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Charter Schools Being Urged to Serve ELLs

Report Maps Out Steps

By [Mary Ann Zehr](#)

With support for charter schools growing across the country, some education and advocacy groups are calling on policymakers and educators to give more consideration to how charter schools can do a better job of serving the nation's increasing population of English-language learners.

Just this month, two such Washington-based groups—[The National Council of La Raza](#) and the [Center for American Progress](#)—put out [a report](#) spelling out how state governments can change their policies to ensure charter schools serve ELLs well and tailor their programs for the needs of such students.

The report features two charter schools that are part of a network of about 100 supported by the National Council of La Raza and two charter schools that aren't part of the network considered to be successful with ELLs.

The report comes as some states and districts are already starting to take steps to address the needs of English-learners who want to attend charter schools.

An ELL advocacy group—Multicultural Education, Training, and Advocacy Inc. of Somerville, Mass.—helped to get a law passed last year that requires charter school operators proposing to open schools in that state's immigrant neighborhoods to have a plan for how they will recruit English-language learners.

And last school year, the 78,000-student Denver district added a review of ELL programs as a component of its process to authorize new charter schools and extend charters for existing ones. "We were concerned that English-language learners, who make up 40 percent of our district, have full equity of access to all of our schools, including charter schools," said Superintendent Tom Boesberg.

But it's still only in pockets of the country that states or charter authorizers have taken action to ensure that English-language learners can be included better in the charter school movement.

Research Picture

Nationwide, it's hard to know how well English-learners are being served in charter schools because states' data on that issue is spotty. Likewise, studies are mixed on whether ELLs are underrepresented in charter school enrollments.

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A national study last year by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes, or CREDO, at Stanford University, found that on average charter schools enroll the same proportion of ELLs nationally as regular public schools do. But in the 1.1 million-student New York City school district, which enrolls one of the largest populations of ELLs in the country, the [National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education](#) at Teachers College, Columbia University, [found that](#)  charter schools enrolled a smaller proportion of ELLs during the 2006, 2007, and 2008 school years than are present in the city's school population. And researchers from Mathematica Policy Research, in Princeton, N.J., in a study of 22 middle schools run by the [Knowledge Is Power Program](#), or KIPP, found that those schools were much less likely to enroll English-language learners than the school districts from which they draw students.



At the Raul Yzaguirre School in Houston, 2nd grader Alex Robles answers a question in class. The charter school is noted for its success in serving English-language learners.

—Smiley N. Pool for Education Week

The report by the two national groups, entitled “Next Generation Charter Schools: Meeting the Needs of Latinos and English Language Learners,” calls on states that are revisiting their charter school laws to include provisions to benefit ELLs. Among those recommendations, the report says states need to clarify that charter schools should get equal access to federal and state categorical funds such as federal dollars for English-language-acquisition programs and state allotments for ELLs. States also should consider monitoring enrollment at charter schools to ensure that populations such as ELLs have equal access, according to the report. It also calls for states to consider requiring charter operators to show how they will educate ELLs when they propose new schools.

“Recently the [U.S.] secretary of education has put a lot of pressure on the charter school community to look at what they are doing for

ELLs and has challenged them to step up to the plate,” said Melissa Lazarín, the associate director of education policy for the think tank Center for American Progress. “I do think that there are only a handful that are probably doing this really well and are proactively thinking about this already,” she said, though she expects that charter schools will get on board.

Praise for Recommendations

The report's recommendations were welcomed by observers of the charter school movement.

Robin Lake, the associate director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington in Bothell, said the report offers “a common-sense approach in thinking about how the next generation of charter schools could improve on the last.”



And Alex Medler, the vice president of policy and research for the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, based in Chicago, praised the report's "recommendations for how to figure out how to get equity in admissions and make charter schools family-friendly and have them work on instructional design."

By the same token, Roger L. Rice, the executive director of Multicultural Education, Training, and Advocacy Inc., said he would have liked the report to go beyond saying that charter schools should enroll the same proportion of English-learners as their local school districts do and also

urge them to enroll ELLs with the same range of English skills. "Otherwise," he wrote in an e-mail, "the charters may end up creaming off the ELLs who are on the cusp of transitioning [to English fluency]."

In Massachusetts, where the state has adopted new requirements aimed at better serving English-language learners in charter schools, one operator says he expects the changes will make a difference, at least in helping charter schools recruit ELLs.

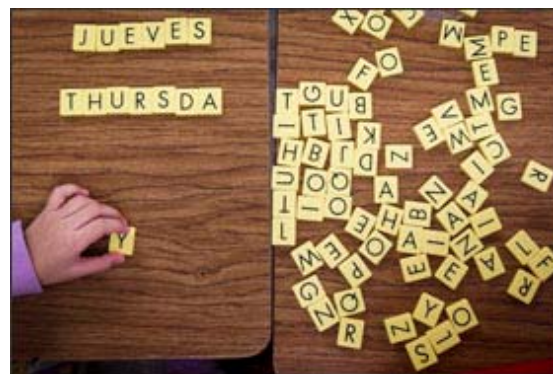
Alan Safran, the executive director of the Boston-based charter operator **MATCH**, explained that his state's new charter school law gives charter operators access for the first time to their local school districts' lists of parents' names and addresses. He says MATCH plans to target mailings to parents who speak a language other than English at home for a new school it has proposed opening in the 2011-12 school year. Though located in immigrant neighborhoods, the middle school and high school already run by MATCH don't enroll any ELLs because of challenges with recruitment, he said. "When immigrants come to cities across America, they don't typically know about the new options for education," he said.

The four charter schools featured in the report by La Raza and the Center for American Progress, however, were deemed to have had much success in recruiting high numbers of ELLs and serving them well.

One is the Raul Yzaguirre School for Success in Houston, where 75 percent of the 950 students are ELLs, according to the school's staff. In 2010, the pre-K-12 charter school ranked as a "recognized school" in Texas' accountability system, the second-highest ranking. The report says the school has shown "steady and significant gains in all core subject areas," and chalks up the improvements to the school's strong teaching practices. The school provides a bilingual education program for ELLs at the primary level, as required by Texas law, and English-as-a-second-language classes for ELLs at the secondary level. Teachers also design an individual education plan for each child so that instruction can be tailored accordingly.

The school is run by the **Tejano Center for Community Concerns**, a La Raza affiliate, that provides services such as English and computer classes for adults. Richard R. Farias, the superintendent, credits strong parent involvement, which he says springs from the school's relationship with the Tejano Center, for the school's success in educating Latinos and ELLs well.

"We meet the needs not only of the child but of the family," he said. "That's what sets us apart from any [other] public school."



A kindergartner at the Raul Yzaguirre School spells a word in English and Spanish.

—Smiley N. Pool for Education Week

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