



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

MERC Publications

MERC (Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium)

2020

Policy and Practice Brief 2: English Learners Are a Priority During COVID-19

Melissa J. Cuba

Virginia Commonwealth University, cubamj2@vcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/merc_pubs



Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#)

Downloaded from

https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/merc_pubs/119

This White Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the MERC (Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium) at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in MERC Publications by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Policy and Practice Brief 2: English Learners Are a Priority During COVID-19

Melissa J. Cuba, Ph.D.

MERC English Learner Research and Evaluation Team



English learners (ELs) are disproportionately impacted by the health and economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. These students often traverse virtual learning with fewer resources, limited access, additional responsibilities, and increased needs. In addition to this, they represent a significant percentage of the student population in school divisions across the Commonwealth.

There has been a steady increase in EL enrollment trends in Virginia in recent decades. Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) data shows the absolute change of ELs in Virginia from 2003-04 to 2019-20 was 107,035 students or 178%.

School Year	2003-04	2008-09	2013-14	2019-20
Number of ELs	60,295	99,839	125,859	167,330
Total Student Count	1,191,010	1,235,498	1,273,532	1,290,513
EL Percent of Total	5%	8%	10%	13%

Of the 132 school divisions in Virginia, Chesterfield County, Henrico County, and Richmond City are three of the top ten school divisions with the highest number of ELs in the state.¹ These students represented 13.98% (3,525 students) of the total student population in Richmond Public Schools, 11.81% (7,404 students) in Chesterfield County Public Schools, and 10.35% (5,360 students) in Henrico County Public Schools in 2019-20.² EL representation continues to grow across the Commonwealth.

As schools across Virginia, in response to COVID-19, continue to rely on virtual learning, VDOE guidance encourages schools and divisions to: “Double down on equity investments. Examine the use of federal stimulus funding to address equity gaps. Prioritize funding to meet the needs of English learners” (p. 14).³ This guidance also encourages schools and divisions to:

- “Prioritize access to learning loss recovery programs/interventions for students who are disproportionately impacted by learning loss during school closures. Before

¹ https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/EL-factsheet2018-Virginia_Final.pdf

² Virginia Department of Education Fall Membership Data

³ https://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/health_medical/covid-19/recover-redesign-restart-2020.pdf

mandating participation and attendance in these programs, evaluate unintended consequences and disparate impact.”

- “Ensure that English learners (Levels 1- 4.3) have contact with a Language Instruction Educational Program (LIEP) specialist to the extent possible.”
- Provide “Translation/Interpretation services”
- Engage and support “families with English acquisition in the absence of ‘formal’ school”
- “Ensure instructional plans address the specific needs of diverse populations including... ELs”

Governor Ralph Northam’s guidance for the phased reopening of schools says, “In-person learning is most essential for special education students, English language learners, young children, and other vulnerable students who depend upon the structure, in-person connection, and resources our school communities provide”⁴ (Secretary Qarni). As the Governor plans for phased reopening, Phase Two includes the return of ELs.

While there are many factors to take into account, both now during virtual learning and as we prepare for the phased reopening of schools, here are some guiding questions for education stakeholders:

- How have multilingual families of ELs been included in the decision-making process, particularly as they may be one of the first student groups to be phased back into school for in-person instruction during a pandemic?
- How is your school/division making all communication and information accessible for multilingual families, so there is informed consent and agreement?
- How is your school/division making all communication and information accessible so multilingual families can support their students?
- How are the physical, social-emotional, and learning needs of ELs as a “vulnerable student group” being prioritized?⁵
- How can we prepare and endorse more ESL teachers?
- How can we build capacity for all teachers who work with ELs?
- How can we provide access to technology, including access to devices/Wi-Fi, as well as training in how to use it?

⁴ <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/all-releases/2020/june/headline-857292-en.html>

⁵ See EL section in MERC literature review [Supporting Student Mental Health During and After COVID-19](#)