ESL instruction reaches students on their terms and provides them multi-modal, self-directed access to the English language.

The programs and software targeted to the English-learner vary greatly in their scope and form, with some programs delivered on CD targeted at self-directed pronunciation improvement...
and other multimedia suites that take on many language concepts interactively through animation, video, voice recording and games.

Pearson’s English Language Learning and Instruction System is one such multimedia suite that centers around “context-based instruction” that virtually places students in real-world scenarios and uses that setting as the basis for specific skill instruction. Many other ELL-focused programs are detailed in the article, such as Rosetta Stone, Longman English Interactive, Tell Me More and provide a brief description of the focus of each program and how they all work (Waters 2007).

Judie Haynes, a veteran elementary ELL instructor in River Edge, NJ and educational author, implements these technological tools in such a way that deemphasizes the teacher and allows the student to take control of his/her learning. Haynes states that “Everything isn’t teacher directed. My kids are doing research, working with content, vocabulary and writing.” Her students can become so absorbed in their virtual world and self-paced learning, that often “they come into class and get carried away. We look up and it’s time for them to leave. I practically have to force them out of the room.” (Waters, 2007, p. 8). Haynes’ classroom provides one example of how to seamlessly fuse the realtime classroom and independent learning, using technological devices as a medium for tailored instruction and student work.

The three pieces of literature examined seek to underscore the importance of training all teachers in best language instructional practices to enhance student achievement. Secondly, research indicates that struggling learners can benefit greatly from technological investments that allow for self-directed, leveled lessons. Lastly, the attitudes of mainstream teachers signal a general reluctance of educators to adapt curriculum that targets language minority students (Cho & Reich 2006).
This combination of factors, from teacher attitudes and opinions regarding ELLs, to the implementation of technologies tailored to unique learning needs and the training of staff in best practices when working with LEP demographics, work together to affect the quality of a district’s educational support system for language minority learners. If the results of our study confirm a significant difference in student achievement between high and low ELL population districts, then these articles may also help to illuminate underlying factors that correlate with high or low performance in districts.
RESEARCH METHODS

Research design.

A quantitative study was carried out to determine if there is a performance gap between high density and low density ELL population districts. The independent variable for this test is ELL population size in a given district and the dependent variables are the graduation rates and ACT scores of these districts. If calculations reveal there to be a significant difference in student performance between high and low population districts in Missouri, educators must reevaluate best practices in working with this demographic, seek professional development in ELL instruction for the mainstream classroom teacher, and examine what technological tools can be utilized to aid this unique demographic.

Study group description.

Data was collected on one hundred and fifty different school districts across Missouri. These districts reported a minimum population of at least one ELL student for the 2011-2012 school year. Districts’ ELL populations ranged from 6 to 3,581 and overall district sizes varied greatly from 68 to 25,155 total students reported for the 2011-2012 school year.

Data collection and instrumentation.

 Archived data from Missouri’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) website was tabulated from three different sets of information: LEP population by
district, graduation rate, and ACT score by district. The t-test divided the independent variable
(LEP population) into two categories - the lower 50% of districts with a lower population of LEP
students and an upper 50% of districts with a greater number of ELL students.

Statistical analysis methods.

A Statistical Package (ASP) software will be implemented to carry out the statistical
calculations of this particular research study. T-tests will be used to separate school districts into
upper 50% with larger ELL populations and lower 50% with relatively fewer ELL students and
then compare how these two groups perform in ACT composite scores and graduation rates.
Google spreadsheets and Microsoft Excel will also be used to organize and tabulate data.
Calculations for the mean, mean D, t-test, df, and p-value were drawn from this test. The default
alpha level was set at 0.25 to determine if we could accept or reject the null hypothesis, which
states that there is no difference in student performance between low and high ELL population
districts.
FINDINGS

A t-test was carried out using ASP software to determine if there exists a significant difference in student performance indicators (ACT and graduation rates) between high and low LEP population districts. The following tables and graphs seek to illustrate the findings based on the raw data gathered from Missouri’s Comprehensive Data System (MSCD) of the state’s DESE website for the 2011-2012 school year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>$S^2$</th>
<th>Mean D</th>
<th>t-Test</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low ELL Population Districts (n = 74)</td>
<td>84.81</td>
<td>48.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High ELL Population Districts (n= 75)</td>
<td>82.77</td>
<td>49.63</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significant when p<= 0.25

Data from the 150 Missouri school districts reporting at least one ELL student was utilized as a means of determining if overall student achievement indicators vary between districts with high or low ELL student populations. Two distinct t-tests were conducted for each student performance benchmark: composite ACT score and district graduation rates.

Looking at Table 1, we see that the mean graduation rate of the low LEP population district group was 84.81% while the average graduation rate for the high LEP population group
was 82.77. The Mean D, or difference between the two groups, was 2.04. The t-test value was 1.77 with 147 degrees of freedom. The null hypothesis stated previously maintains that there is not a significant difference in student performance between high and low language minority populations. However, looking at the results of our statistical analysis, we see a p-value of 0.08, which is considerably less than the established alpha level of 0.25. Therefore, we can reject the null hypothesis and conclude that ELL population does correlate with the number of students that receive their high school degree. Missouri districts in the top 50% of LEP population experience a lower graduation rate than districts in the lower 50% of LEP student numbers.

**Figure 1** - 2012 Graduation Rates in High and Low ELL Population Districts

Figure 1 reiterates the information provided in Table 1 - providing a visual representation of the achievement gap between high and low ELL population districts in Missouri. While the
districts labeled as having low LEP numbers had an average graduation rate of 84.81%, districts with relatively higher LEP numbers experienced a lower graduation rate of 82.77%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S²</th>
<th>Mean D</th>
<th>t-Test</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low ELL Population Districts</td>
<td>21.01</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 74)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High ELL Population Districts</td>
<td>21.11</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 75)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significant when p<= 0.25

Table 2 displays results for the second t-test that draws upon a different performance benchmark: district composite ACT scores. Raw data was compiled from the same 150 districts reporting at least 1 ELL student or more and a comparative test was run against high (top 50%) and low (lower 50%) ELL population groups in Missouri school districts. The mean ACT score for districts with a relatively low number of LEP individuals averaged a composite score of 21.01, while districts with a relatively large number of LEP students averaged a composite score of 21.11.

The Mean D, or difference between the two groups, was -0.09 and the t-test revealed a score of -0.32 with 147 degrees of freedom. Once again, we refer back to the previously stated null hypothesis which posits that there is no significant difference in composite ACT scores between high and low ELL populations in Missouri’s districts. Unlike the first t-test, we are
unable to reject the null hypothesis in comparing this student benchmark, as our p-value of 0.75 is greater than the established alpha-level of 0.25. Therefore, we must not reject the notion that there is no significant difference in ACT scores between high and low ELL population districts in the state of Missouri.

**Figure 2- 2012 Composite ACT Scores in High and Low ELL Population Districts**

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the data tabulated in the second t-test comparing ACT composite scores between the two groups. The average ACT score in the low ELL population group was 21.01 while the average ACT of the higher ELL population group was 21.11, a score that is one-tenth of a point higher.
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The outcomes of this study reveal mixed results for the two student performance benchmarks tested between high and low ELL population districts. While graduation rates are significantly different (lower) in high ELL population districts, ACT scores are not. The disparate outcomes of the t-tests elicit a nuanced examination of all the factors that play into student performance. Ultimately, we must try to discern if districts are providing their ELL students with the necessary support and accommodations as they transition into fluency.

The conceptual underpinning of this study ties into several federal mandates, such as the 1974 Equal Educational Opportunities Act and Title III of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. The former legislation compels districts to provide equal access to education to all individuals, regardless of race, origin or primary language while the latter targets limited English proficient students in achieving the same performance and graduation standards as their native-English-speaking peers.

While we have only tested two student achievement indicators, there are many other ways in which a district’s overall performance can be measured. Such achievement benchmarks include student performance on End-of-Course exams (EOCs), drop-out rates, student literacy scores, student attendance rates, or district rates of D/F grades on high school transcripts. These are other factors worth comparing in trying to understand if/how districts perform differently based on their ELL population size.

One possible explanation as to why graduation rates were significantly different while ACT scores were not is that not all students are required to take the ACT test. This may automatically exclude students that do not have the financial means to pay for the test, or do not
plan to pursue higher education in the United States. Therefore, the very data that was used to compare high & low ELL population district achievement may not even be representative of the very demographic we seek to examine.

Before one can extrapolate broader significance from this research, there are several discrepancies that should be discussed. Firstly, of Missouri’s more than 500 school districts, 290 are listed as having an ELL population of zero. However, the 290 districts with zero LEP students were not included in this study, for reasons of being unable to evenly split the districts into two high and low ELL population groups when over half of the districts in Missouri have no limited English proficient students. Secondly, high and low groups were determined by English language learner total population and not by percentage. If districts were to be grouped according to the ratio of ELL students compared to mainstream English speakers, the results could vary from the figures revealed in this study. One extension of this problem in the study was the division between low and high ELL population districts and the difference in the sizes of these two groups. The low ELL population group had between 6 and 32 language minority students while the high ELL population group contained 34 and 3,581 students. A total of 34 ELL students in a district seems like a relatively small number when compared to 3,581 found in another district, yet both were categorized into the high limited English proficiency population group. One must wonder how similar or closely linked these districts can be when the data - and ELL presence within their schools- differ so greatly.

Returning to the results of district graduation rates by ELL population size, we may be able to draw several conclusions from the information set forth in the study. Because graduation rates were significantly lower in high ELL population districts in the state, these findings may
underscore how districts with higher quantities of limited English population students are less successful in seeing their students through to degree termination. This may be linked to the high levels of transience of the ELL population. It is common for LEP students to move in and out of a district multiple times, travel to their native country for extended periods of time. When hopping from one school to another or moving back and forth from their homeland and back to the United States, ‘migratory’ ELL students will inevitably miss out on a cohesive educational experience. Additionally, LEP students may not be motivated to complete their high school degree in the United States as they envision a future for themselves in their home country. One other possible explanation for this difference could be attributed to a lack of sense of community or belonging with mainstream students, teachers and culture. This feeling of alienation may drive some ELL students away from school and force them onto a path away from traditional education.

Regardless of the outcomes of this study, teachers should always strive to accommodate struggling learners. Districts should ensure that mainstream teachers receive regular professional development sessions in best practices when working with English language learners. Furthermore, schools with large numbers of language minorities should seek out ELL-certified staff and use federal Title III funding effectively in the hiring of ELL support staff or by investing in technology that can be tailored to fit the unique needs of a language learner.
REFERENCES


